

The Pennsylvania State University  
The Graduate School  
College of Communications

***BLACK GIRLS ROCK! AND THE POLITICS OF EMPOWERMENT***

A Thesis in  
Media Studies  
by  
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

August 2016

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## ABSTRACT

In the contemporary moment in popular culture, there seems to be an increase in media messages targeted toward Black women and girls under the notion of “empowerment.” This is a shift from a history of racist, misogynist representations of Black femininity in visual culture but not without complications. This thesis explores these notions of empowerment as portrayed through a case study of the BET awards program *Black Girls Rock!*. Using textual analysis of the program as well as of online feminist responses to the program, this study presents a way of understanding the challenges to engaging in authentic Black girl empowerment through popular media. While such programs extend the efforts of Black feminist scholars and activists by doing the important work of resisting the abundance of negative representation in visual media with positive affirmation for Black women and girls, these efforts still render Black girls as helpless and perpetually at-risk. Even in online responses, the overwhelming focus on proving why Black women should be empowered as a response to social media backlash is a distraction from focusing on enacting a process of empowerment for Black girls. In conversation with Black feminism, media studies, girl studies, and emerging scholarship on Black girlhood, this study considers how best to understand the changing landscape of media culture in terms of race, gender, and youth empowerment.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Upon the completion of this thesis, I am grateful for my advisor and committee members for guiding me through this process. I also want to thank Stevie Berberick, Stephanie Orme, Steve Bien-Aime, Joe Davies, Enica Castañeda, Dr. Ariane Cruz, Dr. Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, Erin, Shannon, Caroline, Nadine and the rest of my family and friends for supporting, teaching, and listening to me along the way. Finally, I am thankful to those who organized, participated in, and/or attended the 2016 Black Girl Movement Conference at Columbia University in April. Without all of your encouragement, insights, and advice this thesis I never would have completed this work and for that I am thankful.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **The Light Inside of You**

In the summer of 2015, Dylan Roof walked into Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina and massacred nine people during a prayer service, with a tenth surviving victim. The shootings set off a wave of grief, debate, and anger throughout the country, but the tragedy was felt particularly hard in Black Southern communities. In addition to the incidents of police brutality against African-Americans which sparked the Black Lives Matter movement, the shootings also had a disturbing similarity to the bombing of another African-American church in the early sixties in Alabama where four Black girls were killed amongst fourteen others (Corasanti, Perez-Pena, Alvarez, 2015). In the days after the 2015 shooting, South Carolina lawmakers drew heat for flying the Confederate flag near the State House when many other flags were at half-mast in respect for the victims. Amidst the week of hand-wringing debate on the status and historical meaning of the flag, social activist Bree Newsome climbed the thirty-foot pole on the morning of June 27 and took it down herself before being promptly arrested when she reached the ground. Though the flag was replaced after Newsome's arrest, the symbolism of a Black woman putting her life and body on the line in the name of racial justice held strong as the video of the act went viral and people across the globe applauded Newsome for her bravery (DemocracyNow!, 2015).

In February of 2016, in the beginning stages of working on this thesis, I went to see Newsome give a talk at the Pennsylvania State University. She gave an account of the amount of work that went into this single act of civil disobedience as well as an inspiring perspective on the history of racism in the United States and the hard work that was ahead of those committed to social justice. In the question and answer portion of her presentation, a young Black woman

thanked her for her empowering message as well as for her act of courage in taking down the flag. She recalled a moment in Newsome's presentation where she had emphasized the need for self-care in activism and the fact that it was usually young Black women who asked her questions about self-care. As the young woman spoke, her voice began to waver as she explained her struggles with depression in the midst of wanting to create social change. While Newsome's activism had inspired her, she found it nearly impossible to think of herself as accomplishing something so vast. In tears at this point, she asked "how do you find that light inside of you?"

Newsome said it was her faith, it was the people around her, and she acknowledged her fear and her own experiences with discouragement and uncertainty even leading up to taking down the flag. After the young woman went back to her seat, another student – also an undergraduate African-American woman - stepped to the microphone and before stating her question, asked the audience to take a moment to thank the first young woman for her vulnerability.

What stuck with me in this exchange was three things. First, I personally felt inspired and motivated after hearing Newsome – an African-American woman not much older than myself, from the same home state, and with an accessible, vibrant sense of humor and spirit – speak about her experiences, her vision, and her faith. Second, I was reminded of the gap between that individual moment of inspiration and the ability to envision and follow through with it in daily life. Third, I was touched at the subsequent acknowledgment of this young woman's vulnerability by her peer, Newsome, and an entire audience filled with majority young Black women. That night was about sharing knowledge, being honest about pain and feelings of powerlessness, and also support and acknowledgement between Black women. Ultimately, what

I felt empowered by was not Newsome on her own but the mutuality, support, and commitment to dialogue palpable in the room.

I share this story because it was a moment – a rare moment – of simultaneously acknowledging the very real power of Black women and girls to create change in their communities without equating accomplishments to some ideal of Black womanhood we should live up to. As I listened to her speak and share her experience with students, she no longer became a representation of an ideal (as she is depicted in illustrations of her holding the confederate flag in Wonder Woman garb, dreadlocks flowing in the wind) but someone who, yes, I could see myself in but also someone who I could *realistically* follow after in my own way. Importantly, it also exemplifies the importance of accountability. As awesome as the story of Newsome removing the flag was, her sharing what she did and why she did it was not enough. It was her willingness to listen to young women share *their* experiences and respond honestly and directly to the difficult questions about *how* to step into that role of activism that made the difference.

For to be a Black woman living in her truth is and has always been a contested reality. On one hand, we are depicted in the news as victims of rape, murder, and other kinds of violence – that is, if that violence is acknowledged at all by news media. On the other, in the majority of non-news television and film, we are overwhelmingly depicted as much more than aggressive, back-stabbing, and incapable of forming healthy relationships, if we are depicted at all (hooks, 1992; Howard, 2015).

In schools, Black girls experience disproportionate amounts of “discipline” in ways that are not only inappropriate but also at times violent and often public. While Black girls represent a small portion of the U.S. population, they account for a third of youth detainments and

incarceration. This is not to mention issues of poverty, teen pregnancy, bullying, drop-out rates, and sexual harassment, among other significant social stigmas and hardships that come to define Black girls, teenagers, and women as in a supposedly never-ending crisis (The White House, 2015).

At the same time, over half of all young Black women between the ages of 18-24 are enrolled in college and represent the highest percentage of any group (by race or gender) for overall college enrollment (Danielle, 2014). At the same time, Harriet Tubman has been announced to appear on U.S. currency (Calmes, 2016). At the same time, First Lady Michelle Obama is finishing eight years of philanthropic work on girls' education and childhood obesity from the White House (Rose, 2016). At the same time, Beyoncé is considered the most powerful woman in entertainment, according to Forbes magazine (Cummings, 2015). This is not to mention the plethora of “#BlackGirlMagic” constantly represented across social media of Black women and girls thriving, succeeding, and living happily in their lives (Wilson, 2016).

So, what gives? On one hand, it seems as though there is nothing *not* at stake for Black women and girls. On the other, to use the title of Tamara Winfrey Harris's 2015 book on reshaping the narrative of U.S. Black women, the sisters are alright. I argue that it is the balancing between these two narratives – Black girls as broken and Black girls as continuing to achieve more than they ever have – that produces the emergent claims for Black girl empowerment we are now seeing in media. Most of these, like #BlackGirlMagic #BlackGirlsareFromTheFuture and Blackout Day on Tumblr, come from mostly Black women and girls on social media sharing their experiences, their beauty, and their support for one another. In addition to social media, these efforts increasingly appear in mainstream media as well with Essence's #BlackGirlMagic *Class of 2016* cover in February (Essence.com, 2016),

Beyoncé’s “Formation” video and controversial half-time performance of the song with her all-female dancers and band in Black Panther garb at the Super Bowl (Ellen, 2016).

One example of Black girl empowerment in mainstream media is the awards initiative and cable television special *Black Girls Rock!*. It is this that I use as case study to interrogate what Black girl empowerment looks like in practice in the current media landscape. Foundational Black feminist scholar bell hooks states in the introduction of her 1992 book *Black Looks: Race and Representation* that the state of media at that time was a “tragic reality” in which “we have collectively made few, if any, revolutionary interventions in the area of race and representation” (p. xi). More than a decade later in the revised introduction to the 2015 edition, hooks expresses a similar sentiment – that even after all this time, we have not gotten very far. Part of my hope is to think through this progress or lack thereof. Have we really not made progress? Or maybe a better question is: are we *now* making progress? An even better question might be: is representation in mainstream media where we should be looking for progress? These are the overriding questions I confront with this thesis with the goal of understanding the potential for or barriers to dialogue and mutuality as part of including media texts in the process of empowerment.

### ***Black Girls Rock!* and Research Questions**

*Black Girls Rock (BGR)* is a two-hour cable TV awards show which honors the accomplishments of Black women and girls throughout the previous year. The program is the result of a collaboration between BET Networks and the mentoring and youth empowerment organization Black Girls Rock, Inc, founded in 2006 by DJ Beverly Bond.

Bond began her career modelling in New York before pursuing her love of music through learning how to DJ, which she quickly became known for in the music industry. Bond appeared at events such as the VH1 Fashion Awards, high-profile night clubs, as well as working with high-profile clients in the industry and appearing on a number of BET programs, including *Rap City: Tha Basement* and the channel's popular music countdown program, *106 & Park* (Livingston II, 2012; "Beverly Bond: Information," 2016). In an interview with Her Agenda, Bond explained that the sexism she experienced during her first years as a DJ – as a consumer of hip hop as well as professionally – was a defining reason in why she started BGR. However, before it was an organization, Bond originally conceived of it just as a t-shirt:

So I wrote down every name of every black woman from Harriet Tubman to Sojourner Truth to Beyonce to Mariah Carey to Shirley Chisholm, you name them I was writing it down. And I'm running out of paper because there's so many black women that rocked for so long. I'm looking at these names and I'm thinking, 'wow, our girls don't know all of these women and they don't know the incredible contributions that these women have given to society. Why aren't these women being put on the pedestal that they are supposed to be on? (HerAgenda, 2015)

From this point on, Bond knew that this issue was bigger than a simple t-shirt or phrase and began planning for both the organization as well as the awards show (HerAgenda, 2015). At present, the non-profit organization works out of an office in Brooklyn, NY, where the focus is to "[empower] Black girls to lead, innovate, and serve." They accomplish this mission particularly through the development of leadership skills, identity development, and diverse literacy skills. Their goal is to "[build] the self-esteem and self-worth of young women of color by changing their outlook on life, broadening their horizons and providing tools for self-

empowerment and efficacy,” (“Mission,” 2016). This work includes annual Queens Camps, a leadership conference for girls, a “Girls Rock! Tech” Initiative, the recently produced “Imagine a Future” documentary, and a newly developed Black Girls Rock! Think Tank for research and advocacy which involves public forums and roundtables on Black culture (“What We Do,” 2016).

Though the organization was in practice first, Bond emphasizes the fact that the awards show was always part of her vision and in fact received media attention from other outlets such as VH1 within a year of founding the organization. Her decision to finally sign the contract with BET came in 2010 when, according to Bond, “BET was trying to change that image and that message,” referring to BET’s association primarily with reality television programs as well as music videos which contained the same kind of sexism Bond experienced in the music industry. “BET obviously needed something like this,” Bond states and therefore selling it to them was not a hardship. A year later in 2011, the first televised BGR awards show aired on BET, with Bond as an executive producer (Philadelphia Sun, 2015).

Six categories of awards are given out, with some minor changes year to year, depending on the honorees. Frequently appearing categories include The Living Legend Award, awarded to long-time entertainers such as Shirley Caesar in 2011 and Patti Labelle in 2014. The Star Power award is given to a woman who is widely successful such as Kerry Washington in 2012 or Venus Williams in 2014. The award for Rock Star honors a music icon such as Alicia Keys in 2012 or Queen Latifah in 2013. The Shot Caller award refers to a woman in media working behind the camera such as producer and writer Mara Brock Akil in 2013. The Young, Gifted, and Black – offered each year except 2015 - award goes to women under the age of thirty who are up and coming in arts/entertainment such as Janelle Monae in 2012 and dancer Misty Copeland in 2013.

The awards not pertaining to entertainment include the award for Social Humanitarian – included every year – as well as intermittent awards under titles like Community Change Agent, Trailblazer, Inspiration, and Icon, which are awarded to a diverse number of women working in activism, business, non-profit organizations, etc. Recipients of these awards have included Angela Davis, Aameena Matthews, and Hawa Abdi. Finally, BGR honors the M.A.D. Girls each year beginning in 2012, three girls under the age of twenty who are “Making A Difference” in their community, most often through non-profit organizations as well as entrepreneurship. In addition to awards, the program features performances by Black female entertainers (Jill Scott, Brandy, and Mary J. Blige, to name only a few) as well as appearances by successful Black women in the media and arts industries.

Since its debut, the program continues to receive strong ratings, drawing just under 3 million viewers for BET in 2013 (Maglio, 2013) and topping Nielsen’s Twitter TV Ratings report in 2016 (Umstead, 2016). In 2015, it was also recognized with a 2015 NAACP Image Award (“Founder and Executive Director,” 2015; Maglio, 2013). First Lady Michelle Obama attended the 2015 ceremony gaining even more visibility for the program and by extension the non-profit organization behind it (Molloy, 2015; Rogers, 2015). Currently, plans are being made for the organization to expand internationally with Black Girls Rock! Africa and a subsequent awards show in Africa for 2016 to celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the organization (BLACK GIRLS ROCK!, 2015).

Unfortunately, this increased visibility in 2015 also drew backlash on social media. Many users – primarily on Twitter – discuss the highlights of the program as it airs, not only chatting about their favorite performances and appearances but also the important issues specific to Black women the program addresses. On these same social media platforms, users in opposition to the

program began the trend #allgirlsrock, alluding to the supposed exclusivity of the program, and subsequently criticizing the First Lady for making an appearance (Maglio, 2013; “Founder and Executive Director,” 2015). In response to these criticisms, Bond explained that the point of the program is a response to the exclusion of Black women in media and history and critiqued people for “never voicing their opinions about things that were degrading us or harming us” yet taking offense at “something that uplifts and empowers and is an affirmation of our young girls,” (wblsfm1075, 2015).

It is this series of events – Michelle Obama’s appearance on the program and the subsequent backlash – which initially moved me to write on this program since both her appearance and people’s anger over it seemed to be signs that the mission of *BGR* was catching on. Therefore, in this thesis I focus primarily on the 2015 awards show. In 2015, Regina King and Tracee Ellis Ross co-hosted the program. King is an actress who, in addition to her roles in shows like *American Crime* and voice work for the animated show *The Boondocks* is also an emerging television director (NPR, 2016). Ross, on the other hand, aside from being the daughter of Diana Ross, is well known for starring in the television show *Girlfriends* as well as the current ABC sitcom *Black-ish* (Miller, 2015). With the exception of the most recent 2016 show, the two have hosted together each year (Porter, 2016). The six women receiving awards in 2015 include: neo-soul singer Erykah Badu (Rock Star), film director Ava DuVernay (Shot Caller), actress Jada Pinkett-Smith (Star Power), Chicago middle school principal Nadia Lopez (Change Agent), CEO of humanitarian organization CARE International Dr. Helene Gayle (Social Humanitarian), and finally actress Cicely Tyson (Living Legend) (“Awards,” 2015). Additionally, performers included Jill Scott, Faith Evans, Sheila E, and more top names in music

in addition to appearances by a number Black celebrities and past awards recipients (“Performers,” 2015).

