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Black Parade: Conceptualizing Black Adolescent Girls' Multimodal Renderings as Parades

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Abstract

This piece builds on scholarship in African American parading and Black Girls' Literacies by presenting parading as a metaphor to analyze a website created by nine Black adolescent girls. I draw on multimodal analysis frameworks to understand the symbolic nature of the site and its components, as well as how the girls use it as a platform to speak to issues of racism, sexism, self-definition, joy, and celebration. The girls write against liminal perceptions of their identities, (re)positioning themselves and their lives as worthy of celebration and themselves as experts of Black girlhood.

Keywords

Black girls' literacies, multimodality, Black girlhood

Research suggests that both historically and contemporarily, when participating in parades, many African Americans employ symbols that allow them to define themselves and their social worlds (Grams, 2013); redefine the boundaries of their identities and cope with anti-Blackness (Abdullah, 2009); and celebrate and practice joy (Player, 2021), often in opposition to government

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and its "formal, institutionally political spheres of action" (Stillman & Villmoare, 2010, p. 486). The release of the song "Black Parade," by Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, coupled with our current national landscape, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the global fight for Black lives led me to question the history of parades for Black folks in the United States. As a Black woman literacies scholar and teacher educator, I build on the scholarship in African American parading and Black Girls' Literacies by presenting parading as a metaphor to analyze a website created by nine Black adolescent girls. I bring together multimodal (Griffin, 2020; Serafini, 2014), Black Girlhood (Brown, 2013), and Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA; Brock, 2018) frameworks to understand the symbolic nature of the site and its components, as well as how the girls use it as a platform to speak to issues of racism, sexism, self-definition, and perhaps most importantly, joy and celebration. The young women in this study, like many young Black girls throughout the United States, are grappling with what it means to come of age in a society that devalues their existence and experiences. However, through the use of their literacies, the girls write against liminal perceptions of their identities, (re) positioning their lives as worthy of celebration and themselves as experts of Black girlhood. In an effort to understand their Multimodal Black Girl Parade, I pose the following research questions:

1. In what ways do parades inform our understandings of Black girls' multimodal celebrations of self?
2. Across their website, entitled "Black Self Love," how do Black adolescent girls author a multimodal celebration of Black girlhood?

I begin this piece with a brief overview of African American parading practices. I then offer a theorization of Multimodal Black Girl Parades as a literacy practice by analyzing the website through the lens of a parade, and offering thematic findings that further build upon the notion of parading as a literate practice. To build this conceptualization, I draw on scholarship of multimodality, Black Girls' Literacies, and Black Girlhood and purvey major themes across the website. The article closes with implications for how the notion of Multimodal Black Girl Parades can inform education research broadly and research on literacies specifically.

A Brief Overview of African American Parading Practices

In Queen Bey fashion, singer-songwriter Beyoncé Knowles-Carter released a surprise single the night of Juneteenth 2020. The holiday marks the official end

of enslavement in the United States—2 years after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed—and in accordance with the day of celebration, the song "Black Parade" is undoubtedly a jubilant expression of Blackness. The title of the song is a provocation for the celebration of Black culture and life amidst a global pandemic that disproportionately affects Black people, and a nationwide fight for Black lives as the result of the killings of unarmed and innocent Black folks at the hands of police, white vigilantes, and domestic abusers. The reference "Black Parade" refers to the celebratory events that have historically taken place in Black communities during or after a period or moment of disaster in an effort to "[reconstruct] community ties and social interaction necessary to rebuild lives" (Grams, 2013, p. 517). For instance, in a study of post-Katrina New Orleans, Grams (2013) explains that parades, "rooted in African and Caribbean religious and festive practices," (p. 504) played a role in rebuilding poor and working-class Black New Orleanian neighborhoods after the devastation of the hurricane. She explains that Katrina "not only destroyed property and displaced community members; it untethered people from ties that enabled them to function in daily life" (Grams, 2013, p. 517).

I draw on disaster literature to more deeply understand the definition of, destruction after, and responses (both governmental and community-based) to (or lack thereof) disasters. Definitions of disaster have evolved over time (Perry, 2018), but have historically focused on natural disasters, such as tropical storms, volcanoes, and earthquakes (Ball, 1979). However, Perry (2018) notes that broader definitions of disasters have characterized them as extreme occurrences that interrupt normally effective procedures and activities. This definition acknowledges that disasters cause disruptions to social orders, marking physical destruction and death as an "essential element" that requires significant readjustment (p. 6). Such occurrences typically destroy or significantly alter the physical, demographic, and cultural landscapes of a space, highlighting the "interplay of geospatial, social, [and] cultural. . .factors in a community's environment" (Rivera & Miller, 2007, p. 503; see also Bullard & Wright, 2012). For instance, Hurricane Katrina caused more suffering "than any other hurricane to strike the nation in several generations" (Rivera & Miller, 2007, p. 512), taking 1,336 (known) lives across five states. In many cases the United States government has been chastised for its reactionary and ill-crafted public policy as well as its neglect of what Rivera and Miller (2007) have referred to as "zones of sacrifice," or those locations inhabited by communities the government does not deem worthy of the dignity of citizenship, and thus, care. In many instances, African Americans have acted as the drum majors of their own salvation, leading initiatives for environmental justice (EJ) in their own communities after disasters occur (Byrnes, 2014).

Extending Grams's (2013) notion of parading after a moment or period of disaster, I draw on the disaster literature to argue that racism and sexism are disasters in and of themselves, as they effectively disrupt social order, and bring about destruction and death. I conceptualize anti-Black racism and misogynoir (Bailey & Trudy, 2018) as disasters that specifically impact Black girls and women given that they maintain stereotypes, policies, and systems of injustice that rob them of their humanity (Collins, 2000). Following this definition, I understand racism and sexism to be literal, not metaphoric, disasters given their destructive and often deadly consequences. To substantiate this claim I employ Patterson's (2018) concept of social death as well as Love's (2019) notion of spirit murdering to make sense of death in specific relation to Black identities in the United States, particularly in schools.

According to Patterson (2018) the Transatlantic Slave Trade and subsequent enslavement of kidnapped African peoples in the United States robbed African peoples of their very personhood. Though I depart from Patterson's (2018) belief that enslavement is perpetual, I acknowledge "America's early history of slavery set the precedent for [B]lack people to be victims of gratuitous and wanton violence" (Warren & Coles, 2020, p. 4). Black girls have not only been victim to this racial violence, but because of their gender the violence perpetrated against them is often under investigated or unreported (Lindsey, 2018). For instance, Lindsey reported that

> forty percent of Black girls have experienced some form of sexual abuse [and that] Black children account for 37% of missing minors in the United States, many of them Black women. . .[although] there has yet to be a specific study of missing Black girls in the United States (p. 167).

