Brown Girls Dreaming: Adolescent Black Girls' Futuremaking through Multimodal Representations of Race, Gender, and Career Aspirations

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Inspired by Jacqueline Woodson's (2014) memoir, this article examines the ways Tamika and Malia, two African American adolescent girls and fraternal twins, act as Brown girl dreamers and articulate their career aspirations through multimodal compositions. Drawing on the psychological literature on youths' career aspirations, theories related to Black Girlhood and Black Girls' Literacies, and case study methodologies, we investigated two key questions: (1) In what ways do two Black adolescent girls represent their career dreams through drawings/sketches created in 2012 and digital dream boards designed in 2018? and (2) Across their 2018 digital career dream boards, what common visual images do two Black adolescent girls curate and interpret to imagine and/or (re)imagine their futures? We composed case studies by integrating rich data from the girls' 2012 career dream drawings, their 2018 digital career dream boards, and transcripts from individual interviews and a 60-minute focus group interview. Our analyses of the visual images and the interview transcripts revealed that Tamika and Malia employed visual design devices to illustrate their career aspirations while honoring their identities as young Black women. Cross-case analyses further demonstrated that as futuremakers, Tamika and Malia critiqued the (under) representations of Black career women and articulated the need for multiliteracies, in the form of professional, aspirational auditory (i.e., music), and life literacies that protect and advance their own future interests and goals. We conclude with implications for how educators can (re) position Black adolescent girls as multiliterate futuremakers in secondary classrooms and center their career aspirations in English language arts curriculum.

"*I want to be a writer.*" With those six simple words in *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014), Jacqueline Woodson brought to light a childhood dream that would inspire her for years to come. At the age of 3, Woodson's passion for writing was ignited as she printed the letter *J* with her older sister's guiding hand. As a young girl, Woodson faced uncertainties and self-doubts about her writing; it was not until she read a library book filled with African American characters that she began to believe that her Black girl ideas, stories, and words were her "brilliance" (Woodson, 2014, p.

246). In *Brown Girl Dreaming,* Woodson envisioned, depicted, and situated herself as a futuremaker—a young Black girl who fought to define and fulfill her dreams of becoming a writer in order to pay homage to her family and resist the erasure of Black girls/women/people in literature. Through *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Woodson provides an opportunity to closely *listen* to the dreams of a young Black girl. In turn, we—two Black women literacy scholars and Jacqueline Woodson fangirls—have become interested in listening to other young Black girls who are dreaming, asking the questions: What types of professional work do young Black girls dream about doing? What career futures do they desire and why? If Woodson articulated and achieved her dreams of becoming a professional writer through literate practices (e.g., reading, writing), how might adolescent Black girls of the twenty-first century use their literacies to author their own professional and personal futures?

Inspired by these questions, we feature the career dreams and future goals articulated by two African American girls and fraternal twin sisters, Tamika and Malia,[1] in this article. Like many youths, Tamika and Malia are engaging with an essential task of adolescence: identifying their future professional goals and life aspirations (Andreassen, 2016; Watson & McMahon, 2005). However, as young Black girls, Tamika and Malia are striving to determine their own career dreams and assert their humanity in a society where "structural racism, sexism, and cultural hegemony . . . powerfully influences the lives and futures of Black females" (Richardson, 2002, p. 676). In seeking to understand and affirm Tamika and Malia as Brown girls dreaming in a broken world (Toliver, 2020), we pose the following research questions:

1. In what ways do two Black adolescent girls represent their career dreams through drawings/sketches created in 2012 and digital dream boards designed in 2018?
2. Across their 2018 digital career dream boards, what common visual images do two Black adolescent girls curate and interpret to imagine and/or (re)imagine their futures?

Theorizing Black Girls' Career Dreams

Career dreams are "an individual's point-in-time expressions of educational and occupational goals" (Andreassen, 2016, p. 16). Psychological research demonstrates that youths' career aspirations develop in early childhood and either change or are solidified throughout adolescence (Andreassen, 2016; Watson & McMahon, 2005). Adolescence is typically the developmental period when "idealistic aspirations are adapted through more realistic expectations of what is actually reachable" (Andreassen, 2016, p. 16) based on youths' identity characteristics (e.g., race, gender), academic experiences, life goals, personal interests, and perceptions of the workplace. While the psychological literature provides a foundational understanding of youths' career dreams as a developmental process, we were dismayed to find that the career aspirations and futuremaking experiences of Black girls are "often

generalized with the experiences of Black males and White, Western, middle class girls, which continues to leave Black girls voiceless and their experiences invisible" (Greene, 2016, p. 274). In the few psychological studies where Black girls' career aspirations are examined, their Blackness and femaleness are framed as deficits to be overcome, suggesting that Black girls diminish themselves, their career aspirations, and their overall expectations for life success because society perceives their race and gender as cultural "disadvantages." S. P. Brown (1996) contends that as a result of "the *dual challenges* of race and gender" (emphasis added, p. 90), Black adolescent girls, regardless of socioeconomic status, "tend to set lower occupational goals and predict as well as expect lower occupational success" (p. 91). Relatedly, while narratives of Black women's success in predominantly White and male occupations exist, "there are *even more narratives* of complacency, defeat, and an inability to progress" (emphasis added, Farinde, 2012, p. 332), which may ultimately deter Black girls from pursuing those career fields.

We turned to Black Girlhood theories to conceptualize African American girls' career aspirations in more affirming ways. Rooted in Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1991; hooks, 1993) and Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), Black Girlhood theories acknowledge that Black girls' and women's experiences are unique based on their raced *and* gendered identities. These inseparable social identities function in tandem, creating intersecting and interlocking oppressions that are multiplicative rather than additive (Collins, 1991; Crenshaw, 1991). While Black girls and women are not a homogenous group, their intersectional epistemologies and experiences illuminate core themes—including the legacy of struggle, self-definition, resistance, political advocacy, and creativity—which profoundly shape their lives and futures (R. N. Brown, 2013; Collins, 1991; Halliday & Brown, 2018; hooks, 1993).

Black Girlhood theories offer a contextualized perspective on how race, gender, and age intersect to profoundly shape Black girls' career aspirations. Given that age is an undertheorized aspect of intersectionality (P. H. Collins, personal communication, October 19, 2018), we examined conceptions of Black girls' youthfulness advanced by Black women literacy scholars (Henry, 1998; Kinloch, 2010; Price-Dennis, Muhammad, Womack, McArthur, & Haddix, 2017) and prominent Black Girlhood theorists (R. N. Brown, 2013; Halliday & Brown, 2018). Moreover, Sealey-Ruiz's (2016) question, "What does it mean to be young, Black, and female in America?" (p. 290) called us to think more deeply about how young Black girls continually define their own futures while simultaneously navigating (mis)representations of Black girl/womanhood. Through a Black Girlhood lens, we theorized career dreams as creative spaces where young Black girls manifest their full humanity by naming and (re)claiming the future life aspirations that *they* desire. More specifically, our study illuminates Malia and Tamika's creative multimodal practices for designing images that express what their dreams for the future have become and are becoming. In doing so, we find it appropriate to deem Malia and Tamika both dreamers *and* visionaries, recognizing the criticality, creativity, and multimodal literacy skills that Black adolescent girls must have to make futures that resist deficit images of Black women and girls.

