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BITCHES BE LIKE…: MEMES AS BLACK GIRL COUNTER AND DISIDENTIFICATION

TOOLS

by

SESALI BOWEN

Under the Direction of Tiffany King (PhD)

ABSTRACT

Memes are a popular source of online media. As such, they become tools that can distribute

racialized and gendered narratives. While memes are often a source of shaming and devaluing

Black girls, my research also explores how they can be used as tools to counter and disidentify

with narratives. Using Hip-Hop feminism and trap feminism as frameworks, I analyze several

memes to not only exemplify the hegemonic narratives of Black girlhood that circulate via

memes, but to illuminate the possibilities for resistance and transformation via this technology.

INDEX WORDS: Memes, Black girls, Internet culture, Visual culture, disidentification

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SESALI BOWEN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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DEDICATION

I'd like to dedicate this thesis to the women in my family, especially my aunt Michelle, who always stressed the importance of education. Granny, thank you for "not playing" with me about my school work. Dana, thank you for showing me that it's not always fun but it can get me to where I need to go. Ma, thank you for reminding me that time is of no issue. I love you.

This thesis also goes out to my homegirls, and all the other Black girls who have ever been forced to roll their eyes at a problematic meme. We take lemons and make lemonade.

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I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Tiffany King for believing in this project and encouraging me to write from the heart. Dr. Lia Bascomb, you are a master linguist: where I did not have the words, you did. The foundation you laid for me in the visual realm anchored this thesis. Dr. Amira Jarmakani, thank you for forcing me to take on the subjects that I tried to avoid at all costs. You reminded me that I was smart enough to get it done. Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown, my fairy god homegirl and the catalyst for everything that I "know": with every line, every paragraph, I wanted to make you proud. Thank you Layci and Shonda for being in community with me in Atlanta, bestowing me with the gift of friendship. Yall brought me back to life. To my cohort, your support and camaraderie for the past two years have been appreciated. I'm proud of all of you. And last but certainly not least, thank you to Yvonne Robinson for opening your home and allowing me to make it mine, you've earned your place as my second mother.

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1   INTRODUCTION

Whenever I tell someone outside of my academic department that I am interested in analyzing memes as they relate to Black women and girls, I often get a nervous chuckle, a quizzical glare, or confused silence. For those outside of the academy, and even some people within it, the educational value of most social media material remains questionable. Memes are the visual evidence of unproductive commentary and meaningless banter. What might come to mind for them are Black girls taking half-nude selfies or twerking in the streets. The additional layer of racialized femininity can also signal a specific kind of unproductivity that is also deviant, perhaps even vile. These responses also led me to conclude that people believe that content which is created on social media and posted by regular civilians -- family members, classmates, co-workers, friends, partners, teachers, and community members -- is irrelevant and distant from dominant social discourses. While the internet operates as a collective space given its reliance on technological connectivity, the collectivity is achieved through individualistic acts of expression online. The resounding response to my research project seemed to be that what people post on their personal social media pages, especially memes, isn't the "stuff" of graduate level inquiries into social relations and power. And yet, it is precisely this personal and individual element/component that has compelled me to explore memes.

As a millennial, I spend quite a bit of time on social media, about 30 hours per week if the reports are true.[1] I consume hundreds, if not thousands of subliminal and overt messages each day as I scroll through my smartphone and/or visit various websites. The amount of information and material available to unpack is limitless, but I find myself drawn to memes for this project.

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[1] Kate Taylor, "Want to Reach Millennials? This Is How They Spend Their Time. (Infographic)." *Entrepreneur*. 9 Oct 2014. https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/238294.

Memes in particular signify a specific type of online content that is perceived as youthful. The "digital native" demographic that tends to use them has the technological know how and literacy that is required to do more than simply see memes. Memes are also understood as satirical, and in most cases deployed for comical purposes. I have observed that people do not yet undertake serious studies of memes, or many other kinds of online content, with the same voracity that we do commercial media like music and television productions. This lack of attention persists despite the fact that memes are often laced with the same amount of oppressive, limiting, and damaging rhetoric, and are often just as visible. I address memes cautiously, but also with faith in the power of this youthful form of media to influence and shift dominant ideologies.

While the various social media platforms I use can allow me to expand or limit who and what I engage, they do not offer the opportunity to exercise complete control. Social media platforms present a space that is not completely safe or void of triggering messages and images. In the spirit of identity building, moral solidarity, faith, or even just fun, individuals that I come into contact with on social media (many of whom I know personally, professionally, or in other offline contexts) can post content that is degrading, harmful, violent, and condemning to me and other Black girls. Sentiments that indicate that my fat body is unattractive and undeserving of respect or admiration sometimes make me feel devalued. Remarks that my queer love or relationship practices are immoral and a reflection of poor character often make me feel isolated. Comments that devalue my self-expression by way of dress, hair, and makeup choices can occasionally cause me to feel inadequate. To say that my project isn't self-serving and perhaps partially defensive would not be completely honest. However, this project poses a unique opportunity to perform an analysis of a type of media material that, as of the time of this writing,

is not included in the Black feminist academic archive. Given the significance of online media on people's lives, an exploration of memes seems necessary.

This project is also an opportunity to talk back and clap back to themes that have insulted and/or offended me at some point in time. It's a way to poke fun at the very thing that was intended to make fun of me and other Black girls that I love. But most importantly, as I will illustrate in my analysis, it is an instrument I can appropriate in order to poke holes in, invert, play with and rework the very mechanisms that are used to police Black girls online.

Research Statement

Young African American females — or Black girls, as we are most likely to call ourselves in everyday conversations—exist at critical intersections of identity and power. Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown defines Black girlhood as "the representations, memories, and lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful, Black, and female. Black girlhood is not dependent, then, on age, physical maturity, or any essential category of identity."[2] This is the definition that I rely on for the purpose of this analysis. While many subjects, images, and reference may appear to point directly toward Black women, I recognize Black girlhood as a fluid category that still encapsulates these specificities. Black girls also exist at the crux of our own lived experiences and others' fantasy narratives imposed upon us, by Black boys and men, non-Black peoples, and older generations. Black girls navigate this unique space in an array of public and private settings that are educational, occupational, communal, familial, media-based, and virtual. I am specifically interested in those virtual realities. Never before have people had so much access to such a broad range of information and media. Smartphones, laptops, tablets, and other devices have revolutionized the way we interact with each other and engage with the

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[2] Ruth Nicole Brown, *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy,* (Champaign: University of Illinois, 2008), 1.

world. Mobile devices with internet capabilities coupled with the rising popularity of online

social networking have almost completely closed the technological gap. And when people,

corporations, and organizations set up shop online, they took the systems and ideologies that

construct racialized gender identities and hierarchies with them.

A need to see, profile, and essentially "create" and/or represent ourselves and our values,

virtually, is more important than ever amidst racially charged and heavily gendered dominant

images and scripts that also circulate on the internet. The booming emergence of social media,

which I will discuss later, has woven self-definition and invention, into the very fabric of our

interactions with others, as so many of these interactions are now mediated through online

channels. Responding to racism and sexism is only one aspect of this experience, just as it is in

their offline lives; it is no less necessary. Black girls are able to accomplish this in a number of

ways that are increasingly, but not exclusively, visual in nature. As internet technology and

functionality continue to grow, the presence and reliance on images follows suit, increasing the

value of visuality as a communication tool. Reflecting the narratives of a culture that is highly

racialized and gendered, images of Black girls are easily accessible and circulate widely in

digital spaces.

So what does this mean for Black girl internet users? Black girlhood is talked to and

about in the virtual world, and the messages are heard loudly. Black girlhood continues to reach

beyond embodied, identity-based representation[3], into the realm of conceptual and visual

representation, which is rapidly reproduced and distributed. One of the creative and abbreviated

ways in which people talk about Black girls online is via memes. Coined by Richard Dawkins,

memes are a unit of measurement for cultural transmission. As it pertains to internet culture, the

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[3] Ibid.

term 'meme' refers to any popular and/or viral cultural content online.[4] For this project I will be focusing on visual memes, or content that is widely shared in the form of images. For me, memes are such a rich source of research material because they bridge the gaps between visual cultures, popular culture and present an opportunity to examine the nuanced terrain of these cultures as well as the ways racial, gendered, and sexual discourses shape them. Visual memes are shared widely amongst online communities and subcultures and can be used to express sentiments or state a position about any topic. For this project I will analyze memes to map current online discourses about Black girls and women and consider the following:

- What dominant messages exist about black girlhood and femininity in memes?

- How, if at all, can memes be used to counter and disidentify with these dominant and/or oppressive narratives about Black girls and women?

1.1   Literature Review

Because the foundation of my project is visual and uniquely situated with the specific cultural context of Black girl culture, it is important to establish how my research is relevant to common themes in visual studies, Black visual studies and Black feminist cultural studies. I include literature from multiple scholars who address Black girls, women and the ways that visuality often deploys tropes of Black female sexuality in ways that often over determine the visibility of Black girls. I also review literature that can generate discussion about how Black girls can use and rework visuality and attendant sexual discourses in unintended ways.

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[4] Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, "Online Memes, Affinities, and Cultural Production," *A New Literacies Sampler*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

1.1.1   Cultural & Internet Studies

This section of my literature review will include a review of concepts such as: encoding/decoding, semiotics, interpellation, and phenomenology. From there, I will review discourse on identity (and performances of it) and the internet more broadly. Finally, I will move on to the specific digital platforms that Black girls are using to participate in identity-based discourses and cultural production. It is my aim to illuminate and explore the openings (maybe interstices?) within which Black girls have found themselves situated as both producers and consumers of online culture and discourses.

As mentioned in my introduction, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins coined the term "meme" to reference a unit of cultural transmission.[5] Dawkins used the term meme to encapsulate the replication and memory persistence of cultural phenomena, including but not limited to ideas, songs, fashion, trends in medicine, leisure, etc.[6] Memetics is part of the larger theory of mimesis which relies on imitation, replication, or repetition as the foundation of human sociality[7]. As it pertains to internet culture, the term 'meme' certainly fits the bill. Meme, in this context, refers to popular and/or viral cultural content online[8]. I am particularly interested in evaluating this content to locate themes related to race, gender, sexuality, bodies, etc. The concept of internet memes, cultural media that replicates itself on a large scale online, informs the means through which narratives about Blackness circulate online (highly visible and at a rapid pace), and the importance of a closer analysis of such content. The means of producing and circulating memes is also important, given that they most often rely on internet connections in

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[5] Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, (New York: Oxford University, 1976).
[6] ibid
[7] Matthew Potolsky, Mimesis, (New York: Routledge, 2006).
[8] Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, *New Literacies: Everyday Practices and Classroom Learning,* 2nd edn, (New York: Open University Press, 2006).

order to be created, consumed, and received. The value of digital images is defined by the images' ability to be easily accessed and reproduced.[9] Private computers and mobile devices give virtually anyone with access[10] the ability to create, engage, and circulate images at any time, without regulation. The result is an endless stream of memes, created and recycled daily.

As evident in its definition, memes are the direct result of continuous reproduction, sometimes multiple layers of it. Different images and texts are reused and recycled to create new images with different messages. Personal access to videos and pictures on mobile devices and laptops combined with basic technologies like cameras, video recorders, "copy & paste" and "screenshots" make it relatively easy and fast to capture images for indiscriminate use; thus creating an endless source of raw material for memes. It is often the case with memes that images, however captured, are partially emptied of their original meaning(s) and as a result of this reproduction process, created anew with a completely different meaning. Elements of "original" image(s) are used to convey certain feelings, emotions, or attitudes; or represent specific items, ideologies, or identities, which are injected into the messaging of the new image (the meme). Images can be both reproduced and appropriated several times over, continuously evolving in meaning and context, as memes are shared and created. Consequently, memes both support and subvert Stuart Hall's theory of the encoding/decoding process.[11] Memes make claims of authenticity, which are important in other kinds of visual images, questionable.

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[9] Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, (New York: Oxford University, 2001).

[10] Joshua Eaton, "Digital divide widens as the Web adopts stronger encryption standard," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 30 Dec 2015, http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Passcode/2015/1230/Digital-divide-widens-as-the-Web-adopts-stronger-encryption-standard, (accessed April 14, 2016).