Love's (2019) notion of spirit murdering builds on this concept, noting the ways that schools act as sites of anti-Black violence by "[robbing] dark people of their humanity and dignity and [leaving] personal, psychological, and spiritual injuries" (p. 38). For Black girls, social death and spirit murdering show up in narratives surrounding school discipline and curricular and pedagogical negligence. For instance, in 2014 the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights reported that "suspensions among [B]lack girls occur at a rate 12% higher than all other girls" and have been reported to have the most rapid suspension rates across all populations in the nation (Gibbs Grey & Harrison, 2020, p. 2; see also Morris, 2016). Likewise, Black girls experience unique marginalization in their literate practices within school-based literacy spaces, often subjected to curricular erasure and silencing (Boston & Baxley, 2007; Kinloch, 2010; Sealey-Ruiz, 2016). However, in spite of any lack of response on the part of school administrators or policy-makers to

protect Black girls, like African American EJ advocates responding to disasters, adolescent Black girls have taken it upon themselves to create, build, and sustain spaces of literacy learning and development that center their experiences and needs (Greene, 2016; Muhammad & Womack, 2015). One site of this literacy learning is Multimodal Black Girl Parades.

Grams (2013) contends that parades are sites where participants can (re) define their social worlds and identities, as they galvanize to collectively and visibly celebrate those very aspects of their personhood that have been disregarded, disparaged, and oppressed by the broader society. In a study of Black, African, and Muslim parades, Abdullah (2009) explains that West Indian Carnivals in the streets of Brooklyn have provided participants with the opportunity to publicly contest their marginal status by way of celebration of the self. He argues that although these parades will invariably differ by context, a central theme of parades is always identity.

For example, newcomer immigrant paraders act out their presence publicly where spectators may observe, but not participate (Abdullah, 2009). Thus, the intention is for paraders to practice their identities freely without concern of interruption by unwanted or unwelcome guests. Moreover, Grams (2013) contends that parades often follow a route that has deep historical ties to the participants where the "actors reference past events through symbol and performance" (Grams, 2013, p. 524). I draw upon these notions to understand how Black girls use online platforms as spaces to act out their identities publicly, and how and why they offer these Black girl authors greater control over audience participation. Grams's (2013) notion of geographical historical ties illuminates Black girls' historical public perceptions and how their multimodal content may serve as a reference to past events.

Finally, parades offer an entree into understanding Black girls' multimodal authorings as they call for a consideration of public protests in writing. As noted by Stillman and Villmoare (2010), parades "provide opportunity for public claims and social challenges to social, economic, and political power" (p. 486). Because of their public nature and the disastrous contexts they resist, these parades challenge us to reconsider the concept of democracy, as they involve engagement and civic participation, emphasize exercising a right to free speech and freedom of expression, and do so while being governed by a land that through policy and cultural practice, denies participants these rights. Specifically, they evidence the concept of democracy despite government (Stillman & Villmoare, 2010), which takes into account how people have "sustained themselves, their cultural lives, and their communities, in reasonably open, and equitable ways in the face of governmental indifference, failure, and rejection" (Stillman & Villmoare, 2010, p. 486). This concept is particularly important as we consider the role of school teachers and

administrators (i.e., the face of government within the microcosm of the school) in how they handle and often uphold inequity and indifference to Black girls in school spaces of literacy learning. Given these understandings, I take up parading as a metaphor through which to understand the website the Black girls in this study created.

Theorizing Multimodal Black Girl Parades

Pedagogues of multiliteracies acknowledge that "modes of representation [are] much broader than language alone" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 5), and may vary according to culture and context. Thus, when considering the literate practices of Black girls, it is never enough to solely consider words on a page. Rather, given their multiple identities, experiences, knowledges, and backgrounds, we must consider them as whole beings and account for the various parts of their humanity, creativity, and expression in their writing as well as the location of their writing. Further, because their diverse needs are often dismissed and overlooked, a pedagogy of multimodal literacies allows us to center the multiliteracies of Black girls. As stated by Muhammad and Womack (2015), "their identities, are multiple, vast, and complex; therefore, the approach to literacy and meaning-making must be also" (p. 11). Parades, as well as the website created by the girls in this study, function as spaces of celebration, and therefore, permit the honoring of these multimodal expressions of self.

A multimodal approach to literacies allows us to denounce monolithic and standardized conceptions of literacy, instead employing broad and inclusive definitions that consider the varied identities as well as racialized and cultural literacy practices of students. Because a framework of multimodal literacy encompasses multiple modes of communication simultaneously, it allows for considerations of texts that combine "written language, design elements, and visual elements" (Serafini, 2014, p. 2). Through this lens, Black girls' visual renderings are understood as legitimate forms of writing and the girls themselves as authors. Therefore, I draw not only on the written words of the Black adolescent girls with whom I worked, but also their visual renderings, as I believe they illuminate the multiple creative and celebratory literate practices of Black girlhood, highlighting the ways Black girls defiantly practice joy as a form of resistance.

Concurrently, I draw upon the work of Ruth Nicole Brown (2009, 2013) who not only defines Black girlhood as "the representations, memories, and lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful, Black, and female" (p. 1), but also acknowledges the inherent creativity of Black girls and thus utilizes methodologies of research that center "Black

women's and girls' creativity renowned for generations and generations" (p. 11). As such, I understand the creative narrative artwork in this study as the authorship of Black adolescent girls who are not only facing the usual tumult of teenage years, but doing so in their Black girl bodies, which are *at least* doubly marginalized given their race and gender (Crenshaw, 1991). Their multiple identities do not exist in a vacuum, and should not be considered as such in research. I turn to Black Girls' Literacies (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016) to help me understand the role of these identities in their writing. Thus, if parades are responses to disaster, then Multimodal Black Girl Parades are responses to the context that constrain Black girls' identities.