The goal of this research is to address the strategies of Black girl empowerment in which *BGR* (the cablecast and, by extension, the organization) engages as well as the result of these strategies as seen in online discourse. My focus is on how we might understand issues of racial progress through this specific media text, the organizations behind it, and audience responses to the program/organization, as well as possible problematic elements that may compromise racial equality and visibility.

My analysis of this phenomenon begins first in understanding *BGR*’s goal to empower Black women in media where they have historically been excluded and vilified, and how the program attempts to achieve that goal. *BGR* creators and participants argue that the program provides a welcome alternative to the otherwise denigrating representations of Black females in media; with this in mind, I address both the advantages and disadvantages of the program, including its empowerment narratives, as a form of correction for media representation of race.

Second, I address how online audience response in the comments section of online articles about the program represent the cultural significance of these narratives of empowerment. How do audiences indicate an identification, or dis-identification, with the slogan “Black Girls Rock”? What are the main messages about being a Black girl from the program that they use in posting about the show? How does the response to the program indicate an overall understanding of what girl empowerment should look like in current popular feminist thinking?

In order to address this topic and the above issues involved with it, I propose the following research questions:

- ➔ RQ1: What narratives of empowerment does *Black Girls Rock* employ in its award show and how do these narratives fit in the history of black feminist activism?
- ➔ RQ2: How might we understand and critique these empowerment narratives and their applicability to Black *girls* and their daily lives?
- ➔ RQ3: How do on-line audiences construct their understanding and attitudes about the meanings of *Black Girls Rock* as manifested in comments to feminist-oriented web publications about the program, the group, and the hashtag “allgirlsrock”?
- ➔ RQ4: How does the program, the organizations behind it, and online responses reflect the challenges and benefits of doing feminist work through a mainstream media text?

## **Methodology**

The first part of my research focuses specifically on BET cablecast of the special from April 2015. I conduct a close-reading of the show, including the speeches of the six honorees, Michelle Obama, and founder Beverly Bond, as well as the introduction of the show and Tatiana Ali’s presentation of the M.A.D. Girls segment. I select these clips because they are identified as highlights of the show and have subsequently been shared across multiple responses media platforms (Obell, 2015; Moody, 2015; Coker, 2015; Heller & Quarles, 2015) and through the program’s official page on BET.com. Therefore, they are the parts of the show most likely viewed even by people who did not see the entirety of the program. Additional texts used to contextualize the show include promotional clips which aired on BET leading up to the 2015 show, interviews with producers and organizers leading up the show (both of which are available on YouTube), and information from BET and Black Girls Rock’s main websites describing the awards show.

Additionally, I examine coverage of the 2015 program by the feminist publications/websites *Jezebel*, *Dame Magazine*, and *Madame Noire*. In all three cases, BGR triggered significant coverage. My selection process involved choosing articles which provided some sort of commentary or response to *BGR* within the article beyond merely describing what happened and allowed for user comments. I identify these publications as feminist because most of them in some way describe themselves as “feminist” or as being specifically about women’s issues. However, each publication represents a different kind of feminism as a whole as exemplified by the type of content they are most known for, the people on their regular staff, and the ways in which they describe themselves.

The corresponding comment boards on each article represent a more in-depth understanding of the differing approaches to feminism each website attracts in its user base (Wazny, 2010). I will use a thematic analysis of these comments to identify common threads in responses to each respective article which imply differing ideas about *BGR*’s feminist implications. Each comment board has between about 100-200 comments reacting to *BGR* articles, making for a total of roughly 300-600 comments and collectively will offer insights about the kinds of political responses and claims made about issues of race and gender with *BGR*. The differences in what kinds of commentary appear in each article provides insight into how differing brands of feminism inform differing responses to *BGR*’s brand of feminism and why. This approach to online discourse about *BGR* will hopefully expand previous research on the importance of social media in shaping feminist discussions online (Driscoll and Gregg, 2011; Rodino-Colocino, 2014; Dubrofsky & Wood, 2014; Brock et al, 2010).

By examining the program and surrounding discourse, I hope to contribute to work on the media construction of African American girls, issues of racialized and gendered problems and

solutions as offered in the media, and reflect on how understandings of girl agency may be enhanced through such efforts.

### **Thesis Chapter Preview**

This thesis begins with an overview of scholarship useful for interrogating the concept of Black girl empowerment as seen in *BGR*. This includes threads of social work and community psychology literature offering a general understanding of the dynamic nature of empowerment as it relates to working in fields like social work. I also rely heavily on Black feminist thought as a way to contextualize the work *BGR* builds from as well as understand what empowerment has looked like and should look like for Black women and girls specifically. Additionally, I look to media studies and girlhood studies to assess the ways girls and girlhood are typically studied in relation to media, race, and gender, and where there is room for growth. Finally, in my review of literature is a move toward emerging authors working specifically on Black girlhood who influence my approach to envisioning the possibilities and limitations of an increasingly commercialized version of Black girl empowerment in media.

Chapter 3, “Narratives of Empowerment in *Black Girls Rock*” is an assessment of the show itself, using the 2015 awards show as a case study. This involves analyses of honoree’s speeches, the co-host’s performances, Beverly Bond and Michelle Obama’s appearances, as well as the M.A.D. girls segment. Part of my aim with this chapter is to highlight the ways in which the show reflects Black feminist hope for progress in media representations of Black femininity. At the same time, I push for an increased substantial engagement with young girls in the hopes of moving beyond the problematic dynamic of traditional youth role model-ing.

In Chapter 4, “Feminist Responses to *Black Girls Rock*,” I turn to online feminist publications and corresponding comments sections to explore public perceptions of the work *BGR* is doing. I specifically identify feminist websites (Jezebel, DAME Magazine, and MadameNoire) as a space where presumably those who overall support Black Girls Rock actively discuss and make sense of the media text as well as the backlash it received.

Finally, I conclude with a look toward *BGR*’s future just after the 2016 awards show as well as an overview of the overall current state of Black girl empowerment in the media.

Overall, the goal of this thesis is to think through what I see as a gradually opening space for Black girl empowerment in media. Although this space is contested by a history of racist sexism, debates over what counts as progress in Black-produced media, and differing definitions of what empowerment is, it is still a space rife with potential for the authentic empowerment of Black girls. In this thesis I regard media both as tool for empowerment which needs to be in the hands of both Black women and girls but – if truly in the interest of *girl* empowerment – then for the purpose of engaging in the creative resistance of Black girls. However, I argue that as long as scholarship *and* public discourse rely on a notion of Black girlhood as always destructed or destructed and therefore in need of “fixing,” authentic Black girl empowerment will continue to elude us. In the end, my aim is to contribute to the slowly emerging scholarship work on Black girlhood not as a space of victimization – by the media or otherwise – but of liberation.

## Chapter 2: Review Of The Literature

### The Process of Empowerment

*BGR* describes itself as “non-profit youth empowerment and mentoring organization established to promote the arts for young women of color, as well as to encourage dialogue and analysis of the ways women of color are portrayed in the media” (“About Us,” 2015). For *BGR*, then, the concept of “empowerment” is a key one and is integrated throughout its discourse. In order to discuss empowerment narratives in *BGR* and their implications for Black girls, then, one must first understand how Black feminist thought and activism has shaped understandings of empowerment and how these interact with critiques of girl empowerment in the media coming primarily from girls studies and other feminist media scholars. Furthermore, it is fruitful to then take into account how these notions of empowerment continue to be shaped today on varying media platforms in conversation with *BGR* as a primary text. Not only does there need to be an interrogation of what notions of empowerment are currently being formulated but also who the players are in shaping these definitions.

Early definitions of empowerment were explicated perhaps most explicitly by community psychologist Julian Rappaport (1987). Indicative of scholarship in the field of community psychology, Rappaport’s theorization of empowerment focuses on a combination of individual as well as societal factors which interact through the *process* of empowerment:

Empowerment conveys both a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power, and legal rights. [...Empowerment]

is a *process*, a mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their affairs. (p. 121-122, emphasis added)

Distinguishing empowerment as a process rather than a state or action was a critique of mental health practices which only focused on prevention but did not properly theorize empowerment as a way to produce the potential for self-corrective capacities. Most importantly, Rappaport emphasized that this process is not only about increasing the ability or access to enact agency but also an acknowledgement and response to the “condition of dominion or authority” which prevent a group or individual from being agential in the first place:

That is, there are limitations as well as powers. [...] To understand the meaning of empowerment one must know something about more than individuals; one must also know what, or who, one has authority over. [...] Empowerment is not only an individual psychological construct, it is also organizational, political, sociological, economic, and spiritual. (p. 129-130)

Furthermore, Rappaport described his theory of empowerment as ecological in nature, meaning focusing on the ways in which individuals are embedded in systems, or communities, and the interactions between people and between people and institutions within those systems.

Therefore, empowerment is contextual and ongoing rather than person-centered and “solution” focused. Finally, Rappaport argues for empowerment in practice to always be self-conscious and about the construction of relationships between those trying to empower and those being empowered as collaborative. In addition, empowerment should not be seen as “a scarce resource which gets used-up” but instead as an ideology or as a starting point to develop appropriate, fruitful, and circumstantially adaptable practices (p. 141-142).

Judith Lee (2001) picks up this theorization to reclaim empowerment as politicized within the field of social work. Lee reflects Rappaport's emphasis that empowerment must both be focused on "political processes, objectives, and transformations along with personal and interpersonal power" (p. 32). Expanding on other scholarship in the field of social work (Simon, 1990; Solomon 1976), Lee defines three dimensions of empowerment: 1) intrapersonal; developing a more positive sense of self, 2) interpersonal; "critical comprehension" of one's own political and social realities specifically through "coming together with similar others" to analyze power structures, and 3) behavioral; a development of resources and competence to achieve *both* personal and collective goals (Lee, 2001; Bay-Cheng, 2010, p. 714). Bay-Cheng expounds on both Rappaport (1987) and Lee (2001), aiming to again recover the political definition of empowerment, because individualized notions of empowerment are not only insufficient but are actually actively damaging in not addressing the ways in which individual agency does not always supercede social and institutional power imbalances (Bay-Cheng, 2010).

Through understanding such scholarship in the fields of psychology and social work – professions which are both inextricably tied to the type of empowerment programming organizations like *BGR* work from – one can conclude the following: 1) Empowerment should be thought of as a multi-dimensional process linking individual agency with the transformation of political structures; and 2) Empowerment is a concept constantly in need of recovering and reclaiming from popular *and* clinical/medical notions of individual transformation or generalized single solutions. It is important to keep both of these points in mind as they provide the ability to link definitions and critiques of perceptions of empowerment in popular culture located in Black feminist scholarship, girls' studies, and media studies. Empowerment is a key concept in each discipline, and specifically in regards to Black feminism's investment in empowerment as a tool

for Black women's liberation. Girls studies scholarship, as will be developed later, most often critiques the appropriation of empowerment targeted toward girls via media and consumer culture (see, for example, Banet-Weiser's work on Nickelodeon, 2004). Media studies, more generally, allows us to think through our relationships to media as a tool of empowerment – whether an ineffective, potentially damaging tool or an authentic strategy towards transformation of social and political structures (Kellner & Durham, 2012). This thesis is situated at the intersection of these three disciplines in the interest of interrogating the ever-increasing narratives of Black girl empowerment we see across media platforms in the contemporary moment.

### **Black Feminism & The Politics Of Empowerment**

In her highly influential work *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins also acknowledges the dual nature of empowerment through Black feminist thinking and activism. For Collins, Black women's activism involves both “struggles for group survival” as well as “struggles for institutional transformation” (p. 204). Struggles for group survival involve strategies for healing and development of critical consciousness. In order to enact both of these processes, however, Collins specifies a requirement of having “institutions that equip Blacks to struggle” (p. 204). She argues,

Recognizing that the path to individual and collective empowerment lies in the power of a free mind, these spheres of influence often rely on crafting independent and oppositional identities for African-American women. As such, they embrace a form of identity politics, a worldview that sees lived Black experiences as important to creating a critical Black consciousness and crafting political strategies. (p. 204)

Thus Collins is speaking of more than a simple safe space. In order to create “independent and oppositional identities” this means Black women-centric spaces must not only be safe but also constructive. They must not only address experiences of pain and struggle but also create new ways of being and relating to one another and to the institutions with which we interact.

Inseparable from group survival, however, is institutional transformation. Here, Collins recognizes the often forgotten yet critical second part of empowerment wherein, as Rappaport emphasized, an activism that seeks to empower must not only focus on individual experiences and relations but also to the surrounding political circumstances which bring about the marginalization of certain identities. This includes political efforts to change laws, policies, and other practices at the structural, institutional level. Where Collins’ framing of Black feminism differs from the aforementioned social work/psychological models of empowerment is in her acknowledgement of the possibility for individual expression *or* organizational action to enact institutional transformation. Collins describes both dimensions – survival and transformation – as “interdependent” in Black feminism, often intertwined in activism and theorizing.

In the revised 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins adds to her original argument with a more rigorous definition of empowerment (where in the original text, her definition refers generally to the features of Black feminism). The first dimension refers to individual women gaining the ability “to recognize that one need not believe everything one is told and taught” (p. 286). In other words, critical consciousness is the ability to first *recognize* power imbalance and to understand that the way these imbalances *are* is not what they *have to* be. This dimension for Collins opens a gateway for *individual* women to engage in “creative resistance” (p. 289). The second dimension of empowerment lies in the ability to construct new knowledges in the interest of creating a “collective Black feminist imagination” (p. 289). The

two dimensions of empowerment and the two dimensions of U.S. Black women's activism actually cut across each other in the development of critical consciousness, creative resistance, and the creation of collective Black feminist imagination could refer to either or both group survival and institutional transformation.

Especially in this most recent addition to the book, the connections become clear between Collins' definition of empowerment within Black feminism and those offered in the trajectory of work from Rappaport to Bay-Cheng. The first dimension of empowerment for Collins addresses the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of empowerment which Lee (2001) discusses, while the struggle for institutional transformation is behavioral.

### **The Development of Girls Studies**

Only in the past couple of decades has girls studies as a discipline become a viable topic, gaining increasing traction in the early nineties and 00s (Kearney, 2009). According to Kearney, girls were marginalized in youth-based research which typically focused on young boys as the universal subject of childhood/adolescence. On the other hand, feminist scholarship overwhelmingly focused on women's issues and adult-centered perspectives. Feminist scholarship typically adopted a protectionist approach towards girls, wherein adult women advocated on the behalf of girls, often relying on the assumption of girlhood as perpetually vulnerable and innocent. Girls were seen as "not mature, rational, and experienced enough to handle the responsibilities of adulthood and thus citizenship. As a result, young people were understood as necessarily dependent on adults to determine what was best for them..." (p. 9). In other words, feminist scholarship up until the late twentieth century was mostly preoccupied with not necessarily the construction or lived experiences of girlhood in and of itself but rather girlhood as the predecessor to the *main* event of womanhood.

