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Breaking Binaries: #BlackGirlMagic and the Black Ratchet Imagination

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Abstract: CaShawn Thompson’s hashtag, #BlackGirlMagic, has transformed into a movement over the past five years. The hashtag focuses on celebrating the beauty, influence, and strength of Black women and girls. However, Thompson’s term sits in a space of tension, where contradictory interpretations create boundaries around what Black girl celebration means as well as who gets to celebrate Black girl magic, specifically when it comes to girls without a celebrity status and girls who are considered hood or ratchet. In this paper, the author contends that the tension between respectability and ratchetness must be further explored, as it is an essential component in discussions of Black girl identities. To do this, the Afrofuturist young adult literature of Nnedi Okorafor is analyzed using a conceptual framework that highlights the Black Ratchet Imagination and its aversion to respectability politics and the ways in which Afrofuturism challenges notions of respectability in terms of traditional Black literary cultural production. Findings suggest that, although each character, like real Black girls, exhibits traits of respectability, they also depict traits of ratchetness. Thus, the author calls for all literacy stakeholders to dissolve preconceived binaries and conceptualize ratchetness as another celebratory space of agency and Black Girl Magic.

Keywords: #BlackGirlMagic, Black Ratchet Imagination, Afrofuturism, Critical Content Analysis, Black Girls



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Introduction¹

I wrote. Spent lots of time near the water. Heard Oshun's laughter twinkling like bells, urging me to recapture the feminine and discover the fierceness of a black girl's magic.

- Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come to Roost*

In 2013, CaShawn Thompson told the world that Black girls are magic. Six years later, her phrase has transformed into a movement, defined by its focus on celebrating the beauty, influence, and strength of Black women and girls. Affirmed by major figures like Michelle Obama and Misty Copeland, Thompson's hashtag, #BlackGirlMagic, has gained prominence on major platforms, such as BET and *Essence* magazine. However, even though Thompson created the hashtag to promote the positive aspects of Black girlhood, critics have contested the use of the term, stating that the phrase further dehumanizes Black girls, as it insinuates a lack of humanity and a focus on superhuman resiliency (Chavers, 2016). Others have stated that the phrase further aggrandizes the achievements of specific Black girls, while marginalizing the existence of Black girls who do not fit into narrowed categories of respectability and success (Epperson, 2018). Ultimately, Thompson's term sits in a space of tension, where contradictory interpretations create boundaries around what Black girl celebration means as well as who gets to celebrate Black girl magic.

In response to the concerns of people who had negative perceptions about who could and could not be included under the #BlackGirlMagic umbrella, Thompson stated the following:

the Black Girl Magic movement was created by a woman who didn't finish college, and had babies young, and grinded in menial jobs for years. This movement is for every black woman—the ratchet girls, the hood girls, the trans girls, the differently-abled girls. Black Girl Magic is for all of us. (Flake, 2017, par. 8)

Essentially, Thompson ensured that the term was created to celebrate *all* Black girls, not just those who meet a certain, narrowed criteria of excellence. Her response also outlined that the celebration of Black girl resilience does not require a superhuman feat; instead, it focuses on Black girls who exist and thrive in a world that is constructed for them to fail. More importantly, Thompson's explicit mention of ratchet, hood, trans, and disabled girls suggests her dedication to everyday girls who do not fit the mold of respectability that critics mentioned in their responses to the phrase. In fact, her use of the word "ratchet" is necessary to focalize in the larger discourse around Black girl magic and celebration.

Ratchet is a messy, fluid word that has contradictory connotations. George (2015) defined ratchet as a reproachful term used to position Black women's behavior as lewd, unsophisticated, or ignorant. Additionally, Michaela Angela Davis, image activist and founder of the "Bury the Ratchet" campaign, described ratchet as a multifaceted word that demeans Black women by characterizing them as backstabbing, aggressive, mean, and vicious (Davis, 2014). However, some scholars have characterized ratchetness as a space for the disruption of and freedom from forced respectability (Cooper, 2012; Pickens, 2015); a cultural technique used to move through oppression by celebrating creativity and individual expression (McEachern, 2017); and a place

¹ I acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that I can use when referring to individuals in my writing. Throughout this article I use

pronouns to refer to individuals that correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

for undoing restrictive narratives that exist to confine Black female subjectivities (Stallings, 2013). Ultimately, there is no explicit or stable definition of the term; it is ever-changing based on one's desire to sustain or destabilize the politics of respectability, the idea that Black people can respond to structural oppression by individually behaving in a "respectable" way in order to gain favor from White people (Obasogie & Newman, 2016).

This tension between respectability and ratchetness must be further explored, as it is an essential component in discussions of Black girl identities. It is a hegemonic force that arbitrarily constrains who is considered good (respectable) and who is bad (ratchet); who deserves success (respectable) and who is destined to fail (ratchet); who merits celebration and veneration (respectable) and who does not (ratchet). It places Black girls' identities in a binary space, limiting their access to a continuum of possible identity positions. Therefore, to challenge the notion of ratchetness as a negative identity trait, researchers must "interrogate binaries and the policing of Black bodies through a more complex reading of the word *ratchet*" (Love, 2017, p. 539).

Thus, the purpose of this article is to add to the discussion of ratchetness as an essential facet of #BlackGirlMagic. To do this, I highlight the Afrofuturist² young adult literature of Nnedi Okorafor, an international award-winning author of African-based speculative fiction. I centralize her work because Black female writers use Afrofuturist literary spaces to explore their identities, subvert societally-enforced ideas about what it means to be Black and female, and create room for Black women and girls to define their own existence in numerous and nuanced ways (Womack, 2013). In this way,

Black women's Afrofuturist stories can assist in creating a progressive and expansive depiction of Black girl existence (Nama, 2009), one that subsists beyond dominant notions of respectability. To focus this inquiry, I highlight the following research questions: (1) In what ways might Afrofuturist novels challenge the ratchet vs. respectability binary? (2) In what ways might Afrofuturist novels expand notions of Black Girl Magic to better include ratchetness?

I begin this analysis by providing a conceptual framework that aligns ratchetness with imagination and Afrofuturism. In doing so, I briefly review the research surrounding the Black Ratchet Imagination (Stallings, 2013) and its aversion to respectability politics. I also highlight the ways in which Afrofuturism challenges notions of respectability in terms of traditional Black literary cultural production. Next, I combine these ideas by applying McEachern's (2017) elements of ratchetness to three of Okorafor's young adult novels, discussing the ways in which each character is aware of oppression, attempts to subvert injustice, and holds dominant groups accountable in dismantling oppression. I conclude by revisiting the idea of ratchetness, calling for all literacy stakeholders to conceptualize it as a celebratory space of agency and Black Girl Magic.