Born from the traditions of Black Feminism and Black Girlhood, Black Girls' Literacies (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016), further help us to understand Black girls as literate beings who enact their multiple identities by employing modes of literacies that are inextricably tied to the historical, collaborative, and intellectual/critical literacy practices of their foremothers. Muhammad and Haddix (2016) assert that new media platforms, including social media, blogs, websites, and the like, provide spaces for Black girls to enact and document self-definitions by "defy[ing] categorization and [defining] and interrupt[ing] the persistent assaults on Black girls' lives and identities" (p. 305). It is this enactment of multimodal literacy in the public digital sphere that allows Black girls to create, organize, and participate in Multimodal Black Girl Parades. I conceptualize Multimodal Black Girl Parades as celebratory spaces of collective, resistant, and joy-filled literacy learning. In these sites Black girls create and author multimodal narratives that run counter to dominant portrayals of their personhood, (re)positioning themselves as the expert authority on their own lives. Multimodal Black Girl Parades center the joy, brilliance, and dynamism of Black girlhood, imploring those spectating to engage in deep reflective work that requires them to assess their own positionality and, perhaps, silence and complicity in the subjugation of Black girls. When taken together, multimodality, Black Girlhood, and Black Girls' Literacies allow us to understand how Black girls employ their literacies in digital spaces to (1) publicly (re)define and celebrate their identities; (2) reference the past through symbols (in this instance, as they relate to colorism); and (3) challenge authoritative structures.

The Spatiality of Multimodal Black Girl Parades

Of particular importance to the notion of parades—both physical and Multimodal Black girl parades—is the spaces in which they occur. Hawthorne (2019) contends that "all social relations are grounded in spatial relations" (p. 4) and points out that scholars of Black geographies "have long been

concerned with questions of space, place, and power" (p. 1). Because the United States was founded on stolen land and built by the hands of kidnapped and enslaved Africans, questions of power, space, and race, are inextricable from any study involving Black people and Black girls in particular. Black geographies—where and how Black folks take up space—are "inherently racialized demographic patterns shaped by history and determinant of the material and physical geographies of human environments" (Davis, 2020, p. 2; see also McKittrick & Woods, 2007). Butler (2018) calls for education research that analyzes the geopolitical and sociocultural locations of Black girls in order to map our stories in theoretically rich and nuanced ways. Thus, Multimodal Black Girl Parades and multiliteracies offer a lens through which to view the digital narratives of Black girls; we cannot adequately understand what they create if we do not also consider *where* they have chosen to create. As Black girls map out space in the digital world, they engage in the practice of world-making and developing counterpublics, or "dialogic spaces that counteract the exclusionary violence of the American public sphere and offer alternative forms of assembly" (Warner, 2002, p. 85). In doing so, they create room for imagination, possibility, and the ability to refuse the social death of racialized and gendered oppression (Thomas, 2019). Multimodal parades, then, not only provide a space where Black girls can practice their multiliteracies, but where they can do so with chosen and strategic visibility, which offers them a layer of protection from disaster they may not be granted otherwise.

Methods

My positionality as a Black woman literacies scholar, teacher educator, and former secondary teacher has largely shaped my understanding of the present study. In my own life, I have often turned to the internet to celebrate accomplishments; commune with friends and family; clap back at trolls; and challenge authority. I have long considered these practices to be components of my larger self-love regimen, and through my research, have grown to understand the importance of online practices in the lives of Black women (Gabriel, 2016; Griffin, 2020; Sawyer, 2017). Moreover, as an educator of Black girls, I became interested in how these same practices might exist in my students' lives. Although we share some fundamental identities, I acknowledge that neither Black girls, nor our experiences of Black girlhood are monolithic and am acutely aware of how my experiences intersect with and diverge from those of my research partners (Garcia et al., 2020).

With this in mind I employed qualitative methods and borrowed elements from Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) out of my commitment to

conduct authentic and humanizing research that centered the girls' knowledge, voices, and experiences (Griffin, 2020; Paris, 2011). I do not claim to have conducted a YPAR study, but rather, as a researcher interested in the overall wellbeing of Black girls, I drew from its elements in my research design because of its ability to view "Black girls. . .as active participants in the research process and not mere elements to be studied" (Evans-Winters & Girls for Gender Equity, 2017, p. 417). By partnering with the girls in a process typically reserved for educators and researchers alone, I created a space for the girls to be active participants in the curriculum-making and research processes, disrupting punitive and exclusionary school policies (Evans-Winters & Girls for Gender Equity, 2017).

Research Partners and Data Sources

Throughout this article I refer to the Black adolescent girls with whom I worked as partners rather than participants. I acknowledge and emphasize the co-constructed nature of the knowledge generated from this project (Evans-Winters & Girls for Gender Equity, 2017; Mirra et al., 2015). My research partners for this project included nine Black adolescent girls who attended a public charter school in an urban mid-Atlantic city. Historically this city has been home to high numbers of Black residents, however, in recent years the city has fallen subject to gentrification, making it especially important to understand the concept of parades and what it means to parade—to take up space—in a location that is being encroached upon by unwelcomed outsiders, or modern-day colonizers. Although I had previously served at the school in several different capacities and was familiar with many of the students, I worked with the assistant principal—a Black millennial woman and my homegirl—to recruit the girls for the study. I established three criteria for research partners, and she approached students who met the criteria to ask if they would be interested in participating. Criteria included that partners must be (1) between the ages of 14 to 18 years old; (2) identify as female on all official school documents[1]; (3) self-identify as Black, African American, West Indian/Caribbean, African, or Afro-Latina. Our recruitment efforts yielded nine research partners who would embark upon this journey with me. The chart in Figure 1 depicts the age, grade, and self-identified racial and ethnic identity of each girl as noted on her introductory survey.

I drew on qualitative research methods (Barone, 2011) to collect multimodal data, including (1) a website created by the girls; (2) transcripts from focus group interviews; and (3) researcher fieldnotes. Given its multimodal nature, I drew most heavily from the website the girls created, which they entitled "Black Self Love." The group met for 45 minutes for a total of

Name	Age	Grade	Racial/Ethnic Identity
Aaliyah	15	10	African American
Brandy	16	11	African American
Chloe	17	11	black (sic)
Gabby	14	9	Black/African-american
Jada	15	9	Afro-Latina
Kelly	15	10	African-American
Raven	15	10	African American
Summer	15	9	Black
Tiana	15	9	Black

Figure 1. Demographic descriptions of research partners.

fourteen sessions on Friday mornings from January 2019 through May 2019 during the school's "family" time. In an effort to replicate the practice of gathering around a kitchen table, we fellowshipped over breakfast foods each week as we read, wrote, and discussed ideas related to self-love and literacy, especially as they pertained to Black girlhood (Haddix et al., 2016). We read works by Black women authors and poets; created playlists full of Black woman vocalists whose voices and lyrics soothed our souls; and learned with and from Black women in the community who were experts in the fields of culinary science and nutrition, finance, future planning, civic engagement, yoga and wellness, and counseling and psychology.