Black Adolescent Girls as (Career) Dreamers: Futuremaking with Black Girls' Literacies

We assert that Black adolescent girls' creative potential for dreaming and futuremaking is inextricably connected to their Black Girls' Literacies. Black Girls' Literacies are "multiple, tied to identities, historical, collaborative, intellectual, and political/critical "(Muhammad & Haddix, 2016, p. 325), meaning that Black girls affirm their intersectional identities by engaging and enacting varying modes of literacies rooted in the historical, collective, and liberatory literacy practices of their foremothers. Importantly, Black Girls' Literacies function as "ways of knowing and acting and the development of skills, vernacular expressive arts and crafts that help females to advance and protect themselves and their loved ones in society" (Richardson, 2002, p. 680). The protective role that Black Girls' Literacies play for African American girls is crucial, especially as they seek to make or articulate futures that counter controlling images (Collins, 1991) proliferating in schools (and other social institutions). In English classrooms, Black girls are rendered invisible in canonical texts and Eurocentric curricula (Griffin & James, 2018), erased by the silencing of their voices, dreams, knowledge, and textual interpretations (Carter, 2006). Distorted images of Black girls as illiterate, loud, aggressive, and disrespectful permeate English classrooms (Henry, 1998; Kinloch, 2010; Price-Dennis et al., 2017; Sealey-Ruiz, 2016), which ultimately minimize Black girls' literate potential, marginalize their intersectional identities, and perpetuate society's visions of fractured and tragic futures for Black girls and women.

Despite pervasive controlling images in schools and society, Black girls continue to dream about the futures they want to see for themselves. Research demonstrates how Black girls have countered deficit views of their future lives through written literacies, using "their pens to make sense of their identities for their personal development" (Muhammad & Womack, 2015, p. 8) and to determine their own destinies. For example, the urban Black girls in Schultz's (1996) study composed their own futures in journals and senior-year writing projects outlining their career goals (e.g., nursing, cosmetology), their future plans, and their struggles to achieve their visions. More recently, scholars have begun to examine how Black adolescent girls engage *multiliteracies* to imagine their own social futures (New London Group, 1996). Muhammad and Womack (2015) found that Black adolescent girls' multimodal compositions (created using Pinterest or Prezi) challenged stereotypical images of Black girlhood and reaffirmed more optimistic representations of their own life trajectories. Dunn, Neville, and Vellanki (2018) demonstrate how Black teen girls, in collaboration with other youth of Color, (re)imagined possibilities for more socially just futures with/in multimodal texts (e.g., posters/visual images, sculptures) that disrupted the school-to-prison pipeline, racial violence, and high-stakes testing. Along similar lines, 18-year-old Sara, an African American Muslim woman, collaborated with a friend to produce a short documentary that critiqued the religious oppression that Muslims experience in America and imagined hopeful and equitable futures for all (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2018). Taken together, these findings suggest a continued need to investigate how Black adolescent girls employ

Black Girls' Literacies within multimodal spaces to author their own futures and imagine life possibilities in years to come.

Methods

Our positionalities as Black women literacy scholars have profoundly shaped the main premise of our study—that Black girls' *futures* matter. Thus, we openly shared our own positionalities, as Black women *and* dreamers, with Malia and Tamika. Jennifer shared how her dreams of becoming an endowed university professor and directing an interdisciplinary research center on Black futurity have emanated from her experiences as a professor at a predominantly White university; as a former college access counselor in a large urban secondary school; and as the mother of two Black teenage boys. Autumn, a former secondary English educator and doctoral student at the time, shared her own dreams of becoming a tenured professor at a research university, highlighting her desire to use her scholarship to change classroom approaches to literacy learning to center the needs and interests of Black students. As Black women researchers, we share common interests, cultural beliefs, and racial perspectives that connect us through "collective Black Girl [experiences]" (Greene, 2016, p. 294), yet we also acknowledge that our personal histories, trajectories, and backgrounds vary. Together, we conducted this inquiry by drawing upon a rich panoply of experiences anchored by our professional and personal lives, a shared commitment to conducting humanizing research (Paris, 2011), and our determination to help Black girls articulate and achieve the futures they desire.

Case Study Participants and Data Sources

Our case study participants were Tamika and Malia, fraternal twin sisters who identified as African American girls. Born in 2002, the girls lived in a predominantly African American community with their mother, a faculty member at a predominantly White public university, and their father, a dentist at a local Historically Black College and University (HBCU). As young girls, Tamika and Malia attended a private elementary school, and both girls enjoyed reading, sports, and spending time with friends. As teens, Tamika and Malia were enrolled in a private Catholic co-ed high school serving nearly 900 students. In their freshman year (2017–2018), Tamika and Malia completed college preparatory coursework, including English Literature and Composition, algebra, and physics, and both girls reported positive perceptions of their teachers and classes.

Drawing on case study methodologies (Barone, 2011), we marshaled rich visual and verbal data derived from studies conducted in 2012 and 2018, including (a) the girls' career dream drawings; (b) the girls' digital career dream boards; (c) transcripts from individual interviews with the girls; (d) transcripts from a focus group interview with the girls and the researchers; and (e) researcher field notes. The girls' visual images, created in 2012 and 2018, were especially pertinent for our descriptive case studies of the girls' career aspirations. Tamika and Malia created the 2012 career dream drawings as participants in a qualitative study conducted in

a university-sponsored reading program. During a 1-hour "design session" (Turner, 2016) with Jennifer and three other children of color, nine-year-old Tamika and Malia created their career dream drawings and were informally interviewed about their visual images. Jennifer's field notes from the design session indicated that Tamika and Malia were "leaders in the group" who were "energetic, friendly, and helpful—they even insisted on cleaning up the papers, crayons, and markers."

Our case studies also featured the digital career dream boards that Tamika and Malia created during a June 2018 design session. Sitting around a large conference table with a spread of fruit, juices, and bagels, we invited 15-year-old Tamika and Malia to use Padlet, a free digital bulletin-boarding tool, to create a career dream board. We asked that their career dream boards include five to ten images, videos, or songs that represented their career aspirations and imagined professional identities. We remained in the room with the girls; however, we wrote field notes after the session to ensure that they didn't feel as if they were being "watched." We played popular songs by SZA, Kendrick Lamar, Ella Mai, and Drake, and encouraged the girls to eat and talk while they worked. The girls seemed comfortable during the design process, often singing along with the artists as they composed on their iPads, and at times laughing while pointing to images on their screens. Both girls completed their digital dream boards in about 30 minutes.