[11] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/decoding," in *The Cultural Studies Reader,* ed. Simon During (New York: Routledge, 1993).

Hall's proposed, tiered process of encoding and decoding messages in images, and across mediums, relies on a theory of communication that includes four distinct stages: *production, circulation, use*, and *reproduction*[12]. According to Hall, each stage of the communication process is governed by a specific set of power structures, dictating how the message moves from one stage to the next. At *production*, the creators (or encoders) of messages package images with messages that reflect dominant societal ideologies. In the case of memes, however, encoders package images based on their unique position within, and relationship to dominant ideologies. These may resist, support, or subvert those ideologies. *Circulation* describes the chosen medium through which viewers receive said images. Questions of accessibility and interpretation - again within said hegemonic ideologies - are of importance in this step as well. Memes are often shared within personal, digital networks on social media, which can vary in size. But they can also be shared on public forums, blogs, news sites, or online advertisements reaching even broader audiences. On the other hand they can be shared on an individual basis via text message, email, or private message. *Use* describes how viewers decode and interpret an image's message based on their own positionality within dominant ideologies and power structures. *Reproduction*, as described earlier, occurs after viewers interpret the messages and dictate what is done with the image afterward. Digital mimetic material makes this process of communication cyclical. In other words, images are constantly being transformed from the state of their intended meanings and messages - amended, altered, dissected, etc. - and (re)produced as something completely different based on various coded discourses and ideologies.

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[12] Ibid.

Successful encoding and decoding of a meme (which prompts sharing and new variations of the image) relies on interpellation, or the hailing of specific subjects[13]. In other words, memes target specific subjects as viewers, especially those memes that deal with racialized gender. Interpellation is the use of specific "signs" to convey certain concepts. To interpellate subjects is to generate a visual trigger that prompts them to identify themselves, or respond in some other way to said stimuli. According to semiotics, signs are the result of relationships between signifiers (i.e. objects, words, or images) and their meanings (also known as the signified)[14]. Meme creators (like the creators of other kinds of media like television, film, etc.) rely heavily on signs that are recognizable to specific groups of people (for example: students at a certain school, fans of a popular television show, people who engage in the same activity, residents of a specific city or country, etc.) in order to interpellate or call out to them. Signs can also be coded along racial, gender, and sexuality lines as well.

It is often the case that the visual material used to construct memes is not created on the internet, but representations of real events that were intended for other mediums like television, live audiences, or personal use. This is just one of the ways that memes blur the lines and collapse the hard boundaries between real and virtual content. Meme content can range from the mundaneness of forgetting your keys to important legislative or political issues. Regardless of the content, in today's internet-reliant ecosystem, memes push messages forward in a way that is interactive. In addition to sharing or participating in the evolution of memes, most platforms that host these images have space for viewers to comment, dispute, reject, approve, and support memes in a variety of ways. Furthermore, the widespread use of mobile devices to capture

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[13] Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).
[14] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).

images that document and/or represent real life in both its banal and exceptional states closes the

gap between public and private spaces. If we consider the trajectory of communication

technology: from multidirectional, community-based channels that rely on personal and public

networks of people for the exchange of information, to the unidirectional, wider engagement of

television and radio that rely heavily on images[15]; then the functionality and mechanics of

memes brings this technology full circle. Online viewers are able to witness events,

conversations, and ideas outside their own "real life" networks, and are able to absorb that

dialogue and apply it to their own realm of existence via personalized, interactive technology.

1.1.1.1 Marginalized communities online

The internet is used by many as a way to virtually represent the self[16]. Fueled by social

media platforms created for users to document their experiences, the internet is thus a site for

performing identities. And memes are a tool in accomplishing that goal. In this way, memes can

be used in the practice of what José Muñoz calls "disidentifying."[17] Disidentification is a

performance practice categorized by its insistence on sidestepping naturalized, hegemonic

identity scripts, and using them to create alternative identification tactics and new forms of

surviving. Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideologies. Refusing to

either assimilate within such a structure or strictly oppose it, disidentification works both on and

against dominant ideology. Using the image of a normalized object to inject it with a new

meaning and make a statement about personal values, identity, or morals is a strategic way to

both express and respond to one's subjectivity within power structures. These tactics represent

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[15] Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, (New York: Oxford University, 2001).
[16] Ibid.
[17] Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999).

coded tools that can be utilized by marginalized communities, allowing them "a mode of recycling or re-forming an object that has already been invested with powerful energy."[18] Muñoz discredits the notion that identities and subjects are fixed, static, or easily mapped under hegemonic discourses. By disidentifying, these communities invent ways to lessen or subvert the impact of that power on their lives, and engage in a creative practice of critiquing it. Throughout my analysis, I will explore and assess the ways in which memes can be used as a tool for Black girls to disidentify with dominant narratives.

According to internet scholar Lisa Nakumura, "Women and people of color are both subjects and objects of interactivity; they participate in digital racial formation via acts of technological appropriation, yet are subjected to it as well."[19] Obviously, Black girls and women participate in internet cultures as users of different technologies and software. Like all social media users, Black girls are able to construct their virtual selves (visual and otherwise) with a relative amount of autonomy and personal choice. Black girls are creating dialogue, art, culture, businesses, relationships, organizations, lives, and of course, memes on the internet everyday. Because the internet is more visual now than it ever was[20], creating the conditions for a meme-saturated market, it is important to understand what traditions of Black visual representation mediate how Black girls are represented on the internet.

1.1.2 *Black Girls' Visuality and Sexuality*

I am certainly not the first scholar to approach the project of visual representations of Black girls and women. Research aiming to explore and document the sexual scripts of Black

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[18] Ibid, 31.

[19] Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet (Electronic Mediations)*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2008), 16.

[20] Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking : An Introduction to Visual Culture*, (New York: Oxford University, 2001).

girls has been undertaken across decades and disciplines. Much of the research, in the tradition

of the infamous Moynihan Report[21], has been funneled into reading deviant sexualities,

analyzing trauma and violence trends, and assessing risk among Black girls. Counter-narratives

that de-pathologize Black girl sexuality have not circulated with the same visibility, but certainly

have a place in the Black feminist tradition.[22]

Contemporary research - relying on mass and popular media as a major player in the way

that Black girls develop and shape their sexual identities and practices - has focused on Hip-Hop

as a dominant source of sexual narratives[23]. Relying primarily on lyrical content and music

videos, Hip-Hop has been framed in this regard as a source of misogyny and Black female sexual

exploitation that determines how Black youth create their gender identities.[24] Gendered critiques

of Hip-Hop broaden conversations about gender and sexuality and can act as a springboard to

analyze what limiting, dominant discourses about Black girls' sexual subjectivity exist within

contemporary mediums. But while this literary catalog on Black girl sexuality is important, alone

it does little to reconcile the complexities of sexuality as it relates to the actual lived experiences

of Black girls, online and in real life. For example, with so much attention paid to sexual

behavior and identity[25], there remains a serious lack of dialogue about the interpersonal,

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[21] U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Policy Planning and Research, 1965. *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, 1965), http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webidmeynihan.htm.

[22] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism.* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[23] T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Pimp's Up, Ho's Down: Hip Hop's Hold on Young Black Women,* (New York: New York University, 2007).

[24] Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks it Down* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999); T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Pimp's Up, Ho's Down: Hip Hop's Hold on Young Black Women,* (New York: New York University, 2007).

[25] Elaine Richardson, "Developing Critical Hip Hop Feminist Literacies: Centrality and Subversion of Sexuality in the Lives of Black Girls," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 46, no. 3, (2013).

romantic relationships that can also frame Black girl sexualities. For example, what culturally

specific moral and ethical codes, or gender roles are important to Black girls and shape their

sexual practices? Most interest in Black girls' romantic relationships mirror the sexuality tropes

in that they focus on intimate partner violence or Black female's status as minorities within

married populations[26]. Furthermore, very little of the research on Black female sexualities and

relationships substantively captures the ways that Black girls make meanings, define moral and

ethical codes and manipulate the functionality of digital spaces.

Historically, sexual tropes about Black girls are deployed in an attempt to control the

bodily and sexual expression of Black girls and women while maintaining heteronormative

masculinity and patriarchy. Unchecked Black female sexuality – often identified through self-

representation practices such as dancing, speaking, occupation, or dress - is a threat to these

sexist structures and is assumed to blemish Black respectability. In "Mammies, Matriarchs, and

Other Controlling Images," Patricia Hill Collins documents the "controlling images" that are

perpetually recycled and reproduced in order to manipulate both the contexts through which

Black women and girls self-represent, and the way spectators read those representations. These

images include the Mammy, Jezebel, Welfare mother, and the Matriarch, which are each

descriptors for deviant, racialized sexualities.[27] Performing respectability means representing the

self in opposition to these controlling images in an attempt to benefit from the privileges of

middle class associations. Language used to shame and exclude those who fail to adhere to these

politics of respectability are created and recycled, not only by those who benefit from

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[26] Stephanie Y. Stevenson, "The Politics of "Being Too Fast: Policing Urban Black Adolescent Female Bodies, Sexual Agency, Desire, and Academic Resilience." (UCLA: UCLA Center for the Study of Women, 2012).

[27] Patricia Hill Collins, "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images" *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism.* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

heteropatriarchy, but by Black girls who want to distance themselves from deviant sexual scripts

as well. Performing respectability and participating in the moral panic (the standard response to

Black girl sexuality[28]) are methods that Black girls can choose to practice in order to distance

themselves from problematic tropes, while simultaneously validating the policing of Black girls.

Other people have explored contemporary Black girl visuality and in a way that traces the

traditional tropes and themes associated with it. Visuality is always sheathed in the politics of

sexuality when it comes to Black female subjects.[29] In "Freaks, Gold Diggers, Divas, and Dykes:

The Sociohistorical Development of Adolescent African American Women's Sexual Scripts,"

Layli D. Phillips and Dionne Stephens compile and analyze a list of contemporary sexual scripts

assigned to Black women and girls.[30] giving attention to their socio-historical significance. These

tropes - the diva, gold digger, freak, dyke, gangsta bitch, sister savior, Earth mother, baby mama

– extend upon Collins' controlling images.[31] The authors' deployment of the term "sexual

scripts" is an intentional step away from strictly visual representations of Black female sexuality.

> "Using the term "images" assumes that these are simply visual representations or two- dimensional symbols of people or objects. The reality is that these are more than mere pictorials that guide behaviors. We suggest it is more accurate to discuss these representations as sexual scripts. According to symbolic interaction theory, people develop a sense of their sexual selves through sexual messaging that takes place within continually changing cultural and social contexts (Longmore 1998). As such, sexuality is "socially scripted" in that it is a "part" that is learned and acted out within a social context, and different social contexts have different social scripts (Jackson 1996: 62). How an individual thinks about herself, how she relates to others, and how others think and relate to her are based

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[28] Stephanie Y. Stevenson, "The Politics of "Being Too Fast: Policing Urban Black Adolescent Female Bodies, Sexual Agency, Desire, and Academic Resilience." (UCLA: UCLA Center for the Study of Women, 2012).

[29] Janell Hobson, "The 'Batty' Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body," *Hypatia* 18, no. 4 (2003).

[30] Dionne P. Stephens and Layli D. Philips, "Freaks, Gold Diggers, Divas, and Dykes: The Sociohistorical Development of Adolescent African American Women's Sexual Scripts," *Sexuality & Culture* 7, no. 1 (2003).

[31] Ibid.

on symbolic meanings that have been associated with sexuality. For African American adolescent women, the sexual scripts available to them rely on negative stereotypes that have changed little over the past century (Hill Collins 2000; Staples 1994; Wyatt 1997)."[32]

According to the authors, the frequent use of these scripts has a direct influence on how Black girls develop and perform their own sexuality. These scripts also become a vital foundation for understanding modern renderings of Black girl sexuality. I can't help but wonder: had these authors been privy to the way internet usage and access would infiltrate the realms of race, gender, and sexuality, would they still dismiss images as just "two-dimensional symbols"?