A major influence on the increase in scholarship on girlhood, as identified by Kearney, is the “girlification” of consumer culture in the nineties and continuing in the present. This scholarship seeks to “understand how the culture, fashion, and beauty industries create commodities for and about girls, how girlhood is represented in such products, and how female youth consume them” (p. 14). This includes scholarship by younger “third-wavers,” part of which focused on the possible radical potential of consumer culture and the reclamation of girlhood, including the term “girl” (Kearney, 2009). At the same time other feminist scholars critiqued postfeminism and the girlification of women, consumer feminism, and “girl power” media (Kearney, 2009; McRobbie, 2007; Gill, 2008).

Much of this scholarship on either side happens over the terrain of media wherein various media are seen as providing new potential for girls to become content producers such as in zines and blogs (Kearney, 2007). At the same time, media are also regarded as perpetuating postfeminist ideals such as in the consumer feminism of *Sex in the City* or in *Cosmo* magazine where empowerment becomes something to be bought and performed rather than enacted (McRobbie, 2007). At present in scholarship on girlhood, there is still much to be said about racial identity (beyond the mere acknowledgement that race is important). What primarily the past two decades of girls studies have done is create room for thinking about girlhood specifically as shaped by more than the social scientific narrative of girl victimization and lack of self-image. Where there is still much more room for growth is in reformulating our ideas of agency, actualization, and empowerment in the lives of girls of color.

### **Tools Of Empowerment**

Education as empowerment has always been a part of U.S. Black women’s activism. “African-American women have long realized that ignorance doomed Black people to

powerlessness” (Collins, 2000, p. 210). Focus on Black girls within Black feminist scholarship therefore has focused considerably on education, supporting Kearney’s (2009) point that education has always been a key factor in feminist work on girls in general. For many Black feminist thinkers, however, this does not just include formal schooling (though, most certainly, that is a major part). Critical media literacy in particular as a tool for resistance is a running theme in much Black feminist/womanist scholarship wherein young people must be equipped with the tools to critique the “controlling images” which are overwhelmingly present across media. Though resisting media does not equate to collective social justice, it is an essential part of fostering the psychic well-being of young people of color, particularly girls and queer youth (hooks, 1992; Collins, 2000; Bailey, 2008). However, it is not a mere matter of the individual ability to interpret media messages; rather, critical media literacy becomes an essential part of Black girls’ ability to self-define, to recognize and often reject the power structures which create damaging media content.

According to Hobbs (2011), there are two ways of approaching media literacy. A protectionist approach, alluded to above, focuses on preventing the negative effect of harmful media representations, mainly by making youth aware of the differences in representation that exist and how these relate to power imbalances in society. This approach often inscribes youth solely as victims of the media they consume who must gain individual understandings of harmful messages in order to resist them. An empowerment perspective, on the other hand, “emphasizes young people as capable, resilient and active in their choices as both media consumers and as creative producers” (Hobbs, 2011, p. 422). These two approaches can furthermore be thought of as addressing different dimensions of empowerment wherein the protectionist approach addresses only the psychological component of empowerment wherein youth resist media

through individual interpretation. In contrast, an empowerment approach addresses both the individual, intrapersonal/interpersonal, as well as the behavioral component wherein empowerment includes the ability to, again, identify resources and build competence in recognizing and challenging oppressive systems in media.

In moving ideally toward an empowerment approach when considering Black girl empowerment in and through media, this involves not only addressing the fraught relationship between media representations of Black femininity, but also identifying resources and encouraging competency in Black girls producing their own images or self-definitions. Additionally, it requires acknowledging the ways in which Black girls are *already* competent and resourceful in redefining Black girlhood through media.

### **Effects of Images of Race and Gender**

The generally negative visual representation of Black women and girls has been a central tenet of Black feminist scholarship, from the exhibition of Saartjie Baartman, the “Venus Hottentot,” in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe to the stereotype of the angry black woman pervasive across contemporary reality television (Gilman, 2000; Howard, 2015). This historical legacy of racialized misogyny in visual culture produces the demonized and hypersexualized “controlling images” of Black womanhood which are “designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (Collins, 2000, p. 69).

Thus, how young Black girls navigate these images has become a defining aspect of studies on Black girlhood. Scholars have argued on one hand that the proliferation of European beauty standards – not just in media but by family as well as in school – have a negative effect

on Black women and girls' self-esteem, body image, and mental health. They are also more likely to deal with insecurity, anger, and other negative emotions due to the internalization of discrimination, increasing the likelihood of issues such as depression. Furthermore, the farther away they are from these beauty standards (for instance, the darker their skin) the more likely they are to experience these negative effects. These stressors may also occur in addition to difficult socioeconomic circumstances leading to the intensification of negative psychological outcomes for Black women (Martins & Harrison, 2012; Bryant, 2013). Even in media targeted specifically toward Black people or Black girls, representations still prove to be problematic either in that they reproduce the objectification of Black womanhood or hold Black women to the standards of respectability politics (Gordon, 2008; Bailey, 2008; Moffit & Harris, 2014). Perhaps the most widely known study on Black girls self-image is Clark & Clark's (1947) "Doll Test" in which Black girls overwhelmingly showed preference for White dolls over Black. This study was recreated by a high school student, Kiri Davis, in her 2005 documentary "A Girl Like Me," producing the same results almost sixty years after the original experiment (ABC News, 2006). Needless to say, from this negative-effects perspective things look bleak.

At the same time, a smaller portion of scholarship presents a different narrative wherein Black girls actively challenge media representations and resist stereotypes which they find to be inconsistent with their own or their community's image of Black femininity. Milkie (1999) found that minority high-school aged Black girls experienced less negative feelings because they did not identify with white images and did not feel significant others would evaluate them by these criteria: "The black girls defined themselves outside the dominant culture and cultural imagery; therefore they seemed to be able to reject the images *as a group*" (p. 206). A similar study on African-American girls' interpretations of teen magazine showed more often Black girls

critiqued these magazines which portrayed an image of White femininity they purportedly did not identify with (Duke, 2000). Both Milkie and Duke emphasize that these results do not mean young African-American women are unaffected by media images but rather point to the possibility that Black girls specifically might have a wider purview of what can be considered beautiful. Importantly, both authors also found participants often cited familial and especially maternal opinions as more important for forming body image perceptions than media sources. This point is further expanded by scholarship finding maternal opinions to also be important in shaping Black girls' opinions of media messages themselves wherein, for example, if mothers interpreted something as racist in a program, children were also likely to see it as such (O'Connor, Brooks-Gunn & Graber, 2000; Moffit & Harris, 2014). Thus, these studies fall in line with the theory of the "oppositional gaze," which bell hooks describes as a type of viewing which Black women media audiences develop ways of reading against and actively critique their own misrepresentations (hooks, 1992).

In the end, what conclusions should be drawn from both sides of scholarship on Black girls' relationship with media is unclear. On one hand, there seems to be a need to address the very real ways misrepresentations of Black womanhood perpetuates and validates structural, interpersonal, and internalized racialized misogyny in society. At the same time, how can we understand Black girls as capable of resisting these representations and foster competency and resources for them to self-define? In other words, how to acknowledge that vulnerability of Black girls without defining them solely by their victimization? If we truly wish to empower Black girls, we must see them as collaborators in their own empowerment and in order to do so, we must believe them to be *capable* of enacting agency in their own lives on their own terms.

## **On Self-Definition: The BET Conundrum**

Before thinking through the questions I pose above, allow me to linger on the notion of self-definition as it relates to media a little longer. The way this is usually interpreted in regards to media is in the need for marginalized groups to create their own representations to create a more authentic, accurate portrayal of experience. For African-Americans, Yuya Kiuchi (2012) boils it down to there being two types of representations of Blackness in media. First, there are images of Blackness produced by/for whites. These types of images are those associated with minstrelsy, demonization, and hypersexualization and they have dominated American visual culture until the present day. The second group of media representations of Blackness are those produced by/for Blacks themselves. In contrast, these “[signal] African-American agency and resistance.” (p. 251). Kiuchi relates this ideology as far back as W.E.B. DuBois’s use of portraits of middle-class African-Americans as a “tool to reverse the idea of ‘Negro inferiority’” (p. 250). It is a strategy and an ideology still persistent in contemporary media, though on a much wider scale where the concern is not just a matter of African-Americans producing their own media but also owning that media. This is the ideologically based tenet which brought Black Entertainment Television (BET) to cable television in the early eighties and a philosophy which continues to complicate its social significance in African-American media representation. As the platform and brand on which the increasing visibility of *Black Girls Rock* rests, we will briefly consider the implications of their collaboration.

## **Black TV**

Diversity on television matters. I learned that media is another powerful platform to change the world -- and that BET played a pivotal role. The fastest way to get to know another ethnic group or religion or sexual orientation is to see it portrayed and

represented on television in a respectful and responsible way. I remember how much Diahann Carroll as the single mom on *Julia* meant to me growing up. I remember seeing the Supremes and the Jackson Five on *Ed Sullivan*. And I remember Phylicia Rashad as Claire Huxtable, the funny, sexy, lawyer mom on *The Cosby Show*. These moments of diversity on TV matter to me... to you... and to our children. -- Debra Lee, CEO of BET Networks (Dunn, 2015)

According to Beretta Smith-Shomade (2008), the success of BET emerged from its opening for a previous untapped Black market as well a prevalent notion in the early eighties of racial uplift through Black capitalism. Black capitalism links the material gain of Black people (through “buying Black,” or supporting Black entrepreneurship and Black-owned businesses) to the progress of the race as a whole; these factors intersected with the rise of cable and hip hop music to serve as keys to the success of BET. Therefore, when BET was launched in 1980 and throughout the following decade, it consistently branded itself as not only providing content relevant to a hypothetical Black audience but also as operating in the spirit of advancing the value of Blackness in popular culture.

However, the more BET grew, the more criticism it drew both in scholarship and in Black intellectual circles particularly in the mid- to late nineties. The height of such criticism came when Johnson sold the network to Viacom in 2001 depriving it of its status as the only Black-owned cable network. However, the criticism regarding the buy-out did not necessarily come from a rejection of black capitalism but rather a rejection of the shift in ownership. In other words, many viewers still believed (and still believe) in the promise of buying Black as a way to advance the race; the problem was rather in the shift of material power (Smith-Shomade, 2008).

In *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem* (2003), bell hooks offers an important critique of black capitalism in context with the history of Black women in the civil rights era. According to hooks, the call for "holistic self-development" was rooted in the Black women's club movement in the late teens and early twenties, citing women like Mary Church Terrell. As hooks argues, "The issue was not just to confront and resist racism but to create a culture of freedom and possibility that would enable all black folks irrespective of class to engage in constructive self-help" (p. 4). However, hooks suggests that to some extent once the Black pride movement was taken up during the sixties, the focus on equal social and economic representation with whites moved the focus away from issues such as healing and mutuality. At this point, as Black women leaders moved further and further into the background of the mainstream civil rights movement (with a few individual exceptions), the focus of racial uplift became more and more focused on making sure Black folks were increasing material and political gain in order to have the access and representation they had been denied for centuries. hooks argues that the focus of patriarchal voices within the Black community on economic representation - while no doubt necessary - sidelines the issues of recovery and holistic self-esteem building, providing access to only one type of material empowerment which feeds back into rather than resists capitalistic structures. As hooks puts it, a crucial mistake leaders have made historically is in equating material gain with holistic empowerment.

Beyond racial representation in capitalism, however, is the question of Black women and girls' place on Black media. Messineo (2008) explored whether or not advertising on "niche" networks such as BET – as compared to general networks like ABC or CBS – was a venue for better gender representation. Messineo concluded that while BET provides the opportunity for alternative gender representations, that is not the whole picture:

At the very least, the presence of niche networks provides an increase in the number of minority images seen in the overall media landscape. [...] If BET is an indication of other networks, niches do not appear to be a haven for positive and exclusively minority representations, nor is it clear that exclusive representations should be the goal.” (p. 762)

Additionally, relying on these “niche” networks for representation potentially reduces the pressure on major media outlets to incorporate diversity into their content (Messineo, 2008).

Gender representation on BET continues to shift in recent years. Smith-Shomade points out that, for example, the content of BET is largely music videos or reality television which often showcase the same sexist, objectifying images of women of color as one would find in any mainstream outlet. At the same time, “BET consistently pushes women to the forefront of both its original programming and its managerial staff” (p. 93) Debra Lee, quoted in the beginning of this section, has been the Chairman and CEO of the network and also is an executive producer with Beverly Bond on *Black Girls Rock*. Lee was also instrumental in the development of Centric, “the first network designed for Black women,” where entertainers such as Queen Latifah and Whoopi Goldberg, for example, will produce their own programs (Dunn, 2015). The question is, does this increase in representation in women throughout the network mean women and girls will be able to look to BET and its affiliates as a source of empowering media?

Also valuable to consider is that Messineo’s classification of BET as niche misses the reality that BET’s audience continues to expand much farther than just Black audiences. The distinction Kiuichi (2013) makes between Black representation produced by/for whites or by/for Blacks also does not necessarily hold up when we consider that BET is considered to be “for African Americans and consumers of Black culture globally” (PrimeMediaProductions, 2014). While the increased consumption of Black culture might make individual Black entertainers and

media producers more wealthy, it also means that Black media as a cultural space for Black people is much more complex because it lacks boundaries of who sees and occupies that space.

### **Black Women and Girls Online**

If we think of media as a cultural space, then, we must also consider the different levels and platforms which define that space. When it comes to popular culture, the content of any given text is now only a portion of all that may contribute to the meanings, social significance, and circulation of the text. Online platforms such as Twitter, individual and networked blogs, and other forms of social media become a place where pop culture is constructed and contested. Most mainstream film and television entertainment have official websites, twitter feeds, and facebook pages. At the same time, these media platforms are also spaces of activism, social commentary, and of course conflict over social issues like race, gender, and sexuality. Therefore, for a program like *BGR* which offers not only entertainment but is attached to a larger Black feminist message in the effort to address the experiences of Black women and girls, online responses to the program provide insight to how people interpret and respond to messages of Black girl empowerment.

Feminist media scholars identify online platforms as important tools in building feminist communities where marginalized voices have space to discuss their concerns and understandings of feminist issues. Of course, this does not mean social media are guaranteed spaces where feminists can agree or debate these topics democratically. Often, the tensions that characterize feminist movements historically – the universalizing of white, middle-class, Western feminism, the privileging of academic feminism, and struggles for solidarity across cultural, racial, and gender lines – are often replicated in these online spaces (Rodino-Colocino, 2014). At the same time, even though these spaces remain contested, productive conversations have nonetheless

emerged for them, especially from Black feminist circles online such as #SayHerName, #Free\_CeCe and other forms of hashtag activism, networking, and online discussions on blogs and websites (Wazny, 2010; Dubrofsky & Wood, 2014; Rodino-Colocino, 2014; Williams, 2015; Fischer, 2016). In addition to BGR's presence online and the tags such as #blackgirlmagic as mentioned in the introduction, social media as platforms for Black girl empowerment still leave questions such as where are Black girls voices located in these online feminist communities? Black girls *are* online, but are they included in formative discussions of content such as BGR? Finally, how might we theorize empowerment programs for Black girls given all of the factors – different theories of empowerment, different images of Black women and girls in the media and their effects, and different tools, online and offline, for empowerment?