Additionally, we integrated individual and focus group interview data from the 2018 design session into our case studies. After the girls completed their digital career dream boards, Jennifer interviewed Tamika and Autumn interviewed Malia for 30–40 minutes. The interview protocol probed the girls' interpretations of their 2012 career dream drawings and 2018 digital career dream boards, providing space for the girls to reflect on their career aspirations and to discuss the meanings and memories their work evoked. During the 60-minute focus-group interview, each girl individually created a five-song playlist (including song titles and artists) that represented their future aspirations, and then they discussed their rationales with us. Next, we (the researchers) shared our own career dream boards with the girls, because we wanted our focus group to resemble a gathering around the kitchen table where "Black girls and women . . . come together, to be seen, to be heard, and to just be" (Haddix, McArthur, Muhammad, Price-Dennis, & Sealey-Ruiz, 2016, p. 380). Indeed, rich conversational spaces opened as we talked about our respective career dreams and our pathways toward achieving those goals, with the girls raising questions (e.g., "Why did you choose to join your sorority?") and making connections (e.g., "You saw [the movie] *The Hate U Give*? I want to see that!"). Finally, we discussed Sealey-Ruiz's (2016) question, "What does it mean to be young, Black, and female in America?" (p. 290), in a free-flowing conversation related to intersectionality, identity, and the digital tools that the girls perceived to be important for their futures.

Data Analysis

To understand the girls' career dreams and multimodal futuremaking, we critically analyzed the multimodal images that Tamika and Malia individually composed in 2012 and 2018 (within-case analysis) and examined the common visual images

across their 2018 digital career dream boards (cross-case analysis). We adapted Serafini's (2014) framework to develop a coding sheet that we completed for each visual image (see Figure 1).

	Tamika	Malia
Image		
Perceptual Dimension	This image features a white woman with a young white girl. The white woman is wearing a white uniform and has a clipboard in front of her on a table. The girl has her hand on her forehead and looks upset. The woman's hand is placed gently on the girls' shoulder in what looks like a consoling gesture.	This is an image of a white woman standing in a maroon pant suit. The woman is wearing heels and has her hands in her pockets. The picture seems to be an ad for a clothing company.
Structural Dimension	This image is placed in the center of Tamika's dream board and is also the largest of all the images. She selected it because she thought it represented a child psychologist or counselor working with a child.	This image is placed in the third row to the right. It is the only one on Malia's career board that includes a human character. She selected this image explaining that people take women in pant suits "seriously."
Ideological Dimension	This image is the only one that features two white people on Tamika's dream board. Tamika mentioned that psychology is not a field where she sees many Black people represented and that her Google search did not yield many images of Black psychologists.	This image features a white woman and is the only picture on Malia's dream board that does so. This image is also the only one with a representation of Malia's future career that features a human character.
Participant Interpretation	It was difficult for me to find a Black psychologist…I feel Google says that Black people are usually working at restaurants…and not teaching and doing all of this. Like at my mom's conference that we went to it was a lot of white people…and then some Black people.	So, there's not a lot of women in STEM. That's what I've learned in the past year…So I don't see a lot of African American architects. I've only met one, and for engineers, I've met a few women…

FIGURE 1. *Example of critical visual analysis coding sheet*

In Phase 1, we used the coding sheets to analyze each girl's image by carefully recording the characters, objects, and behaviors/actions (perceptual dimension); the relationships among the visual elements rendered through layout, salience, perspective, color, and other design choices (structural dimension); and the ways images visually represented intersectionality (i.e., race, gender, age) and Black Girls' Literacy practices (ideological dimension). We strengthened the trustworthiness of our interpretations by closely attending to the girls' explanations of their visual images derived from the individual and focus-group interview transcripts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

In Phase 2, we conducted our cross-case analysis. We first identified visual images appearing across the girls' 2018 digital career dream boards, using our completed coding sheets to reexamine *what* was visually represented (e.g., the image itself), *how* it was visually represented (e.g., visual grammar), and *where* it was situated (e.g., intersectional identities and literacies). Next, we determined common themes—such as *music, family,* and *language* —from the coding sheets, and looked for extended discourse related to these codes in the interview transcripts. Through these analyses, broader themes related to Black girls' multiliteracies and the (under)representations of Black career women emerged.

Case Study Findings

The two case studies in this section highlight the career futures that Tamika and Malia composed as young adolescents (9 years old) in 2012 and as teenagers (15 years old) in 2018. We focus on the multimodal futuremaking practices that Tamika and Malia engaged to articulate their professional and personal aspirations while protecting and affirming their intersectional identities, experiences, and future possibilities as Black girls.

Tamika: Mapping Race and Gender in Future Career Spaces

Across her 2012 and 2018 multimodal compositions, Tamika creatively engaged the "politics of spatiality" (Dotson, as cited in Butler, 2018, p. 39) by purposefully mapping her career and personal goals "through the lenses of place, race, gender, and age" (Butler, 2018, p. 39). In 2012, 9-year-old Tamika aspired to be a gymnast (Figure 2).

As Tamika sketched, she chatted about Gabby Douglas, the young African American woman who became Olympic all-around champion that year. Tamika's image featured a gymnastics school as an imagined place that resembled the dance studios she and her sister had attended since the age of 3. In bringing together prior gymnastics experiences with future visions, Tamika's sketch functioned as a map, designating areas for skills practice and movement that were important to her via multiple design devices (e.g., labels, arrows) and various shapes (e.g., circles, rectangles). As a young Black girl who had attended predominantly Black gymnastics schools, Tamika mapped the social geographies of mobility (e.g., doorways, arrows) and inclusivity (e.g., the welcome sign) that Black students navigated within the physical spaces of the gymnastics school. Relatedly, Tamika reported

Figure 2. *Tamika's 2012 career dream drawing*

that she "liked being able to dance on [her current] team" and that she "really liked that kind of interaction" with the other girls. Anchored by these positive dance experiences, Tamika's map outlined the physical and socioemotional contours of a gymnastics school where young Black girls like her would be invited to develop their skills and experience success as future competitive gymnasts.

In 2018, 15-year-old Tamika's multimodal futuremaking shifted from mapping a career site (i.e., the gymnastics school) to charting race, gender, and youthfulness within her professional and personal futures (Figure 3).

Consistent with her 2012 map, Tamika's 2018 map located significance among the eight images representing her future goals and aspirations through salience (e.g., images' positioning and size) and visual devices (e.g., thin black arrows and labels). In the first row, Tamika's arrows directed movement from left to right. The first image depicted a Black ballet teacher working with young girls, including several Black ballerinas, and represented Tamika's dreams of becoming a dance teacher or choreographer. Although Tamika acknowledged that this image was "hard to find," she persisted in finding a Black woman dance teacher because she wanted to include an image that mirrored her own intersectional identities on her map.