The Black Ratchet Imagination

The politics of respectability, coined by Evelyn Higginbotham (1993), is a specific form of resistance. Some Black women attempted to embed "middle-class values and behavioral patterns among the masses of urban blacks who retained rural folkways of speech, dress, worship, and other distinct cultural patterns" (White, 2001, p. 196). Additionally, to combat the stereotypes that categorized Black

² Okorafor has recently rejected Afrofuturism, choosing to define herself as an Africanfuturist (Okorafor, 2018). Still, her work is often classified under Afrofuturism in

English scholarship (see Faucheux & Lavender, 2018; Jue, 2017; Marotta, 2018). More research on Africanfuturism is needed.

women as angry, hypersexual, welfare queens, etc. (Collins, 2002), some Black women believed it necessary to implement dominant values, ones that would allow them to avoid negativity from White people. In this way, respectability ideology implicitly restricted the individuality of Black people, as they had to police their identities to uplift the collective of Black people (Pickens, 2015). More importantly, the politics of respectability assumed that *certain* Black people needed to lose their identities in order to elevate the race in the eyes of dominant society. Ultimately, respectability politics placed parameters around Blackness, confining Black activities to a finite list of appropriate behaviors. Those who chose to live beyond those parameters were often relegated to the margins.

The castigation of Black individuals who chose not to conform to the politics of respectability created myriad tensions with Black communities, and the conflicts are clearly present in hip-hop scholarship. As Love (2017) described, “due to the hypersexual and misogynistic visual, sonic, and narrative landscape of popular music, particularly of hip hop, Black women are deemed loud, hostile, reckless, and therefore, ratchet” (p. 540). These tensions surrounding the idea of ratchetness in the field of hip-hop scholarship undergirded the creation of the Black Ratchet Imagination (BRI). Coined by Stallings (2013), the BRI is a liberatory, imaginative, reconstructive, and authentic space that “is the performance of the failure to be respectable, uplifting, and a credit to the race” (p. 136). Aligning with the notion of a Black radical imagination (Kelley, 2002), Stallings insisted that the BRI focalizes how Black people can imagine new worlds, reconstruct social and individual

relationships, and prioritize creativity over rationality.

Further, Stallings (2013) claimed that the BRI had the ability to unleash imaginative and activist spaces that can undo definitions of gender and racial identity prescribed by Western philosophy. That is, the BRI assumes that Black people who exist within the space of ratchetness redefine what it means to be and exist in a Black body, reconstructing racist notions that restrict Black people to dominant norms that confine speech, behavior, and social interaction (Pickens, 2015). It accepts expressions of Blackness that are unregulated by a White gaze, unfettered by the policing of behavior by Black community members, and unbothered by the artificial need to maintain a “respectable” version of identity to ensure dominant comfortability.

“Ultimately, respectability politics placed parameters around Blackness, confining Black activities to a finite list of appropriate behaviors.”

Both Love (2017) and McEachern (2017) extended Stallings’ conception of the BRI by presenting methods useful to conducting scholarship within the frame.

Love (2017) built upon Stallings’ definition to create a methodological perspective that implores scholars to conduct humanizing research that welcomes and contends with the various ways that Black queer youth maintain their agency and produce knowledge in hip hop spaces. To achieve this goal, Love discussed the need for scholars to conduct research studies that are “intersectional, seek to understand youth’s agency to reclaim space, refuse binary identities, subvert language, create economic opportunities with new economies, and recognize the precariousness of queer youth of color” (p. 541). In other words, researchers who use the BRI must be willing to create and imagine innovative ways to foreground and affirm a continuum of identity possibilities for Black queer youth. Thus, the BRI

requires the entire research process to center Black youth's racial and sexual identities and ways of producing knowledge, subverting norms, and practicing self-care.

McEachern (2017) extended beyond hip hop scholarship to focus on the general existence of Black non-men. She argued that ratchetness is a form of liberatory consciousness that empowers Black girls "to maneuver through oppression without collapsing into dejectedness by allowing for creativity in the ways [they] express [themselves], use social media, promote body positivity, and dismantle the gender binary" (p. 79). McEachern presented four elements of liberatory consciousness that align with ratchetness: awareness, analysis, action, and accountability/ allyship. Awareness is the ability to give up the safety of ignorance and notice areas of oppression. Analysis refers to one's ability to summarize what is happening in the world, decide what needs to be done to fix the problems, and discuss the problems and solutions with numerous stakeholders. Action moves beyond seeing, analyzing, and deliberating to a space of operation that subverts oppression in varied ways that are unsanctioned by dominant groups. Accountability and allyship remove the onus of liberation from marginalized groups and hold dominant groups accountable for dismantling oppression. Essentially, McEachern's elements enable researchers to focalize the ways in which ratchetness can assist in the liberation of minoritized groups, specifically Black women and girls.

Connecting the BRI to Afrofuturism

As a space for activism, imagination, and liberation, the BRI aligns well with the main goals of Afrofuturism. Like the BRI, Afrofuturism can represent an oppositional stance, one that counters hegemonic depictions of Black identities that are

confined by the politics of respectability. Mark Dery (1994) coined the term *Afrofuturism* and defined it as speculative fiction that uses technology and enhanced future contexts to address African American themes and concerns. In creating his argument for Afrofuturism, he asked, "can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?" (Dery, p. 180). That is, Dery situated Afrofuturism as an imaginative space and oppositional stance, one that created alternative and futuristic options for a people who have historically faced oppression.

A decade later, Alondra Nelson (2002) described Afrofuturism as a reflection of the Afro-Diasporic experience through innovative stories that center identity, technology, and the future. She contended that Afrofuturism consists of works that form new paths in the study of Afro-diasporic culture, pathways that are supported by history and modernity rather than attempting to completely sever the past and present from the future. Additionally, Eshun (2003) categorized Afrofuturism as a program "for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken" (p. 301). He argued that Afrofuturism was a space in which Black people can analyze, adapt, create, and revision the past, present, and future. In doing so, he envisioned Afrofuturism as a place in which Black people can create innovative tools with which to subvert hegemonic forces.

Womack (2013) furthered the dialogue by acknowledging that Afrofuturism inverts traditional conceptions that attempt to affiliate Blackness with dystopia, powerlessness, and fatalism. Additionally,

she challenged the idea that imaginative Black cultural production had to centralize Western conceptions of science and technology by arguing that Afrofuturism fuses elements of “science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs” (Womack, 2013, p. 9). Anderson (2016) supported Womack’s claim by recognizing that the focus on Western conceptions of technology marginalized alternative worldviews.

