A “Sense of Presence”

The “me of me” in Black Girlhoods

Claudia Mitchell and Ann Smith

We begin by paying tribute to feminist Black scholar, bell hooks, who died 15 December 2021. As the numerous citations in just this issue alone bear witness, she has had a huge influence on feminist ways of thinking particularly in relation to how race, gender, and capitalism intersect. In her well-known essay, “In Our Glory” on Black girlhood and visual culture (hooks 1994), she offers a memory of losing a photograph of herself as a young girl in the 1950s masquerading, as she called it, in full cowgirl regalia. As she put it,

I loved this snapshot of myself because it was the only image of me available to me that gave me a sense of presence, of girlhood beauty and capacity for pleasure. It was an image of myself that I could genuinely like ... The camera captures me in my cowgirl outfit, white ruffled blouse, vest, fringed skirt, my one gun and my boots. In this image, I became all that I wanted to be in my imagination. (45)

She goes on to talk about taking this snapshot with her when she travels to visit her cousin and his wife, Lovie. As she writes,

I packed it carefully. I remember giving her [Lovie] the photograph for safekeeping; only when it was time for me to return home, it could not be found. This was for me a terrible loss, an irreconcilable grief. Gone for me was the image of myself I could love. Losing the snapshot I lost the proof of my worthiness—that I had been a bright-eyed child capable of wonder, the proof that there was a ‘me of me.’ (45)

But what was so powerful in this writing is her sense of how the interplay of memory and the visual (or the missing visual text in this case) could lead to working with the past to inform the future. As she observes, “Using these images, we connect ourselves to a recuperative, redemptive memory that enables us to construct radical identities, images of ourselves that transcend the limits of the colonizing eye” (53).

It is worth noting that while we were preparing this editorial, coinciding with the beginning of Black History Month that begins on 1 February, a dear colleague at McGill sent along, quite serendipitously, a reference to this poignant essay.¹ Pertinent to what we go on to talk about, we are reminded of what hooks said in 1999, in *Remembered Rapture*. “No Black woman writer in this culture can write ‘too much.’ Indeed, no woman writer can write ‘too much’... No woman has ever written enough.”²

Given this, we were not sure what to do when we saw the n-word repeated in the creative piece by the guest editor, Esther Ohito, of this special issue on Black girls in space. Since this had never happened before we checked with our publisher about whether they had a policy in place to deal with this. She wondered if the word should perhaps be left uncensored in primary source material (quotes, excerpts, and so on), but censored in the author’s analysis with a brief endnote explaining the decision but advised us to consult with our community of Black woman scholars. Given the North American context, Aria Halliday came to mind immediately; she has published in *Girlhood Studies*, has reviewed for us, and is on our editorial board. Ann Smith, as managing editor, wrote to her.

The next special issue coming up is on Black Girls in Space and the first of the pieces I have seen, a creative one written by the guest editor, uses the n-word (in capitals) ... I get that queer people became allowed to call themselves queer as part of the movement towards reappropriating offensive language and I was part of all that many years ago as a gay activist in South Africa and I guess the same might be true of Black people regarding this word, but queer has assumed a number of related meanings in a refusal to see heteronormative language as the only possibility but these are not ways in which the n-word could ever function so I don’t think these are parallel cases.

I think that this Black guest editor may say that “we can call ourselves Ns but you whites can’t” ... [and] I can’t argue with this, of course, but we have all our contributors and, of course, our readers, current and future, to think about here, too.

This (from Rap lyrics) is what is giving me so much trouble.

... and roar wildly,

FUCK THEM OTHER NIGGAS, CAUSE I’M DOWN FOR MY NIGGAS

FUCK THEM OTHER NIGGAS, CAUSE I RIDE FOR MY NIGGAS

I DIE FOR MY NIGGAS, MAN, FUCK THEM OTHER NIGGAS

(C-Murder et al., 2016)

I don’t know, Aria. What do you think we should do?

Aria’s reply was immediate and thorough.

I understand your concern and hesitancy here. I'm glad you came to me.

I think as a Black woman, the guest editor can write it and should not be censored in any way (whether quoting or in analysis). The journal editors might want to create an endnote reflecting their support of the author and Black self-determination to use words and phrases that reflect their lived experiences and quote directly from cultural texts that use so-called controversial words. To do the work of Black people, and support it, means allowing Black people to articulate their experience and work however they want, even in 'respectable' settings. I think a note on your part, reflecting this conversation and your full-fledged support of the guest editor will go a long way in this situation and in the future of the journal, especially in its desire to continue to be a place where Black scholars and topics related to race and girlhood are welcome.