Tamika selected images of a musical note and a Grammy award as visual renderings of her musical aspirations: "I want to be a singer after college. . . . I'm

FIGURE 3. *Tamika's 2018 digital career dream board*

gonna try to win a Grammy . . . and . . . put my music out there." Envisioning her music career, Tamika curated a playlist that included inspirational songs connected to Black cultural genres such as contemporary rhythm and blues (R&B), gospel, and hip-hop:

- Best Part (H.E.R. & Daniel Caesar)
- Man in the Mirror (Keke Palmer)
- Tremors (SOHN)
- Bad and Boujee (Migos, featuring Lil Uzi Vert)
- Made to Love (John Legend)
- Take Me to the King (Tamela Mann)

    On the second row, Tamika represented the languages she desired to learn via an image of multicolored speech bubbles, explaining, "I wanna learn different languages. I'm learning sign language next year and then I wanna learn Spanish . . . and then some type of African language." Although Tamika didn't specify an African language that she wanted to learn, it was clear that she was charting a future connected with African peoples and communities. In reading this future "map," Tamika then did something unexpected: she skipped the middle image and moved directly to the last image on the row. Using the arrow, Tamika linked the first image (language bubbles) to the third image, which depicted a globe with iconic landmarks on each continent (e.g., the Statue of Liberty, the Eiffel Tower) and airplanes flying in all directions, asserting that "for traveling the world, I'd have to learn a lot of different languages."

The final images on the third row were connected to Tamika's dreams for a marriage and family. The first image of a mansion represented Tamika's desires to have a "big house. . . . And everything I'm not getting as a kid I'm gonna get as an adult . . . like a bathroom and a TV in my room." With a black arrow signifying the image's importance, Tamika related her hopes for a marriage and family through an image of an African American mother, father, son, and daughter:

> I really want to have a family . . . [and] for my family idea, it's gonna be like this, where the husband does the cooking, and . . . goes grocery shopping. And my mom [said], "Have fun with that. I've never heard any husband wanting to go grocery shopping." And I [said], "No, he's gonna do that while I stay home, and if he goes to the grocery store, then I'll cook and make dinner for the kids."

Clearly, this image reflected the ways Tamika hoped to navigate marriage, partnership, and family in the future, mirroring the significance that many Black working women place on issues of work-life balance (A. Brown, 2018).

Finally, the image in the middle of the second row seemed to represent "uncharted territory" for Tamika. Prominently located in the center of the composition, the image depicted a White woman in a white uniform, seated next to a young White girl whose head was resting in her hand. This was the only image in Tamika's multimodal composition that included White people; all the other images depicted Black women, men, and children. When asked about this image, Tamika explained that it represented a "back up" career plan:

> I want to do singing and dance, and my mom [said], "Just make sure you know that singing and dancing are hard, and a lot of people don't make it." And I [thought], "If I don't do singing and dancing, I have to find something else that I like. . . ." At first, my mom wanted me to be a teacher. But I [thought], "Teachers [teach], but they don't get to actually . . . talk to the kids about how they're feeling." So I [said], 'I think I wanna change to a psychologist."

Here, Tamika's words "find something else" signaled how she was navigating this unknown career space, trying to make a way toward another occupation that would fulfill her. On Tamika's map, the middle image represented her exploration of child psychology as a professional site for socioemotional work with youth. Visibly frustrated, Tamika explained that it was "hard to find an image of a Black psychologist" in her online search, so she ultimately selected the image of the White woman and girl to represent this career. In working to digitally locate Black women in varying career fields, traversing unmapped terrain (i.e., child psychology), and excavating sites of passion (e.g., the arts, family, travel), Tamika was charting her own course toward a future that she asserted was "held in my own hand."

Malia: Building Black Girl Confidence for Successful STEM Futures
While the underrepresentation of Black women in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) may deter some young Black girls from pursuing science and

math careers (Ireland et al., 2018), Malia had been dreaming of a future in STEM since she was 9 years old. In 2012, Malia aspired to be a veterinarian, and in her career dream drawing, she depicted herself smiling widely and standing next to a dog on an examination table (Figure 4). Malia wanted to be a veterinarian because she "loved animals and she wanted to help them when they were sick." At the time, her family had a dog, and she explained that when she "took my dog to the vet, it was pretty cool to see what they did."

Malia's drawing was simple but bold; the deeply saturated color of the blue marker, the character's direct gaze, and the thick, solid lines demand viewers' attention. Noting that blue was her favorite color, Malia carefully made several overlapping lines as strands of hair, bringing attention to her feminine identity. Though she never said if her dog's veterinarian was Black or female, Malia seemed to know that veterinary medicine was the kind of work she wanted to do; perhaps some of this confidence emanated from the books Malia reported reading, because she stated, "I like reading about animals and I know a lot about how animals grow and how to take care of them." This type of confidence in and affiliation with STEM work (e.g., veterinary medicine) nurtures Black girls' STEM identity development (Ireland et al., 2018).
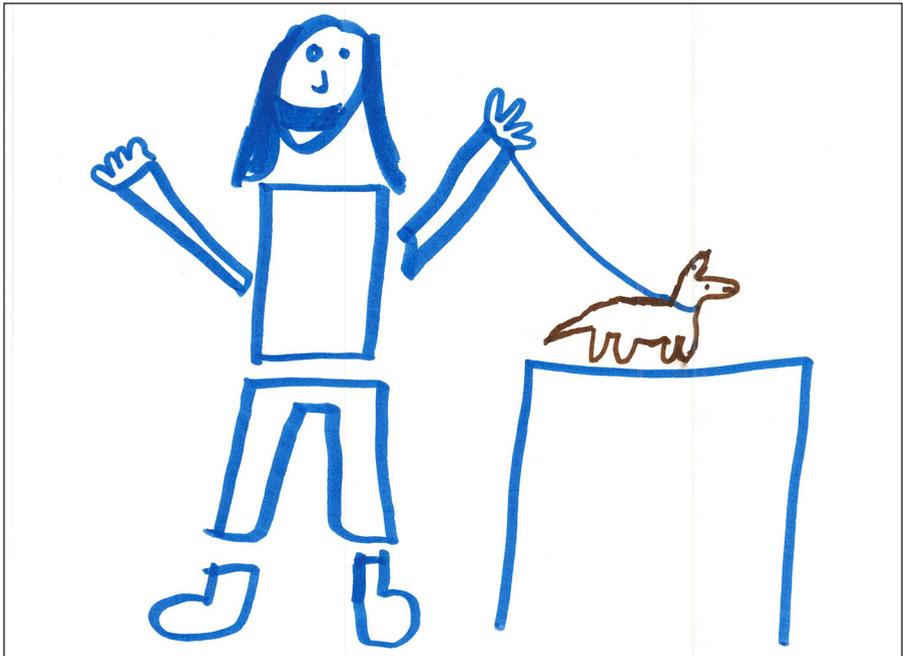

FIGURE 4. *Malia's 2012 career dream drawing. Previously published in "Career Dream Drawings: Children's Visions of Professions in Future Workplaces," by J. D. Turner, 2016,* Language Arts, 93, *pp. 174. Copyright 2016 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Reprinted with permission.*