### **Black Girlhood Empowerment**

“Everyone’s got an agenda for what black girlhood is but no one cares about Black girls.”  
(Chatelain, 2016)

In looking through conceptions of empowerment in social work, Black feminist activism, feminism and girls studies, on television and online, we see many different pieces moving to shape experiences of Blackness and girlhood. What we do not necessarily see is Black girls. Like Dr. Chatelain’s statement above, we absolutely need to remember the agendas that organizations and individuals bring to Black girlhood – be they altruistic or destructive – and how those agendas affect our ability to meet Black girls where they are. In interrogating emerging narratives of Black girl empowerment in the current media landscape, we must understand the ways in which “empowerment” is constantly in flux, the history of Black feminist activism and

scholarship which informs current Black women's progressive work, the commercialization of both Blackness and girlhood, and the nature of the literal and virtual spaces which Black women and Black girls occupy. Most importantly, we must commit to an intervention and conceptualization of Black girlhood that includes Black girls.

In the past decade, there fortunately has been an insurgence of scholarship working toward this goal. These are scholars working across a multitude of disciplines committed to the centrality of Black girls as the subjects rather than the objects of their work. From tracing the rhythms in hip hop back to childhood games Black girls played in the street (Gaunt, 2006), to acknowledging the ways girls living in Detroit homeless shelters reshape the institutions they occupy (Cox, 2015), to challenging the criminalization of Black girls in the classroom (Morris, 2016), among others, these scholars not only center their study on Black girlhood but push for new ways of acknowledging the vulnerability of Black girlhood while still upholding Black girls as capable and resilient. Much of the work comes from the emergence of hip-hop feminism in the mid- to late nineties which refers to perspectives developed by feminist thinkers within the post-civil rights "hip hop generation." These were younger Black feminists and womanists focusing on how simultaneously empowering and problematic popular culture is, starting from hip hop music and culture but expanding out to lived experiences of daily life. Where Black feminism traditionally "deprioritizes generational differences in the interest of historical, activist continuity," (Springer 2002, p. 1060-1061) hip hop feminism centers on and emerges from the particularities of being young and Black particularly in the United States (Morgan, 1999; Brown, 2007). What evolves from hip hop feminism is many adult Black women now in academic, activist, and other positions working with young Black girls and continuing to acknowledge the ways that the voices of Black youth, especially Black girls and Black queer youth, continue to be

marginalized even by the scholarship and programming which intends to protect them. The work of Ruth Nicole Brown on empowerment programs for Black girls is included in this scholarship and particularly foundational in my analysis of *Black Girls Rock*. Coming from a combination of political science, hip hop feminism, and girls studies Brown's earlier work called for a acknowledgement of Black girls and youth in general as political actors:

Hip hop feminists are not up and coming, we are present and doing, acting as muses to black girls. We understand the experiences of black girls to be political because we know that all too often gender entraps them in less than healthy situations. Youth renders them invisible and powerless. Race marks them as promiscuous and loud. [...] In their political journey of girlhood, how do black girls define who they are and desire to be in the world? (Brown, 2007, p. 124)

Brown began exploring this question in her own praxis after working with empowerment programs for Black girls and finding an overall reluctance to incorporate Black girls in these programs in the larger process of empowerment. In regarding mentoring relationships as a political process of socialization, Brown (2007) calls for accountability on the part of adults to recognize youth voices as “embody[ing] a distinct political voice worthy of receiving a hearing in the political process” (p. 127). This means a move away from the apolitical, helping-helpee version of programming which operates through a protectionist approach to empowerment meant to produce individualized solutions generalized to a monolithic image of Black girls as perpetually at-risk. Instead, Brown's work embodies Rappaport's (1987) call for a collaborative, self-conscious, and adaptable process of empowerment which acknowledges the power dynamics that define the mentor-mentee relationship between women of color and girls of color. (Brown, 2007; 2009).

In her more recent work with young Black women and girls in Chicago through the program Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT), Brown puts these critiques into action. SOLHOT operates as a space for the celebrate that she terms the “creative potential of Black girlhood,” meaning a space where Black girlhood is regarded as artistic, visionary, and creative – within and against the institutions and structures in which Black girls exist. This approach changes the shape of the mentoring relationship wherein it is not just the adults in the program attempting to “manage Black girls into being and becoming the norm – White, middle-class minstrels of femininity,” but rather such programs remain in dialogue with Black girls and empower *them* to shape the *program* (Brown, 2007, p. 21).

Both Brown and Aimee Meredith Cox spoke at the Black Girl Movement national conference in Harlem, NY in April 2016 on this idea of creativity in working with Black girls. Cox stressed the ways in which Black girls occupying spaces change the space and therefore, scholarship, on Black girlhood and that we should acknowledge not just the ways Black girls respond and are contained by society but also the ways they transform and create their own spaces. In other words, as Cox explained, that there is a need to “use the theorizations of Black girls to understand the world, not just theory to understand Black girls,” (Cox, 2016).

I use Brown’s work with SOLHOT not as an ideal model to compare BGR but rather as a tool for understanding how BGR creates a space in the online and offline media landscape for girls of color and how the awards ceremony itself functions as a televisual media space. Furthermore, BGR uses the cablecast as a way to apply its mentoring to a national audience, much of which is young girls without access to mentoring services. Therefore, Brown’s frame is useful in thinking of how BGR engages with the equally political process of mentoring through a screen.

Therefore, in looking at the BGR program, the subsequent questions follow: How does the awards ceremony incite *meaning* into the practice of Black girlhood? How are the women celebrated in the awards show articulating experiences Black girlhood beyond identity? How does Black Girls rock use the power of collectivity? What does it mean for an empowerment program to move to television in the format of a 2-hour award show and where does this leave room for reflexivity, dialogue, and accountability? On a platform like BET, is there room for Black girls to be collaborators in the process of empowerment? The following chapter addresses such questions.

### Chapter 3: Narratives Of Empowerment In *Black Girls Rock*

#### “This Is Why I Rock”

In a 15-second promo clip released in March of 2015 on BET Network’s official YouTube Channel – a month before the April 5<sup>th</sup> awards show – we see a young, smiling Black woman wearing a “Black Girls Rock” t-shirt which she holds out to the camera proudly. A soulful chorus of feminine voices sings “This is why I rock!” as a beat reminiscent of the rhythms of African-American girls’ handclapping games kicks in. A masculine narrator then invites us to “get ready to celebrate the bold ambition of Black girls who rock.” In the video, we see clips of young Black women high-fiving, dancing, clapping, posing individually and in pairs, all wearing Black Girls Rock t-shirts. The clip sets a tone of celebration, fun, and a distinctly young, African-American, feminine aesthetic (BETNetworks, 2015).

In another similar promo found on the organization’s main website, the promotional video is the same length and features the same music, yet with different content. Rather than teenage girls, this promo features still photos of Black women which flash by along to the beat of the music. The same masculine voice narrates: “A Black girl who rocks is beautiful...brilliant... and a woman who stands in her truth. Celebrate her achievements with us,” followed by the information about the date and time of the show’s broadcast. This promo also has a celebratory atmosphere but is not as playful as the former. Again, the women depicted are noticeably mature not just in the fact that they seem to be between their early 20s and early 30s, but also in feel; some of them seem to be dancing or laughing, but just as many of them are pictured in sharp profile or looking fiercely into the camera. They are of varying skin tones, though not varying body sizes (they are all thin) and – with the exception of one – all have natural, kinky hair.

Similar appearances and styles appear in the clip with the younger girls, communicating in both examples an aesthetic which is – relative to other mainstream media – accepting of the diversity of Black women (but within reason of what is acceptable for television, i.e. mostly thin, not above thirty, etc) and also distinctly “authentic” in Black femininity, coded by the overrepresentation of natural hair (BLACK GIRLS ROCK, 2015).

The duality of these promotional clips exemplifies two approaches of the BET Networks and the BGR awards in signaling potential audiences for this program. For adolescent Black girls, the focus is on ambition as well as playfulness and, noticeably, much more emphasis is placed on the branding of the organization (such as the uniformity of the BGR t-shirts). For adult Black women, the focus is on beauty, brilliance, and a sense of resilience. Movement and behavior is less emphasized in the latter video, but rather an air of nobility is highlighted. The visible differentiation is indicative of basic principles of market segmentation in that each promotion positions the viewers in a specific light to appeal to a larger audience (Smith-Shomade, 2008); what is curious about it is the ways in which it reflects the subtle distinction between representations of *empowered* womanhood and *to-be-empowered* girlhood as enacted in the awards show. It is this distinction that this chapter explores. On the one hand, the representation of Black women as powerful and able-to-empower is in stark contrast from historically embedded images of Black womanhood. On the other, the positioning of Black girlhood as ambitious and vibrant but not necessarily actualized is indicative of a long-standing approach to youth empowerment which leaves much to be desired.

Over and over, as the previous chapter discussed, scholars working within the paradigms of Black feminism, hip hop feminism, and womanism have specifically addressed the ways media texts produce “controlling images” through racialized misogyny which dehumanize,

hypersexualize, and otherwise demonize Black femininity. These images uphold larger historically embedded scripts of Black women as less than capable, less than worthy, and in many ways less than human (Higginbotham, 1992; Collins, 2000). To resist the power of these images, scholars emphasize the need for Black women themselves to be creators of their own representations. Additionally, it is imperative to uplift the voices of other Black women even in order to reclaim the ability to frame our own lives and experiences (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1992). Part of the resistance to racist, sexist tropes in culture, then, involves equipping young people of color with the tools to critique these images along with sustained, collective movement for social justice (Bailey, 2008; Davis, 2008). Part of my argument in this chapter is that overall, the aforementioned defining aspects of Black feminist thought Collins outlined and which hooks expanded on in *Rock My Soul* are at work in the awards show. Across the performances of the co-hosts as well as the honorees, we see an emphasis on the following: the critical necessity of Black women's self-defining, the sharing of common threads of experience while also acknowledging heterogeneity within those experiences, the importance of collective action, the acknowledgement of both race and gender as important axes of oppression, and finally a focus on holistic well-being for women. The other part of this analysis, however, takes into account the ways in which actual Black girls become canvasses on which the project of constructing successful Black womanhood gets painted and therefore lose their role as collaborators in the process of empowerment.

My argument is that *Black Girls Rock!* is emblematic of hooks' ambivalence toward notions of progress articulated in the introduction. Although *Black Girls Rock!* provides a necessary intervention in the routine degradation of Black women and girls in media, the program is also limited in scope for enacting change in a way that is relevant to the "girls" it is

meant to target. In the following textual analysis of the 2015 broadcast, using the complementary frameworks reviewed in the previous chapter of Collins (2000) and Brown (2007, 2009, 2013), I critique the politics of empowerment at play in the show. By “politics” I refer to the same duality we see in the promotional videos as discussed at the beginning of the chapter wherein on one hand the strength and capability of Black womanhood is emphasized while on the other hand actual Black girls are constantly in a state of to-be-empoweredness. Across these two aspects, I first consider the implications of declaring “Black Girls Rock” on its own followed by an analysis of the performance by the two co-hosts in setting an overall tone for the awards show, the speeches of the six honorees, and Beverly Bond. Then, I take into account the M.A.D. girls segment and Michelle Obama’s speech during this segment in an effort to understand how *BGR* is addressing the only actual girls who appear significantly in the program. Through these two complementary lenses, it is my hope to explore the mediated progress of women and girls, especially women and girls of color, through this text that may offer ways to identify the blind spots which arise in any efforts to empower girls through role-modeling.

### **Power In The Name**

In and of itself, the name “Black Girls Rock” is a political statement. The t-shirt slogan origin implies that the statement -- noun and verb, Black Girls Rock -- functions not only as the title of an organization but also as an intentional declaration. It also implies the branding potential of Black girl empowerment, not unlike the commercialization of Black Power phrases like “Black Is Beautiful” in the late sixties and early seventies (hooks, YEAR RMS). The intermingling of the political assertion of Black people’s empowerment as well as the marketability of widespread declarations of resistance is encapsulated as well in BET’s branding.

Since BGR is partnered with BET -- again, a network owned now by the media

conglomerate Viacom -- it is not a stretch to assume that similar marketing logics are shared between the organization and the network in regards to the image and branding of the awards show. In fact, BET has had a long history of entertainment branding. Beretta Smith-Shomade (2008) breaks down the longest running BET slogan, "Black Star Power," suggesting multiple possible interpretations of the slogan: 1) BET's creation of successful artists and the audience participation in watching them; 2) a validation and enactment of celebrity power of the stars important to African-Americans; 3) a declaration of BET's own power to make or break black and up and coming stars; and 4) the evocation of Black power movements, with an air of romanticized radicalization – a call for self-determination, self-respect, self-defense (that is, Black Star Power is an entertainment-industry call-back to the earlier Black Power Movement). In a similar fashion, BGR is polysemic: we must ask not just what *does* Black Girls Rock mean, but what *can* Black Girls Rock mean? For it is the multiple meanings which differentiate between the ways the honorees, the hosts, and the attendees use "black girls rock," and the way that supporters or those who oppose the program at home feel about it.

First, it can work – as originally conceived for the t-shirt – as a declaration, a statement: *black girls rock*. This implies that the fact that it needs to be declared, that the ability of Black girls to rock is in question in our society and therefore, the statement is needed to resist the perception that Black girls do *not* rock. In this context, then, "rock," means excel, achieve. Black girls – specifically – rock; agree or disagree it is a fact whether or not y'all are aware of it. Second, it could be a declaration of action – especially when put in the context of the television program. Rather than just a statement that hey, black girls rock – it could instead go further as a statement of *for the next two hours you are about to see Black girls rocking*. Here, then, the word "rock" takes on its more traditional musical meaning, at least in part, but also an agentic, active

and visible sense. This program is a space for Black girls *to* rock – and most certainly, this second interpretation is fulfilled as the performers take the stage, the honorees make powerful speeches that literally send chills through your body, the hosts create an atmosphere of joy and dignity, the First Lady and the legend Cicely Tyson take the stage, and of course everyone looks glamorous as they do so. In a sense, this last interpretation would be more like *watch me rock*.

We have already seen the multi-faceted nature of BGR and its goals in its promos, but it is also displayed during the awards when BGR founder Beverly Bond makes a speech addressing the night's honorees, explaining that BGR is honoring them with the hopes of providing “diverse, layered, and healthy” examples of women that young Black girls can look up to:

Your elevation in our culture matters because all too often the breadth and depth of contributions made by black women are pushed outside the margins of mainstream culture. In result, young black girls do not always get to see diverse, layered, and healthy representations of role models to emulate.