In 2007, Carla E. Stokes addressed the link between Black girl sexuality, online interactivity, and visual representation and how these tropes translate online.[33] Specifically discussing the role of Hip-Hop media in creating dominant sexual scripts for Black girls, Stokes analyzed more than two dozen personal MySpace homepages belonging to Black girls. Her findings reveal how for Black girls, visuality is constantly layered with sexual discourses. Stokes also supports the phenomenon of Black girls using images to both align with and resist dominant sexual scripts. This work draws a direct connection between how Black girls exist on social media and what landscapes they navigate in doing so. However, the digital landscape has shifted and evolved in the eight years since Stokes's project. There are new mediums of communication and methods of circulating Black girl sexuality and romance themes. Corporations, organizations, and other media entities have made homes for themselves on the internet, bringing with them different sources of content and functionality. All of these pieces move around, alongside, and against constructions of Black femininity and sexuality online.

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[32] Ibid, 8.

[33] Carla E. Stokes, "Representin' in cyberspace: Sexual scripts, self-definition, and hip hop culture in Black American adolescent girls' home pages." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 9, no. 2 (2007).

Treva Lindsey also employs black feminist theoretical frameworks to analyze three popular visual representations of African-American adolescent girls: a viral video showing a teenaged girl consensually performing oral sex; a musical clip from popular children's television show, Sesame Street, called "I Love My Hair"; and the music video for "Whip My Hair" by an African-American singer, Willow Smith.[34] The first video is recognized by Lindsey as child pornography and a disempowerment of the female teenager who appeared in the video, as she comes to represent pathos of black femininity. The latter two are recognized as empowering because they create spaces that affirm the humanity of black girls and celebrate their diverse aesthetic. Lindsey argues that the popular/public culture (namely mass, digital, and social media) represents an important platform that offers both opportunities and obstacles for the empowerment of African-American girls. Lindsey provides a valuable framework, Hip- Hop and black feminism, to analyze visual online representations of African American adolescents. Lindsey also appropriately situates Black girls within broader sociopolitical contexts and media forms that examine the tropes used to traditionally represent Black girls in the United States. The internet played a significant role in the visibility of all three of these videos, which again reinforces how the internet operates as a vehicle that moves images and narratives about Black girls. Regardless of where Black girl images originate, they are subject to the encoding and decoding practices that are specific to internet distribution and reproduction.

Negotiating the meanings of Black female visuality is necessary labor given the social histories of race and gender in the United States. In their collection of almost 200 images of Black women, scholars Deborah Willis and Carla Williams undertake this work in *The Black*

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[34] Treva B. Lindsey, "'One Time for My Girls': African-American Girlhood, Empowerment, and Popular Visual Culture," *Journal of African American Studies* 17, no. 1 (2013).

Female Body: A Photographic History,[35] providing historical context and analysis. Willis and

Williams trace the photographic history of the Black female body, mostly in the nude, in order to

pinpoint the social and historical contexts that framed them. In the process they remind us that

stereotypical images of Black women's bodies often influence the views of society and Black

women. Black women have been forced to carry and modify themselves in accordance to

historical tropes that have marked their bodies deviant and hypersexual. Yet, Willis and Williams

recognize that when it comes to Black women facing victimization and self-realization in the

visual realm, there is no hard definition of either, nor is there a hard or binary line separating

those outcomes.

Jennifer Nash's text, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography,*[36]

establishes a really important foundation for my project for several reasons. In this book, Jennifer

Nash performs close readings of racialized pornography in order to examine pleasure and

excitement in racialization, and performances of race that disrupt its meaning. Nash pays close

attention to Black women's performances, visibility and subjectivity in pornography in order to

conduct a visual analysis of racialized pornography and underscore the ways that Black women

can use racialized (even racist) sexualized images to re-present themselves and perhaps to

experience pleasure. To support this, Nash relies on Judith Butler's notions of gender being a

series of repeated acts that have settled into our collective understandings of humanity. For

Nash, race can be defined, altered, created, and erased via the repetition of specific acts. She

claims that "racial mythologies"[37] are often exaggerated or spectacularized and are imposed onto

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[35] Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*,
(Philadelphia: Temple University, 2002).
[36] Jennifer Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography,* (Durham:
Duke University, 2014).
[37] Ibid, 119.

Black women, demanding that through technology, they participate in visualizing imagined racial differences. However, in her reading of racialized pornography, Nash demonstrates how Black women extend and mutate images so that they facilitate new conversations and experiences of pleasure. These observations directly support my reading of memes as tools that influence how racialized gender exists online.

The Black Body in Ecstasy poses two critical interventions. First, doing a thorough reading of Black feminist texts on the subject of representation, Nash concludes that the Black feminist archive treats the visual realm as a site of injury for Black women and their bodies. Black feminist theorists are constantly looking for "the wound"[38] in Black female visuality. In other words, Black feminist scholars and cultural critics often contend that visual representation is harmful to Black girls and women because of the legacies of racist tropes and stereotypes that strip Black women of their humanity. According to Nash, prominent Black feminist theorists often find possibilities for recovery and freedom from this injury in self-created and initiated representations or completely outside of the visual realm itself (i.e. literature, music, etc.). Nash critiques this position, suggesting instead that Black female subjects can use representation to express not just pleasure but freedom.

Nash's other important intervention is the suggestion that the same representations that are injurious, limiting, controlling, or otherwise harmful can be used to subvert and pervert the very ideologies that construct race and racialized sexuality. Because images are, according to Nash, charged to produce affective, political, and/or cultural results then that same charge can be used to perform or embody racialized sexuality that is not in line with respectability politics, heteronormativity, male supremacy, sexism, racism, or other oppressive forces. In other words,

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[38] Ibid, 1.

the nature of images allows disidentification to occur. I am assuming a similar stance in my reading of racialized and sexualized memes. I do not wish to argue memes are either wound inflicting or wound deflecting on Black women and girls. Instead, I wish to explore the narratives that memes are charged with, what messages they carry with them as they circulate and consider: How might memes visually set the parameters on Black female self-representation online? And how can the elements (oppressive and liberating) of these coded images be put to work to redefine Black female sexuality and create new characterizations? And in the same way that painful racialization can sometimes be a site of pleasure for Black women in pornography, how might Black girls and women experience joy and excitement from the heavily charged messaging present in memes?

1.2   Theoretical and Analytical Frameworks: Hip-Hop & Trap Feminisms

Hip-Hop is invoked in a myriad of contexts and conversations about the experiences and ideologies of Black Americans. More than a popular genre of music associated with African-Americans, Hip-Hop is an American cultural phenomenon that has affected portrayals of Blackness, and more importantly, established a visible, defined, and commodified Black youth culture.[39] Its historical significance as a response to the sociopolitical effects of racism, in addition to its capacity to be capitalized upon in music, film, television, and other loci of high visibility, has made Hip-Hop a staple point of reference for inquiries into the lives of Black youth, including that of Black girls. Hip-Hop also exists as a framework for enacting and performing specific kinds of racialized gender and sexuality. However, Black feminist have intervened in order to address the ways that Black women and queer identified people have been relegated to the backdrop in hip hop. Black feminists have also critiqued the sexism and

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[39] Bikari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture,* (New York: Basic Cavitas Books, 2002).

homophobia in some of the content of hip hop. . Engaging with both of these possibilities has been some of the work of Hip-Hop feminism.[40]

In her groundbreaking text, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks it Down*, Joan Morgan attempts to reconcile the unique positionality of Black women who are invested in the transformative potential of Hip-Hop as a revolutionary cultural force, but also marginalized within it as a result of patriarchal misogyny.[41] Morgan describes Hip-Hop feminism as an ideology bold enough to "fuck with the grays."[42] I find this framework to be the most useful in doing the messy work of not only analyzing images of Black women and girls - or contextualizing the new ways in which Black girls express and receive ideas about their lived experience - but also prioritizing their daily practices and attempting to articulate how they "clap back" at problematic and limiting narratives that are imposed upon them. She theorizes that Black women and girls have a more complex relationship with misogyny and anti-Black woman racism, one that can also provide a source of pleasure. In the same way that Nash offers pleasure and enjoyment as a potential outcome of racialized pornography, Morgan presents a gray space as a site of productivity and possibility for Black women.

Aisha Durham defines Hip-Hop feminism as "a socio-cultural, intellectual and political moment grounded in the situated knowledge of women of color for the post-Civil Rights generation who recognize culture as a pivotal site for political intervention to challenge, resist,

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[40] Whitney Peoples, "'Under Construction': Identifying Foundations of Hip-Hop Feminism and Exploring Bridges between Black Second-Wave and Hip-Hop Feminisms," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 8, no. 1 (2008).

[41] Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks it Down* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

[42] Ibid, 59.

and mobilize collectives to dismantle systems of exploitation."[43] These systems of exploitation include heteropatriarchy and thus create the possibility to explore alternative realities and identities for Black girls. Hip-Hop feminism is committed to talking back to a culture that only talks about Black girls and women. Not only is Hip-Hop feminism determined to remind consumers, performers, producers, and critics that Hip-Hop includes the contribution of Black women and girls,[44] it has repositioned Black girls as active agents in the production and meaning making of Hip-Hop culture.[45] This is an important declaration as it establishes Black girls as more than passive receptors of narratives about how they should define and act in their relationships and sexual behaviors. Black girls can and do 'clap back' at imposed narratives, and given the prevalence of the internet, they are most likely to do so online in one of many digital community spaces.

The advent of Black girlhood studies is a direct product of Hip-Hop feminism and an innovative way of documenting and validating these responses, and their methods. This academic tradition, spearheaded by Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown, inserts the lived experiences of Black girls into Hip-Hop cultural scripts. As subjects, Black girls are understood as complex master teachers adept at not only telling their stories, but interpreting new meanings of their lived experiences. Girlhood is understood as a fluid concept, often carried into adulthood or invoked

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[43] Aisha Durham, Brittany Cooper and Susana Morris, "The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay," *Signs* 38, no. 3 (2013), 722.

[44] Ruth Nicole Brown and Chamara Jewel Kwakye, introduction to *Wish to Live: The Hip-hop Feminism Pedagogy Reader*, eds. Ruth Nicole Brown and Chamara Jewel Kwakye (New York: Peter Lang, 2012).

[45] Ruth Nicole Brown, *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood,* (Champaign: University of Illinois, 2013) and Gwendolyn Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*, (Boston: Northeastern University, 2004).

via art or shared experiences.[46] Black girlhood studies also accounts for the erasure of

adolescence and innocence from Black female bodies. Black girls are often read as adults, thus

sexual and relationship scripts that would typically be reserved for adults are written onto them.

As evidenced above, Hip-Hop feminism is a critical framework for my research for

several reasons: 1) It has fostered Black girlhood studies, which rethinks the normative

subjectivity of Black girls. 2) Hip-Hop itself is a theme in Black memes. It serves as a reference

point for translating the messages encoded in memes. 3) It validates alternative models of

knowing, and knowledge production. In other words Hip-Hop feminism expands the

epistemological and pedagogical potential of Black girlhood by recognizing emerging

technologies as active sites of theory, activism, resistance, and transformation. It supports new

media platforms as sites of resistance, creativity, and cultural documentation for marginalized

groups, including Black girls. And 4) Hip-Hop feminism offers a space that allows Black women

to disidentify with dominant ideologies.

A hip-hop feminist analysis is critical of how sexual scripts are packaged and sold to

Black women via hip-hop cultures, but its "gray space" provides a platform for working within

and without its margins, stretching its boundaries and subverting their meanings and offering

critical responses. Complex analyses of Black girl sexual scripts and messages are necessary, but

so are completely alternative readings of those scripts. Lamonda Stallings offers a great example

of this in "Hip Hop and the Black Ratchet Imagination."[47] Stallings provides two necessary

interventions in contemporary Black cultural dialogues. First, she posits that the ways that Hip-

Hop promotes themes that are assumed to be irresponsible and unproductive within American

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[46] Ruth Nicole Brown, *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy,* (Champaign: University of Illinois, 2008).
[47] LaMonda Stallings, "Hip Hop and the Black Ratchet Imagination" *Palimpsest* 2, no. 2 (2013).

culture represents the creative potential of Black people and hip-hop. Further, Hip-Hop uses

creative and alternative methods to create these "irresponsible and unproductive" ways of living.