Similarly, Malia's 2018 career dream board, entitled "Visions of the Future," communicated strength, stability, and vibrancy in the architectural field (Figure 5).
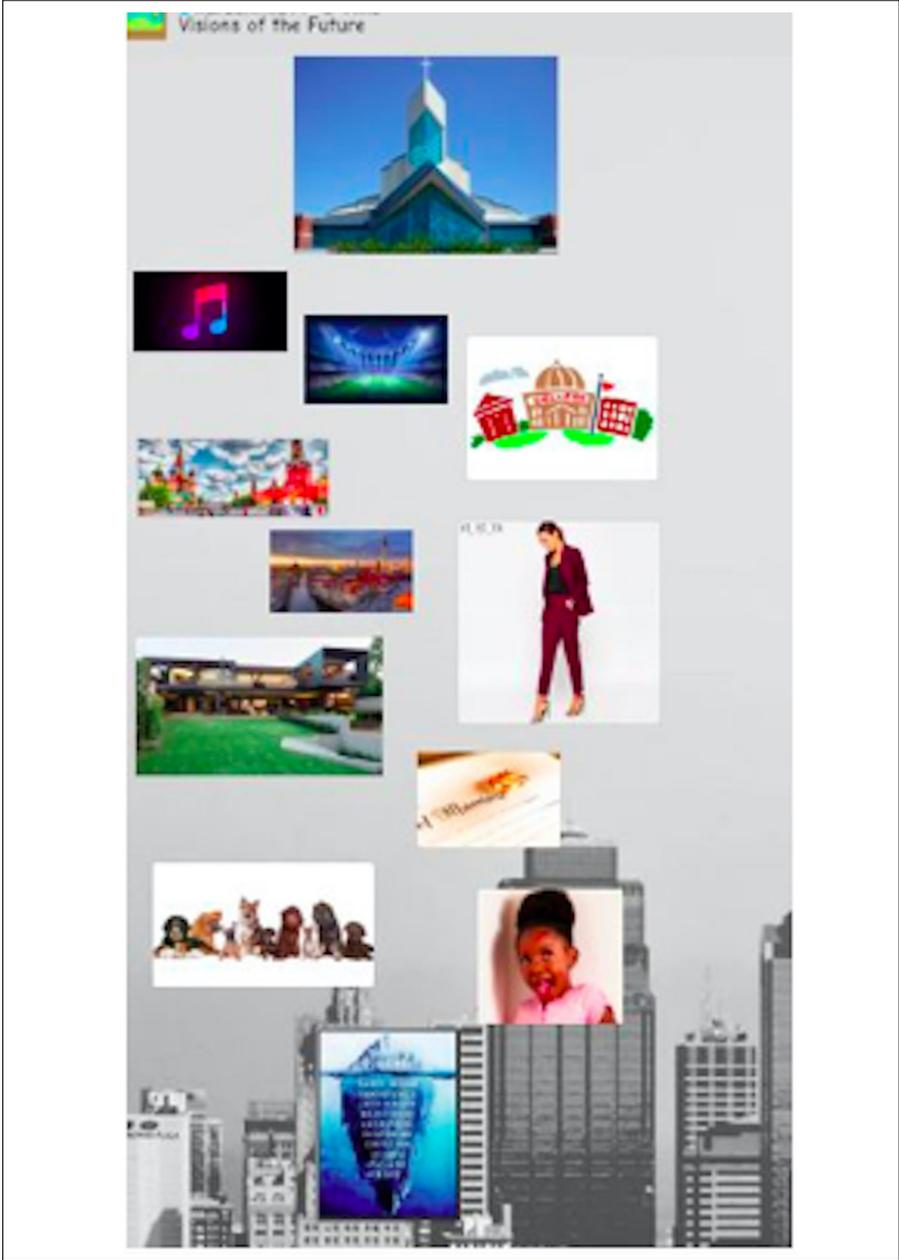

FIGURE 5. *Malia's 2018 career dream board*

Malia stated that she didn't "know a lot of people [who] want to be architects; a lot of my friends want to be doctors and stuff. So I think I want to be different from everybody else. I want people to look at me and [say], 'Wow, she actually did that!'" Anchored by this confidence, Malia designed her future world, including representations of spiritual, physical, mental, and familial domains. The background of her board was a city skyline in grayscale, suggesting that as an architect she had "built" her career dreams on an urban landscape. Malia composed her career dream board from 12 digital images in the shape of a diamond; she purposefully placed the images in chronological order and used her architectural imagination to build a vision for her future.

At the top, Malia placed an image of a large church with a tall cross that stood proudly atop the building. "This isn't *my* church," Malia explained, "but this is *a* church because I think that God is above everything, and we should put God first." For Malia, representing her faith as the starting point of her career dreams was vital. Grounded in Black spiritual practices, Malia included the image as a representation of how she interpreted the importance of her faith in her life, as it stood "above everything."

Below the image of the church, Malia included a colorful eighth note, explaining, that "music is a big part in . . . a lot of people's lives because it gets you through things and it's actually fun to listen to." Malia's playlist included:

- Encourage Yourself (Donald Lawrence)
- Jump (Cynthia Erivo)
- In the Middle (Isaac Carree)
- Never Needed No Help (Lil Baby)
- Teenage Fever (Drake)
- Help Us to Love (Tori Kelly)

Given Malia's strong spirituality, it is not surprising that three of the six songs on her playlist were gospel, and one other was heavily influenced by gospel music (e.g., a gospel chorus). Malia's playlist also included genres grounded in Black musical traditions, such as hip-hop and contemporary R&B.

To the right of the music note, Malia represented her love of soccer through an image of a soccer stadium; although there was no one on the field, the stadium seats appeared to be filled and the lights were shining brightly. Malia not only played soccer as a high school student, but she also aspired to play in college: "It's not a potential career, but I want to have it on the side [in college] and while I am an architect, I want to be able to play soccer." For Malia, soccer was a recreational activity that would allow her a physical and mental release from her job.

Malia then explained how the next visual, a clip-art image of a college, represented both others' postsecondary aspirations for her *and* her own collegiate dreams:

Well, my mom wants me to go to [public university] because I can go there for free, but she said if I get a scholarship somewhere else, then I could go. So I am going to work really hard because I don't know if I want to go to [public university].

Although this opportunity existed for Malia, she recognized that it might not be the best choice for *her*. When asked about her dream school, Malia responded, "At first it was Duke. . . . Then it was Spelman. But now I am looking at University of Pennsylvania and schools in upper Massachusetts, like Amherst College, even though those are far away and those are small." Like other Black high school girls, Malia was considering a range of predominantly White institutions and a prestigious all-women's HBCU in her college search process. Race-related variables, such as a strong cultural affiliation and the opportunity for active racial self-development (Van Camp, Barden, Sloane, & Clarke, 2009) might become more integral to her college decision-making processes in the next few years.