This posits BGR as addressing two goals at once. One is doing the work of recovering the unheard voices and unrecognized contributions of Black women. If these voices have been “pushed outside the margins of mainstream culture,” then BGR’s mission is to pull them back in to be the center on a national platform. The second function of BGR is providing black girls with role models who not only look like them but who defy the two-dimensional representation of Black womanhood often seen in the media and are (presumably, as a result) healthy role-models. This returns us back to the dual nature of the promotional clips wherein for adult women, recognition (what you *have* done and who you *are*) is the focus whereas for girls, ambition (what you *can* be -- your elevation, for you to emulate) is at the forefront. Such a declaration both arguably is an implicit critique not just of media generally, but perhaps even of BET itself given

criticism of its sexism (Smith-Shomade, 2008). These distinctions between visibility and invisibility, and girls and women, also appear in the show.

### **The Truth, Beauty, and Strength of Black Womanhood**

Black Girls Rock is more than an awards show. It is a monumental movement that empowers girls and represents the truth, beauty, and strength of black womanhood. Congratulations to all of the inspiring, trailblazing women we are celebrating tonight. (Debra Lee, CEO of BET Networks, Black Girls Rock 2015 Awards)

*Black Girls Rock!* is an important departure from how we typically see Black women depicted in mainstream television. Rather than conflict and “drama” which drives the entertainment value of reality television (Muhammad & McArthur, 2015; Howard, 2015), the program is an example in media where women come together to celebrate and encourage one another. This is exemplified not only in the selection of the honorees but in the performers, presenters, and especially in the co-hosts Regina King and Tracee Ellis Ross’s performance. In the show’s introduction, King states that Black girls are indeed “changing the game with class and confidence, which only we can.” She then turns to Ross and, in unison, they pronounce that this is because “we are black girls who rock.” Amidst an uproar of affirmative cheers, Ross and King thank Michelle Obama for attending the ceremony and then introduce the six women to be honored for the night. In the following comedic set-up, King declares her love for *Black Girls Rock!* yet laments that it’s the only time she and co-host Ross get to see each other because Ross is simply too busy. Ross denies this and says that is actually King who is too busy with the new television directing credits she has. King waves the acknowledgment off and instead points to the

award Ross received in the past year for her performance on sitcom *Black-ish* as proof that Ross is hard to reach.

This introduction emphasizes at least two empowerment themes in the special. First, it establishes this ceremony as a way for successful Black women to be in fellowship with one another where they might not be able to on a daily basis. The need for women of color to create spaces together where they are at the center is a theme not only in Black feminist scholarship (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1992) but also in psychological, sociological, and other social-scientific scholarship which shows that these spaces allow women of color reprieve from the daily challenges they experience based on their identities, the sharing of critical information without the need to over-explain their perspective, and a chance to validate their experiences outside of that space (Tatum, 1998; Cohen, 1991; Martinez-Aleman, 2000; Sue et al, 2007). Second, the plugs for each of their achievements over the year is not portrayed as competitive but rather an acknowledgement of the “grind” they are both on. This segment sets the tone for the awards show not being any attempt to determine who is best, but rather about acknowledging what exceptional women have achieved in their fields.

Additionally, we can see from the beginning how *BGR* operates differently from other similar programming on BET. In describing the earlier established BET Awards, Smith-Shomade argues that they were “suggestive of the most clichéd example of black family gatherings...the awards program exudes the feeling of down home. It operated as if it was an indoor, exclusive space for African-Americans who know ‘how we do’” (p. 92-93). *BGR* departs from this model. Rather than being the extensive, mildly chaotic, and primarily entertainment-based program that the BET Awards were in the mid 00’s when Smith-Shomade was writing and still are today, *BGR*, while still entertaining has a notably more prestigious air about it. In other

words, if the BET awards have the tone of a family cook-out, *BGR* is more like a post-graduation dinner. It is still a program of fun and fellowship but the focus is much more on celebrating accomplishments rather than letting loose. As Smith-Shomade explains, the BET Awards exemplify “the paradoxes inherent in mainstream, capitalist representation,” which “[play] themselves out across the bodies of African Americans,” and as far as awards shows go, was what BET was known for at the time (Smith-Shomade, 93). It is most likely this kind of image that Beverly Bond suggested BET was attempting to move on from in picking up *BGR* and therefore *BGR* ends up operating almost like a moral compass for the channel, not unlike the Black feminist social club movement hooks (2003) describes as being crucial to civil rights early 20<sup>th</sup> century wherein respectability and well-being were at the forefront of the cause.

In a later skit, “T-Murda meets Queen Floetic,” Ross and King come on stage in costume as stereotypical representations of “empowered” black women. King, as Queen Floetic, exemplifies the “conscious” calm empowered black woman in culture, dressed in a long black dress, an afro wig and what seems to be an African-inspired neck piece/necklace. She is firm yet spiritual, uttering an affirming “blessings,” to T-Murda and remaining stoic and serious throughout the skit. She performs spoken word poetry and asks for “snaps.” Ross as T-Murda is on the other side of the spectrum – a little chaotic and overly excited, she reads her rap off of her phone and appears to be a combination of nervous but joyful to be performing. At the end of her rap, she takes the now-obligatory selfie and asks everyone to yell “T-Murda.”

Both of these skits take these tropes of Black female empowerment and poke fun at them without necessarily ridiculing them. It is most definitely an instance of the audience laughing *with* the hosts rather than *at* the people they are supposed to portray. It is possibly a moment of self-awareness where there is a recognition that certain performances empowered Black

womanhood have now become tropes in popular culture (at least, popular culture consumed primarily by Black women). However, their over-familiarity does not necessarily remove them of their validity. The characters of T-Murda and Queen Floetic are funny but the pieces they both perform are not to be scoffed at. They call out the achievements of the honorees (a highlight of the skit, for example is the line in T-Murda's rap: "Miss Cecily's a guiding light to a generation/Badu in Givenchy? Yo, straight murderation!") Again, the delivery is comedic but the content genuine.

Second, they can be interpreted as a marriage between differing performances of Black female empowerment. Often times, "conscious" hip and mainstream rap are pitted against one another and for Black women specifically this divide often is mapped onto a more sensual, conscious, "grown," performance akin to Queen Floetic versus a younger, less polished, more aggressive performance akin to T-Murda.. What this skit may be communicating in some way is that both of these avenues of performing Black female empowerment are not only valid but they are in some way dependent on one another. Additionally, the skit hints at there being more than just one type of successful Black woman. Again, this reflects a purportedly authentic Black femininity which is still diverse, at least to an extent, as seen in the promotional clips discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Though *BGR* does not necessarily go as far as it could in challenging beauty standards, it does represent a wider range of Black female embodiment and performance than one would normally see on cable television.

## **Honorees**

The six women receiving awards throughout the night include the following: neo-soul singer Erykah Badu is honored as the night's "Rockstar," film director Ava DuVernay is the "Shot Caller," actress Jada Pinkett-Smith is awarded for "Star Power," Chicago school principal

Nadia Lopez holds the title of “Change Agent,” nonprofit CEO Dr. Helene Gayle is the “Social Humanitarian,” and finally actress Cicely Tyson receives the honor of “Living Legend.” Though these six women are not necessarily a part of the organization Black Girls Rock, Inc. and therefore do not speak for the organization itself, by the nature of them being honored by the organizers as exemplars of excellence they are, for the audience, representations of what it means to be a Black girl who rocks. A Black girl who rocks acknowledges the successes of other women working through similar struggles as she as well as those who have struggled before her. A Black girl who rocks is ambitious about the future of her community and therefore works to improve and give back to it. A Black girl uses the aspects of her being which have been marked as negative and turns them into assets.

I look to these speeches as evidence of the ways in which *Black Girls Rock!* successfully communicates the same messages put forth by Black feminist thinkers before them. The six honorees collectively communicate a message of resilience and passion representative of the organization’s mission to empower young girls of color through positive role models. Through their acceptance speeches, these women address the intersecting oppressions of race and gender as a common thread of experience binding the women and girls in the room. Principal Nadia Lopez, for example, speaks of the ways in which women often question their success, making *Black Girls Rock!* an important vehicle to reaffirm and celebrate those successes. Legendary actress Cicely Tyson encourages young girls to know their own greatness in the face of discouragement because “no one is gonna try to put you down if you are not a threat to them.”

Though Black women are a diverse group, the “legacy of struggle” shaping their experience within the U.S. becomes a way for Black women to uniquely relate to one another (Collins, 2000, p. 26). As Jada Pinkett-Smith states, “I need you to understand that we are the

women who marched from cotton fields into fields of medicine, politics, law, education, entertainment.... We even found a way to march ourselves into the White House as the first lady of the United States of America.” She declares that achievements made by individual women are achievements for all women and likewise, any slight toward individual women is a slight toward all women. Pinkett-Smith goes on to explain that what this platform allows for is a space where Black women can come together, celebrate one another, and say “you’re enough as you are, ‘cause we *are* enough *as we are*.” Pinkett-Smith’s speech focuses on the wholeness of Black womanhood, quoting her daughter Willow Smith in her concluding statement: “I am you, you are me; we are one.”

Furthermore, the diversity of the women chosen also represents how this commonality differs for individual women informed by an “ongoing dialogue whereby action and thought inform one another” (Collins, 2000, p. 30). Both Erykah Badu and Ava DuVernay allude to this need to unify intellect and creativity with action. Badu speaks of maintaining the “vitality” which keeps Black women going through the unification of the physical and spiritual self. DuVernay uses the metaphor of “lights, camera, action” to refer to her strategy for dealing with self-doubt wherein spirit (lights), mind (camera), and life (action) work in one accord in order to move “onward.”

Similar to the merging of thought and practice, Collins (2000) also describes the significance of merging “taken-for granted” knowledge with formal knowledge production (p. 34). As a result of this blending, Black feminists “must aggressively push the theme of self-definition because speaking for oneself and crafting one’s own agenda is essential to empowerment” (p. 36). Self-definition means more than just defining the individual. It also refers to the significance of a *community* of Black women trying to define and describe the

dynamic nature of our experiences. DuVernay reflects this point as she stresses the need to acknowledge her predecessors in film by starting her speech with naming ten Black women filmmakers who she describes as a “small and mighty tribe.” She asserts that when Black women make films “it’s not an interpretation of Black womanhood; it’s a reflection and it’s important to embrace it.”

Most emblematic of all of these themes is Dr. Helene Gayle’s speech in which she relates the wisdom of her mother who told her “you have a good brain and a big mouth, so use them.” This puts the stereotype of the loud, Black woman in a different light where having a “big mouth” is not a symptom of unruliness but rather a tool to be put to use for change (West, 1995; Brown, 2013). Gayle explains that one of the crucial parts of doing just that is by lifting the voices of girls and women “because when girls and women gain voice, they become empowered and when that happens, *everyone* wins.”

These women offer much more than empty advice. What each honoree presents is important strategies for women and girls of color tuning in for to “survive in, cope with, and resist our differential treatment” (Collins, 2000, p. 31). Nevertheless, the use of grown Black women as exemplary ideals of what young girls of color will *eventually* become “[reinforces] what adults think they know about girls, without creating spaces for girls to define themselves” (Brown, 2007, p. 135).

### **From Black Girls Who Rock...To Black Women Who Rock**

As discussed above, in BGR, we see many images of Black women role models: they are exemplified by the founder (Beverly Bond), by the hosts, by special guest Michelle Obama, and by the honorees. But in this televised special called *Black Girls Rock*, where are the actual Black

girls, and when to we hear their own distinctive voices? When I refer to “actual Black girls,” it is not my intention enforce a strict dichotomy between womanhood and girlhood. “Actual Black girls” refers to two things. First, I refer to a literal conception of female youth who fall within the 12-17 age range that Black Girls Rock, Inc. as an organization identifies as its target population. Second, I pull from a more theoretical framework of girlhood as proposed by Brown (2009) in her book *Black Girlhood Celebration*. According to Brown, the use of the word “girl,” like the use of the term “Black,” is not meant to necessarily define an essential category of identity. Rather, girlhood can be thought of as the “representations, memories, and lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful, Black, and female” (p. 1). This is a point of commonality shared by *all* of the women celebrated throughout the duration of the program. Therefore, I do not necessarily contend with Black women using the term “girl” or the concept of girlhood as a way to frame their own experiences.

What is more central to my critique is the reproduction of what Nikky Finne, in the forward to *Black Girlhood Celebration*, describes as a “You Too Can Be A Success” approach to girl empowerment. This approach depends on the construction of “Black girl as empty vessel and Black woman as vintage wine.” In other words, Black women as role models are expected to have all the answers for Black girls, who are encouraged to “keep mostly silent and still” (Brown, 2009, p. xv). This both obscures the ways in which adult women are always in the process of being and becoming as well as disallows Black girls from owning their own understandings of their experiences. Brown expands on this point, describing the tendency for empowerment programming to rely on a relationship between women and girls wherein “the adults make decisions about how to empower girls, and the girls [are] the objects of our empowerment” (p. 11). As stated previously, self-definition is central to a history of Black

feminist activism and thought and BGR is consistent with tying empowerment to voice, whether that be DuVernay's emphasis on the need for Black women to tell their own stories cinematically or Dr. Gayle's defining empowerment as "gaining voice." However, the question remains: are Black girls gaining voice through this awards show? In what ways do they remain, as Brown put it, objects of empowerment where than empowered subjects?

The problematics of a role-modeling approach are exemplified by the two limited roles young Black girls fulfill in the awards show. First, they are audience members receiving wisdom from and applauding the wisdom of Black women. Throughout the program, individual Black girls are shown in the crowd responding affirmatively to the words of the women on stage. Their visual presence in the audience is notable but it is one that presents a sharp contrast to the adult women on stage; clearly the boundary between who is *giving* knowledge and who is *receiving* knowledge (presumably) is clear. This strategy positions girls – both literally and symbolically – as perpetual listeners rather than speakers, as receiving Black women's truth rather but not able to produce their own.

The second place where young girls are visible in the program is in the segment on the M.A.D. girls. The M.A.D. girls are three teens "Making a Difference" in culture through their contributions to media and technology. The celebrants include Chental-Song Bembry, Gabrielle Jordan, and Kaya Thomas. Bembry is the author and illustrator of the book series *The Honey Bunch Kids* which she created at the age of fifteen in 2012. The book series "teaches youngsters the importance friendship, empathy, and respect for others who are different" (M.A.D. Girls Highlight, 2015). Jordan is the youngest member of the Great Black Speakers bureau as well as co-founder of ExCEL Youth Mentoring Institute which mentors other young entrepreneurs in their endeavors (Meet Gabrielle Jordan, 2015). Kaya Thomas is a vlogger who created an mobile

application which allows the user to find literature by and for people of color. Thomas is also a student programmer Dartmouth University's game-design lab, Tiltfactor, which focuses on social change (The Root 2015 Young Futurists, 2015).

In introducing the segment, Tatiana Ali – an actress who in her time on *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* was one of the most popular examples of a televised Black girlhood – states: “one definition of the word ‘mad’ is ‘to be greatly provoked. Tonight we recognize three amazing young women who’ve been greatly provoked to make a difference in their respective communities and in the world.” These are girls who, at their young age, exemplify what “using your good brain and big mouth” looks like in action. Like Dr. Helene Gayle’s advice, the M.A.D. moniker inverts the stereotype of Black girls as indeed being “mad,” meaning loud, angry, and difficult to deal with (Brown, 2013). In this context, the use of the word “mad” to mean “making a difference” acknowledges the ways in which Black women and girls break out of traditionally feminine performances of passivity to exert voice and agency (Morris, 2007). In this context, to be “mad” is to be a Black girl who rocks.