In three of our final four sessions together, I tasked the girls with creating a digital product that would not only articulate what they learned throughout our time together, but that could also be shared with other Black girls who sought to join them on their journey toward self-love. The girls spent the first week brainstorming, strategically deciding what platform to use. Once they decided to create a website and selected Wix as their platform, they began to discuss the layout, color scheme, what components they wanted to include on their site, and who would be responsible for which tasks. Although I remained in the room with the girls at all times, I was largely disengaged from the process of creating the website, as I did not want them to feel as though they had to report to me for approval or that

I was stifling their creativity. So often in school-based spaces of literacy learning, Black girls are restricted and policed in what to create and how they are able practice literacy (DeBlase, 2003). My goal was to disrupt this notion, and (re)position them as knowers and experts; I wanted them to trust their own instincts.

Their design process was intentional and deliberate. While Tiana and Summer worked together to write the blog entry for the website, Raven, Chloe, and Jada worked to develop a protocol they would use to interview classmates and teachers to eventually create a video for their website. Brandy designed the t-shirts that read "Beautiful in Every Shade," that the girls would wear for their group photo to post to the website. Kelly selected artwork for the homepage, Gabby chose quotes for the "Shoutouts" page, and Aaliyah wrote a list of ways for Black girls to practice self-love. Even though they were all designated specific roles, the project was truly collaborative in nature, allowing girls to jump in and assist one another where needed or requested. Each page was thoughtfully crafted in a way that engaged their various literacies and celebrated Black girlhood, and the girls laughed, danced, sang, and played as they created.

Data Analysis

I bring together multiple frameworks, including a critical multimodal analysis framework (Serafini, 2014; Turner & Griffin, 2020), Black Girlhood (Brown, 2013), and Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA; Brock, 2018) to understand the girls' website, both examining visual themes across the website ("Homepage" and "About") and individual items on each page. To begin, I modified Serafini's (2014) framework for multimodal analysis to develop a coding sheet (Turner & Griffin, 2020) for the individual images on the website (see Figure 2). His tripartite framework for analyzing multimodal texts (Serafini, 2014) consists of three analytic perspectives, including the perceptual, structural, and ideological, which he conceptualizes as a set of three concentric circles nested within subsequent perspectives. In the innermost circle is the perceptual analytic perspective that consists of the image or text itself. Here, readers assess basic visual elements of composition, including line, shape, and pattern. The middle circle, representative of the structural perspective, draws upon semiotic theories of meaning that require readers to look for meanings, themes, motifs, symbols, and recurring patterns in an image or text. Finally, the outermost ring, the ideological perspective, includes the social practices and sociohistorical contexts of images and texts, considering both history and culture. However, for my own analysis, I restructured Serafini's framework to account for unique experiences

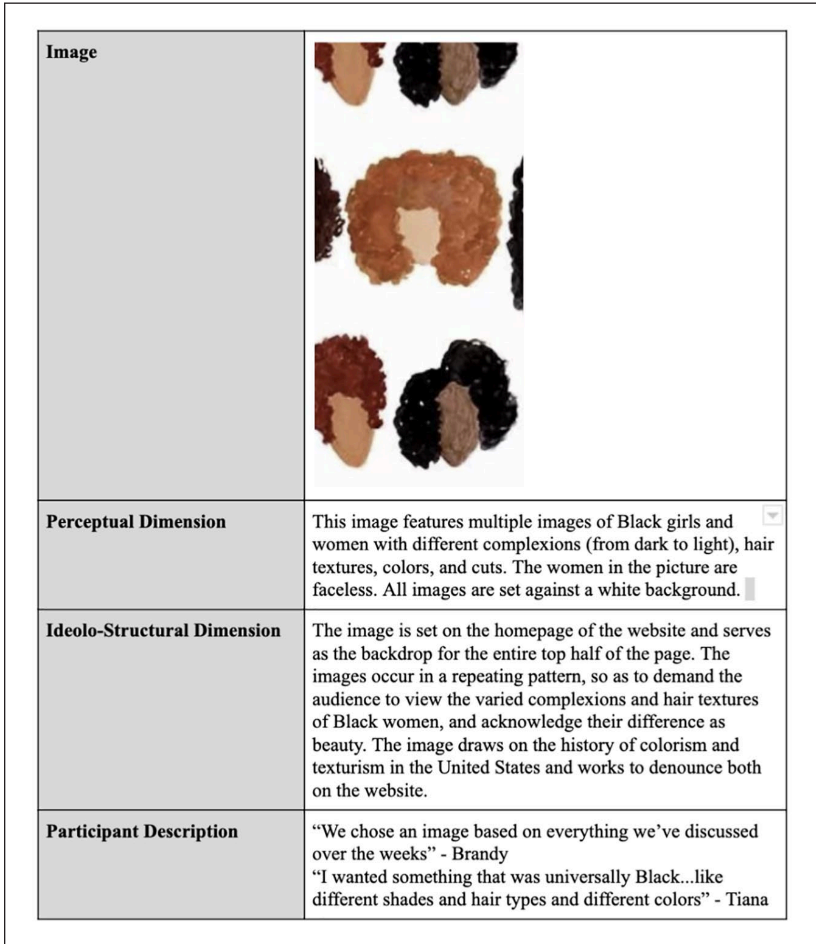

Image	
Perceptual Dimension	This image features multiple images of Black girls and women with different complexions (from dark to light), hair textures, colors, and cuts. The women in the picture are faceless. All images are set against a white background.
Ideolo-Structural Dimension	The image is set on the homepage of the website and serves as the backdrop for the entire top half of the page. The images occur in a repeating pattern, so as to demand the audience to view the varied complexions and hair textures of Black women, and acknowledge their difference as beauty. The image draws on the history of colorism and texturism in the United States and works to denounce both on the website.
Participant Description	"We chose an image based on everything we've discussed over the weeks" - Brandy "I wanted something that was universally Black...like different shades and hair types and different colors" - Tiana

Figure 2. Example of multimodal analysis coding sheet.

specific to Black Girlhood (Brown, 2013). Drawing on Andre Brock's (2018) multimodal analytic technique, CTDA, I argue that it is irresponsible, dangerous and inherently deficit-oriented to consider themes of Black girlhood without considering the context, culture, and history of race and gender in the United States. Thus, I apply a multimodal analysis framework twice (Brock, 2018): once to the perceptual elements of the website (design elements), and a second time to what I refer to as the ideolo-structural elements (those that consider the meanings, motifs, and themes of the website shaped by Black

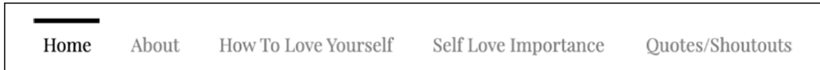

Figure 3. Web banner.