Ultimately, Afrofuturism combines science fiction, fantasy, magical realism, horror, history, and imagination to highlight unbound Black subjectivities in future or alternate worlds (English & Kim, 2013; Womack, 2013). It is a way that Black writers can combat socially-constructed realities that converge Black identities with calamity and contest stories where imaginative spaces align the persistence of Black lives with a disastrous future (Yaszek, 2006). It also forms a foundation to disrupt modern, racist ideology that exists to restrict Black imaginations, and it provides a space for Black people to envision the tools (Eshun, 2003; Hopkinson & Nelson, 2002) necessary to subvert oppressive paradigms and create the futures and worlds they wish to see.

Afrofuturism is anti-respectable as it is situated within the speculative and imaginative, an area in which Black people have been historically and systemically marginalized in art, literature, and film (Hopkinson & Nelson, 2002). Additionally, Afrofuturism is not focalized on Western European conceptions of knowledge, so it maintains an anti-respectability politic in the ways that it decentralizes Whiteness. Lastly, because futuristic representations often attempt to sever Blackness and history from the future, Afrofuturism provides a space to bolster the connection between historicity, modernity, and futurity (Eshun, 2003; Nelson, 2002). Essentially, Afrofuturism, like the BRI, is a space to reclaim

literal and figurative space, refuse strict spatial and temporal binaries, subvert language and genre restrictions, create economic opportunities with new economies, and recognize the precariousness of Black bodies in the past, present, and future. Therefore, Afrofuturistic literature provides a rich space to conceptualize a new way of viewing ratchetness, one influenced by the BRI and imbued with Black girls’ agency and magic.

Method

Dery’s (1994) initial argument excluded young adult literature, as he referenced adult literature writers such as Octavia Butler, Steven Barnes, and Samuel Delaney. However, the mainstream distribution of Afrofuturist novels such as *The Summer Prince* by Alaya Dawn Johnson, *A Blade So Black* by L.L. McKinney, and *Orleans* by Sherri Smith suggests a need to highlight young adult literature. Though there are numerous authors who write within the aesthetic, one author has “established herself as one of the most powerful and recognized Black voices in current science-fiction and fantasy”: Dr. Nnedi Okorafor (Black Girl Nerds, 2018, par. 1). Thus, to narrow the analysis of how Afrofuturist novels might challenge the ratchet vs. respectability binary and expand notions of Black Girl Magic, I centralize Okorafor’s work in this paper.

Okorafor is an international award-winning author of African-based speculative fiction. She has been called one of the most innovative and visionary writers of science fiction and fantasy whose stories, often set in West Africa, use the speculative to explore social justice issues, including racism, sexism, political violence, and environmental destruction (Alter, 2017). In a TED Talk, Okorafor (2017) noted that her version of Afrofuturism does not align with Western-rooted science fiction that privileges White, male perspectives. Additionally, she noted that her construction of Afrofuturism

centers African cultural production and ways of being instead of relying on a specific, African American context. Thus, Okorafor's mixing of speculative genres, numerous award-winning stories, and ability to subvert traditionally-focused, Western-thinking conceptions of narrative storytelling situates her work as a prime place to examine the connections between Afrofuturism and the BRI.

Although Okorafor has written graphic novels, short stories, novellas, and novels for children, young adults, and adults, I focus on her young adult novels for this analysis. These novels include *Zahrah the*

Windseeker, *The Shadow Speaker*, and *Akata Witch*. I selected this area of her writing because each text has a Black female pre/teen in an African setting. This demographic is essential because the BRI attempts to expand expressions of Blackness by ensuring that identities are unregulated by a White gaze, unfettered by the policing of behavior by Black community members, and unbothered by the

artificial need to maintain a "respectable" version of identity. By setting each text in Africa and including young African female characters, Western society is decentralized, discussions on respectability within Black communities can be highlighted, and respectability can be questioned based on race, gender, and age. In Table 1, I provide the title of each narrative and a description of the plot.

Data Analysis

The BRI is fledgling in the field of education, so it is essential to highlight how to use this conceptual

frame in the field of literacy research. To approach the analysis of Okorafor's Afrofuturist work, I relied on a critical content analysis (Short & Worlds of Words Community, 2017) heavily undergirded and influenced by the BRI (Love, 2017; McEachern, 2017), meaning that my analytic procedure moves away from an explicit inductive approach in favor of a more reflexive, iterative analysis that required a top-down and bottom-up approach (Bradford, 2017). As Srivastava and Hopwood (2009) contended, themes and patterns "do not emerge on their own;" instead, they are created by "what the inquirer wants to know and how the inquirer interprets what the data are telling her or him according to subscribed

theoretical frameworks, subjective perspectives, ontological and epistemological positions, and intuitive field understandings" (p. 77). In other words, I acknowledge that the BRI heavily influenced how I interpreted information within the texts.

For this study, I read each text once and noticed a possible connection to the BRI. Upon that realization, I reread each

text, explicitly coding sections that aligned with elements within the BRI. Informed by Boyatzis' (1998) characteristics of quality code creation, I generated a label, definition, and description for each theme. Each label was derived from McEachern's (2017) work, but I expanded on the label by adding a definition and description that focused on how the labels were shown in the novels. Listing the tenets was essential, as Short and the Worlds of Words Community (2017) noted that synthesizing theory into a small set of tenets sharpens critical content analyses. The themes I highlighted are represented in Table 2.

"By setting each text in Africa and including young African female characters, Western society is decentralized, discussions on respectability within Black communities can be highlighted, and respectability can be questioned based on race, gender, and age."