Ali describes the accomplishments of each girl in turn, beginning with Kaya Thomas. Thomas is celebrated “for breaking down barriers for girls in technology and empowering them to believe that girls can do anything.” Bembry is honored “for exhibiting your best beautiful through your efforts to help increase literacy amongst Black children.” Finally, Jordan receives praise “for shining strong as you inspire young leaders to dream big and exceed expectations.” In each description, a clip plays showcasing the works of each girl as well as the girls respectively in their element (Thomas is seen coding on her computer, for instance). Along with their specific accomplishments and titles of publications each of the girls has put out, Ali makes sure to emphasize how young they were at the time of their achievements. At the end of each

introduction, Ali speaks directly to the girl in question, earnestly declaring “*you rock.*” Each girl is given this moment to stand as the audience applauds her and her accomplishments. Kaya stands as the audience applauds her.

Conceptually, this segment of the show is ripe with potential to go beyond regarding young girls as objects of empowerment. It is one of the few moments where young girls watching are able to see girls *their own age* enacting social change and receiving recognition for it. However, what undermines its potential is the fact that once again, the M.A.D. girls do not speak but rather, are spoken *about*. Even once the girls are on stage during Michelle Obama’s speech, they stand behind her as she narrates their success:

I am sure that in the process of achieving all that they’ve achieved that they have faced plenty of obstacles [the three girls nod]. I am sure that they had plenty of voices telling them that their dreams were too big or too hard...or not the right kind of dreams for girls like them. See but these girls didn’t listen to those voices. They listened to their own voices; they held fast to their own dreams and most importantly, they prepared themselves to achieve those dreams by working hard in school and getting their education. [...] That’s the reason I am here tonight because, look, I worked hard in school. Education was cool for me. I did my best on every paper every test every homework assignment. And I want every single one of our black girls to do the same, *and* our black boys. I want them to do that all the way through high school then college and beyond. I want you to work as hard as you can, learn as much as you can. *That* is how you will go from being black girls who rock to being black women who rock. That is how you will unleash the genius and the power and the passion required to rock your communities, to rock our country, to rock this world.

While Obama's speech reflects a focus on education in the same way that Black feminism has focused on educating Black youth as part of the strategy to sustain progress in Black communities, it also presents achievement as a matter of individual will to overcome obstacles. In other words, she addresses Collins' first dimension of empowerment –individual consciousness development – but not the latter which attends to collective restructuring of oppressive values and institutions (Collins, 2000). Finally, rather than offering a true departure from defining girls as needing to be saved by their adult counterparts, what the segment accomplishes is using the M.A.D. girls as an anomaly, an exceptional ideal for what Black girls *could* do. Coupled with the fact that the M.A.D. girls are also not mentioned in the introduction of the program nor are they on stage at the end of the ceremony with the other honorees, this segment falls just short of giving Black girls voice within the program. These examples relegate them to a secondary role compared with the other celebrants and therefore severely limit the radical potential for the segment to put girls at center stage. Instead of being a moment where Black girls are given a space to articulate their *own* ideas of what it means to “rock,” the segment becomes a way for grown Black women to define an exceptional ideal of girlhood for young viewers to live up to.

## **Conclusion**

I started Black Girls Rock to create a space where Black women and Black girls could proclaim our identities boldly and unapologetically. Black Girls Rock is not just an ornamental phrase used to cloak ourselves in vanity. It is a critical and necessary affirmation [...]. So, saying that we ‘rock’ is a response to the tremendous neglect that Black girls feel when they grow up in a society where they are underrepresented, misrepresented, or completely overlooked. When girls tune into Black Girls Rock on BET, they get the message that Black girls matter. They see

phenomenal women who look like them rocking out and calling shots. (Beverly Bond, *Black Girls Rock!* 2015)

Bond differentiates between empty celebration and BGR, which she declares as a critical, intentional response between and for Black women and girls to resist the all-too-common negative messages thrown their way. Bond's specific reference of privilege on the basis of race and gender echoes Black feminist thinkers as well. And this is not to imply that Black feminist scholars within the academy are the ideal which Black women in entertainment and other non-academic spaces need to live up to in order to be counted as useful. Rather I am arguing that what is present in academic Black feminist work is slowly emerging in popular culture in an intentional and visible way. I disagree with hooks on the point that we have not made much progress. As shown in this analysis, *Black Girls Rock* seems in part to be a program expressing counter-hegemonic values expressly intended for Black women and girls and committed to following through with the work of recovering Black women's voices while serving young Black girls. It is of course not a perfect example and therefore not the entire answer. I strongly emphasize this last point as it is crucial that we do not look to any singular text as a stand-in for everything that *should* be happening for Black women and girls. *BGR* is a step in the right direction on a wide and winding road toward authentic empowerment. The step should be acknowledged but it is not the entire process.

The goal of my analysis is attempting to simultaneously acknowledge the important steps being made through *Black Girls Rock!* as well as identify areas for improvement. The program is certainly a welcome alternative to the "increase in hateful images" of people of color, and engages in the important work of actively celebrating Black women rather than only defining them as victims of oppression. However, I also stand by the importance of acknowledging the

limitations of empowerment as a productive narrative for young girls of color. In order to move beyond these limitations, grown women of color must not allow our self-definitions to dictate ideals for young girls to ascribe to. Rather, young girls of color should be given the space to articulate their own perceptions, contextualize their own experiences, and subsequently identify what solutions are most relevant to their current material realities. True empowerment must acknowledge the ways in which Black girlhood can *already* be a space of liberation, not the mere prelude to one. As Brown states, “to remember Black girlhood does require Black women to forget themselves” (Brown, 2009, p. 19). By forgetting ourselves, we successfully take on the crucial task of meeting girls where they are *at*, not where we want them to go. However, the question remains whether or not a television program – especially an awards show – is even capable of offering the kind of dialogic, self-reflexive and adaptable aspects of the empowerment process. I explore this question further but through the platform of online discussions of *BGR* in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 4: FEMINIST RESPONSES TO BLACK GIRLS ROCK

### Feminist Responses

As stated in chapter 3, the very name “Black Girls Rock” is central to the reception of the program. However, it is also this name which drew backlash online during both the 2013 and 2015 awards broadcasts as non-supporters took to social media to criticize the show – and by extension, the organization – for only focusing on Black girls. In 2013, the hashtag #whitegirlsrock appeared and evolved into #allgirlsrock in 2015, not unlike the #alllivesmatter response to the Black Lives Matter hashtag and movement. The ideology behind the two controversies was similar in that people advocating for #whitegirlsrock claimed that only focusing on Black girls excludes all other girls of differing races. Much of the 2015 criticism was specifically in response to the First Lady’s supposedly inappropriate appearance at the awards show. These users felt that as a representation of the entire United States, she should not only be addressing the needs of Black girls (Rogers, 2015).

Of course, this backlash is intermingled with people livetweeting the awards show and expressing their gratitude for its message and sharing reactions to the entertainment. However, as a result of the negative responses each year specifically about the awards show as well as other examples of online trolling and racist co-optation of online conversations between mainly people of color, it seems as though Black women have come to expect spaces established on these social media platforms, including those meant to be positive like #BlackGirlsRock or #blackgirlmagic, are never without the intrusion of racism and sexism (Rodino-Colocino, 2014).

The #allgirlsrock was an especially visible reaction to the program, but not by any means the only one. A program such as BGR with its implied intersectionality of race, gender and age, for example, is embedded a larger conversation about the nature and scope of feminism, or even feminisms (Thornham, 2010). What I analyze in this chapter is a few of the online feminist responses to the program. Specifically, I observe the responses to articles on the awards show on three feminist websites; these responses include responses to the content of the program itself, responses to the backlash, as well as discussion about the underlying issues addressed by the program.

According to Wazny (2010), a website may be considered feminist if: 1) The site defines itself as such through the title or description or if it is in the web address (such as [www.feministing.com](http://www.feministing.com)), 2) its content relates widely to “women’s issues” and is usually staffed by women so as to put forth an authentic perspective, and 3) a statement of some type on the blog which reflects the publication’s commitment to feminist issues or values.

Wazny uses her criteria to analyze popular feminist blog Jezebel, a site I also engage along with two other feminist online publications, Dame magazine and MadameNoire. While Jezebel has a reputation for being more of a community for white feminists – or, at least, for writers who frequently and problematically leave race and class out of their cultural commentary – Dame and MadameNoire are as of yet unstudied, newer magazine-based websites. In choosing specifically feminist publications, the aim is to explore the ways in which communities in support of BGR’s overall mission – empowering young girls of color – might respond to awards show and the surrounding discourse. As discussed below, Dame does not have as explicitly feminist a rhetoric as Jezebel does while MadameNoire specifies its intended audience as women of color (with a heavy emphasis on Black women, judging by the name, the primarily Black

staff, and the content). My focus, then, is simultaneously on the ways in which this discussion creates community (and conflict) around the issue of Black girl empowerment and contests dominant interpretations of the program and the subsequent backlash within feminist circles.

In the rest of the chapter, I focus on the one article each site devoted to BGR, and conduct a thematic analysis of the comments section on each. Overall, comments reflected a preoccupation with the #allgirlsrock backlash, a disenchantment with challenging racism online, and a strong identification specifically with Michelle Obama. Through these themes I look for connections or possible incongruencies between my own interpretation of the 2015 awards show and its narratives of empowerment and how those might be addressed (or not addressed) in online discussions. Finally, are there any openings for young Black girls to actively participate in these discussions in, again, shaping their own understandings of the issues that affect them?

### *Jezebel*

Jezebel is a blog launched in 2007 under the tagline “Celebrity, Sex, Fashion for Women.” While it does not have a description section, Wazny (2010) accurately describes it as being “known for its sarcastic and snarky coverage” (p. 3). Their one article on Black Girls Rock, however, was mostly celebratory. Written by staff writer Hillary Coker, the article is entitled “Michelle Obama’s *Black Girls Rock* Speech Is the Pep Talk You Needed,” and focuses exclusively on Michelle Obama’s speech as the main point of interest for the awards show. The author briefly provides an overview of the show, a YouTube clip of the speech as well as a transcription. The article is the only of the three articles I looked at which explicitly mentions girl participation – or girl viewership – of the program. Coker specifies that Michelle Obama’s appearance was to honor “three teen girls” (the M.A.D. girls) and that while some people took issue with her appearance, the most important thing was that for the young girls in the audience

“all that mattered was that the first African-American FLOTUS was speaking directly to them.” Again, though the article makes a point of referring to the girls in the audience, they are positioned as only needing words of wisdom – being spoken to but not speaking. Coker herself states that after watching the First Lady’s “magical” speech, she also feels like she as though she can “take on the world,” as well as her need to “speed-read” Michelle Obama’s biography, to be released two days after the awards show. Once again, this connects empowerment to a personal feeling, and possibly a temporary one at that, as the use of “pep talk” as a descriptor indicates *as well as* the need for consumption, possibly as a way to sustain that feeling.

### ***MadameNoire***

MadameNoire launched in 2010 by Moguldom Media Group. The site is described as “the leading lifestyle website for black women” focused on providing “news and inspiration for smart, stylish black women.” Their mission is “to empower millennial women of color with engaging content that covers everything from health, fashion and beauty to career, parenting, entertainment and breaking news.”

The one article about 2015’s BGR is written by Jazmine Rogers and titled “White People Are In Their Feelings About Michelle Obama Attending Black Girls Rock” and was published on March 30, just before the 2015 award show, in response to the announcement that Michelle Obama would be in attendance. This article focused nearly exclusively on the negative reaction – assumed to be a white reaction – to that year’s BGR and the participation of FLOTUS. Rogers expresses MadameNoire’s collective excitement (“We were pretty stoked...”) at Obama’s appearance, but then turning to the expectation of “backlash” (the word they used) given the 2013 #whitegirlsrock response. “[Y]ou can imagine how salty folks were this year when the First Lady of the United States was in the building,” Rogers writes, implying that the more high-

profile the guest, the more those who do not approve of the program's message will find issue with the program. Additionally, the specific use of the term "salty" gives the impression that the disagreement is not the product of genuine political differences but rather the product of trivial bitterness.

After giving a few examples of the opposing discourse which included commenters on Obama's Instagram who felt that the program alienated nonblack girls and that we should no longer notice race if we really want racism to end, Rogers provides a concluding example of a supporter of Obama who explains "to all my fellow white women" that the show is meant to respond to the problematic media representation of Black women. Finally, Rogers poses the question to her readers: "Are you surprised by any of this?" Like Jezebel, you get a sense that the author – and the MadameNoire team – supports the idea of *BGR* even if just as platform on which Michelle Obama was to speak. Unlike Jezebel, however, this article includes actual examples of the backlash and therefore focuses on it more intentionally. However, though it seems easily implied that the authors do not agree with the backlash and present the final example as a way of challenging it, the rhetorical question at the end is not one necessarily of anger, frustration, or disbelief. Rather, it attempts to focus the discussion not necessarily on the content of the comments or on Michelle Obama's attendance but rather whether or not readers expected this kind of response, a question answered not only in the comments on MadameNoire but across all articles.

### *DAME Magazine*

Lastly, DAME magazine describes itself as being "For women who know better, " The website's description states:

Incisive. Irreverent. Curious. Provocative. That's DAME. We take an unabashed look at the issues our readers are really talking about. And like our readers, DAME is smart, quick-witted, opinionated and unapologetic.

DAME likens itself to publications during the “golden age of women’s magazines,” publishing essays on race, gender, sex, culture, and a slew of other topics. They define their tone as “irreverent, witty, and provocative,” and their objective as “[moving] the conversation forward” on topics they deem most relevant to women “– that is, when we’re not starting the conversation.” (About DAME, 2016).

The article in question is certainly the longest and most provocative of the three observed here. Like the article in *MadameNoire*, it mostly focuses on the backlash rather than the program itself. Entitled “Why Won’t ‘Becky’ Let Black Girls Rock?” writer Stacey Patton, PhD. takes on a tone of setting-the-record-straight (in fact, it is archived within Dame’s “How It Is” tag), demanding to know “why White America has such a problem with Black women and girls who dare to love and think highly of themselves.” Rather than the recap on Jezebel and the conversation starter on *MadameNoire*, Patton uses Dame’s platform to explicitly express her frustration at white women – referred to with the whiteness-evoking name “Becky” -- co-opting efforts for Black women’s empowerment. In line with Dame’s “quick-witted, opinionated, and unapologetic” content, Patton states that rather than doing her usual sharing of her knowledge with readers she would rather “cede the floor to White readers and ask what this is about. Because Becky, you go some ‘splainin to do.” However, the article works somewhat rhetorically as Patton addresses “you” as Becky, the stand-in hypothetical representative of white female privilege as though this is her one chance to finally get out what she has been meaning to say for a long time. Patton argues:

*Black Girls Rock* is a moment to celebrate and admire Black girls and women who continue to survive and thrive in racist-ass America. And *you* mad?

Patton goes on to assert that Black womanhood has been under fire from slavery up until the present, citing recent issues of Black girls experiencing cruel discipline in school, the school-to-prison pipeline, and assaults on Black beauty. She concludes about such discrimination and racism that

The hard facts of life conspire to keep us at a disadvantage. By every measure – health, wealth, employment, healthy babies, and children, and so on we trail you, thanks to centuries of institutionalized inequality tipping everything in your favor. Yet, you are tripping over ‘Black Girls Rock’?