This claim is particularly relevant to this project because as suggested in my introduction,

engaging with memes is considered a leisurely, non-work activity. Stallings claims that this

"Black ratchet—a   term used describe the practices and values of poor and working class Black

Americans—imagination" is a valuable cornerstone of hip-hop culture. Her second intervention

is the suggestion that hip-hop strip club culture, and the specific genre of rap that represents this

space's soundtrack, have perverted traditional gendered and sexual scripts, flipping them so that

the shameful and reductive become gateways to self-liberation. Stallings argues that, "The

enthusiasm and excitement for this music and the space it promotes might be best understood

and comprehended through the lens of queerness and sexual culture, critiques that take into

account distinct and multiple configurations of gender and sexuality as opposed to normative,

heterosexual, and fixed ones."[48] What Stallings offers here is a queer reading of Black sexuality,

which is not uncommon in digital community spaces where individuals have the opportunity to

self-define and express their identities and beliefs.

Another alternative reading of gender and sexuality, within a specific Hip-Hop context is

accomplished via "trap feminism." I coined trap feminism as a feminist response to trap music

and its affiliated culture.   Trap music is a Hip-Hop subgenre known for its aggressive sound and

was started by rappers whose lyrical content centered around drug dealing.[49] I acknowledge the

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[48] Ibid, 138.

[49] David Drake, "Real Trap Sh*t? The Commodification of Southern Rap's Drug-Fueled
Subgenre," *Complex.com*, 2012, http://www.complex.com/music/2012/10/real-trap-sht-the-
commodification-of-southern-raps-drug-fueled-subgenre.

relationship between hip hop feminism and trap feminism and also explain how Hip-Hop

feminism created the space to reassess how Black female sexuality works in a trap subspace.

> "Within trap music, access to women's bodies and sexuality are usually viewed as
> the perks for men with newly acquired wealth. But if you're a trap feminist like
> myself, you'll find that women are occasionally active agents, negotiating the terms
> under which they use their bodies and sexuality. Travis Porter's "Make it Rain" is an
> excellent example. In the chorus, a woman rhymes, "You wanna see some ass. I
> wanna see some cash." The entire song is a response to this demand. It's a smug,
> combative response, but the demand is met. When we step away from the filter that
> views women like this as victims to a male-dominated sector, and instead accept
> them as independent agents navigating their daily spaces, we're able to seek and find
> trap feminism."[50]

Here, Black girls perform femininity outside the boundaries of respectable womanhood. First,

whereas sexism dictates that female sexuality and bodies should only be available and dictated

by heterosexual masculinity, negotiating and even demanding financial compensation in

exchange for sexual fantasies or experiences is a perversion of normalized sexuality. This

transaction suggests that Black girls' sexuality, which is read as excessive in the context of

trap culture, is actually a ruse, trick, or cover for their own demands of pleasure and capital.

This specific performance of femininity is very closely related to Stallings' notions of

"ratchet," because of the racialized performance of alternative gender, but also because of the

class implications of trap culture. Defined by its strong associations with underground

economies like drug dealings and sex work, by avoiding state-sanctioned economies trap

subjects do not fulfill the requirements of productive or responsible citizenship. Embodying

racialized gender while participating in an alternative model of capitalism that relies on

specific gender roles is a disidentification in itself.

> More than just female voices within hip hop, trap feminist lyrics offer a culturally
> specific glimpse of women on the 'come up.' They create a narrative that portrays

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[50] Sesali Bowen, "Explicit Content: A Brief Intro to Trap Feminism," *Feministing.com,* 2014,
http://feministing.com/2014/01/08/explicit-content-a-brief-intro-to-trap-feminism/.

women also trapping. Yet when it comes to trap music, we are only concerned with male responses to female sexuality, as opposed to deconstructing the narrative of those women. It is not so hard for us to imagine women negotiating sexuality, power, and money when we're talking about sex workers, Slut Walks, or, dare I say, Miley Cyrus. We acknowledge how women can navigate and even flourish in male-dominated, corporate settings. So why not women in rap? Beneath it all is an almost romanticized, black-and-white notion of the trap being a site for violence and crime; a place where no good and no feminism can come about. Preconceived notions about race, class, and sexual expression permeate and allow us to only see these spaces as oppressive and unproductive. That doesn't have to be the case."[51]

Trap subculture is categorized as lowbrow. It actively rejects demands for intellectual, cultural, radical and political productivity that undergirds idealized and historical notions of Hip-Hop's and Hip-Hop feminism's legacy. It is distinguished by its associations with ratchet, and emblematic of poor and working class Black youth cultures. Armed with an understanding of Black sexism, consumerism, classism, and white privilege as systems of inequality, I reimagine the potential of Black female sexuality in an environment that has been marked as harmful to Black female sexual expression. Trap feminism takes advantage of Morgan's "gray" space in order to create a framework that uses the specificities of trap culture in order to read sexual, racial, and gendered scripts. While Hip-Hop feminism makes space for Black girls to disidentify, trap feminism documents and affirms the alternative identities—like the stripper, sex worker-- that are created as a result. Trap feminism acknowledges the ways in which Black girls might benefit from and enjoy performing racialized gender in ways that have been deemed inappropriate, reductive, and unproductive. Trap feminism is an important lens for my project, one that considers how ratchet might be useful after all.

Hip-Hop and trap feminism allow me to rethink the socio-cultural landscape and focus on social media as a site of identity formation and manifestation for Black girls. Scholars Aisha Durham, Brittany Cooper, and Susana Morris acknowledge that Hip-Hop feminist work can be

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[51] Ibid.

done through a multitude of mediums that are not limited to "text-based cultural criticism but also increasingly on performative, ethnographic accounts that describe hip-hop as embodied, lived culture."[52] I would argue the same for "trap feminist" methodologies. Each of these methods can be enacted online, via memes.

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[52] Aisha Durham, Brittany Cooper and Susana Morris, "The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay," *Signs* 38, no. 3 (2013): 727.

2   SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS & MEME FUNCTIONALITY

In order to grasp the significance of memes and how they are shared on social media, it is important to understand the history and evolution of several important social media platforms and their functionality. Additionally I would like to provide an example of how memes encapsulate social- and identity-based narratives.

2.1   Social Media Platforms

Myspace, one of the first widely used social networking sites in the United States, was founded in 2003[53]. This free community allowed users to connect with one another and as a result share pictures, videos, music, personalized profiles, blogs, etc. with friends. By becoming "friends" with another user, Myspace account holders can share private and instant messaging with each other. Amidst platforms like WordPress, which support long form, text-based blogging, Myspace was a trailblazer in the world of social networking sites. In 2006 it was the most visited website in the United States.[54] Myspace was put up for sale in 2011, after the layoffs of about 500 employees.[55] It was relaunched in 2013 as a platform to connect musicians with their fans.[56] As a result, Myspace is considered a dated social networking site and has not been a catalyst for memes in the same way that other media based sites are.

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[53] Timothy Stenovec, "Myspace History: A Timeline Of The Social Network's Biggest Moments," *The Huffington Post*, 29 June, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/06/29/myspace-history-timeline_n_887059.html, (accessed April 16, 2016).
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Timothy Stenovec, "MySpace Relaunch: Redesigned Site, Mobile App Include MyRadio Streaming Music Service," *The Huffington Post*, 12 June, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/12/myspace-relaunch-myradio-app_n_3428934.html, (accessed April 16, 2016).

Facebook was created in 2004[57] and included many of the same sharing features as Myspace. However, Facebook users cannot personalize their profile format. This social networking site was designed for users to connect with people that they know from school, work, neighborhoods, and other personal networks. As an online community space, Facebook is used as a way for people to share important details about their personal life, like engagements, graduations, births, moves, etc. Users connect on Facebook by becoming "friends" under the premise that they know each other, meaning that the content on individuals' Facebook pages are often used as a tool to have conversations with people that they know personally. Even though Facebook is used to share information in the form of text statuses and links, its widespread usage and image sharing capabilities mean that this platform is also a medium for circulating memes. Memes can be "shared" on Facebook, giving the user's friends the opportunity to share their views on the topic.

As a micro-blogging site, Twitter is a social media outlet that allows users to express moments and ideas in messages of 140 characters or less, called tweets. This is significant to the popularity of memes because Twitter's release in 2006[58] was an intentional step away from the longform text-based means of sharing online. Tweets, which can include photos and videos, are housed on the profile of the original poster and anyone who follows that user can see that tweet (and those of all the users they follow) in real time on what's called a 'timeline.' Followers can 'retweet' (post the same tweet to their own profile for their followers to see), tweets as well. One of Twitter's most distinctive features is the hashtag. Inserting a hash or pound sign before a word

[57] Sarah Phillips, "A brief history of Facebook," *The Guardian*, 25 July, 2007, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2007/jul/25/media.newmedia, (accessed April 16, 2016).
[58] Nicholas Carlson, "The Real History of Twitter," *Business Insider*, 13 April, 2011, http://www.businessinsider.com/how-twitter-was-founded-2011-4?page=1 (accessed April 16, 2016).

or phrase on Twitter automatically turns it into a link that you can click on to see all tweets that

include the same hashtag. This feature has been vital in connecting people (allowing them to

follow each other in order to receive the other person's tweets) along similar interests and

identities on social media. Hashtags on Twitter can also be used to organize and enact mass

online actions, as well as track the effects and reach of certain products, campaigns, and

movements. Hashtags make the congregations of different communities easier and common,

resulting in Twitter subcultures like "Black Twitter". According to Soraya Nadia McDonald at

the Washington Post:

> "Black Twitter is part cultural force, cudgel, entertainment and refuge. It is its
> own society within Twitter, replete with inside jokes, slang and rules, centered on
> the interests of young blacks online — almost a quarter of all black Internet users
> are on Twitter.
> There's no password. The only entry fee is knowledge. If you've spent time
> steeped in black culture, whether at a historically black college or university or in
> the company of friends or family, you will probably understand the references on
> Black Twitter.
> ...You can observe its power and impact in the witty, sharply worded rebukes that
> haunt public figures when they do or say something stupid, especially if it's
> racially insensitive."[59]

This description illustrates the attributes of Black digital communities across multiple other

social media platforms like Instagram and Tumblr.

Popular blogging site Tumblr is similar to Twitter in that it is also classified as a

microblogging site. Different from blog hosting sites like Blogger and WordPress, Tumblr's

content consists of links, images, videos, and texts that are displayed in compacted view for easy

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[59] Soraya Nadia McDonald, "Black Twitter: A virtual community ready to hashtag out a
response to cultural issues," *Washington Post*, 2014,
http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/black-twitter-a-virtual-community-ready-to-
hashtag-out-a-response-to-cultural-issues/2014/01/20/41ddacf6-7ec5-11e3-9556-
4a4bf7bcbd84_story.html (accessed April 15, 2015).

viewing and reblogging. Released in 2007,[60] Tumblr also takes advantage of the hashtag's functionality, in addition to sophisticated search capabilities that organize search results by relevancy. This allows users to easily find (and follow) other blogs, or blog posts that interest them. Tumblr bloggers, if they so choose, are able to maintain a higher level of anonymity given that its focus is on the sharing of interesting content as opposed to the intimate details of people's lives (although users participate in both kinds of sharing).

Instagram, on the other hand, is more personal. Also known as 'IG' or 'the gram,' Instagram is an online photo and video sharing application. One of its defining features is its mobile exclusivity, meaning that while anyone can view and comment on the images and videos posted to Instagram on a computer, users can only upload content from mobile devices like smartphones or tablets. Instagram is particularly important to my research because as an application that specializes in sharing pictures, it serves as a prominent database of memes that can be easily accessed via hashtag searches. It is also worth noting that out of all of the social media applications, Instagram has the highest percentage of Black users.[61] Instagram is one of my primary sources for memes that specifically feature or target Black girl subjects. Like Tumblr and Twitter, Instagram accounts also rely on followers in order for their content to be seen.