Table 1

Novel Summaries

Title	Description
<i>Zahrah the Windseeker</i>	Zahra Tsami is a shy, quiet 13-year-old girl who lives in the small town of Kirki in the Ooni Kingdom on the planet of Ginen. Zahrah was born with dadalocks – dreadlocks intertwined with living vines. Her hair is the cause of much derision in Kirki because people fear dada people. They believe that people with dadalocks are born with strange powers and that they have rebellious souls. Soon, Zahrah discovers that people dadalocks can fly, and her best friend, Dari, encourages her to test her powers by practicing in the Forbidden Forest, out of the ever-watchful eyes of Ginen’s adult residents. However, one day while they play in the forest, Dari is bitten by a deadly creature, and the antidote is considered impossible to obtain because it is protected by a monstrous, deadly beast in the heart of the Forbidden Forest. To save her friend, Zahrah must shed her timidity and enter the forest alone. In the wilderness, Zahrah faces her fears and learns to trust in herself.
<i>The Shadow Speaker</i>	Set in the near future of 2070, this story takes place after Peace Bombs were released upon the Earth, causing some children to be born with metahuman gifts. Fourteen-year-old Ejii Ugabe, a Muslim girl living in the Nigerian village of Kwàmfa, is one of those children. Eji is known as a Shadow Speaker, one who can talk to and become one with the shadows. Because of her ability, some people fear her, while others embrace her talents. Her shadow-speaking gift and her inner strength attracts the attention of the warrior queen, Jaa, a fierce, ill-tempered woman who has earned the respect of the people of Kwamfa. Ejii decides to join Jaa on a quest to save Earth from an intergalactic war. Along this journey through dangerous terrain, Ejii must prove to Jaa and herself that she has what it takes to lead. If not, the people of Earth may cease to exist.
<i>Akata Witch</i>	Sunny Nwazue is a 12-year-old albino girl who was born in America to two Nigerian parents, but when she was 9, she and her family moved back to Nigeria. This migration makes Sunny a product of two worlds: she is Nigerian and American; she has African features, but she has white skin. Her duality makes her the target of insults, like <i>akata</i> , a term that means “bush animal” and is used as a pejorative for foreign-born Black people. Sunny feels as though she does not fit into any social group, but one day she discovers her latent magic ability. This ability allows her entry into a society of Leopard people, magical individuals who exist alongside non-magic beings. As a member of this group, she is granted the camaraderie and visibility that she desired. Yet, her newfound abilities also open the door to a dangerous new world, one in which she and her friends must use magic, wit, and friendship to defeat a serial killer and save the world.

I conducted line-by-line examinations of the narratives in relation to the BRI elements, which allowed me to identify the units of analysis that would most align with my purpose. As I was looking at how the protagonists engaged in respectability politics, were aware of oppression, analyzed and acted against injustice, and held dominant groups accountable, my analytic units consisted of sentences and paragraphs that were illustrative of respectability politics (e.g., discussing proper dress, speech, or actions), tensions between dominant and minoritized groups (e.g., conflicts between adults and youth), and activism against oppressive forces and situations (e.g., speaking out or fighting against oppressors). Focusing on the BRI elements throughout my second reading of the full text and multiple readings of specific text sections bolstered the recursive, analytic process because it ensured that “the major themes and categories [took] shape

with strong evidence from the text to support [my] themes” (Short and Worlds of Words Community, 2017, p. 13). In other words, although I initially read the text without a frame to guide my reading, subsequent readings were infused with information from my conceptual framework.

Findings

In the following sections, I highlight the ways in which each protagonist has certain traits that align with respectability politics. Then, to provide nuance, I focus on how Okorafor’s Black female protagonists embody ratchetness as a Black femme liberatory consciousness (McEachern, 2017), aligning the Afrofuturist narratives with components of the BRI. To assist with the flow of the Findings section, subheadings using quotes from the novels will separate the discussion of each novel. Additionally,

Table 2

BRI Thematic Groups

Label	Definition	Description
Awareness of Injustice or Oppression	Character acknowledges, through thought or inner speech, that something is unjust (adultism, racism, heterosexism, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Character must think that something is unjust • Must be internal • Must be explicit by calling out injustice, no inferences
Acting Against Oppression	Character actively speaks out or acts against oppressions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Character must respond to someone or act subversively against someone or something • Must be external • Response must be directed at something or someone
Holding Dominant People and Groups Accountable	Character overtly questions authority figures, dominant people, dominant groups about their role in oppression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Character must overtly question an authority figure or oppressive character or group • Must be external in response to another character’s/group’s actions or speech

the names of the protagonists will initially be presented beside the name of the novel. Subsequent references to protagonists will be presented in name only.

Representations of Respectability Politics

Higginbotham (1993) noted that respectability politics policed Black people into reforming their behavior and attitudes—including their “sexual conduct, cleanliness, temperance, hard work, and politeness” (p. 196)—in an effort to improve U.S. race relations. In other words, in order to protect Black people from racism and violence, many Black folks restricted their actions, speech, dress, and other individual behaviors and attitudes. However, Pickens (2015) argued that the ideology of respectability implicitly uplifts “the idea that it is not possible to remain individualized as a black person: one’s individual will and desires must be subordinated to the political and social uplift of the collective” (p. 42). It is a forced policing of individuality in an effort to ensure acceptance into the larger community and/or gain some semblance of equality in the dominant social sphere.

“Make sure we look good.” In *Zahrah the Windseeker*, the protagonist, Zahrah, depicts a form of respectability through her appearance, specifically maintaining the status quo through her choice of clothing. At the beginning of the story, she discusses the need for the citizens of the Ooni Kingdom to look “civilized” to show that they are polite, well-mannered, and socially acceptable. For instance, Zarah states that “there’s no way the typical northerner would go outside without wearing his or her most civilized clothes and looking clean and nice. Not even for a second. We all carry mirrors in our pockets, and we take them out every so often to inspect our reflection and make sure we look good” (p. ix). Here, Zarah describes the weight of outward appearance within her society. No “typical” person

in the community would leave their homes without consistently looking clean and nice, not even to complete a quick errand. Additionally, to ensure that they are consistently upholding the civilized ideal, they carry mirrors in their pockets and sew them into their clothes, consistently checking their appearance to ensure that they cannot be ostracized for any unkempt aspect of their daily look.

Because of the societal requirement to maintain a “civilized” appearance, Zahrah attempts to maintain a socially acceptable aesthetic, but her dadalocks make that difficult for her. Dada people are born with matted or locked hair (Johnson, 2018); they do not make a stylistic choice to produce dreadlocks. This condition ails Zahrah because although she can shave her hair off, she cannot “un-lock” her natural hair. Her annoyance is shown in a passage where she is heading to the market. In the scene, Zahrah looks in her mirror and admires the fact that her dress is spotless and unwrinkled; however, she avoids looking at her dadalocks, for they are “only a blemish to [her] appearance” (p. 17). In other words, her style of clothing aligns with the civilized ideal, but her hair does not. Because the natural growth of her hair does not and cannot fit within the civilized ideal, she shuns it and considers it to be a stain on her otherwise respectable appearance. Her individuality is a blemish.

“Did he ask any of you rich people how old you were?” Ejii, the protagonist in *The Shadow Speaker*, also attempts to hide aspects of herself, but she has vastly different reasons than does Zahrah. Particularly, as Ejii and her friend, Dikeogu, journey throughout the desert to find Jaa, they arrive in the city of Agadez, a bustling metropolis that is vastly different from Ejii’s hometown of Kwamfa. The pair plan to find Jaa by searching the two best hotels in the city, but they are sorely out of place because of their age and their appearance. Explicitly, Dikeogu was sold into slavery because his parents believed

his powers to be a disgrace to the family name. Although he escaped enslavement, his status as a slave is visually evident by “markings on the bridge of his nose” (p. 109). Additionally, both Ejii and Dikeogu, after traveling through the desert for a long time, have tattered clothing from the journey. Both characters appear too poor to gain entry into either hotel, but they look the most out of place at The Yellow Lady hotel, a tall building where “there were motorbikes heavy with polished chrome, and even jewels and sleek cars that looked more like tiny airplanes pulling up to the front, dropping off expensive-looking people” (p. 171). In order to avoid ostracization, Ejii decides to mirror dominant norms.