Girlhood) to analyze not only the technical and sociohistorical aspects of the visual elements, but also those that are racialized and gendered.

Site-Wide Findings

In this section I foreground "Black Self Love," the website created by nine Black adolescent girls. I focus on the literate multimodal practices the girls employed to articulate their celebration for and love of Black girlhood as well as their warnings against those who are unwelcomed critics of their personhood. I begin with an overview of the website, offering site-wide findings and then purvey the thematic findings across the site.

Home

Using the homepage as the starting point of the parade route, the girls mapped race and gender onto messages of identity and self-love. The site is vertically aligned with clear boundaries of beginnings and endings of segments. The banner at the top (Figure 3) displays links to the various pages, including an "About" page, tips on "How To Love Yourself," a blog post on the importance of self-love, and a page that pays homage to ancestral and elder Black women.

The backdrop of the homepage (see Figure 4) features faceless drawings of Black girls of different skin tones and varying hair textures, colors, and lengths. The faces are inserted against a white backdrop, communicating a disturbance to the whiteness of the page. In the center of the page is a white square with the words

Black

Self

Love.

Using color as a key element of design, the girls chose brown for the first letter of each word and for the remaining letters of each word to be black,

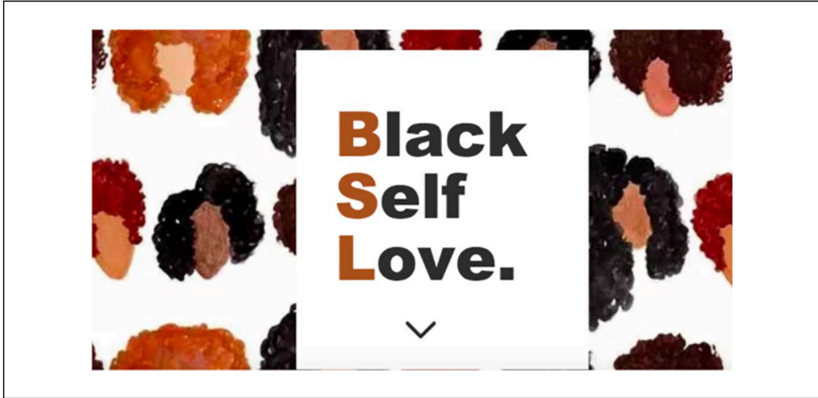

Figure 4. Homepage.

perhaps a tribute to shades of black and brown skin. "On our opening page," Tiana explained, "I wanted to feature different shades, different hair types, and even different colors. Because you know, some [Black girls] actually have red hair. So, I liked how it had a redhead girl, too, cause you don't see a lot of that. . .and we should've probably incorporated some albino people, too. Cause you don't see that either." Tiana's comments reflect her thoughts around the inclusion of various representations of Black girls across varied complexions, specifically those that she believes often go unrecognized. Her comments along with the pictures challenge viewers to think about the United States' fraught history with colorism, the inter- and intra-racial discrimination based on skin color stratification (Hunter, 2007) with a preference toward whiteness. Guided by this thoughtfulness, the girls designed a webpage that would celebrate a range of Black girls with varying skin tones.

The homepage, which celebrates various Black girl phenotypes, is a visual love letter to Black girls. It features the varying skin tones, hair textures, and styles of Black girls, celebrating them not as "beautiful for a. . .," a backhanded compliment often ascribed to Black girls, but rather beautiful because.

As you scroll down the page, the faces disappear and a short orange line, a banner, comes into sight, denoting a transition in the page (Serafini, 2010) from one section to the next. Below it, the word "SELF" slowly materializes from left to right (Figure 5). Underneath each letter is a word, creating an acrostic poem horizontally across the page. The words that make up "SELF," "SAFE," "EMBRACE," "LAVISH," and "FINE," are written below each

Figure 5. SELF acrostic poem.

letter. This acronym serves as a statement by, for, and about Black women, and below each word follows an explanation or definition of the concept. For instance, beneath the letter S for the word SAFE is a quote by the late Dr. Maya Angelou. The quote is in all capital letters and reads "YOU ALONE ARE ENOUGH. YOU HAVE NOTHING TO PROVE TO ANYONE." Summer explained that she "[hopes] the website lets people know there's a community out there to support them. . .to let them know you have support, you have community," echoing the theme of safety on this page for Black girls. Each of the messages the girls wrote in the poem acts as a calling in of Black girls to join in the jubilation of the parade. The call welcomes them and affirms that they are safe; that they can rest, rather than strive, as they freely celebrate and come into their full selves. While visiting the site, they do not have to not have to perform a version of self that might be necessary for survival outside of this page, but rather, as those in parades often do, can be themselves freely and openly.

Nestled between the first and second acrostic poems is a video the girls created, featuring Black members of the school community, the majority of whom are women and girls; all are unambiguously Black. The placement of the video is reminiscent of a float in the middle of those marching in a physical parade. In order to produce, write, and direct the video, the girls worked together to develop interview questions and use their cell phones to record classmates' and teachers' responses to questions of how they define and practice self-love, especially as it relates to their Blackness and, when appropriate, girlhood. The recordings are set in classrooms and hallways decorated with brightly colored student artwork. Playing softly in the background of the video is an instrumental of Beyoncé's rendition of Before I Let Go from her live performance at Coachella. Video participants proclaimed that they love their faces and bodies and practice self-love by instilling self-confidence in themselves and others, using gentle words toward themselves, and knowing when to "isolate yourself from all of the other things around you." Their statements echo the sentiments of the site, and the accompanying background

Figure 6. LOVE acrostic poem.

music serves as a triumphal reminder of the overall theme of the website. Like a parade float, the video serves as a physical celebration that calls attention to the people who are spatially elevated by the float, uplifting their voices as inspiration, and joy.

Further down the page is a second orange line, communicating a final transition. Below it, is a second acrostic poem for the word "LOVE" (Figure 6). What is different between this section and the earlier poem, "SELF" however, is that the girls have chosen to write their own quotes, claiming their stake as experts on the topics of Black girlhood and self-love, asserting, valuing, and centering their knowledge in a schooling system that indicates otherwise.