I also want to note that in trying to mitigate your own discomfort with the word (and the possible backlash by publishing the word), you are potentially stifling a Black scholar, which is the opposite of what you are trying to accomplish. The discomfort is normal, but we should (especially in the feminist sense) embrace the discomfort.

So, instead of an endnote we offer this by way of a kind of full disclosure of how we, as white women, learned a valuable lesson and we thank Aria Halliday for her frankness and guidance.

We thank Esther Ohito for guest editing this issue on Black Girls in Space and her graduate student, Lucía Mock Muñoz de Luna, for her invaluable help in doing so. Thanks to Esther, too, for her generosity in giving her remaining word allowance to us for this editorial.

Our sincere thanks go to the anonymous reviewers without whose work there would be no issue to publish.

This issue opens with Renee Nishawn Scott's article, "Taking on the Light: Ontological Black Girlhood in the 21st Century" in which she describes the "lighthearted, encouraging, and self-preserving" process that she calls light making, in which Black girls engage. She links this to a deconstruction of what is, for her, "Black Girl Magic" and discusses "contemporary examples of light making as a way of understanding the critical role that Black girls play in Black cultural formation."

Then, Stephanie Renee Toliver, in "Dreamland": Black Girls Saying and Creating Space through Fantasy Worlds" notes that the "rampant murder of Black women and girls in the United States proves that this place is not safe for them." In wondering whether any space at all is safe for them, she examines two "fantasy short stories written by Black middle school girls ... to explore how they resisted spatial control by creating new worlds they had the power to construct and dismantle."

Moving into the sphere of education, Dehanza Rogers offers “a parallel reading of the consumption of Black girlhood in speculative fiction in the television series *The Passage*, and the film *The Girl with All the Gifts*, and in the classroom.” Given that “the classroom consumes Black girls physically along with their futures,” she argues that we need to understand how, in creating “narratives for themselves” they resist this consumption and create “new liberatory geographies.”

Then, in “Renewed Possibilities: Showcasing the Lived Realities of Black Girls using Ethnopoetics,” Dywanna Smith explores how “ethnopoetics can be a profound research methodology” and ... a pathway to self-actualization.” She shows how “the verse novel [can] communicate Black girls’ and women’s feelings and experiences” to allow them to express grief and to “praise, love, and grow” in ways that stand “in marked contrast to dominant narratives of Black girlhood.”

Katie Scott Newhouse, in “Cultivating Educational Spaces that Support Black Girl’s Spatial Inquiries,” uses “disability studies in education and critical race theory with critical spatial theory” to show how (in the study on which her dissertation is based) a particular participant who “self-identifies as a Black girl, described her lived experiences while attending the Voices alternative-to-detention program” co-created a space “with adult facilitators to center her lived experiences” in this program.

This is followed by “Spatializing Black Girlhood: Rap Music and Strategies of Refusal,” in which Asilia Franklin-Phipps takes “seriously the cultural contributions that Black women and girls make to hip-hop” in relation to the “sociocultural and political landscape” and, in noting the “cultural force of the current moment in hip-hop that is increasingly dominated by young Black women,” focuses on how “Black women rappers model and perform multiple embodied refusals that expand the possibilities for Black girls.”

This section ends with Apryl Berney’s “Collective Identities, Black Girlhood and 60s Vocal Groups” in which, “[d]rawing on interviews with Black women who sang in all-female vocal groups during the late 1950s and early 1960s,” she shows how, in their taking up “audible space in institutions of higher learning whenever they harmonized with friends or acquaintances” the “collective identities Black girls created in their vocal groups allowed them to challenge racial and gender stereotypes.”

The issue wraps up with the creative piece “Dear Mama: A Luo’s Letter Addressing Gossips, Girl Fights, and Gashes” by Esther Ohito, in which she moves from describing a daughter’s need of her mother to an examination of ways in which “[s]istering is complicated.” In this moving tribute she

says, "So, I am writing to thank you because even as I get older, Mother, you remain my best teacher" and ends it with the recognition that "[f]or always, we are together, in every place, forever and ever. Amen."

In closing, we return to bell hooks and offer this collection of articles in homage to her.

Reference

hooks, bell. 1994. "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life," In *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, ed. Deborah Willis, 43–53. New York: The New York Press.

Notes

1. Personal communication from Jaswant Gudzer, 30 January 2022.
2. See <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/162231-no-black-woman-writer-in-this-culture-can-write-too>