Ejii knows that class hierarchy is prevalent, and she knows that most people look down on those who have been enslaved. Thus, to enter The Yellow Lady, she devises a plan in which she would pretend to be a high-born lady, and Dikeogu would pretend to be her slave. When they approach the reception desk, Dikeogu attempts to gain the receptionists’ attention; however, not falling for the hoax, the receptionist dismisses them, stating that they are children who cannot afford a room. In response, Ejii exclaims, “If I can *afford* my slave here, then I can afford this stupid place” (p. 174). Of course, Ejii does not have enough money for a room, but her mother had taught her that “if you act like you know what you’re talking about, people will treat you that way” (p. 174). That is, altering her speech and behavior could change how people treat her.

The receptionist further questions the pair about their age, but Ejii grows tired of the inquisition. She then turns from the receptionist to some of the hotel guests and asks, “Did he ask any of you rich people how old you were when you checked in?” (p. 174). In this scene, Ejii shows that she understands that certain styles of speech and behavior are more respectable in upper-class settings. She also exhibits

an awareness that age affects perceptions of power. So, to maintain an air of respectability, Ejii has to adopt the dominant norms of the hotel, including having a slave in her command, categorizing her slave as an object rather than a human being, loudly admonishing workers that irritate her, and consistently referencing her wealth.

“All one needed to succeed in life was an education.” Even though the politics of respectability affect both Zahrah and Ejii’s appearance and actions, Sunny, from *Akata Witch*, shows the politics of respectability through her views on education, family, and upward mobility. Particularly, Sunny believes that educational attainment can ensure happiness and success, so she strives to obtain great grades in school. She also believes that she will do well in the future because she comes from a two-parent home; her family is well-respected; and she is a part of the middle-class. For Sunny, the combination of these elements should result in great achievements. However, a new friend, Chichi, upends everything she believes, for Chichi is poor, lives in a single-parent home, does not attend school, and has more knowledge than Sunny.

The abundance of knowledge that Chichi has even though she does not attend school confounds Sunny. This vexation is shown in a scene in which Sunny visits Chichi’s house and both Chichi and her mother have a conversation about books and reading. Chichi tells Sunny that she reads and travels instead of attending school, but Sunny does not understand this way of living:

something else was nagging at her. Her father believed that all one needed to succeed in life was an education. He had gone to school for many years to become a barrister, and then gone on to be the most successful child in his family. Sunny’s

mother was an MD, and often talked about how excelling in school had opened opportunities to her that girls only two decades before didn't normally get. So Sunny believed in education, too. But here was Chichi's mother, surrounded by the hundreds of books she'd read, living in a decrepit old mud hut with her daughter. (p. 28)

This excerpt shows the tension Sunny feels when she sees Chichi and her mother engaging in a conversation about what they learned from reading together at home. Sunny had been raised by the politics of respectability that state that attending school, being socioeconomically stable, and presenting oneself respectably will uplift the individual and the community, but Chichi confounds everything Sunny knows. Chichi does not embrace the politics of respectability, and thus, Sunny becomes aware that her dedication to a specific type of learning from a specific learning institution is not the only path to social upliftment.

Awareness of Injustice/Oppression

The BRI provides a way for Black girls to intentionally combat and critique racist, sexist, misogynistic, and colonialist ideologies (Love, 2017; McEachern, 2017). However, in order to deliberately combat oppression, Black girls must first be aware of injustices. Thus, one aspect of the BRI is to showcase Black girls who notice what is happening in the world and who give up the comfortability that comes with ignoring social issues (McEachern, 2017). Each of Okorafor's texts presents this facet of the BRI, as the main characters struggle with new knowledge or show contempt for certain oppressive

forces or actions in their societies. The oppressions they acknowledge are vast, including the awareness of classism, colorism, and ageism. However, the awareness of sexism in a patriarchal society is present across every text.

“Only boys and men were supposed to be rebellious.” Zahrah is acutely aware of the rules that confine the behaviors of women and girls. This recognition is shown in the introductory section, where Zahrah recounts how people with dadalocks are treated in her society. Ginen residents have access to vast amounts of information due to their technologically advanced society, yet many of the residents hold on to unfounded superstitions. Namely, Zahra states that dada people are considered outsiders, not only because their hair grows with vines in it, but also because the residents

“However, in order to deliberately combat oppression, Black girls must first be aware of injustices.”

of Ginen believe that dada people have strange powers and are doomed to develop personality traits as rebellious as their hair.

As Zahrah explains society's response to her hair, she also notes the gendered confinements of being dada. She says, “And what made things even worse was that I was a girl, and only boys and men were supposed to be rebellious. Girls were supposed to be soft, quiet, and pleasant” (p. viii). In this excerpt, Zahrah shows that she is aware of sexist notions that limit the range of identity characteristics for women and girls. She is aware that her society is more accepting of girls who avoid rebellion and defiance. Instead, society would rather have women and girls who are silent, agreeable, and undemanding. That is, her society would prefer women to be obedient. Therefore, even though being dada automatically creates a means to exclude a person from ideological conceptions of normalcy, Zahrah's gender identity creates a way for others to further reject her existence, and she is

greatly aware of the fact that her gender creates an additional hurdle for her as a resident of Ginen.

“It’s not right for me to lead.” The objectification of women and prominence of gender roles is also prevalent when Ejii shows her awareness of the constructed differences between men and women. In the story, Ejii comments on the differences between her father’s regime and the rule of Jaa. She writes, “When Kwamfa was Jaa’s town, everyone learned how to shoot a gun, ride a camel, take apart and rebuild a computer. Girls and women with meta-abilities were allowed to hone their skills and learn from elders” (p. 13). However, her father stopped all of this masculine conduct, as he told the masses that women were too beautiful to get their hands dirty.

Ejii acknowledges the influence of patriarchy on constructed gender roles. She recognizes that the matriarchal leader wanted women to have freedom over their bodies and their actions. She specifically mentions that every person, including women, could learn various survival skills, and she indicates that every person could improve their superhuman skills through apprenticeship. With her father, on the other hand, women were confined to specific duties, characteristics, and styles of dress. They were unable to learn necessary skills for survival in an ever-changing world. Ejii’s comparison of Jaa and her father’s ruling style and her direct statements about the oppressive regime of her father denote her awareness of oppressive patriarchal systems.