"LOVE" is a reminder of all of the things Black girls are free to be when they are celebrated and wrapped in love of self and other Black girls. The website, like a parade, serves as a space where they can be lively, original, vivacious and who they are at their very essence without the looming presence of whiteness and patriarchy. To be "lively" and "vivacious" means to cast off their cares, throwing away the worries of being labeled a "loud Black girl" (Fordham, 1993) by those who might not understand that their voices are expressions of joy that is fully realized when they are "happier, healthier, and better." To claim the word "original" is to recognize and accept that Black girls are "unnormal" (Player, 2018); that to be uniquely different is to be lovable. Lastly, to embrace all of these elements of self is the essence of celebrating Black girlhood (Brown, 2009; Player, 2021). The girls' use of the word "essence" is a lesson in the idea that self-love as a Black girl means to allow "love [to fill] your soul and [bring] you an inner peace." The word "peace" as the final word in the two acrostic poems is no mistake—it is an expression of the truth that to be at peace with your Black girlhood may be the highest expression of Black girl celebration. To find a community of Black girls who affirm you, encouraging love for self, especially as it relates to racialized and gendered identities, is the epitome of a Multimodal Black Girl Parade.

About

Throughout our time together, the girls and I engaged in several conversations about the importance of naming and defining ourselves before we give society the chance to do so. Given that "African-American women have long struggled to find alternative locations and epistemologies for validating our own self definitions" (Collins, 2000, p. 269), naming is a Black feminist act that plays an especially important role in the lives of Black girls. Because of their unique gendered and racialized struggle, self-definition for Black girls is a fight against stereotypes and attitudes that render them simultaneously hper- and invisible. Thus, as Black girls read, write, speak, perform, and create texts in ways that bring them closer to selfhood, they are resisting such subjugation through literate acts (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016). Likewise, Black girls seek to establish selfhood amidst negative perceptions as an act of self-love through resistance and agency (Muhammad & Womack, 2015). In doing so, they are able to embody the sentiments of a parade and "more accurately able to self-define and rebel in the face of often deficitizing, shallow, or one-note definitions of women and girls of color" (Player, 2018, p. 34). The "About" page of the girls' website, then, is an act of self-definition. It is the space where the girls both present and define themselves for their audience, anticipating and speaking back to any (mis)representations.

Splayed across the top of the "About" page is a picture with seven of the nine girls[2] and myself (see Figure 7). The girls chose a brick wall as the backdrop for our picture; the rigidity of the wall contrasted by the warm smiles on our faces. We are wearing matching t-shirts designed by Brandy. The shirts read

> BEAUTI
>
> FUL
>
> IN
>
> EVERY
>
> SHADE

echoing Tiana's sentiments in her vision for the website's homepage. The t-shirts are black and include the same golden yellow lettering at the bottom of every page of the site. Abdullah (2009) suggests that within parades, clothes serve as nonverbal communication, bringing two or more people into dialogue. Thus, the shirts not only communicate the girls' perceptions of their

Figure 7. About page photo.

own beauty, they also bring them into conversation with a long history of colorism discourse within and outside of Black communities.

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

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

Their self-definition on this page serves as a mission statement. It is reminiscent of a sign or banner paraders might hold, identifying themselves to the audience, so as not to get them confused with any other group. Their statement that they are “some” of the young Black women at their school highlights their existence within a larger community of young Black women. The assertion that they discuss “self-love specifically relating to

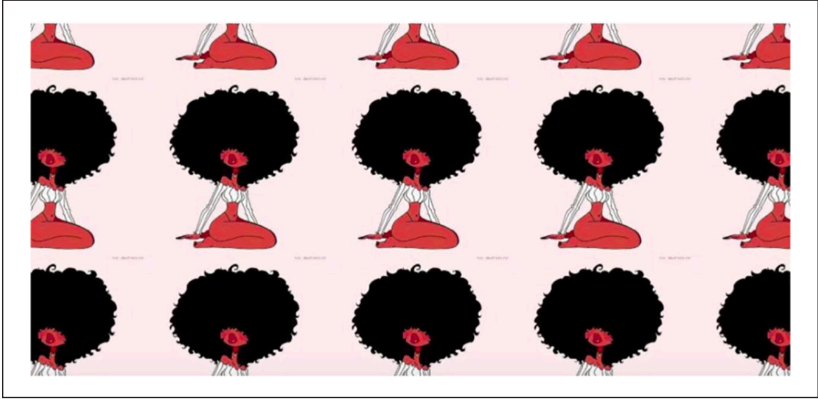

Figure 8. How to love yourself.

African-Americans" leaves no room for question about for whom they have created the site. They have chosen to center and proclaim Blackness and womanness in their discussions of self-love. Lastly, their proclamation that they "hope to share what [they've] learned" is a second calling in to other Black girls and to those who love Black girls like they do. The page concludes with the word "Love," typed in red followed by a list of all of their names. Through the list, they establish ownership and give themselves credit for the creation of the website and as doers of the work.

How to Love Yourself

When viewers click on the page labeled "How to Love Yourself" they are greeted by an image of a Black woman (Figure 8). Her image is reminiscent of Betty Boop, who is often rumored to be based on a Black woman. She has brown skin, a large black afro, and thick red lips. Her eyes are hidden; we cannot see where she is looking, although the position of her head suggests she is staring directly at the viewer. She is wearing a white crop top and her legs are folded beneath her seat. Her image is repeated throughout the page and aligned both vertically and horizontally to form rows, as if in a parade of her own. Her confident stance and direct—although hidden—glare are an unapologetic nod to her unambiguously Black features (i.e., coarse hair, thick lips, wide hips); features that have historically been positioned as ugly or animalistic (i.e., Saarjte Baartman). Conceptualized here as a large balloon in a parade, which both looms over paraders and stands as a symbol of those participating in the parade, the image of this woman

provides a critical reader response to a troubling history wrapped in the appropriation and erasure of Black girls' and women's culture and aesthetics by restorying a popular image of a well-known cartoon character (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016). It "[provides] us with different ways to think about black female subjectivity and black female spectatorship" (hooks, 2003, p. 104). Their reader response centers their historical and contemporary knowledge of the ways Black women's bodies have been disregarded. Their repositioning of this character, especially given her direct gaze at the audience, politicizes the gaze and reorients their positionality from subjects of the gaze to gazers themselves.

As viewers scroll down the page, they are confronted with a list of "17 Tips on Self Love." Largely informed by Lizzo's piece, *Self-care has to be rooted in self-preservation, not just mimosas and spa days* (Lizzo, 2019; see also Lorde, 1984), and our ongoing discussions, the tips range from advice about relaxation and positive messaging to walking courageously and making informed voting decisions, suggesting that for Black folks' our self-love is always political. The tips are written in black in a numerical list and centered on a white background, drawing our attention directly to the words and simultaneously disrupting the pristine whiteness of the page itself. The list acts as a banner stating the group's stance on self-love and offering support to community members who may not be parading themselves, but rather viewing from the sidelines.