Moving down the board, Malia described several images representing her architectural aspirations, asserting that she had intentionally designed these images to be read "in order." Based on her explanation, Malia planned to travel to Germany and Russia because she was interested in learning new languages: "This [image] is Germany because I want to learn German. I like that language. I don't know any German, I just want to learn German. And that [image] is Russia because I want to study abroad in Russia." Perhaps Malia envisioned traveling and learning about German and Russian architecture, because the buildings in the images had unique architectural styles (e.g., exceptionally tall buildings with rounded and colorful tops). To describe the next image, a White woman in a magenta pantsuit and high heels, Malia pointed to the pantsuit and exclaimed, "And that's a pantsuit [and] I really like that pantsuit and then that [image of the house] is supposed to represent me as an architect." While glancing at the White woman in the suit, Malia explained that she was aware there were very few Black women architects, but that she planned to advocate for other Black women once she became an architect. With the confidence that she could open doors for other Black women architects, Malia imagined herself as an architect, dressing for the job by wearing a pantsuit because she believed that people take women in pantsuits "seriously." Although Malia mentioned Hillary Clinton as a woman who wore pantsuits and was taken seriously, she quickly added, "but I don't know if I would really look up to her." Further, Malia was sure to clarify that it was the image of the house—a modern-style dwelling with large windows and a room jutting out from the rest of the house—and not the image of the White woman, that represented her future career. Thus, the pantsuit on Malia's board did not represent a desire to be a White woman; rather, Malia wanted to feel powerful in her pantsuit as a Black woman architect focused on the work of designing beautiful modern homes. Collectively, these images depicted Malia's interest in design, her future career as an architect, and her current positionality as a Black girl dreamer and visionary.

The next three images represented Malia's family and personal life outside of her architectural career. An image of two wedding bands above the word "marriage"

reflected the kind of partnership she envisioned. An image of nine dogs reflected the love of animals she had as a young girl, and as she explained that she wanted dogs "a lot" in her future. The next image, a young Black girl with an afro puff hairstyle, represented the children that Malia wanted to have "after the dogs." We were especially intrigued by the image of this young girl, and by the notion that Malia didn't *just* see children in her family; she envisioned a young Black girl with natural hair. Her future child seemed to be a reflection of Malia's younger self and represented her own intersectional identities.

The final row of Malia's career dream board included a single image: an iceberg. Above the water, the word "success" was written; terms like "hard work," "late nights," "rejections," and "discipline" floated beneath the waterline. Malia understood that as a Black girl, she would have to work twice as hard to achieve her dreams. When she described her board at the end of the interview, she pointed to the images and noted, "This is success because that's my life planned out." Even in adolescence, Malia grasped the complexity of success and the often invisible or unnoticed labor it takes for Black women to create the beautiful ice sculpture on the surface.

Cross-Case Findings

In this section, we present findings from our cross-case analysis of Tamika's and Malia's 2018 multimodal compositions (see Figures 3 and 5). Specifically, we examine the girls' visual images related to two key themes: Black Girls' multiliteracies and (under)representations of Black career women.

Illuminating Black Girls' Multiliteracies for Future Success

Disrupting the illiterate futures projected onto Black girls in American society, both Tamika and Malia articulated the need for more opportunities to engage multiliteracies—in the form of professional, aspirational auditory (i.e., music), and African American Girls' Life Literacies—that would protect and advance (Richardson, 2002) their own future interests, goals, and aspirations.

Professional Literacies

Though Tamika and Malia had different career aspirations, the images they curated evoked shared understandings of professional literacies. In particular, the girls articulated the need for a shared language *of* work (i.e. dance, architecture) and a shared language *needed for* work (i.e., communicative language, Spanish) within their respective professions. For instance, in thinking of her future as a dance teacher, Tamika explained,

> For dancing, I would need to know . . . the names of the positions, and I would actually study the dance. But then, I just have to push myself more, and push my mom . . . to put me in dance places that actually make [dancers] do splits for like 15 minutes, and make us do leg lifts for 20 minutes. That type of place [where we] dance for three days a week [and] four hours of dance each day, because I feel that's what I would need to do.

Tamika understood that her future lay not solely in her raw talent, but in her ability to deeply understand the literacies in her field of interest; she knew that dancers have a shared language and understanding of how the body moves, and that in order to exist in that world, she must have that same understanding. Mirroring her sister's representation of the "success" iceberg, Tamika explicitly articulated the deep, often unacknowledged level of commitment it takes to be a successful professional dancer through a detailed description of the rigor and intensity of the classes/training.

Similarly, Malia explained that she would need to have "good writing skills" and "read blueprints" as an architect. When asked if understanding blueprints is a type of reading, Malia asserted, "Yeah, I guess blueprints could be like a type of language because you have to know what symbols represent and stuff. And . . . you have to know . . . what tools to use and measurements for architecture, too." Like Tamika, Malia acknowledged that she would need proficiency with languages related to architectural work (e.g., measuring, designing). Similar to other Black girls defining their career dreams (Griffin, 2020; Turner, 2020), both Malia and Tamika had already begun to articulate the critical role that professional discourses (e.g., career-oriented vocabulary, skills, and knowledge) would play in achieving future career success.

Furthermore, both girls expressed interest in learning another language as a means to successful work in international contexts through images on their digital career boards. Featuring images of foreign countries on her dream board, Malia explained how multilingualism would be beneficial to her as a future architect: "Well, if someone doesn't speak English and speaks Spanish, I'll be able to understand them and talk to them." Likewise, Tamika included an image of multicolored speech bubbles with "hello" in different languages on her dream board, explaining that this visual represented her desire to learn a variety of languages, including "sign language . . . Spanish, and some type of African language." Tamika further elaborated that as a dancer, she would have to travel the world and "learn . . . a lot of different languages to do that." Like other Black adolescent girls who have learned to speak multiple languages as a way to open doors for their futures (Griffin, 2020), Tamika and Malia realized that every "human encounter with another [is] a moment of response to the person in front of me on his or her terms, rather than based on my own comfort, convenience, or desires" (Case, 2015, p. 366). That is, Tamika and Malia employed their critical Black Girls' Literacies (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016) to question the power dynamics involved in traveling; rather than attempting to enact linguistic privilege as English-speaking Americans, Tamika and Malia acknowledged that they would be visitors in other countries, and they desired to use the communicative practices of the local people. Notably, both girls understood how language could function as a conduit to help them engage in business matters as they traveled for work.

Aspirational Auditory Literacies

In representing music using similar images (e.g., musical notes, a Grammy award) across their digital dream boards, Tamika and Malia enacted *aspirational auditory*

literacies, or the intrinsic ability to select music that motivates or inspires aspirational achievement. Black women and girls engage music literacies for multiple purposes, including identity development (Gaunt, 2006) and political and personal empowerment (Halliday & Brown, 2018). In this case, Tamika and Malia carefully selected genres of music that reflected the complex intersectionalities salient to their future-making, including religious identities (e.g., Black gospel/spirituality), Black youth culture (e.g., hip-hop), and racial identities (e.g., R&B, hip-hop, gospel), which inspired and motivated them to pursue their career futures.