Patton maintains that this round of “white tears” is “nothing new,” also citing the previous years’ #WhiteGirlsRock trend. Rather than attributing it to just plain ignorance, however, Patton describes the backlash as coming from “willful cluelessness” and asks white women to “stop acting like you don’t realize the system hates us [...], stop acting like you are the only victim in the room and that nobody loves Becky.” Patton emphasizes that “any effort to publicly state love for Black girls and women” is “insulting” to white supremacy, later on describing BGR as “a moment to recharge our own batteries and sense of personhood,” which is “predictably” interrupted by white women’s “righteous indignation and faux rage.” Clearly, the article focuses almost exclusively on the nature of the backlash but – unlike the previous two articles - uses the circumstances to express a larger frustration with what Patton describes as a “*faux*-White-woman-victim paradigm [...] part of a larger racial history.” Also unlike the other authors, Patton makes explicit connections to structural issues which disproportionately affect Black women and girls such as state violence, incarceration, and of course issues with beauty ideals

and questions why white women do not address these issues but feel offended by “Black women and girls who dare to love and think highly of themselves.” However, Patton’s focus on interrogating the backlash does not necessarily overshadow her engagement with *BGR* as a text. In fact, she is the only one of the three authors who gives background information on the organization and most extensively explains the nature of the show. Still, this article generated the most reaction out of the three, drawing more critics than the previous publications, most likely due to its confrontational approach clear even in the title.

### **The Response**

Rather than discussing each comments section separately, it may be more fruitful to look at the threads between them. Despite the notably differing tones and differences in focus of each article, the way commenters responded to the articles was remarkably similar. The most visible themes included posters responding specifically to the #allgirlsrock backlash, discussion specifically of Michelle Obama’s appearance, and to a lesser degree, discussion of the program or organization’s message of Black girl empowerment.

#### *Response to backlash*

A majority of users across all three articles attributed the negative response to ignorance of Black women’s struggles. On all three articles there were examples of people commenting with lengthy explanations of these experiences that merit a program like that of *BGR*. Some were responses to points made in the article but most of them were in response to other commenters who expressed opinions opposing *BGR*. These threads were particularly prevalent on *MadameNoire* and *DAME* and most extensive on the latter, perhaps due to the provocative title of the article inviting more outside argumentative voices than the other two articles. Users on the

DAME article refer to it as a “wake up call to white women who think it’s only about them,” or a “come-to-Jesus-moment.” However, by the sixth comment, the debate which consumes a large chunk of the comment section ensues. The thread goes for over 70 replies – about half of which are a back and forth debate between two users and the other half are people chiming in with their opinion. The original commenter angelkakes expresses their view that the show should address the empowerment of all women:

Shouldn't be all women rock instead of just black girls or white girls or whatever. The point I'm making is if someone a white person a white girl went and said white girls rock then everyone would be saying oh she's racist. So when it's on the other foot is that racist? You have to look at it from both sides. Everyone should just be loved because they are human white black yellow green Asian Spanish whatever we're people. (*sic*)

A number of the ensuing replies question the validity of the question, however, either asking if they read the article or directly stating things such as:

You might want to go back and read the several inches of the article beyond the headline. Your statement is akin to someone saying Steak Rocks! and someone saying well what about chicken? Chicken Rocks too. See what I did there? It's entirely possible for steak to rock and chicken to rock. Saying steak rocks, though isn't about chicken. That's what this piece is about. Saying Black Girls Rock does not equate with White Girls Suck. It's not about white girls at all.

At this point, In response to these comments, a user Neighbor comes to the defense of the original poster, suggesting that the root of the problem is rather Black women’s resentment toward white women which forecloses any chance at conversation between the two groups:

Personally I don't really care. Following black women on twitter for several months has convinced me that most hate white women anyway so it's hard to care in return. And nothing any one could say in response to this "invitation" would change the author's fixed narrative.

Some dismiss Neighbor as a troll that should be ignored. However, Neighbor insists that their intentions were sincere:

It was entirely justified! Do you think it is fine to dismiss someone's concerns by denying reality and saying they are imaginary? There are NO "white girls rule" events. Your valid concern is with under-representation in industries mostly controlled by white men. Yet you insist on attacking white women and girls.

Another user, Dimples engages the conversation and attempts to explain and contextualize the event:

Your entire issue with BGR is that YOU feel excluded, when that is not the case. Even the CREATOR of the program said that you are more than willing to join in on the celebration. What it honestly sounds like to me is that you're upset at what a black woman has created to celebrate the accomplishments of people that look like her, something that doesn't EVER happen otherwise, because it takes the focus off of you. The program wasn't created to say "Black girls rock at the exclusion of everyone else." It was created to say "Black girls rock JUST LIKE everyone else" It's honestly the case of, "the entire class was invited to the party, but I didn't get a personal one, so I'm going to pitch a fit".

This user in addition to many others, including the author of the article Stacey Patton, join the thread to provide examples of how Black women are excluded from mainstream culture -- citing the Oscars, Cosmopolitan magazine, and the proliferation of European beauty standards – though none seem to be successful in convincing this user. Patton returns to the thread to encourage this user – and another who joins halfway through to defend Neighbor – to re-read the article again as well as engage with the embedded links she included. Patton emphasizes that both users are experiencing an “emotional reaction to a Black person loving themselves more than they love whiteness.” Still, this does not seem to sway either Neighbor or Maria, the new commenter who has now joined in their defense. The thread goes on longer but perhaps the most curious comment comes from the point in which Neighbor again states their feeling of being attacked, except this time tries to connect a sense of progress (or rather, lack thereof):

"Black is Beautiful" was a popular slogan in the 70s what happened? Black women wore their hair natural. Why are we all pretending that those changes never even happened? How are white people responsible? Maybe some specific hypotheses could help. Why are we moving backwards? Why all the hate for white women?

What’s interesting about this progression that it seems as though this commenter as well as those defending them not only feels that white women are being attacked due to Black women’s “resentment” but in fact, that something has changed for Black women as a whole. The evocation of the “Black is beautiful” slogan reveals a puzzling contradiction wherein the earlier slogan becomes somehow romanticized as an unthreatening version of Black female empowerment. One possibility of this perception – aside from ignorance of the historical context from which “Black is beautiful” emerged – could be a specific attribution of social media or

online discussion in general as being counterproductive to racial progress (racial progress in this interpretation being one in which everyone just gets along).

Though these are individual users in a single thread, the same pattern of discussion appears across the articles. A large portion of each comments section – again, regardless of what the actual article is about - therefore is dedicated to debating with and attempting to “educate” a small portion of individuals not only on why the show is necessary but in general on the very foundation of racism, sexism, and Black women and girls’ experiences. This is consistent with Rodino-Colocino’s (2014) findings looking at the co-optation of the #YesAllWhiteWomen hashtag in which the overtaking of the hashtag by trolls became an issue that was overshadowing the point of Black women critiquing white female privilege. However, where these comments differ is in the fact that there were very few trolls to be seen on these comment boards (with the exception of one which people did not engage with). Rodino-Colocino suggests that overall, feminist discourse online – whether activist in nature or in response to media - remains limited because feminist activism has not created sufficient safer spaces for that mobilization. Implicit is the wider question of when attempting to develop and/or share critical perspectives, at the point (or through the point) of publication, there seems to always be the problem of co-optation, whether by corporate commodification or by the derailment of discourse (or both). However, what complicates this even further is in Patton’s title which could easily be seen as perhaps *inviting* a certain level of outside criticism. Therefore, it is understandable that some users found the focus on the backlash to be counterproductive to the purpose of the program.

Many comments on MadameNoire described the backlash as something akin to “foolishness,” or as otherwise unsurprising, irrelevant, and as the equivalence of crashing a party. One commenter simply responds with nothing more than, “Frankly I don’t care what they

are feeling,” presumably referring to the “White People” in the title thought at this point “white people” becomes a stand-in for people who do not support *BGR*. Another commented, “It is really sad that with so much that needs to be discussed in this world, this is what people want to focus on,” followed by a suggestion that if people want the First Lady to empower all girls they should “have a program for that purpose and invite her.”

Can we stop making posts and giving limelight to an irrelevant group of ignorant white people on social media? There are always going to be stupid people so let’s stop baiting black people into anger and giving attention to these trolls. These people don’t matter and their numbers are INSIGNIFICANT. Why then should I be sweating my weave over nonentities. Y’all won’t get my blood pressure up with these bait posts. Nope! Bye!

The idea that these sorts of articles actually draw attention to “trolls” suggests the community feminist sites create is sometimes not just because of shared identity and interests but specifically out of a shared *reaction* which may actually detract from the issue at hand. Problematically, however, boiling down the backlash to “trolls” also depoliticizes the issue and paints racism not only as a matter of an opinion only a few people hold but also as something that would be fixed if people just knew better.

On the Jezebel article, one user (Blah\_Recessive) commented:

Who cares what white people think about *Black Girls Rock*? Why do white people need to be a focus here? Why are 90% of the comments on this black event about white people’s support, or otherwise, for this event? This consistent appeal for white approval by some Jezebel writers and commenters is becoming downright embarrassing. White people’s feelings or thoughts on this is irrelevant. The whole point of the show is

encourage black girls to live life on their terms. White people are and should be a non-factor.

Blah\_Recessive brings in a critique which persists in debates on representation and diversity in pop culture. It goes back to the different interpretations of for whom the phrase “Black Girls Rock” is intended. As I explained in the previous chapter, it could be interpreted both as a declaration of affirmation – directed towards Black girls and women as a reminder that they are valid and worthy – or it could be a declaration of confrontation – directed towards a world which consistently denies Black women and girls their fair share. For this user, the affirmation should ideally have precedence over “convincing” anyone of the worth of Black women and girls.

One user, Dee, from DAME specifically suggests that the increased platform BGR has on BET is the main reason for the inevitability backlash:

...I still laugh that black girls rock has been around since 2006 but because the revolution was not televised, Becky, along with Stacey and Sarah have not said a word back then.

All the responses to the backlash imply that whether or not commenters felt it was productive to engage with critics of *BGR* and whether or not they truly felt this backlash was inevitable, the notion of a “safe” space online is complex. When Patricia Hill Collins (2000) described the importance of safe spaces, she specifically emphasized that they are important for Black women to come to voice – a point made in the awards show as well:

While domination may be inevitable as a social fact, it is unlikely to be hegemonic as an ideology within social spaces where Black women speak freely. This realm of relatively safe discourse, however narrow, is a necessary condition for Black women’s resistance.”

(p. 100-101)

As exemplified by the above comments, these online spaces – though they are feminist in nature, according to Wazyn’s (2010) criteria – are still not social spaces where Black women are able to speak “freely,” *even though* they are able to speak boldly and directly. How, then, to create some semblance of a safe space online? More importantly, what opening does this leave for Black girls also to “come to voice,” in the words of Collins, when discussing their experiences online?

### *Michelle Obama*

Just as Michelle Obama’s attendance was a central focus in all three of the articles, it also garnered much discussion in the comments. Commenters overwhelmingly applauded her attendance and moreover, expressed how much they identified with the first lady. While some focused on her role as a mother as defining her necessary place at such an event, others pointed to her “class” or “grace” as being part of her power as a role model. Still others focused on the trajectory of her time as first lady and the criticisms she’s received as both reasons why they identified with her as well as a reason to value her advice. A MadameNoire commenter by the username “frances” stated:

This woman has beauty, intelligence, class, and grace especially under pressure. She has been subjected to some of the ugliest, most racist remarks, and this was just another excuse for her haters to pile on her. I love the way that she took part in uplifting girls that this society consistently devalues, and it’s obvious that she can do nothing right in their eyes anyway. She should just keep on doing her and forget about the intellectual midgets who have to nitpick everything the First Family does.

Another commenter, “Nina,” also on MadameNoire expressed a similar sentiment:

White people are the reason Michelle Obama needs a place where she is appreciated and not banned from giving speeches or called ape or monkey. She also doesn't have to hear the way her husband is trashed on a daily basis. She has a safety zone among black people.

A post on the Jezebel article, Guest – who has no username – commented:

It's so funny to me, they have no problem hurling all sorts of racial epithets at this woman, and she doesn't say A WORD, but the minute she uses her voice to uplift black women instead, it's a problem. The fact that there are STILL people unashamed of bashing the First Lady of the US because of her blackness, should tell you why such an organization [corrected] like black girls rock is needed.

In reply to this comment, a commenter Estella Cohen says:

That's why it was so important for her to be there. Her position as FLOTUS has made her vulnerable to attack. Glad she took this opportunity to take her power back!!!

All four of these comments showcase two prominent opinions visible across these articles. First, Obama's appearance is seen as in and of itself an act of resistance and that by choosing to appear on the program, she is asserting her identity in spite of dissenting opinions as a way to "take her power back," as one user put it. Second, she is seen as vulnerable to racist sexism rather than transcendent of it and therefore just as much in need of a space like BGR as the average woman.

This expression of sympathy and admiration toward Obama is explored more thoroughly in the book *Go, Tell Michelle*, a collection of women in the African diaspora writing to Michelle Obama upon the inauguration of President Obama. Editors Nevergold and Brooks-Bertram

(2009) suggest that Michelle Obama serves a very symbolic, representational function where Black women can see something greater for themselves and at the same time her collaboration, for instance, with Black Girls Rock, and her philanthropy otherwise represents a tangible investment in communities – especially young women and girls of color. In one of the letters to the first letter, a woman writes:

Sister Michelle is within us all. When I behold her heights, I am witnessing the magnificent rising of my own rainbow within me...As Afrikan womyn, our heritage and pride never ends. Our legacy is to know that we never walk alone and our tradition is to defy being destroyed (p. 10).

In a similar fashion, the people commenting on Obama's appearance at BGR seem to mostly feel identification with Obama's perceived struggles with her representation just as much as they do inspiration from her presence. Though she lives a privileged life most likely vastly different from many of these commenters, they feel as though the racialized misogyny she experiences in a sense is something they can relate to and something which earns her the *right* to be a part of this program. These things make her relevant to black women *beyond* differences in privilege. At the same time, an implication of her specific ability to be "classy" undergirded many of these comments. For example, one user from MadameNoire expressed admiration for the First Lady's efforts to "assist our black girls that are growing up in the world full of kim k's and amber roses!" referring to celebrities Kim Kardashian and model Amber Rose, both of which are particularly known for their openness about sexuality in popular culture. Therefore, a binary of good/bad role model becomes a part of Michelle Obama's praise.

It is safe to assume that these two dimensions of participating in the program could be applied to all of the women who appear over the course of the event where on one hand, they are

using their power given to them by financial, social, celebrity status to uplift Black women and girls and on the other they are talking back to the discrimination they face in the industry, pop culture, or in daily life, and reclaiming their power – through this reclamation presumably, we as Black women are empowered, and Black girls will also be empowered.