2.2   Methodology and Methods

I understand memes to be functional images that contain the capacity to create, circulate, and reproduce narratives about Black women and girls, especially about their bodies and

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[60] Josh Halliday, "David Karp, founder of Tumblr, on realizing his dream," *The Guardian*, 29 January, 2012, http://www.theguardian.com/media/2012/jan/29/tumblr-david-karp-interview, (accessed Apirl 16, 2016).
[61] Kurt Wagner, "How Diverse Are Your Social Networks?" *Mashable.com*, 2014, http://mashable.com/2014/01/23/racial-breakdown-social-networks/.

sexualities. I am interested in examining some memes with this specific context. Given the evidence cited in my literature review that connects Black girls' visual consumption with their sense of identity and autonomy, I use memes as archival evidence of how Black women are constructed, represented, and approached within the current digital landscape. To document this, I intend on using a collection of memes gathered from within my own social networks – including but not limited to Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, and personal correspondence – as research materials. I recognize the limitations of my sources, especially when such a high volume of possibilities exists under the expansiveness of the internet. For clarity's sake, my social networks consist of primarily of multigenerational Black people who are either American or have experience with Black American popular culture. These networks are often engaged in discourse around Hip-Hop, gender, and sexuality that reflect a shared understanding of dominant scripts and ideologies. I also acknowledge that there are several ways to interpret these memes.

However, it is precisely this expansiveness that makes me confident that there is room for my interpretation and that the results of this analysis are at least relevant to a certain subset (my social network) of the collective experiences of Black girls. Analyzing hundreds of memes from more structured and democratic sources would still only represent a drop in the bucket given the number of memes about Black girls that can be assumed to exist. Because memes rely on constant reproduction and distribution in order to "be live," the fact that a meme reaches my limited corner of the internet, or my text message inbox, allows me to assume that at least multiple others have seen it and read it through their own frameworks of Black girlhood. The fact that I and others in my social network share the meme and create shared meanings with each other about that meme also allows me to assert that I am participating in a collective experience with other (though not all) Black girls. I would also like to recognize yet another limitation in the

scope of my project. I am reading these memes through a framework of Blackness and Black girlhood that is rooted in a United States context. I recognize that the memes I analyze contain symbols and references that do not translate universally across the Black diaspora.

The memes that I chose for this project directly address Black women and girls, using images of Black female subjects in the image, or indirectly, via textual and visual references to a racialized (Black) gender – which I identify using a combination of textual and visual analysis methods. Most of them point to sexuality, relationships, body, and attractiveness tropes. Memes are images that can include multiple layers and elements, including customized text, altered pictures, or updated captions. While these multiple layers tend to subvert, shift, oppose, or agree with the messaging of other material (produced by often anonymous users), the sheer scope of the circulation and morphing makes it impossible for this project to also assess captions and comments, or reveal the identities of the original poster or creator (this would probably be impossible in most cases anyway). The context in which I saw a meme may not be its original intent. In other words, the fact that the certain meme exists is enough to justify its inclusion and need fro analysis. As a part of my method, I include multiple possible readings of the following memes as further commitment to this neutral position.

I will conclude with a summary that seeks to map what kind of digital landscape Black girls currently navigate using interactive visual technologies. I aim to illustrate a dual functioning tool that disciplines and policies the sexuality of Black girls, but also creates a space to resist and/or completely transform that disciplining as well.

2.3   Analyzing and Interpreting Memes

To use relevant terminology, I see my project as an update: an attempt to make sure

systems of analysis exist that can adequately support the shifting nature of the new social media

climate. I identify websites and mobile applications like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and

Tumblr as sites of operation for digital community spaces that are formed around various

identities, beliefs, geographic locations, age, etc. Photographs, videos (clips), and text coexist to

create a world of images that mirror the popular culture landscape, but also talk back to, inform,

and create it as well. In the process, online images circulate racial, gendered, and sexual

narratives. Let's consider this meme as an example.

Figure 1 "Single mother doing her best" starter pack meme

"Starter pack" memes became a trend in 2014[62] and consist of multiple images of objects,

people, specific features, products, or activities that collectively represent a subject that is

identified in the accompanying text. The premise of "starter pack" memes is that the content of

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[62] Brad, "Starter Packs," Knowyourmeme.com, last modified August 2015,
http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/starter-packs.

the images are necessary or typical in embodying the identified subjectivity. The "single mother doing her best" starter pack specifically targets Black viewers by including a Black woman (the "single mother") and (her) representational Black child. The woman is wrapped in a salon cape - a visual reference to beauty shop culture, which operates as a physical space with symbolic connections to the African American community as loci for sharing information about the nuances of Black femininity itself. This meme also relies on a culturally shared understanding of racial and gendered socioeconomics for its desired effects. Black, single mothers are heavily represented as impoverished. Freshly done hair, a son participating in an extracurricular activity like football, in addition to a reasonably priced Chevrolet Impala and a Michael Kors tote suggest that this single mother is able to afford basic necessities and minor luxuries for herself and her child. Thus she is represented as "doing her best" as a middle/working class single parent. Visual representations of shared cultural experiences or similar relationships to structures of power are an example of the racial coding and signifying that I talked about earlier. Black memes (memes that hail Black subjects) not only use symbols and icons to represent shared experiences and relationships to Blackness, they validate Black cultural experiences even in the absence of said experiences. For example, the specific combination of spiked haircut, football playing son, monogramed Michael Kors bag, and Black Impala are probably only relative to the experience of a small number of Black single mothers. But the iconicity and branding of those things, and viewers' relationship to them, authenticate, and thus define, successful single Black motherhood in the U.S.

The popularity of minimalist sites like Twitter and Instagram reveal much about contemporary shifts in social media usage and communication. These two sites in particular require users to truncate their thoughts and expressions with character limits and emphasize

visual means of communicating and self-constructing. This has been a catalyst for the widespread usage of memes, which take advantage of images, and sometimes text, to convey messages. Individuals, companies, organizations, and celebrities also take advantage of these platforms and continuously blur the lines between consumers and producers of cultural content.

2.3.1   *"Bitches Be Like…:" A note on the title*

I titled my thesis "Bitches Be Like…:" after the popular phrase used in many memes to set the viewer up for the pun or message. While it can be used to describe "bitches" (girls and women) of any race, these memes often target Black girls specifically. It is also worth noting that "bitches be like" is a phrase that reflects African American vernacular (AAV) or slang; despite its commodification and widespread usage, it is still linked to Black communities. Although the politics of respectability requires a rejection of the phrase for its vulgarity and deployment of AAV, it is still widely identifiable among Black communities. I identify the phrase, "Bitches Be Like" as a textual and visual sign that works to hail Black girls or signals that they are the both the audience and subject of this meme or content.

"Bitches Be Like" memes can take many forms and formats and can be used to make an observation about something perceived as common among women (based on truth or stereotype), but it is usually the case that they seek to criticize, make fun of, or dehumanize women in some capacity. Here are several examples.

Figure 2 "Bitches Be Like" meme example #1

This meme suggests that women are intentionally deceptive about their bodies and overall

attractiveness on Instagram.

Figure 3 "Bitches Be Like" meme example #2

It's foundational association with Hip-Hop and its focus on the backside - a body part

that been associated with hyper-sexual blackness and delegitimized - Black women, girls, and

other feminine subjects who twerk are almost always exclusively charged with deviance,

immorality, and unproductivity. And yet within Black femme communities themselves the

context of twerking is one of liberation, joy, exuberance, and community. This meme addresses the new mainstream fascination with twerking by illustrating women's enthusiasm to engage in the dance (which involves strategically manipulating the fat and muscle in the butt).

Another possible reading, based on the lack of clothing and upkeep of the dolls in the image, is that women who twerk are not presentable, even trashy. Engaging with one's own body outside of the limits set by patriarchy is unacceptable, and twerking is no exception.

Figure 4 "Bitches Be Like" meme example #3

In this meme, women of color are accused of being possessive and jealous to extreme lengths in relationships, despite their claims to be trusting of their partners.

"Bitches be like" is highly recognizable in its relation to memes, so I thought it best-captured the subject matter of my project. Seeing these memes, and others like it on a regular basis also prompted me to consider how using this phrase in the title of a document that ultimately suggests that memes can also be used as a tool to completely skirt, or at least resist, the impact of these messages, might be a disidentification in itself. By using the phrase outside of

the context of causal, informal discourse flips its intended signification in the service of something completely different.

3   MEMES

The memes that I have chosen to analyze here are only a small fraction of the memes that are created to hail or provide commentary on Black girls and women. There are thousands that exist. They often rely on humor and/or relative understandings of Black culture and dominant ideologies about gender and sexuality that are often rooted in heteronormative patriarchy and misogyny. This selection of memes is evidence of the prevalence of these themes.

3.1   Demoralizing Memes in Black girl's online spaces

The following memes are examples of the ways in which Black women are policed, shamed, mocked, ridiculed, etc. online via memes. These images rely on mainstream ideologies about respectability that are rooted in racism, sexism, and classism.
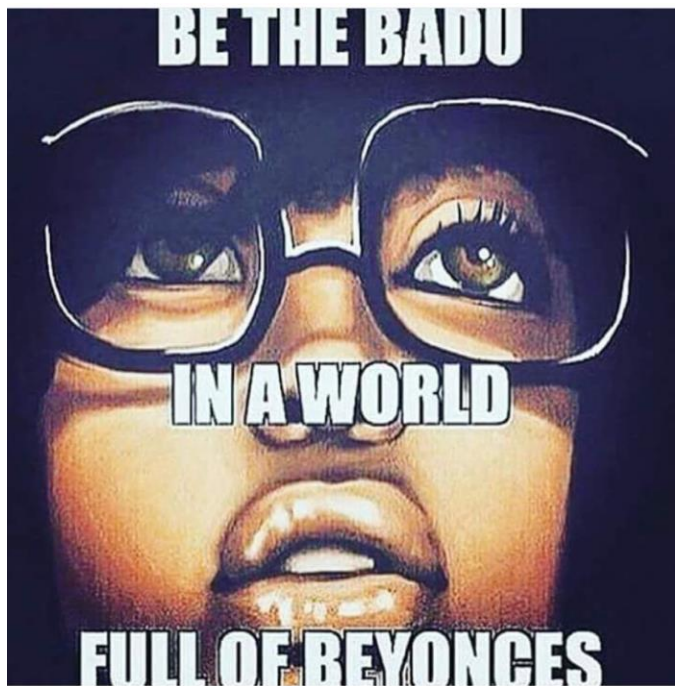
3.1.1   Be the Badu in a world full of Beyonces

Figure 5 "Be the Badu in a world full of Beyonces" meme

This meme was the image that "broke" the proverbial "camel's back" for me. Unlike other images I see on a daily basis, I couldn't just scroll past this one with a shake of the head or a shrug of the shoulders. This was the meme that prompted me to seriously consider the possibilities and power of memes in driving identity-based narratives. Essentially, this is the meme that conceived the idea for this thesis project. There is not anything excessively violent or offensive about this image that sets it apart from any of the others I have seen, which is more than I can say for other internet images featuring Black women. I think that more than the content itself, my strong reaction to it was caused by the sheer volume of pictures in its likeness that I have encountered, and how frequently they are circulated.

On any given day, I can see up to a hundred memes. Many of them intend to police Black women's appearance, sexuality, parenting, communication style, etc. When a friend of mine posted this specific meme on Instagram, it was more than an anecdote on two great Black women musicians and performers. This was no musical or artist critique. There was a glaring motive, with a rich history and a specific imperative and context. This was yet another meme with a directive for Black women on how they should perform their Black femininity. It was yet another example of how the visuality of the internet is used to critique and police Black femininity online - and I was over it.

"Be the Badu in a world full of Beyonces" uplifts Erykah Badu as a model of ideal Black womanhood. Badu, an eclectic R&B singer is known for her earthy, Afrocentric aesthetic. Since her debut in 1997, Badu's style has spanned the gamut of head wraps, ankh adornments, afro wigs, dashikis, brightly colored and flowing dresses to match her head wraps; and more recently, leggings, top hats, futurist metallics, feathered shawls, dress coats, and high heels. Not only does Badu evade the male gaze in her fashion choices, she bypasses trends and normality with her

style. Erykah Badu's musical content has also helped her build a brand that is aligned with afrocentricity by addressing racism, capitalism, individuality, Black Power, and spirituality in her lyrics. Badu's iconicity has been defined by her insistence on adorning herself outside of a limited male gaze, and supporting a Black politics that embraces aesthetic and ideological alterity. Labeled as "conscious" - which is coded language for an awareness of Black history, representation, and the effects of anti-Blackness at the hands of American and European colonialism, imperialism, and racism - Erykah Badu benefits from the binary separation of gender and sexuality from notions of Black nationalism, activism, and politics.