In her explanation of the songs she chose, Malia attended to the *content* of the songs. Importantly, Malia noted that several of the songs were favorites because they related to "taking risks," and she connected that idea to her own career aspirations: "I think if I were to be an architect, I'd be taking risks because there's not a lot of women in those fields." Malia selected "Encourage Yourself" and "Jump" because "I think everybody should encourage everybody and people should encourage others to do stuff." Similarly, Tamika's playlist was filled with songs that nurtured her artistic aspirations. She chose "Best Part" and "Man in the Mirror," two songs recorded with or by young Black female vocalists, because "I don't know what the word is, but when I sing these songs, they have the best vocals. It just sounds the best when I sing these songs." Contemplating her dance aspirations, Tamika continued, "'Made to Love' is a great song to dance to. . . . I thought at first it was instrumental, but there were words to it. . . . And then I like 'Bad and Boujee' because it's a hip-hop song and anyone dances to that." Importantly, Tamika selected songs that reflected her desires to sing and dance as a Black female artist—future careers that others had told her would be difficult to attain—and served as motivation to persist toward those goals.

African American Girls' Life Literacies

Lastly, Tamika and Malia included representations of African American Girls' Life Literacies on their dream boards. We define *African American Girls' Life Literacies* as those non-scholastic, intersectional literacies that help African American girls to navigate the world in their Black female bodies (Richardson, 2002).

First, both girls included images related to future family goals on their dream boards (e.g., wedding rings, a young African American girl, an African American family). Envisioning her future family, Tamika explained, "I think, for my family idea . . . the husband does the cooking, and . . . goes grocery shopping." Clearly, she imagined a future where she would share responsibility with her partner, allowing her to pursue her career goals. Although Malia did not elaborate upon her hopes for a family, her images suggest that she did indeed hope to someday have a partner and raise a child. Despite literature suggesting that some Black girls lower their aspirations to balance work and family (S. P. Brown, 1996), Tamika and Malia imagined fulfilling family lives that would enable rather than constrain their career success.

The girls also explored personal and professional passions as integral aspects of their futures. For instance, Malia asserted that she intended to play soccer in her free time:

It's not a potential career, but I want to have it on the side. . . . While I am an architect, I want to be able to play soccer [in] an adult league. I don't want to go professional because it's going to take up all my time.

Although soccer was not a career option, Malia was adamant about being able to play in her "free time." She realized what so many adults have forgotten: how we spend our free time is just as important to our quality of life as the careers we choose to pursue. Similarly, Tamika's desire to pursue artistic careers, rather than a more pragmatic career in child psychology, demonstrated that she believed her future work should incorporate both passion *and* necessity. Malia's and Tamika's ability to envision futures where they would make deliberate choices about how to spend their time resonates with the sentiments found in *Sisters of the Yam* (hooks, 1993), which details the ways Black women's work can and should allow us to "maintain a spirit of emotional well-being" by doing work that "makes life sweet" (p. 32). Like hooks (1993), Tamika and Malia understood that in order to live as Black women in "right livelihood" (p. 32), they must devote themselves to work they enjoyed and felt called to do.

Critiquing (Under)representations of Black Career Women

Across their digital dream boards, Tamika and Malia included images of professional women (e.g., the White woman working with the young girl; the White woman in a pantsuit; the Black dance teacher) that evoked thoughtful critiques about the underrepresentation of Black career women. Frustrated by the limited representations of Black women in STEM, Malia asserted:

So, there's not a lot of women in STEM. That's what I've learned in the past year. . . . [And] I don't see a lot of African American architects, I've only met one. For engineers, I've met a few women, and people are amazed. . . . It's like, "You're actually an engineer, you actually make cars and stuff?" So, I was like, "Okay, you can do this," and as long as I focus and don't let other people's opinions get to me, then I think I could do it.

As a Black adolescent girl, Malia's comments highlighted her awareness of her own intersectional identities and revealed how she imagined negotiating (1) the lack of representation in the architecture profession, and (2) the probability of challenges and barriers to future professional success. Malia recognized that as a Black woman architect, she would be a "hidden figure" (Ireland et al., 2018, p. 227) in a field that privileges Whiteness and maleness. Through her words and images, Malia envisioned herself embodying the personal attributes (e.g., self-confidence, self-efficacy) that are critical to the success of Black women in STEM careers (Ireland et al., 2018).

In addition, Malia clearly anticipated future microaggressions, as her comments illustrated the disbelief she might encounter from people shocked that she was a successful Black woman architect. However, Malia decided to decenter "other people's opinions" and reimagine how the architecture profession might look if she served as a trailblazer for future Black women architects. When asked how she hoped to change representations of Black women in architecture, Malia replied,

Well, I want to open it up. I want to encourage people, like young girls, to do it. I want to make my coworkers . . . know and realize that there's not a lot of people like me in that field and they need to make a change. I want to open their eyes to it because they might be in denial or they might not realize it.

Malia's critique of underrepresentation in the architecture profession transcended mere acknowledgement of the problem; she sought to be a part of the solution, imagining a future where she would use her status to "open up" the field and make it more inclusive and accessible to other Black women architects. In placing the responsibility for change squarely upon those responsible for upholding white supremacist patriarchy, Malia's digital career board redesigned the architecture profession in ways that made visible (Ireland et al., 2018) the contributions and success of Black women.

Relatedly, Tamika critiqued the underrepresentation of Black career women in digital spaces. She explained,

It was hard finding a Black dancer [on Google]. I was like, "Are you serious?!" Because there's a lot of Black dancers out there. There's Debbie Allen who teaches dance, and there's Misty Copeland. There's a lot of Black dance figures out there. And I was like, "You guys should update Google for all these Black dancers."

Unfortunately, Tamika's critique is quite accurate. A quick Google search for images with the key term "dancers" produced the array of images represented in Figure 6, which renders Black dancers nearly invisible within the digisphere; the prominent Black dancers whom Tamika mentioned were not even yielded as results in the search.

Tamika's critique strongly resonates with Noble's (2018) book, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism,* which explains that Google's algorithms reflect the racialized and gendered biases of the programmers rather than providing a level playing field for all ideas, values, and identities. Thus, Tamika's assertion correctly places the responsibility for more inclusive representations of Black career women (i.e., professional dancers) on the programmers.

Notably, Tamika's critique of the lack of representation of Black career women in the digital realm also applied to the field of child psychology. After acknowledging that it was "hard to find an image of a Black psychologist on Google," Tamika explained,

For psychology, I see how that happens because a lot of White people get all the big jobs. . . . And I feel like Google says, or people say, that Black people are usually working at restaurants and not teaching and doing all of this [waves her hand, perhaps indicating "work" in academia]. Like at my mom's [professional] conference that we went to, it was a *lot* of White people . . . and then some Black people.