Quotes/Shoutouts

Finally, the shoutouts page is a nod to the collective nature of parades. It features quotes by famous Black women and includes a space for comments that invites spectators to participate in a way that has been pre-determined by those organizing the parade. The page includes three rectangular boxes within gray lines. At the top left of the box is an avatar with the picture from the home page. The words "Quote of the Day!" are written in Black, but when the mouse scrolls over them, the words turn orange. Inside of each box is a quote by a famous Black woman (see Figure 9).

The first is by supermodel Tyra Banks, who has publicly discussed her own struggles with self-perception as a curvy Black woman within an industry known for centering Eurocentric notions of beauty. The quote reads, "Self-love has very little to do with how you feel about your outer self. It's about accepting all of yourself." The second quote, by Janelle Monae, a queer Black woman singer/actress states, "Even if it makes others uncomfortable, I will love who I am." Monae's statement suggests that as a queer Black woman, her presence is inherently uncomfortable for some people and, in

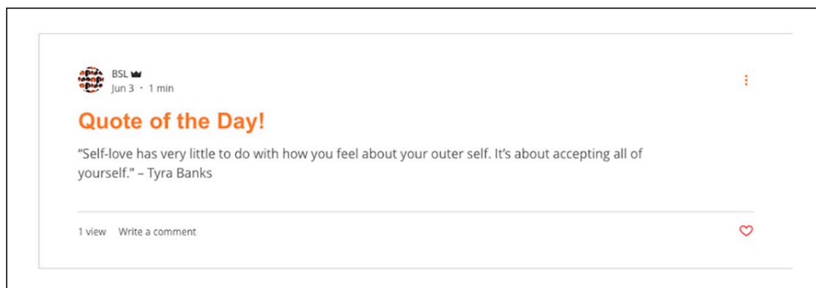

Figure 9. Quote of the day!

spite of this, she loves herself completely and refuses to shrink herself to put others at ease. The last quote, by the late Dr. Angelou reads, "Success is liking yourself, liking what you do, and liking how you do it." Taken together, the quotes express the importance of collectivity in multimodal authorship. Below the quotes, the girls invite spectators to interact with the content by "liking" or commenting on each quote, again calling in other Black girls and women as active participants on the site. They call for Black women and girls, specifically, to engage and commune with them. Importantly, the girls strategically chose both where and how spectators would participate, limiting comments to this page alone. Their parade, like many Black parades, dictates who can participate and under what circumstances.

A Multimodal Black Girl Parade: Thematic Findings

In this section, I present the thematic findings of "Black Self Love." In particular, I examine the written and visual renderings on the website related to three major themes, and argue that Black adolescent girls (1) publicly (re) define and celebrate Black girl identities by (2) referencing the past through symbols, specifically as it pertains to colorism, and (3) challenging authoritative structures.

Publicly (Re)Defining and Celebrating Black Girl Identities

Often, the online work of Black girls and women involves (re)defining their identities as a means to disrupt and write against deficit notions projected onto them in a white, patriarchal society (Ellison, 2017; Ellison & Kirkland, 2014; McArthur, 2016; Muhammad & Womack, 2015; Sawyer, 2017; Steele,

2011). Lu and Steele (2019) contend that when Black people post joyful images online, they

> challenge mainstream media's attempts to fix Black people and Black life into a position of death and despair; assert Black people as fully human, capable of experiencing and expressing a full, dynamic range of emotion; and capture, share, and circulate expressions of Black life without concern for the white gaze. (p. 829)

Drawing from colloquial traditions of African American Language and vernacular (Smitherman, 2000), I contend that joy, unlike happiness, is not bound by circumstances (Lu & Steele, 2019), and that for Black folks, joy and pain always co-exist (West, 2010). Because Blackness has historically "been treated as the antithesis of life. . ..disassociated from joy" (Lu & Steele, 2019, p. 830) and vulnerable to premature death, joy as a revolutionary act of defiance runs counter to mainstream narratives that position Black folks as deviant, violent criminals (Dixon & Maddox, 2005). Black folks have long known that indeed "resistance is the secret of joy" (Walker, 1997, p. 281). Brown's (2009, 2013) emphasis on celebrating Black girlhood is a call to learn from the inherent joy, dynamism, and insight Black girls possess. The About Page picture (Figure 7) represents just that.

The picture was taken on the school grounds during our last session together. The girls chose the rough brick wall as the backdrop, highlighting their warm smiles against the rigidity of schooling spaces for Black girls (Morris, 2016). In another picture not included on the site, the girls share a warm embrace and show even brighter smiles. The live picture function on iPhone allows you to hear the giggles that occurred during the taking of the photo. In both images, their easygoing postures, and the creativity and pride they express through their t-shirts and hairstyles exemplify a celebratory joy that exists in spite of the oppressive nature of schools. The public nature of the website serves as a public celebration of their identities. In both their visual expression and choice to post the picture to a public platform, the girls (re)claim, (re)ascribe, and (re)define their identities as fully human and capable of experiencing, participating in, and creating joy, even in the face of oppression.

Referencing the Past through Symbols of Colorism

The animated images the girls chose for the website are symbolic celebrations that highlight and celebrate the varied skin tones and hair textures of

Black women and girls, problematizing a history of colorism. Colorism is discrimination based on skin tone—and is often associated with facial features and hair textures as well as skin tone—and has existed since the days of settler colonialism and enslavement (Kendall, 2020). It "disadvantages dark-skinned people while privileging those with lighter skin" and is "linked to lower job prospects, difficulty getting promoted into high-level positions, low marriage rates, higher rates of arrests, and longer prison terms" (Kendall, 2020, pp. 106–107). The media is often responsible for overemphasizing images of poverty, crime, and violence related to dark-skinned Black people to draw on fear associated with Blackness (Dixon & Maddox, 2005). Dark-skinned Black women and girls, then, are depicted as "Gross," (as on the Disney cartoon the *Proud Family*), loud, aggressive, unattractive, undesirable, uneducated, or welfare mothers or daughters (Collins, 2000; Greene, 2016; Steele, 2016).

The Black girls with whom I worked sought to acknowledge, reference, and reposition these narratives through their website. To begin the images referenced in figures four and seven center, celebrate, and position as beautiful the varied skin tones, hair textures, and facial and body features of Black girls and women. These images take portrayals usually reserved for comic relief (Steele, 2016) or public critique (Dixon & Maddox, 2005) and reappropriate them, referencing past tensions and highlighting what is beautiful about them. Further, the affirmation written across their t-shirts (Figure 7) situates them within the historical dialogue about the problematics of colorism and critiques notions that lighter shades of skin are or should be valued or privileged above darker shades of Black skin.