The pictured image of Erykah Badu featured in this image appears to be a painting and has infantilized her facial features, which are almost drowned out by oversized glasses and an afro, representing intellect and Black pride, respectively. The image is cropped (or perhaps the artist intentionally created this frame) to only show her face; erasing her body, which has been under scrutiny and subjected to the male gaze (despite her intentions) ever since she stripped nude in the music video for her single "Window Seat." This seems to be an intentional decision given the way she is gazing up in childlike admiration - which infers that she possesses the innocence and purity associated with children - at the aforementioned values, which her current brand represents. This detail makes the individuality, futurism, and Black pride that are all infused into her iconicity ethereal qualities that prop up Badu as a fitting role model and a beacon of Black female respectability- hence her downplayed sexuality in this meme.

While Beyoncé is not visibly present in this image, her recognizable iconicity prompts viewers to insert a visual counter-reading of her based on the establishment of Badu as the ideal Black female subject. Beyoncé, like Badu, is also an R&B singer who has attained massive commercial success and recognition internationally. Beyoncé's R&B sound has been

manufactured and packaged to intertwine with pop music and culture. Formerly the lead singer of successful girl group, Destiny's Child, Beyoncé has been immersed in the music industry since she was a child. Her stardom is a product of strategic branding and bureaucratic relationships, which have brought attention to the way she, and other artists in her position, work within corporate structures to obtain success and material wealth. Beyoncé chooses to wear her hair blonde and either straight or with loose curls or waves - a style that contradicts notions of Black pride, which implies that embracing one's natural hair is a political statement of solidarity (an assumption here is that Black women don't have naturally blonde, wavy hair and thus can't signify Blackness). Her street style often mirrors trends defined by mainstream fashion entities. Furthermore, Beyoncé's persona as a performer celebrates female sexuality lyrically, choreographically, aesthetically, and stylistically. She often performs dance routines that include hip and butt movements in leotards and tights. Her willingness to be publicly sexual has been critiqued by those who think that Black female sexuality is inherently deviant, both inside and outside the scope of mass consumerism. Beyoncé, in juxtaposition to Erykah Badu, represents corporate commodification and assimilation, processes that are both mediated by white privilege and capital greed.

According to my reading of this meme, to "be a Badu in a world full of Beyoncés" is to be respectable and discretionary or passively engaged with your sexuality, while other women publicly or explicitly express theirs. Being "a Badu in a world full of Beyoncés" is to be eclectic and different while other Black women choose to enjoy chic as defined by specific industries. The "Badus" reject the status quo and "Beyoncés" embrace them and flourish. But while these artists have been framed as oppositional representations of Black womanhood, the similarities and contradictions in their respective personas betray this meme's simplistic reading of "Badus"

and "Beyonces" or Black girls and women for that matter. Important overlaps in the women's lives as they negotiate the music business as well as Black nationalist or American ideals are overlooked as this meme compares them, asks us to judge, and then choose. Despite the differences in technique and sound, both Badu and Beyoncé are committed to contemporary renderings of the Black sonic tradition that is R&B.[63] They are both signed to major recording labels -- Beyoncé to Columbia Records under parent company Sony Music, and Badu to Def Jam under parent company Universal Music Group. They are both subject to the scrutiny of major label bureaucracies and procedures, despite both carving out spaces to embark on their own creative endeavors. While she certainly does not share the same level of visibility as Beyoncé, Badu has had her share of corporate endorsement deals, including those with Tom Ford and Givenchy. While Badu and Beyoncé present their race, gender, and sexuality in different ways, the public packaging of their images are filtered through the same processes and systems.

As it pertains to respectability and representations of sexuality, Beyoncé is certainly more aligned with the values of heteronormative sexual purity. She has only been known to publicly date one man, rapper Jay-Z, whom she married and eventually had a child with. Meanwhile, Erykah Badu has yet to marry and has had three children with as many partners. A critical race and gendered lens leaves room for both of these Black artists/women to exist, acknowledging that neither one of them is any more or less political, respectable, desirable, or Black than the other. But the sexual lifestyle differences between Beyoncé and Badu illuminate glaring hypocrisies in uplifting a figure (Badu) that in so many ways goes against the Black respectability tropes and Black nationalist proscribed notions of racially appropriate behavior. The comparison between the two is one that doesn't need to be made and it heavily relies on the

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[63] Short for Rhythm and Blues, a genre of music with roots in African-American communities.

visual performances of Black female sexuality for its sustenance. What was revealed to me when I saw this image in the context of a friend's Instagram post was that viewers, creators and distributors of memes like this seem to be more invested in visual representations of Black femininity, as opposed to the lived experiences and embodiments of those who inhabit those specific traits.

This dependence on visuality is what gives memes the power to distribute and validate racialized narratives. For me, memes are such a rich source of research material because they bridge the gaps between visual cultures, popular culture and its nuances, in addition to specific race, gender, and sexuality discourses. As the subjects of online memes, Black people exist within preset, racialized narratives – some of them embraced and supported by various Black communities, others rooted in oppressive rhetoric that aims to criticize, demonize, and shame. Their visibility in memes can act as conduits in translating those narratives in the public spaces of the internet.

To that end, it is worth noting that while I chose this specific reading of the meme based on the context in which my friend shared it, there are other ways to interpret this image. For example, someone using a Black or Hip-Hop feminist lens might share or support this image in a way that validates the sexual practices of Black women who have not followed the behaviors laid out by heteronormative patriarchy. From this vantage point, women who don't marry before they have children, those who have or have had multiple partners, or perhaps even those who are queer might find themselves supported. Or in another scenario, this meme could be interpreted as a critique of corporate music and/or fashion industry practices, encouraging Black women to seek alternative modalities for artistic expression and creativity. Maybe a supporter of this meme could be critiquing capitalist greed, with an appreciation of Badu's downplayed fashion and

lifestyle choices. However, both of these readings would be based on a false assumption that Badu does not participate in capitalist, corporate business practices like Beyoncé does. The latter reading is also a return to the visual as authoritative truth. Further, assumptions about the stylistic and aesthetic choices of Badu imply that she is less invested in material wealth than Beyonce. Despite the well-meaning intention of either of these possible alternatives, they both rely on a binary comparison and separation of these artists, which ultimately uplifts and supports Badu at the expense of Beyoncé. Ultimately, any rendering of this meme is a direct attempt to shame and police Beyoncé and any other Black girl assumed to exist within similar moral or visual categories.

3.1.2   Fat Black girls' undesirability

This image of Gabourey Sidibe in a sex scene from the show *Empire* is another meme that targets Black women,this time, addressing their bodies and sexuality.

Figure 6 "This nigga aint slick we all know tax season coming" *Empire* **response meme**

This meme started circulating online after an episode of FOX's hit show *Empire* showed one of its characters, Becky Williams, engaged in a sexual scene with her lover.[64] Williams is played by actress Gabourey Sidibe, who stands out in Hollywood as a fat,[65] dark-skinned Black woman. Responses to Sidibe's tenure in the spotlight have been wrought with fatphobia[66] and suggestions that because she is a fat, Black woman she should not be allowed to exist in such a publicly visible way. She has been relentlessly mocked, ridiculed and reduced to just her appearance, especially within Black communities. To illustrate what I mean in the latter point: In her breakout role, the film adaptation of the novel *Push*, Sidibe played main character Precious, an HIV positive and illiterate teen mother from a low income, abusive household. Though the film is over six years old, many people still insist on referring to Sidibe as "Precious," despite the different roles that she has played since then. This intentional act of misnaming Sidibe reveals the way in which she has been dehumanized and objectified; because her physical features are perceived as a grotesque anomaly, it is not even worth the effort to know her name. In the absence of other bodies that look like hers in mainstream media, her iconicity, under the label "Precious," has been used to ridicule and shame other fat women, and to epitomize

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[64] *Empire*, "A High Hope for a Low Heaven," Episode 18, directed by Mario Van Peebles, written by Robert Munic, FOX, Broadcast on 4 November, 2015.

[65] The term "fat" is often stigmatized and used in way that is meant to insult, humiliate or otherwise hurt the person it's used in reference to. In this document, I intentionally use the term as a neutral signifier. As a fat, Black woman invested in body positivity, I do this as a way to reclaim and shift the power dynamics of the word.

[66] This term is widely used by those in the body positivity movement to describe the fear, dislike, discrimination, mistreatment, and violence against fat people, which are pervasive in many cultures, including the United States.

unattractiveness and undesirability. To illustrate this: in his verse on the song "Mercy 1" rapper Kanye West said "…my bitch make your bitch look like Precious."[67]

The rhetoric about Sidibe's undesirability is the basis of this meme. The picture included in this image is a still frame from Sidibe's sex scene on *Empire*. It is set on a rooftop terrace with starry lights from the fictional New York cityscape surrounding them. They're making heavy eye contact as Sidibe wraps her leg around her partner's body. All of these visual elements combine to suggest that this is a romantic encounter between two people who care for each other. However, when fat, Black women and girls – who are often represented in reference to Sidibe's iconicity – are categorized as inherently unattractive and sexually worthless, this scene prompts commentary that supports this harmful trope. The text in this meme provides said commentary.

In addition to showing Black bodies, this meme speaks directly to Black audiences in several ways. First, the use of African American vernacular engages Black viewers in a particular way. For example, term "nigga" is an evolved form of the racial slur "nigger" that some Black communities have reclaimed as a term of familiarity, endearment, and/or identity. The term "you aint slick" also has strong ties to Black linguistic traditions. It is a culturally specific way of telling someone that they aren't fooling, tricking, or deceiving you, despite their intentions. The reference to tax season in this meme is significant. Tax season, which comes with the strong likelihood of a tax refund, is recognized as an opportunity for financial gain: directly, via the official tax filing process, and indirectly, by getting someone who is expecting a tax return to share some of their money with you. It is kind of a running cultural joke (that has been made explicit via the conversations and images on social media) that some Black folks who are

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[67] Kanye West, Big Sean, Pusha T & 2 Chainz, "Mercy. 1," by Kanye West, Big Sean, Pusha T & 2 Chainz, in *Kanye West Presents Good Music Cruel Summer,* Getting Out Our Dreams Inc./The Island Def Jam Music Group, 2012, MP3.

not expecting money via the formal tax return process will often recommit to current relationships, renew past relationships, or begin new relationships in the months leading up to tax season, in order to be in the good graces of their partner so that they can benefit from their partner's refund. The episode of *Empire* that was the catalyst for this meme aired November 4th, about two months before W-2s start arriving to employees so that they can begin filing their taxes.

Thus, the caption "This nigga aint slick we all know tax season is coming" immediately strips the male character of any authentic feelings or desires for Williams (Sidibe), suggesting instead that he is making a strategic move to profit from her. The weight of "This nigga aint slick" relies on the widely supported trope that fat, Black women are not attractive; there *must* be some other reason he is willingly engaged in such an intimate moment with Williams. Under this damaging ideology, it is not believable that any man could be genuinely interested in someone like Williams. This rhetoric sends a message to Black girls that a failure to perform (meaning, a failure to meet limited beauty standards that include light skin, and an at least average-sized body) under a male gaze makes them ineligible and undeserving of love and admiration. His alleged intentions also call into question the socioeconomic standing of the male character. His inability to secure his own tax return suggests that is unemployed, underemployed, or perhaps working in some underground or illegal economy. In my reading of this meme, his social standing is important because there is also an underlying implication that unsuitable (under neoliberal capitalist standards) candidates are the only ones available or interested in fat, Black girls reinforcing the messaging that they are unable to have authentic relationships.