Even though her father is assassinated and Jaa reclaims her position as leader of Kwamfa, the doctrine prescribed and enforced by Ejii’s father still influences her thinking throughout the story. This indebtedness is shown in a dialogue between Ejii and Dikeogu as they plan the course of their journey. In the conversation, Ejii asks Dikeogu if they should camp for the night, and his response is

indecisive because he does not know where they are going. Instead of accepting that she has knowledge and can lead them to their destination, she tells him that she should not be making all of the decisions. However, her thoughts provide more nuance to her outward response. Internally, she ponders the following:

She didn’t know many boys who like to be led. It’s not right for me to lead, she caught herself thinking. She frowned. The ideas of her father, again. What of Jaa? She leads everyone, she thought. And Dikeogu doesn’t seem to mind me making the decisions. And I *do* know the way. (p. 111)

Essentially, Ejii is influenced by her father’s dogma even after he is no longer in power. Yet, instead of allowing his ideology to prevent her from taking the lead, she reminds herself that she has knowledge, that she has seen a successful female leader, and that some men do not prescribe to the ideology of her father. Her frown indicates that she is aware of the sexist regime of her father that deemed women incapable of leading, and her realization that she does know the way suggests that she is aware that her father’s way of thinking is wrong.

“I wasn’t the son he wanted.” Sunny and Ejii’s fathers share a contempt for the freedom of women and girls, even though Sunny’s father did not have the power to enforce his rules upon larger society. This is shown in a flashback about an interaction that Sunny had with her father. She recalls that she would play with her father by sneaking up on him in order to scare him. Instead of seeing this as a form of play, however, he would call Sunny a stupid girl. Sunny states:

he wanted to hurt me because he knew that I knew he was scared. Sometimes I hated my father. Sometimes I felt he hated me, too. I couldn’t help that I wasn’t the son he wanted

or the pretty daughter he'd have accepted instead. (p. 5)

In this excerpt, Sunny exhibits an awareness of the ways in which men perceive women, including their daughters. Her father is upset, not because she scares him, but because she knows that he was scared. She saw him exhibit an emotion that is unbecoming of his role as the authoritative figure of the house. Moreover, she acknowledges the contempt her father has for her, specifically citing that he would have rather had another son instead of a daughter. Her awareness of the dynamics between fathers and daughters shows a cognizance for how sexist systems operate within familial relationships.

Sunny also faces sexism outside the home, as she is conscious of which sports girls are allowed to play. As an albino child, Sunny is unable to play in the sun, so she cannot play soccer after school with the boys even though she loves the game. Instead, she has to play at night with her brothers, and she is only allowed to play with them when they allow her to do so. Even though she does not get to play often, she learns to become an indomitable force in the game of soccer. However, she knows that no matter how good she is, the boys would never let her play. She says, "they wouldn't have let me anyway, me being a girl. Very narrow-minded" (p. 3). Once again, Sunny sees how girls are relegated to a minoritized position in society. She could play better than most of her male classmates, but she would never be given a chance because she was a girl. Her classification of this form of thinking as narrow-minded suggests that she is aware of confined gender roles and that she is against such narrowed ways of thinking.

Acting Against Oppression

Although the BRI creates a space to represent Black girls who acknowledge oppression without fear, it also highlights Black girls who can analyze injustice and take actionable steps toward dismantling it (McEachern, 2017). Instead of defining a specific way of subverting oppression, however, the BRI allows for creativity in how Black girls respond and act. Specifically, because Black girls have the authority to choose how to rectify an oppressive situation within the BRI, their actions are unsanctioned by dominant forces. Their ways of responding to oppression are valid, no matter what people in dominant positions think. This element of the BRI is shown in Okorafor's narratives, as each character responds physically and emotionally to various oppressions.

"The less I talked about it, the less of a role she played." Because Zahrah has dada hair, she is constantly the target of bullying, especially by the popular girls. Ciwanke, the most popular girl in school, tells her that she is pathetic and disgusting and that her hair is a monstrous entity, possibly rife with unknown microorganisms. Ciwanke does not do her bullying alone; she enlists the aid of other popular girls. Zahrah states that Ciwanke would "gather those friends at least twice a week, track [Zahrah] down in the hallway, and lead a chant" (p. 2) that commented on the vines that grew in her hair. Although she does not show her unhappiness outwardly, she internally states that names like vine head, swamp witch, and freak caused her emotional pain. She explains, "though I knew I shouldn't have cared, the words still hurt like pinches. And pinches can be very painful when done in the same place many times in a row" (p. 2).

In response to Ciwanke and her crew's bullying, Zahrah chooses to remain silent. She is a shy and quiet girl, and the thought of talking back to Ciwanke makes her nervous. She also notes that speaking to them would make them linger and taunt her more. She declares, "I didn't like talking about

Ciwanke and her harassment. The less I talked about it, the less of a role she played in my life, which was fine with me” (pp. 50-51). In this passage, instead of responding directly, Zahrah chooses to respond by remaining silent. That is, her response to oppression is inaction. She could have spoken to Ciwanke and asked them to stop, but she heeds her mother’s advice that “silence was the best way to answer a fool” (p. 50). This response is not one of weakness, for it takes strength to ignore Ciwanke’s consistent taunting, especially when the words cause her emotional pain. However, to preserve her peace, Zahrah refuses to engage with her oppressor.

“Releasing her rage into him felt wonderfully sweet.” Although Zahrah takes a more passive approach, Ejii does not take the same stance. Just like Zahrah, Ejii is taunted in school by a bully, but instead of this bully being a popular girl in school, Ejii’s bully is her older half-brother, Fadio, the first son of her patriarchal and sexist father. In a world where children can be meta-humans, Fadio is considered normal because he has no powers. He constantly provokes Ejii, claiming that she is not only abnormal, but also ugly. Ejii often refuses to acknowledge his insults; however, Fadio begins to talk about Ejii’s mother, and her passive resolve falters. Fadio shouts to Ejii, “Your mother is a whore!... She couldn’t even stay in her husband’s house. Maybe you look like that because she hit the ground too hard when he threw her out” (p. 28). This passage shows Fadio’s words to be more than a comment about Ejii’s outward appearance. Instead, it is a direct affront to Ejii’s mother and the patriarchal dynamics of her mother and father’s relationship. Moreover, as Fadio was the first son who also grew up in the shadow of his father, Fadio

has absorbed the sexist ideal that he is superior to the first child because she happened to be a girl.