### *Black girl empowerment*

The discussion of what empowerment entails for young Black girls was somewhat lacking, but what discussion there was presented a rather limited vision of what empowerment looks like. One MadameNoire commenter, “Guestest,” read as such:

...I hate that young black girls have to read all the slander towards black women. That could make them hate being a black girl and feel some type of way about becoming a black woman. We black women need this for ourselves and especially our young black girls.

A commenter on DAME expresses a similar sentiment, sharing that she has to remind her daughter she “rocks” on a daily basis:

We know that everybody should be love...but black women arent...thats the whole point of this article....do you not get that? Just because we wish the world was a certain way doesnt make it a reality. ...every day I have to tell my little black girl she rocks. ...that her hair is pretty just the way it is becuse if I dont.. that frozen hat, you know the one with the long blond braided ponytail attached to it sold at Claires? Will be more coveted by her than the hair growing put her head ...(sic)

On Jezebel, one commenter felt that Black girls don't get to experience the same sense of youth as others:

White girls get to be girls and treated as such until they are Betty White's age. Black girls don't even get the chance to be children (Mo'ne Davis, Quevahzhne Wallis...)

The examples given are of young successful Black girls who both experienced explicit racialized misogyny. Davis, believed to be the first African-American girl to play in the Little League world series at the age of thirteen, made headlines in 2015 due to a conflict with university baseball player Joey Casselberry. When it was announced that Disney Channel would be making a film based on her life, Casselberry tweeted "WHAT A JOKE. That slut got rocked by Nevada," (Brown, 2015). Wallis is an Academy Award nominated child actor who experienced a similar situation in 2013 at the age of nine when satirical news outlet *The Onion* tweeted "Everyone seems afraid to say it, but that Quvenzane Wallis is kind of a cunt right?" (Memmot, 2015). Both incidents involve a particular kind of racialized sexism which, as the above commenter suggested, disrupts our notion of what girlhood *should* be, not to mention it further emphasizes my earlier points about the trouble with online forums as safe spaces. Another commenter also from Jezebel expands even more on this point, this time citing her own experience as a Black girl as evidence:

This is going to be a strong sentiment but here goes.

Fuck anyone talking about that "allgirlrock" nonsense. Fuck each and every one of you. I'm black and days away from my 35th birthday. I was told in 2nd grade that "black people don't read as well as you so you must not be fully black." That was by my TEACHER. Again, in high school I was told by my guidance counselor that I should

think about maybe taking courses that were tailored to my grade level instead of my advanced abilities because it might make the rest of the students feel inadequate. I mean, we can't have all the other white kids feeling inadequate with this extra smart black chick around.

THIS is the shit I dealt with growing up. While white girls and Asian girls and mixed girls and virtually every other type of girls were being told they were worthy and enough by simply existing by anyone with a pulse, black girls were struggling to just fucking BE. Be smart. Be children. Be encouraged. Be gifted. Just. Fucking. Be.

So if your little feelings are hurt by ONE fucking celebration that tells black girls that they are worthy. They are talented. They CAN do it and it's OKAY to do so? I have no words for you other than these two...

Fuck. You.

Again, these are the few comments which point specifically to girlhood as a space of contestation rather than necessarily conflating womanhood with girlhood. Still, girlhood once again is only evoked as a space of abject discrimination and victimization whether interpersonally or institutionally. Oddly enough, I find DAME commenter Neighbor's word most useful here; there *is* a "fixed narrative," at work across these comments *although* I would disagree that this fixed narrative is false. Rather, it is a narrative which repeatedly constructs Black womanhood and girlhood as space where one feels consistently and overwhelmingly confined and degraded with little space in the discussion to continue the celebration of Black women and girls the show attempts.

## Conclusion

What both the articles and comments communicate is threefold. First, there seems to be an overall struggle with derailment of conversations about Black women and girls' issues which distracts from the content of the positive message of BGR. Even though many people were unsurprised by the backlash and some felt that it was not an opinion held by a majority of primarily white people, the reaction to it still took up most of the space in the overall discussion. Even in articles like Jezebel where the backlash was merely a single link within the article and not addressed again, most of the comments discussed it to some degree.

Second, Black women need this message too. As expressed through their discussions of Michelle Obama – arguably one of the most powerful Black women in this country – clearly these women feel that no matter how successful Black women are, they are still in need of “safe zones” where they do not have to deal with the micro- and macro-aggressions. Ironically, however, the platform on which these women are discussing this issue is itself not a safe space. The aforementioned distraction of the backlash creates an environment – at least online for those who want to discuss the program – where even the effort to empower Black women and girls is questioned.

Third, there is very little space on these sites for Black girls to discuss the program which is purportedly meant to empower them first and foremost. This is foreclosed in a number of ways. First, the sites themselves are not the best forums for engagement by youth – articles covering the program do not generate as young an audience of commenters as say, a social media site like Twitter which even then does not necessarily invite young girls to discuss their views. Second, as many of the commenters suggested, since the focus on Black women specifically is viewed as so paramount, there is little room to differentiate the experiences that Black girls

specifically might face. In other words, within a two-hour show since *everyone* needs to be empowered, it seems as though the conclusion is that it does not make sense to only focus on girls because Black women are still facing the effects of racism and are just as in need of validation from those similar to them. This may seem like a conundrum but it is not necessarily a problem without a solution. When we challenge the traditional role modeling/mentoring model that assumes that adults automatically are more capable in all ways than youth, not only does this allow room to acknowledge young girls' agency but it also grants space for adults to confront their own ongoing struggles. As concluded in the previous chapter, as well-intentioned as *BGR* is, it relies on the model wherein grown women are the end point of empowerment. As is seen by the comments here, the idea that there is some destination at which people arrives once they are empowered not only paints youth as perpetually helpless but it also obscures the ways in which adulthood does not magically protect you from systematic oppression.

Finally, many commenters expressed the view that this awards show is the *one* time of year where Black women are celebrated on television. Therefore empowerment becomes exactly the opposite of Rappaport's description, a scarce resource that could be used up and which must be constantly defended from intrusion. What is also noticeable about all three of these comments sections is they are comprised of mostly grown women discussing grown women discussing girls. Again, the voices and reactions of girls and what they take away from the program is lost, which is unfortunate because those voices would be valuable in assessing, to use Rappaport's (1987) term, the "radiating impact" of Black girl empowerment efforts in media texts such as this.

To return both Rodino-Colocino (2014) and Wazny (2010), perhaps the underlying concern is the notion of online spaces not only for feminist activism but even for simple

discussion. What spaces online exist where Black women and especially Black girls can speak “freely” about issues concerning their lives? This study is admittedly limited as it does not offer an answer to the latter. Though we can build on the insights from the discussion on these three websites, the voices of actual Black girls remains absent and therefore their perceptions of the project of *BGR* as well as ways of engaging in these discussions leaves a gap in understanding how *BGR*’s brand of Black girl empowerment is might be received. In future research, possible directions would hopefully include a deeper look into where these spaces are for Black girls, how they understand and use their voice online, and what they view as empowering.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

What I have hopefully outlined over the course of this thesis through the case study of *Black Girls Rock!* is two things: what I view as a positive increase in Black girl empowerment as a force in media as well as the very real limitations which still make authentic empowerment a difficult (but not impossible) to access for both Black women and girls. Furthermore, I would argue that a text like *Black Girls Rock!* could very well be one of these external sources Black girls can look to as a jumping off point for engaging in a process of empowerment.

Implicitly building from a tradition of Black women's activism and thought, *BGR* emphasizes concepts central to Black women *and* girls empowerment: collectivity, the development of critical consciousness, the importance of supporting and learning from other Black women and girls, and the nurturing of a holistic self. In the final pages of *Rock My Soul*, bell hooks pushes against the assumption that people need something outside of themselves to begin the process of healing from personal and collective histories of oppression. In hooks' view when we rely on external circumstances to provide healing, we are prone to seeing ourselves as victims:

The fact that racism continues to impact negatively on our lives as African Americans has led many of us to feel that we can never be free of suffering. That is a slave mentality, because it denies both our history and our own agency (p. 211).

As well-taken as hooks's point is – the need for self-reflection and self-motivation is indeed essential – I would disagree with her overemphasis on internal strength as a starting point for healing. Instead, I suggest that what is necessary is a balance of external and internal forces to create the foundation for self-esteem and, by extension, empowerment. Through focusing on

balancing internal and external healing, we tap into a more complex and useful approach to empowerment that fulfills Patricia Hill Collins' call for both group survival and institutional transformation. We begin the ongoing process which Julian Rappaport described as ecological in nature – acknowledging the ways subjects are embedded in systems but *not* overlooking subjectivity. In cultural studies, media which propose to “empower” girls is usually put on the chopping block and dismissed as postfeminist (and by extension neoliberal and often postracist), presenting a false version of feminism which relies on individual consumption as a way to transcend systematic sexism. However, I should be clear that *BGR* does not appear to be any of these things and rather intentionally works to address both racism and sexism, even in its shortcomings.

The glitz and glamour of the awards show makes it all too easy to dismiss the program as simply another mainstream appropriation of so-called real activism. However, even though celebrity (or at least, looking like and being as popular as one) might be inadvertently presented as the *ideal* end-goal, it is not necessarily presented as the *path* to empowerment. Yes, there is an overemphasis on an individual woman's ability to rise above circumstances, but it does not ignore or deny oppression at the level of societal levels. What it *does* do is feed into notions of material gain and upward mobility as the representation of an empowered Black woman. The focus becomes so much on the result – the eventual status of being a Black girl who rocks enough to receive an award for it – that the process is romanticized.

Still, we should not be so quick to dismiss the very real difference programs like *BGR* can make in people's lives because it does not address every issue of systematic oppression. I would argue, in fact, that a show like *BGR* is not even capable of fully representing the level of resistance necessary to be truly considered revolutionary. This is precisely why we need to

understand what use we can make of it, where we can build from what the producers are trying to, but also recognize what is not useful and in fact may be counterproductive. *BGR* may not be the solution but that does not mean it cannot be *part* of many solutions.

Overall, where the program falls short is not as *much* in its message as it is in the underlying approach. Although the message is “Black girls rock,” the show still renders actual Black girls virtually silent. It is crucial to understand that this view is one prevalent in empowerment programs in general – especially those geared towards Black girls – where Black girlhood is evoked as a space of lack which the right kinds of role models need to fill. Therefore, what is meant to be positive actually results in contrasting a deficient Black girlhood against actualized Black womanhood. The issue with this is first of all, that it is counterproductive to the end goal of empowerment. If we think of empowerment as a process and those we are empowering as *collaborators* then at the very beginning we must think of them as having agency *to* work toward their own empowerment. This does not mean ignoring the limitations and sometimes violence Black girls face in their daily lives. What it does mean is being in dialogue with Black girls, meeting them where they are at, and intentionally working to see Black girlhood as *more* than victimization. Patricia Hill Collins defines agency as “an individual or social group’s will to be self-defining and self-determining,” (2000, p. 298). Therefore, even in the direst of circumstances Black girls are still capable of having the *will* to self-define. It is not the job of Black women to dictate what those definitions look like but rather to assist Black girls in turning their will into action. When we are willing to see and celebrate Black girlhood beyond the negativity which we’ve come to accept as defining it, we no longer have to place ideals of acceptable Black femininity as the only solution to “fixing” the problems that girls deal with.

The underlying question, then, is are these spaces in media – whether the awards show or the online spaces in which people discussed it – where that kind of mutuality and adaptability can happen productively? The nature of online spaces like those that I analyzed in response to the program are important in shaping conversations about the nature of experience and hopes for resistance. These spaces present the same potential for individual and collective resistance and transformation the same way a television program might. Therefore, there needs to be a similar attentiveness not just on the issue being discussed in specific online spaces but also in how these spaces shape the ability for people to discuss their opinions and experiences with focus on both individual and collective experience. When the conversation is about Black girls especially, how can we shape online space so that that focus remains where it was intended? As reflected by my personal experience in the introduction as well as the literature I reviewed, cultural spaces where Black women and girls come together to discuss their experiences, thoughts, and strategies are crucial to their survival. Since online spaces are now included as a platform to have those discussions, we should be just as intentional and diligent about shaping those spaces so that they best serve their purpose.

When I started this analysis, to be honest, I actually did not see the authentic empowerment I argue for as possible. I was critical of Black girl empowerment as a vague concept growing as a central topic in the media I engage with but I felt that indeed, this would be as good as it could get. What changed that was attending the Black Girl Movement conference in April of 2016 where for the first time, I really *did* see Black girls at the center of the conversation. They served on panels, led workshops, DJ'd the welcome reception, and were consistently involved in the Q&A portions of discussions. When Black women spoke of Black girls, they did not use Black girlhood as an absent referent but rather spoke directly of the girls

they worked with on a day to day basis – many of which were in the room and would sometimes respond in their own ways, in their own voices. The girls who lead activities during the conference were accomplished but they were not models of success that other girls were meant to climb to at some distant point in the future.

On a panel discussing best practices in working with Black girls, prison abolitionist and educator, Mariame Kaba, stated the following which stuck with me:

I wanna fight for Black girls just to be ordinary. I really do. The fight for so many years has been to prove that Black girls are *extraordinary*. I just want them, and me, and those girls I love to be ordinary in the world (Kaba, 2016).

I wrote down her words and thought about *Black Girls Rock* which so clearly is doing the incredibly important work of declaring Black girls as having the *potential* to be extraordinary. Not long after, I spoke with Ruth Nicole Brown as well and tried to explore this idea of media as a space for empowerment, asking if she could ever in any distant future see SOLHOT as being televised and if so, what would it look like? Her first answer was a definite “no,” and then after some thinking, she explained that it wasn’t necessarily the nature of media but rather than reality of having to compromise that she – at least at the moment – would not be interested in. However, she emphasized the need to be visible on those platforms but “only under certain conditions,” then, as an aside, “Maybe Oprah could do it” (R.N. Brown, personal communication, 2016).

After our conversation and still ruminating on Kaba’s proclamation of a fight for Black girls to be ordinary, I at the very least concluded that a major limitation of a show like *BGR* was simply a matter of *time*. In the span of two hours (less than two, including commercials), once a year it is nearly impossible to allow for *voice*. In addition to re-centering the program on Black

girls, there would need to be a much longer breadth of time to allow for necessary dialogue about experiences, strategies, and visions. “Collective Black feminist imagination” does not happen in the span of an awards show as it requires building, reworking, debate and agreement. Therefore, not only does the field have to be leveled for Black girls’ to actively participate in their own empowerment but it also would have to be expanded. It’s possible that this very process might be taking place on a more intimate level at the actual event but in terms of the show that people see as the end product, there is very little ability for that kind of engagement. Indeed, maybe only Oprah Winfrey or someone of her stature would be able to create a space wide enough for a project like that – at least on a wide, mainstream scale. However, where it may already be happening is between Black girls online and in their homes, talking to one another and navigating Black girl empowerment media messages whether from *BGR* or a Beyonce music video, a blog post, or a t-shirt logo. What is needed in scholarship, then, is a way of identifying and engaging with girls in these spaces in a way which intentionally privileges the truth-making Black girls engage in rather than only defining them through the narrative of how “bad” Black girls have it. As previously stated, that scholarship is slowly emerging at present, but more attention is needed specifically in media studies and especially feminist media studies. At best, this would allow us to see Black girls as complex and capable agents in the ever-shifting media landscape.

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