This meme critiques Gabourey Sidibe's appearance, which symbolically represents unattractiveness in all of its forms because of her combined fatness and darkness. By suggesting

that her sexual desirability is only considered when it translates into financial or other material gain, this meme also effectively constrains the sexuality of Black girls based on their perceived desirability. While the "Be the Badu in a world full of Beyonces" meme was created to police the behavior and expression of other Black girls. Using a combination of visual, textual, and cultural references, memes like these target Black girls in an attempt to control and contain them. Bot memes contain messages that align with dominant notions of heteronormativity, patriarchy, and a limited male gaze. Because these images are widely circulated, they can easily affect the way Black girls and women express themselves publicly, arrange their relationships, and respond to their own lived experiences.

3.2   Memes that dis- or counter-identify with oppressive Black girl tropes

Luckily, Black girls are also able to rely on these visual technologies to create messages that speak to their experiences, thoughts, and values as well. When memes reflect identities that do not align with dominant scripts, they create more opportunities for Black girls to self-identify and resist the effects of constant policing and shaming. I will analyze the following memes to demonstrate how this disidentification is a possibility for Black girls.

3.2.1 Response to the policing of Black girls' sexuality

Figure 7 "Don't even have a house to put a hoe in" meme

This is one of my favorite memes because it provides the best clapback[68] for one of the

longest lasting tropes about women's morality and sexuality. The phrase "you can't turn a hoe

into a housewife," makes several bold, definitive statements in one sweeping line: The

catchphrase advises men (although I have certainly heard queer women use the phrase in earnest

as well) to not seriously consider women who are labeled as promiscuous as candidates for

marriage. Furthermore, the specific version of marriage evoked via "housewife," is one that

implies female domesticity and reliance on one's husband for financial security. The saying also

suggests that this (or perhaps any) version of marriage is or should be the ultimate goal for

women. In other words marriage is a prize or gift that men are able to leverage against women in

return for their strict adherence to hetero-patriarchal standards of sexual purity. It is also worth

noting that while it specifically mentions "housewife," the underlying meaning suggests that

[68] Clapback is a slang term that means a comeback.

these women should remain ineligible for any meaningful affections, connections, love, or serious partnerships.

And in yet another context, the advisory of "You can't turn a hoe into a housewife" is supported by another faulty ideology, one that ingrains sexual deviance into the very essence of women. The literal inability to "turn a hoe into a housewife" connotes that the individual sexual choices of women cannot be separated from their persons. Under this rhetoric, promiscuity becomes a permanent moral deformity for the women who carry that label, not allowing the wearer to meet the requirements for marriage or certain types of relationships. This phrase is often used as an advisory to young men – to help them avoid the embarrassment of essentially valuing a woman who is only meant to be engaged with sexually; and to young women – in order to warn them that their sexual experiences carry long term implications for their life.

Culturally specific words are powerful enough to transmit racialized messages without using visual images for emphasis. So powerful, in fact, that the words themselves can become an image that accomplishes the same thing. The historical context of certain phrases and words are able to stand in for visual representations of certain subjects, like Black men. Although it doesn't include pictures, this meme responds directly to this popular phrase with a witty, and Black-girl-related retort; and in the process critiques some of its sexist messaging. Just as it did in the "This nigga aint slick we all know tax season is coming"[69] meme, the term "nigga" in this image denotes that the author is speaking directly to or about Black subjects and/or viewers. In this case, "niggas" can be assumed to be the Black men who believe and trust in the validity of not being able to turn hoes in housewives, hence the reason they "love saying" it. However, when they "don't even have a house to put a hoe in" they are assumed to not meet the financial

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[69] See Figure 4.

requirements that support the standard of marriage that they themselves uphold. Essentially, they – just like women they have labeled "hoes" – also do not meet the requirements for that standard. This strips Black men of their title as the sole gatekeepers of the structure of marriage and relationship. As a result, Black men are on the receiving end of being called into question and critiqued on the basis of their financial capabilities, in the way that Black girls often are.

According to Muñoz's theory,[70] this meme is a counter identification because it offers a response that does not challenge or change the power inherent in words like "hoe," or the privileging of a model of marriage that has roots in neoliberal capitalist, patriarchal, nuclear family structure. Instead, it merely challenges the notion that Black girls unquestioningly accept this model without stipulations and demands of their own. According to my specific reading, it argues that Black girls can and are just as invested in this oppressive narrative, but can be just as demanding regarding outcomes as their male counterparts. It rejects hoe-shaming, but provides a stipulation under which hoe-shaming is allowed to occur (i.e. when men can afford to sustain the housewife marriage or relationship model). In other words, it resists the narrative, but does not change it.

However, counter narratives like this are still important. Even the rejection of Black girls' passive acceptance creates a small opening for Black girls to define, (re)imagine, and construct alternative models of relationships that are liberating and feeing. It also represents just one of the ways that Black girls practice resilience in the face of oppressive messaging.

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[70] Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999).

3.2.2 Reclaiming the word "hoe"

Figure 8 "When your friend calls you a hoe but they ain't wrong" Rihanna meme

In this meme, the text and picture combine to provide context in order to perform a disidentification. As mentioned in my analysis of the previous meme, the word hoe is used to describe someone who uses her sexuality outside of the boundaries of patriarchal respectability. The word has specific meanings for women of color. In an open letter of opposition to the mainstream feminism's popular Slut Walk, a group of Black women noted this: "Moreover, we are careful not to set a precedent for our young girls by giving them the message that we can self-identify as 'sluts' when we're still working to annihilate the word 'ho,' which deriving from the word 'hooker' or 'whore', as in 'Jezebel whore' was meant to dehumanize."[71] My textual analysis of this meme will reveal that I disagree with the notion that oppressive language is static

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[71] CADCE, "An Open Letter From Black Women to the Slut Walk," *NewBlackMan (In Exile): The Digital Home for Mark Anthony Neal*, 24 September, 2014, http://www.newblackmaninexile.net/2011/09/open-letter-from-black-women-to.html.

and fixed, but this an important anecdote on how "hoe" has been used to target Black women specifically – making this meme especially applicable to Black girls.

"When your friends call you a hoe but they ain't wrong," subverts the power of the word hoe in several ways. First of significance is that "a friend calls you a hoe," and in my reading of this meme, it is not someone who would be invested in shaming or demeaning you, or judging your sexual choices. This already shifts the intention and impact of its usage because it is not meant to be verbally violent. This specific subversion of the word "hoe" is not exclusive to this meme. In the past few years the terminology has been reclaimed, allowing Black women to absorb the word without the shame and stigma associated with it. I've described this phenomenon at length

> "Many women of color are doing their part by talking candidly about the pleasures and obstacles to casual, non-monogamous, unwed, and paid sex in public settings. And the terminology that they are using to describe themselves is a word we all know is coming when we talk about women of color's sexuality: hoe. But the intention behind using hoe as a reclamation is not one of guilt or devaluation. It is a way of neutralizing or lessening the power of a word that has been so often used to harm women."[72]

This is a great example of how social media can be used to uplift and spread Black girls' disidentification tactics that can exist both on and offline. Given this alternative framework, when a friend calls you such a name, it can be assumed that it is meant as a term of endearment, acknowledgment, or at least playful a tease. To the point that the word "hoe" can be and often is neutralized as a harmful phrase, "but they ain't wrong," isn't necessarily a surprising statement. The subject here is also embracing the term hoe as part of their own identity or relationship to their sexuality.

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[72] Sesali Bowen, "Why Hoe Is Life," Feministing.com, 15 January, 2016, http://feministing.com/2016/01/15/why-hoe-is-life/.

Another reading of this meme's text could reject that "hoe" has been reclaimed and that instead, it is a self-deprecating statement that relies on harmful meanings of the word. But the two pictures included in the image lead us to believe otherwise. Both pictures appear to show pop music megastar Rihanna as a guest on a talk show. In the first frame she holds a quizzical, but reflective face, as if she is seriously considering the validity (or perhaps her response to) of something that was just said to her. She glances downward, pensively pursing her lips. In the next frame, Rihanna's face is illuminated with a smug smirk. From the corner of her eyes she is acknowledging the person she is engaged with, pointing a finger in their direction in an affirming way. Behind her are artificial lights, paneling, and floral arrangements that resemble the stage set for a daytime television talk show. The symbolism of this location can also add meaning to this image. When talk shows interview celebrities, it is not uncommon for the hosts to ask questions or make comments about sensitive topics like sexuality. It is decorum for hosts to present this dialogue as light-hearted and for celebrities to respond in a similar fashion. In this context, the host could very well be "the friend" and Rihanna's witty response could be that "they ain't wrong." The first frame implies that being called a hoe has caused the subject to reconsider her sexual choices and action, building anticipation to what her response will be. But the second frame erases this effect, illustrating that she not only agrees with her friend's assessment but that she experiences enjoyment and fulfillment from that behavior that would warrant her that title.

Rihanna's public persona helps to emphasize this messaging. She has been called rebellious because of her bold style and unapologetic sexuality in her music, performances, and appearances. This, and her casual associations with different male suitors after a public breakup has also made her the target of harmful "hoe" labels as well. Georgis states,

> "Rihanna's sexuality, like that of all black women regardless of celebrity, is
> regularly policed. When she appears anywhere in an outfit not appropriate for a

> Catholic mass, writers and parents and Twitter-dwellers rush to remind her she really ought to be wearing more… But Rihanna doesn't beg pardon for her body; she claps back."[73]

Her refusal to apologize for the ways that her body and gender performance are read as deviant and impermissible, while simultaneously using these sexist foundations to constantly reshape her image, make her a very public example of what disidentifying can look like for Black girls. Rihanna's cropped body can also be read as an element of disidentification in this meme. She is only shown from the neck up, signaling that this meme is not concerned with her actual body and sexuality, only her imagined response to such an inquiry. Her iconicity highlights the messaging in this meme because of the way Rihanna "stands in" or represents carefree Black girls who are divorced from limiting demands for respectability.

This meme successfully disidentifies with the negative "hoe" trope by utilizing the term in a way that strips it of guilt, remorse, and shame that the wearer of such a label is supposed to carry. And yet, it is still used as the signifier of a sexuality that falls outside of those imposed by patriarchal models of proper femininity. It does not argue against the term's existence, or its applicability to the sexual life or history of Black girls. It chooses a third mode of engagement that allows Black women and girls the freedom to explore and express their sexuality.

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[73] Hannah Giorgis, "Rihanna And The Radical Power Of "Carefree Black Girl" Celebrity," *Buzzfeed*, 7 April, 2015, http://www.buzzfeed.com/hgiorgis/rihanna-da-gawd#.rtglOwqe5.

3.2.3 Response to policing Black girls' bodies
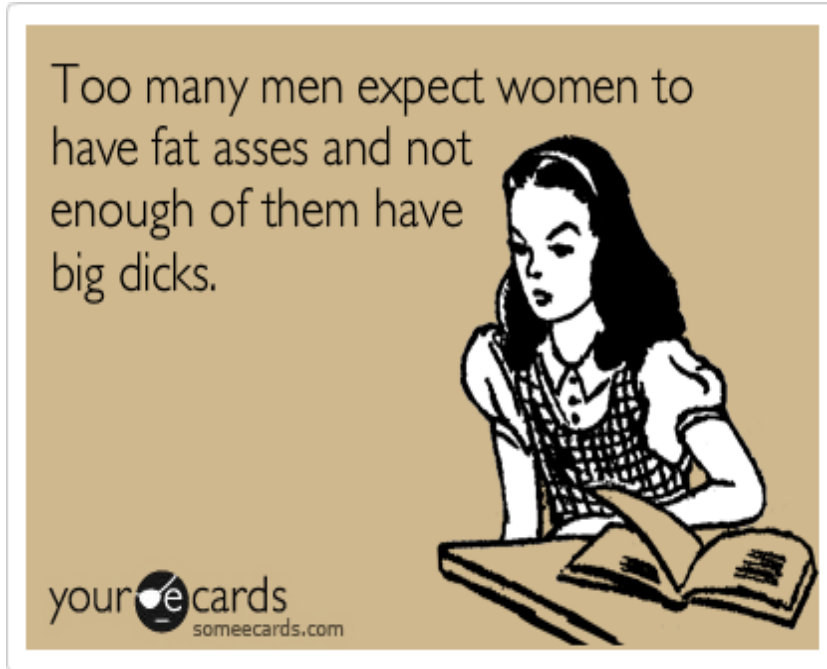
Figure 9 "Too many men expect women to have fat asses and not enough of them have big dicks." meme

Someecards.com was started in 2007 and lets users create their own e-cards with basic backgrounds and a selection of stock images.[74] Usually taking a sarcastic tone, the humor in them is often created via the juxtaposition of the text and the chosen images – usually of cartoon people from historical eras, from Victorian to the 1950's and present time. They combine visuals that imply highbrow culture with lowbrow language and text. The visuals convey and confirm the emotion or affect driving the text, and in many cases reveal information about the referenced subjects. These e-cards, which are essentially user-created digital images, are shared and once they're in circulation, they become memes.