In response to this oppression, Ejii chooses to fight Fadio. She does not hesitate to think through her actions prior to the engagement, and she does not care that he identifies as male while she identifies as female. She jumps into action to subvert the notion that patriarchy, female objectification, and women’s abuse are acceptable practices. She begins the brawl to show Fadio that she will not tolerate sexism, especially when the target of the insult is her mother. She fights Fadio because she is angry. This resistance is shown in the following description of the fight:

“She jumps into action to subvert the notion that patriarchy, female objectification, and women’s abuse are acceptable practices.”

She plowed into his chest, wrapping her arms around his waist and they both fell to the ground. Releasing her rage into him felt wonderfully sweet. They were an even match.... It took several teachers, the school headmaster, and a bucket of cold water to finally break them apart. “I hate you!” Ejii screamed, her voice cracking. “I hate you!” But even as she screamed this, again she could feel it—satisfaction at the release of it, the violence of it. (pp. 28-29)

As Ejii fights Fadio, she releases her anger upon him, taking out her frustration on the person who embodies the oppressions that have made her life difficult. More than that, she claims that her rage is “wonderfully sweet” and that she is satisfied at the release of hatred and violence, suggesting that she is content in her choice. Of course, her actions are unsanctioned by adults, as they pry the young people away from each other, but the decision to choose violence instead of passivity was Ejii’s choice to make.

“Sunny was a hurricane of rage.” Similar to Ejii, Sunny decides to take a more active approach to dismantling domination. Whereas Ejii does not respond until Fadio insults her mother, Sunny chooses to act because she has had enough of her bully’s taunting. Jibaku is Sunny’s classmate, and she is “the richest, tallest, toughest, and most popular girl in school” (p. 12). Throughout the story, Jibaku threatens and mocks Sunny, calling her an ugly *akata*, threatening to fight her, and leading other children to fight her collectively. In the beginning, Sunny tries to ignore Jibaku’s remarks, but, eventually, Sunny can no longer take the ridicule. Moreover, now that Sunny has awakened her magic, she feels as though fear is no longer a necessity.

Like Ejii, Sunny decides to physically fight her oppressor to show that she will no longer endure derision. Unlike Ejii, however, Sunny has time to think about her actions before the fight commences. At first, Jibaku pushes Sunny, a common tactic that she uses throughout the story to taunt her. In response, Sunny tells her to leave her alone and pushes her back, but, before any fighting begins, there is a lull in the action. Jibaku’s boyfriend arrives at the school to pick her up and takes the girls’ attention off one another. Additionally, Sunny’s friend, Orlu, tries to pull her away from Jibaku before a fight can begin. However, Sunny tells Orlu that she is not afraid. At this point, the following scene occurs:

Suddenly, they were both on the ground, rolling in the dust, kicking and punching and scratching. Sunny was a hurricane of rage, only vaguely aware of Orlu and the boys exchanging angry words. A crowd gathered. She didn’t care. She rolled on top of Jibaku and slapped her face as hard as she could. (p. 177)

As Sunny is on top of Jibaku, she shows her spirit face in order to scare her into submission. The spirit face is a mystical countenance that all Leopard people have. However, showing one’s spirit face to “normal” humans is against magical law. Nevertheless, Sunny reveals her face to Jibaku and warns her to etch the face and the beating into her mind. As Jibaku runs away in fear, Sunny walks away triumphantly, defeating her oppressor without fear of consequences.

Sunny knew that her actions could result in great consequences before the fight began. She could incur the wrath of her father, which would most likely result in a beating. She could also suffer significant penalties in the magic community for revealing her spirit face. Yet, Sunny still chooses to engage in the altercation and diminish the authority of the oppressor by any means necessary. Like Ejii, Sunny places her rage into her fists as she fights the person who consistently tells her she is unwelcome in Nigeria because of the way she looks and because of where she was born. She lets Jibaku know that she is unafraid to fight in response to her insults. She shows Jibaku that she will no longer back down to her just because she is the toughest, tallest, and most popular girl in school. Ultimately, Sunny knows the possible consequences, but she chooses to subvert oppression in a way that is validated by her own beliefs, and this conscious rebellion is essential for the BRI.

Holding Dominant Groups Accountable

Even though the BRI centralizes the ways in which Black girls are aware of and combat oppressions, it also focuses on how they “speak directly to those in power about [their] own experiences and share [their] perspectives with other marginalized groups” (McEachern, 2017, p. 87). It provides representations of Black girls who advocate for themselves, hold people in dominant positions accountable for their

actions, and share their experiences with other minoritized groups. To achieve this end, the BRI showcases Black women and girls who not only subvert oppression by individually destabilizing oppressive structures, it also features depictions of Black girls who challenge oppressors to regulate themselves. Okorafor's protagonists depict this element of the BRI by telling dominant forces about the ways in which they oppress and then holding them responsible for becoming accomplices in the dismantling of oppression.

“They were living in ignorance, I had been living in ignorance.” In Zahrah's story, the people of Ginen are forewarned about the dangers of the forbidden jungle, a forest on the outskirts of town that everyone is told to avoid. The residents are prohibited from entering the jungle or even asking questions about what may exist within the wilderness. In fact, the one book that contains information about the jungle, *The Forbidden Greeny Jungle Field Guide*, is greatly censored, as the king believes the information within the text is harmful. This fear is shown in a letter to the book's readers, where the king remarks that because the book can impress the weak-minded, he will allow “only a small taste of this book's contents to appear... a smidgeon of information to satiate the hunger of those so inclined to ingest it” (p. 309). His only condition is for the entries to be hidden from children.

Yet, after she begins her quest through the jungle, Zahrah comes to an important conclusion about the forest and about the people of Ginen. She claims:

The people of Ooni all lived in a very small part of Ginen. They were very limited. They were living in ignorance, I had been living in ignorance.... The jungle had always loomed just behind my village, but I'd never thought much about what was in it. At least not that

deeply. Nor did I wonder about how far it went. I used to think the same way as almost every other person in the Ooni Kingdom; now I felt silly for it. (p. 147)

Zahrah sees how adultism and classism have led to the obliviousness of the people in Ginen, as adults and the monarchy have chosen what information is necessary and what information can be taken away from the children and commoners. However, Zahrah knows that entering the forest and finding the antidote is the only way to save her best friend, so she chooses to find knowledge instead of sitting in ignorance. However, gaining knowledge for herself does nothing to ensure that other people are aware of the jungle's possibilities.