Tamika's critique acknowledged the way mainstream media reinscribes white supremacist notions of anti-Blackness (Collins, 1991). She recognized that what
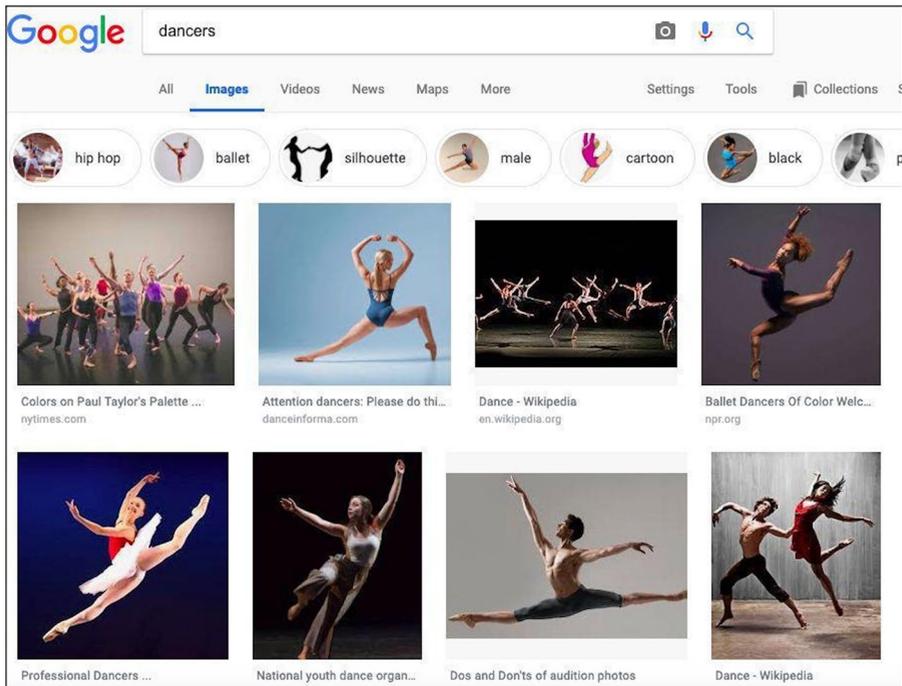
FIGURE 6. *Screenshot of a search for "dancers" on Google*

"Google says" is merely a reflection of the inequities reproduced in many professional industries: "White people get all the big jobs," like those in psychology, while Black people are paid less, offered fewer opportunities for advancement, and may be relegated to supportive roles (e.g., service sector) rather than directive roles (e.g., executive positions) in the workplace (Noel, Pinder, Stewart, & Wright, 2019). Tamika identified the racist algorithms of major search engines like Google and took the observation a step further by pointing out how they affect our everyday lives. Given the racist algorithmic codes of the internet (Noble, 2018), it is quite possible that the girls were unable to find visual representations of their future selves as Black professional women that were satisfactory for inclusion, rendering their career dreams invisible to Google, a multimillion-dollar corporation cofounded by White men.

Call to Action

In light of research that has shown how Black girls are marginalized within traditional literacy spaces (Kinloch, 2010; Price-Dennis et al., 2017; Sealey-Ruiz, 2016), and because Malia's and Tamika's visions for their futures help us to see the liberatory possibilities available to Black girls when we acknowledge and engage their dreams, we see this study as a call to action. Specifically, we call on English teachers

to move beyond traditional curriculum that erases and silences Black girls, and to reimagine literacy pedagogies by (1) seeing Black girls as learners *and* visionaries; and (2) centering Black girls' dreams and aspirations in the classroom.

To begin, Black girls, including Tamika and Malia, participate in literacy in ways that are tied to their racialized, gendered, and cultural identities. Black Girls' Literacies expand beyond the confines of the page and include such ways of knowing as dance, music, social media, and play—as exhibited by Tamika's and Malia's dreams for their futures. For teachers to acknowledge all the ways Black girls learn and communicate information, they must first come to understand these varied forms of literacy that exist outside of hegemonic narratives of who is literate and what constitutes literacy. To do so requires eliciting responses from Black girls about what they dream for their futures and what they desire to learn. Teachers can replicate the activities we implemented with Tamika and Malia, setting up a time for students to create multimodal representations and/or playlists to learn about their career interests and future goals. Then, using students' responses as a springboard, teachers can create a curriculum that prepares students for life beyond the walls of the school (Griffin & James, 2018). Enacting a similar model, Griffin (2020) co-created a digital literacy curriculum with nine adolescent Black girls. Together, they explored various aspects of their futures as Black women, including communication, healthy relationships with themselves and others, financial and civic literacy, future planning, and their imagined careers (e.g., photographer, beauty salon owner, lawyer, judge), while learning with, from, and about Black women and girls.

Likewise, we draw on the work of scholars who suggest teachers leverage Black girls' aspirational auditory literacies to critically analyze required texts and to decenter Eurocentric notions of literacy (Johnson, Jackson, Stovall, & Baszile, 2017). For instance, teachers could invite students to create playlists that mirror salient themes in classroom texts, which would allow Black girls to draw from their own musical interests and knowledge bases, while simultaneously thinking deeply and critically about the themes of a text. To be clear, we are not suggesting that teachers carelessly throw rap, hip-hop, or R&B songs into their curriculum, but rather that they work *alongside* Black girls to purposefully incorporate music in ways that humanize English curricula and classroom spaces. By shifting from curriculum transformation (e.g., choosing more "culturally diverse" books) toward curriculum co-creation, English teachers invite Black girls from the margins to the center, rendering both their present *and* future lives visible in schools.

Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming* reminds us that the dual oppressions of racism and sexism require Black girls to constantly live in multiple temporalities, not only remembering their pasts, but remaining present, and considering their futures. As they grow and shape their future careers, Malia, Tamika, and other Black girls navigate the tensions between enacting agency and resisting systemic oppression. Resisting the invisibility of Black girls in varying career fields (e.g., STEM fields, child psychology, dance), Malia and Tamika designed multimodal compositions where they acknowledged the fraught, sexist, and racist work history

of Black women, (re)claimed their professional hopes and desires for the future, and sketched expansive life trajectories as they envisioned more equitable professional worlds for Black career women.

Given the ways adolescent Black girls must navigate these tensions as they progress through high school and toward their future careers, educators who work within and act as gatekeepers to anti-Black, patriarchal institutions have a responsibility to serve as agents of change. In doing so, educators must consider what it means to act as co-conspirators (Love, 2019) that assist Black girls in obtaining access to careers from which they might otherwise be barred. English educators, in particular, can help Black girls in the process of envisioning themselves in their futures, perhaps by assigning texts such as *Brown Girl Dreaming* and other memoirs by Black girls and women, to inspire new possibilities and worlds. Tamika and Malia, along with so many other Black adolescent girls, are making futures at a time when they are just becoming aware of how their intersectional identities will shape their professional careers and personal lives. As English educators and researchers, we must do all we can to support Black girls as they work toward the futures they have imagined for themselves.

NOTE

1. All names of people and places have been replaced with pseudonyms throughout this article.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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