Challenging Authoritative Structures

It is no secret that generally schools are places of racialized and gendered violence toward Black girls (Morris, 2016; Staples, 2017) and that literacy classrooms, specifically, center the voices, knowledge, and experiences of white people, especially cis-gender, heterosexual white men (DeBlase, 2003; Sutherland, 2005). In my work with the girls, they often spoke about their displeasure with their schooling experiences given many educators' preference toward whiteness, especially regarding curriculum. Many of them echoed Raven's sentiments that "we never [get] a chance to talk about Black people in general. It's always the white man or the white lady." As such, it did not surprise me when the quotes they chose to invoke on the website were those of Black women. The quotes position these women as authors and authority figures on Blackness and Black girlhood. In selecting and centering these quotes, the girls de-emphasize dominant academic knowledge they are

presented in classrooms, instead esteeming the voices of Black women. This choice to challenge academic authority is but one of the ways they continue in the act of parading.

Another is the means by which they created the website. The project was student-selected and created with little influence, guidance, or direction from me as the researcher. Rather, the girls participated in the democratic process (Stillman & Villmoare, 2010) of creating the website in a manner that was unconstrained by the presence of authoritative scrutiny and assessment. The very process by which they created their Multimodal Black Girl Parade challenges authoritative notions of how literacy learning can and should occur.

Conclusion and Implications for Black Girl Parades

Black girls' lives and literacies are worthy of celebration, especially amidst chaos and oppression. Their parades—their Black [Girl] Parades, in the words of Queen Bey—are worthy of our understanding. Conceptualizing Black girls' multimodal renderings as parades reminds us of that fact and engages us in the act of celebratory spectatorship. Indeed, Multimodal Black Girl Parades provide a celebratory lens through which to analyze a website created by nine Black adolescent girls; a lens I hope will be taken up in future research to understand how Black girls construct and (re)define their identities through their literate practices.

Theorizing Black girls' multimodal writings as parades provides several implications for literacy practice and research. To begin, the findings of this study allow us to envision a schooling experience for Black girls free of physical, emotional, and academic policing and violence. Black girls' bodies (Morris, 2016), thoughts (Jones, 2020), and engagements online (Haddix & Sealey-Ruiz, 2012) need not be subjected to restraint, containment, or penalization in order for learning to occur. While police often show up to parades to escort and protect those participating in the celebration, they have never been a viable option for Black communities (Alexander, 2011; Davis, 2003). As such, educators cannot and should not replicate the role of police in classrooms and schools. Rather, they must serve as co-conspirators to the liberation of Black girls. The above study provides an example of what is possible when Black girls feel liberated to create and engage in literate practices without the threat of punitive repercussions. Literacy educators must work to actively change their minds about Black girlhood, and disrupt the idea that to educate a Black girl requires restraint and containment. Instead, conceptualizing Black girls' literate renderings as a parade, challenges educators to take up the notion of celebration and implores them to celebrate *with* Black girls

as they parade (Clifton, 1993). Thus, educators must not presume to lead or direct, but instead, be ready and willing to spectate in celebration and/or march alongside Black girls as they celebrate, express joy, and (re)define their identities through their literate practices.

In particular, they must seek to genuinely understand, acknowledge, uplift and invite the creative, embodied, and performative literacies of Black girls into classrooms. The conceptualization of a Multimodal Black Girl Parade offers us another way to *do* education. Brown (2009, 2013) emphasizes Black girls' varied ways of knowing and expression, arguing that educators should work to celebrate rather than silence their knowledge. The girls in my study exhibited this same type of expression on their website, authoring narratives of Black girlhood that were informed by their understandings of their experiences both past and present. Their collective reading and writing practices led them to render articulations of themselves that were more than mere regurgitations of knowledge, but knowledge production (McArthur & Muhammad, 2020). Allowing Black girls to create without the constraints of rigid grading standards or teacher interference allows opportunities for collective authorship and learning experiences (i.e. democracy despite government—Stillman & Villmoare, 2010). Given the relevance of the subject matter to their lives and personal interest in the subject, the girls in this project were not only engaged themselves, but worked to engage their larger school community. I offer, then, that moving forward, literacy teachers create curricular, and instructional opportunities that allow Black girls to work together to read and write about topics related to their personal identities and histories.

Concurrently, Multimodal Black Girl Parades challenge us to think about the narratives and images we present to students in classrooms. Yes, the history of Black folks in the United States is fraught with racial tensions, from the arrival of the first slave ship, to the Civil Rights Movement, and the current Black Lives Matter movement. Histories of struggle and suffering are indeed important to teach so that we can understand the role of white supremacy in maintaining systemic and structural injustice today. We should also consider, however, that these narratives have and continue to exist alongside narratives of Black joy, Black love, and Black celebration. Parades amidst challenging times remind us of that. Thus, literacy educators must grapple with the idea that if literacy curricula do not supply students, particularly Black girls, with enough material to create their own parades, then their curricular choices are inherently limited and myopic. Literacy researchers must also begin to include stories of Black girls' joy and celebration in their critical research. Yes, schools work to perpetuate the oppression of Black girls in very real ways, but Black girls are also

working to resist that oppression through joyful acts. When we focus solely on the oppression they face, we rob Black girls of their full humanity and spectrum of emotions (Lu & Steele, 2019). Focusing on multimodal parades and returning to joy disrupts monolithic notions about Black girls and confronts us with our own biased ideas about who they are capable of being, even in the face of oppression.

Further, this study has implications for elevating Black girls as knowledge makers, particularly in the curriculum writing process. Like physical parades, Multimodal Black Girl Parades make the work, knowledge, and brilliance of Black girls visible and call us to think about how we, as educators, invite them to participate alongside us in the knowledge-making process. The girls in this study designed and executed the project on their own without adult assistance or interference. The manifestation of the project serves as a reminder that Black girls are capable of any and everything when their teachers see, acknowledge, and love their brilliance. Educators, then, must meet Black girls where they are and engage them in instructional collaboration and development. Teachers must ask questions to learn about what Black girls feel is being left out of classroom discussion and curriculum and how they might work together to incorporate those missing pieces. Such acts create opportunities for teachers to develop curriculum that centers Black girls in literacy learning and offer humanizing pedagogy (Camangian, 2015; Muhammad, 2019). Similarly, researchers must consider what it means not only to study Black girls, but to create knowledge *with* Black girls as they guide our thinking, because they, more than anyone, are experts of their own lives.

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Notes

1. Given that IRB requires participants had to have a permission slip signed to participate, this choice was made to protect any students who identify as

trans or gender non-binary at school, but not have come out to their parents or families at home.

2. Two of the girls were sick and absent from school on the day of the photo.

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