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[74] Power, No Limits, "Your Ecards / Someecards.com" *KnowYourMeme.com*, last updated December 2015, http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/sites/your-ecards-someecards-com.

This meme, like the "Don't even have a house to put a hoe in" meme,[75] responds directly to demands from a dominant male gaze with a logical rebuttal given the context. I consider this meme to be one that is useful for Black girls in particular, because "fat asses," specifically round, fat butts on hourglass shaped women is a trait that is especially valued within Black communities – because they fulfill a heterosexual Black male gaze no less. The butt has always been associated with Black women,[76] and pressure to adhere to this specific aesthetic, and the feelings and experiences that we encounter when we do not, is very much a part of Black girls' lived experiences. If, according to the meme, there are "too many men" who "expect women to have fat asses," one way of reading this image is to assume that these are Black men who believe that Black women and girls should be naturally endowed with big booties. Within this reading, the author or speaker can be assumed to be a Black girl or woman.

The visual of the angry black and white cartooned woman stands out against the solid, beige background. She is fully dressed and in a blouse with a jumper. Her hair is managed with a headband, allowing us full access to her facial expression. She sits at a desk or table, facing away from a book, or perhaps a magazine, that she was reading before she engaged the topic at hand. This posturing lends itself as an analogy, and illustrates one of the emotional outcomes of being boxed into such a narrow standard of beauty. Dressed at least semi-professionally and sitting at a desk or table with literature is emblematic of the complexities of Black girls. Brown supports this assertion by suggesting that Black girlhood exists beyond corporeal realities and fixed identities.[77] So although a white woman is drawn in this image, Black girlhood appears because

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[75] See Figure 4.

[76] Janell Hobson, "The 'Batty' Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body," *Hypatia* 18, no. 4 (2003).

[77] Ruth Nicole Brown, *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood,* (Champaign: University of Illinois, 2013).

of the memory and lived experience of Black girls with this trope. The notion that Black girls should have been behinds has become embedded in our memories via offhand comments by classmates, song lyrics, imagines on television and in magazines, passed down family histories, etc. This meme is an example of the way Black girlhood also exists as a practice of critique and creativity, lacking a concrete subject. We are full human beings that exist beyond the boundaries of our bodies. We have hobbies, talents, and interests that give us depth and substance. Some of us have professional and educational backgrounds that are related to our life goals. We represent a range of body types, shades, and beauties. And it certainly can certainly be a distraction when we are reduced to "fat asses" and have to defend ourselves for perhaps not having them. The character's frustrated irritation with this constant reminder is evident in her steady posturing and her unyielding gaze.

Responding to this demand from a heterosexual Black male gaze with "not enough of them have big dicks," boomerangs this kind of command so that it is directed at them instead. It challenges the complacency that Black men are allowed regarding body image, uplifting that under a similar heterosexual gaze, women have widely felt preferences about what Black men's bodies should look like as well. It is also worth noting here that big penises have also been historically, scientifically, and socially associated with Black men[78] in the same way that big butts have been associated with Black women. "Big dicks" are also uplifted as the desired aesthetic within Black communities and are expected as the norm; and some Black men who do not fit this trope are ridiculed and mocked. But the gendered distinctions between butts and penises matter. In our sexist culture, the gaze is often unidirectional – from men towards women. So although there is similar rhetoric driving the expectations and thoughts about these two body

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[78] Angela Y. Davis, "Rape, Racism, and the Myth of the Black Male Rapist," *Women, Race & Class,* (New York: First Vintage Books, 1983).

parts, there are fewer opportunities to engage with the male anatomy because they are not as often under the scrutiny of a sexualized gaze. Furthermore, while male genitalia is most likely hidden underneath clothing (minimally to the point where their exact specifications are indiscernible), the size and shape of women's butts can be very easily assessed in most clothing and remain visibly accessible throughout the day. This contrast in privacy and accessibility – which is also a result of intentional gendered socialization with specific investments in male penises and female butts – dictates which of these body parts is more open to public critiques. This retort is powerful because it targets men who have previously enjoyed the privilege of hiding parts of their body, while openly shaming women for theirs.

This meme can be used as a counteridentification to the standards of beauty that require a "fat ass" because it remains rooted in a heteronormative framework that erases the desires of queer people and their unique experiences with both of these corporeal tropes. Nor does it challenge the supposed validity and naturalness of Black women having big butts that are desirable under that heterosexual gaze. By challenging Black men on their penis size, Black girls using this meme merely impose similarly limited standards of desirability onto them. This maneuver also gives Black men with dicks the permission to continue judging women based on the size and shape of their backsides.

3.2.4   Embracing Black girl gestures

Black girls be like "Can I help you?? Damn all in my fuckin face.. The Fuck"

Figure 10 Black girls be like "Can I help you?? ..." meme

This meme moves away from the sexual realm and addresses one of the easily recognized practices of Black girlhood. In this image, a screenshot of a virtual representation of NBA player Kevin Durant stands in for a Black girl. Durant's head is slightly cocked to one side as he gazes directly into the camera with an expectant, serious face. One of his arms is bent at the elbow, as is his wrist, which supports a closed hand. People familiar with the intricacies of Black girl gestures recognize the relevance of virtual Durant's posturing, notably his hand gesture. "Black girl hands" come in multiple forms and are a very important part of Black girls' iconicity. Here

are several examples of this specific version of it.
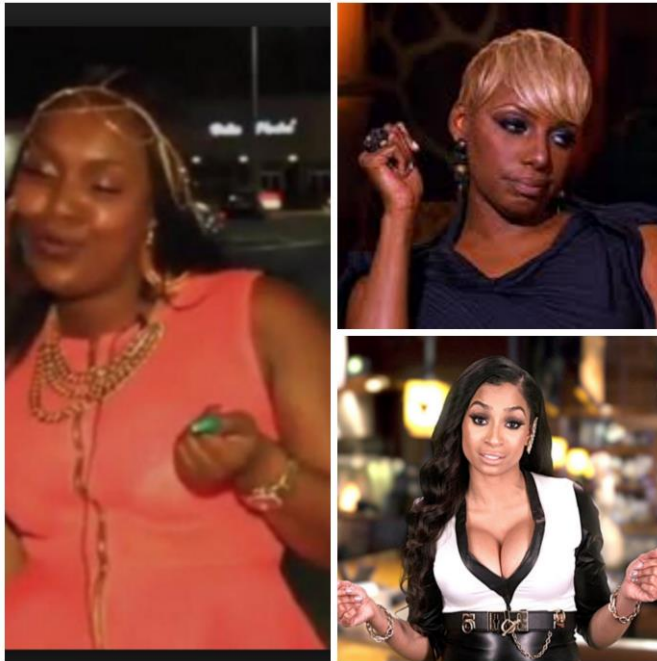
Figure 11 Example of one type of "Black girl hands"

This version of the Black girl hands is usually a physical expression of any intense emotion, confrontation, or reaction. It is one of the ways Black girls use their bodies to animate their dialogue and self-represent when engaging with others.

This is also one of the gestures that cause critics who visually come in contact with Black girls to label them as excessively inappropriate. Black girls who do not visually satisfy the requirements of middle class respectability are often marked as "other" and looked upon as spectacle. Our bodies, language, and mannerisms are branded as deviant and excessive, and lacking in the qualities that would make our femininity acceptable. We can experience this from white people, other non-Black people of color, Black men, and sometimes other Black girls who are interested in supporting mainstream respectability politics. To reiterate the point of Dr. Ruth

Nicole Browm and Chamara Jewel Kwaye[79], Black girls' bodies are always read as in need of containment.

Given this hyper-surveillance, Black girls may choose to aggressively respond when they witness others staring or eyeing them without clear intentions. This meme imitates one of these moments. I will expound upon the meaning of quote included in the images text to illustrate the components of such an interaction: "Can I help you?? Damn all in my face… The fuck." If nothing else, Black girls are resilient and creative. If someone is staring at a Black girl in a way that makes her suspicious or uncomfortable she is likely to try to draw out their reasoning via a sarcastically worded question like "Can I help you?" This means that she has noticed them looking at her and is simultaneously: inviting them to greet or approach her in a more straightforward manner, and also implying that is she is not afraid or intimidated by their gaze. "All in my face" is an accusation and a calling out of the other person's behavior. In American culture, staring at other individuals is widely understood as rude and impolite, this is also true within Black girl culture. By staring, they have symbolically violated her personal space and although they might not be in physical close proximity to her face, they are still "all in" it. Publicly addressing the way in which she is being subjected to this uncivil behavior is a way of asserting agency, and in a subtle way allows her to reverse the direction of the gaze back towards the spectator. In this context, "The Fuck" is an abbreviated version of the more common rhetorical question, "What the fuck?" that can express exasperation, disbelieve, shock, anger, etc. In this shortened version, it acts as a punctuation mark that simply magnifies the incredulous tone of the entire statement.

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[79] Ruth Nicole Brown and Chamara Jewel Kwakye, introduction to *Wish to Live: The Hip-hop Feminism Pedagogy Reader*, eds. Ruth Nicole Brown and Chamara Jewel Kwakye (New York: Peter Lang, 2012).

Given the racist stereotypes that already assume Black people to be more aggressive than other groups, and the sexist standards of ladylike modesty that all women are expected to embody, this kind of interaction is read as ghetto at best, and violent at worst. It continues a legacy that boxes Black girls into categories like "ratchet." Therefore, this meme operates as a disidentification depending on who chooses to use it, and under what context. Someone who is invested in dominant narratives that devalue the unique expressions of Black girls can use this meme as another opportunity to mock and shame them. For people who insist upon using negative tropes to define Black girlhood, this memes reaffirm that position.

Meanwhile, a Black girl, or someone familiar and supportive of distinct Black girl expressions, might use it as a way to simply exemplify these interactions as part of their daily experiences. A Black girl might choose to share or post this meme in an attempt to identify with the feelings of being surveilled and judged, and/or to confirm that they have also confronted an onlooker in the same way. These latter readings of the meme successfully disidentify with negative meanings that insist on their aberrance because it allows the creative expression of Black girls to exist outside of the parameters of deviance, excess, and problematic alterity. Here, the neck popping, lip smacking, wrist-bending language of Black girls is not a spectacle, it simply is.

4   CONCLUSION

With Bitches Be Like, I explored the narratives that exist in memes about Black girls, how memes reproduce and circulate these messages, and considered how memes could be used as tools in the service of counter- or disidentifying with those tropes, using Jose Muñoz's definition of these terms. True to the tradition of Black female visuality, almost all of the memes in my sample focused specifically on Black girls' sexuality and bodies. Problematic memes sought to police Black women and girls into adhering to the politics of respectability via their aesthetic and behavioral practices. Additionally, with undertones of sexual purity hidden beneath the surface, these memes also demean and dehumanize fat Black girls who fail to satisfy a limited male gaze; and establish the terms under which women should be sexual. My other set of memes responded to controlling messaging by either countering them with creative punch lines and retorts; embodying demoralizing and dehumanizing labels and transforming their meanings; or celebrating the aspects of Black girlhood that are considered abnormal and uncivilized.

While there were possibilities for multiple readings of these memes, "Bitches Be Like" echoes Jennifer Nash and intercepts the insistence that memes, and visuality as a whole, is an inherently problematic space for Black girls. Understanding that the narratives in visual media translate both online and off, I would conclude that memes can create an opportunity for Black girls and women to enact identity, and self-actualization that are not governed by toxic tropes and demands for heteronormative, middle class, patriarchal femininity.

This project successfully updates the current body of work on Black girls' visuality and media representations.

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