Upon her return, Zahrah's family allows for interviews, mainly because no one has ever spoken to a person who has entered the jungle and survived. Zahrah agrees to have the dialogue, not because she wants attention, but because she wants to tell the world about what she has been through and what she saw on her journey. Zahrah mentions that people “couldn't get enough of my ‘incredible story’ and ‘act of bravery’” and that her best friend's “radical ideas coupled with my tales of adventure sparked several heated and fruitful debates about the Forbidden Greeny Jungle” (p. 293). However, even though she shares her experiences with anyone who will listen, she discloses that “most people still viewed the jungle as a forbidden place, even after all our talk with the newspapers. Old habits are hard to break, I guess” (pp. 297-298).

Essentially, Zahrah sees the need to subvert adultist and classist censorship of knowledge. She knows that the only way to ensure that her message is widely heard is for her to participate in media interviews about her experiences, in hopes that people will try to search for knowledge on their own. However, she also knows that “old habits are hard to

break,” and the oppressive forces of adults and the monarchy greatly influence the masses’ willingness to change. In fact, Zahrah’s experience shows just how ingrained oppression can be in society, suggesting that even though the BRI creates a space for Black girls to challenge oppression by sharing knowledge with other minoritized groups, it does not mean that that information will be well-received.

“We’ve suffered because of your type of backward thinking.” The fact that some groups will not listen to the messages of Black girls is also present in Ejii’s story. Specifically, both Ejii and Dikeogu join with Sarauniya Jaa to prevent a war between Earth and Ginen. Because they are young, Jaa tells them that they are only invited to the war meeting to observe. They are not allowed to speak or get involved in the business of adults. However, when the adults continue arguing without finding a solution, Ejii shouts, “Enough!” (p. 304). At her comment, the leader of the realms tells her to “Sit down and close your mouth. How dare you speak before such great men!” (p. 304). Surprisingly, one adult in the room advocates for her, and asks for her to speak before her moment passes. In this time, she says the following:

“You... you all call yourselves ‘masters’? Masters of what? I can’t believe the... the... stupidity of what I’m hearing.” She paused. Her words tasted good... We’ve suffered because of your type of backward thinking... You talk of war... what you’re defending now belongs to us. Together. We’d just be fighting ourselves. So... stop it!” (p. 305)

In this passage, Ejii ignores the chief’s comment that focalized her gender as one reason why she should not speak. Additionally, she disregards Jaa’s order to remain silent and observe the meeting from the side of the room. Instead, she holds every chief

accountable for their decisions, highlighting the fact that they are not acting like leaders and that their decisions have repercussions that affect all people.

When another adult asks what they should do instead of arguing, Ejii replies, “we should listen... listen to each other. Talk. Understand. We’re all from different places but we have a lot to share” (p. 305). To this comment, the chief tells his guards to remove the children from the room. Thus, even though Ejii is shown to assert herself and her beliefs and hold the adults accountable for their actions, the response of the adults suggests they do not consider her solution to be a viable option. Instead, they would rather resort to violence.

“Serves him right for being so thoughtless.” Sunny also experiences times when no one listens to her because of her age and gender, but she still attempts to hold dominant people accountable for their words and actions. It is important to note, however, that dominance is not always in the hands of adults. For instance, while Sunny is training with her three comrades, two of the young men—Orlu and Sasha—get into an argument. Orlu was born and raised in Nigeria, and he is upset that his family is hosting a Black American boy in their home, especially since the boy is known for getting into trouble. When Orlu tells Sasha that he does not want to have a dangerous person in his home, Sasha calls him a self-righteous African. In response, Orlu growls that Sasha is “a troublemaking *American... Akata* criminal” (p. 58). As mentioned in the novel description, *akata* is a derogatory word used to describe foreign-born Black people in Africa. Thus, Orlu was using his positioning as a native African to present Sasha’s existence as lesser.

In hearing this exchange, Sunny chooses to speak and hold Orlu accountable for his words. Consistent with the insults presented by Sunny’s bully, Jibaku, Sunny is also considered to be an *akata*, and she is

regularly ridiculed for her birth in the U.S. Thus, she wants Orlu to understand the weight his words carry, no matter who they are directed to. In the following passage, she addresses her feelings:

“So you know,” she continued, “I was born in the States, too. I came back with my parents when I was nine. That’s only three years ago.” She paused and looked meaningfully at Orlu. “I may not talk about it much, but most days I feel very much like an . . . *akata*.” Orlu looked at his feet, obviously ashamed. Serves him right for being so thoughtless, Sunny thought. (p. 58)

Here, Sunny discusses her connection to the word and explains why those words are hurtful. However, more than just stating her opinion, she uses persuasive techniques such as using strategic pauses and looking “meaningfully” at Orlu as she spoke. She not only wants to explain the way that the word make her feel, but she wants Orlu to feel ashamed that he has used it in the first place. Contrary to the experiences of Zahrah and Ejii, however, Orlu listens. In fact, his character never uses that word again for the rest of the book.

Discussion: Black Girls Can Do Both

Nnedi Okorafor’s Afrofuturistic young adult novels provide a basis to challenge the binary between ratchetness and respectability, for they call into question the very existence of both terms as opposite ends of a spectrum. Specifically, each character embodies many of the traits of respectability politics that White (2001) describes. They are from middle-class families, and they

maintain and represent the cultural patterns of their towns through speech and dress. Sunny’s father is a barrister, her mother is a medical doctor, and they live in a nice house in Nigeria. Similarly, Ejii is the daughter of a former ruler, and her mother is an advisor to the current leader, granting Ejii a higher-class status. Moreover, Zahrah performs a respectability of appearance, where she makes sure to acknowledge the appropriate style of dress that will enable her to look civilized in the eyes of her community members.

However, each character also portrays characteristics of ratchetness. Zahrah chooses to avoid silence and go against decades of knowledge suppression by venturing into the forest and

speaking about her journey in an interview. Her actions cause others to explore the jungle, something that was unimaginable before she told her story. Both Ejii and Sunny choose to enact violence in order to dismantle oppressive forces even though the more “respectable” action would be to remain silent. Additionally,

Ejii yelled at the adult leaders, discussing their childish behaviors in times of great strife. She destabilizes their roles as adults and asserts her position as an authoritative voice in the room even though respectability would require her to remain obedient. Sunny challenges gender roles and nativism by calling out the language used by her male friend. She chooses to project her voice into a conversation that is not directed at her to ensure that Orlu does not get away with his oppressive name calling. Thus, even as each protagonist exhibits traits of respectability, they also depict traits of ratchetness. They assume both traits and call upon them as aspects of resistance whenever they deem necessary.

“Thus, even as each protagonist exhibits traits of respectability, they also depict traits of ratchetness. They assume both traits and call upon them as aspects of resistance whenever they deem necessary.”

Because each protagonist has both “respectable” and “ratchet” traits, the binary is dismantled, for there can be no binary if the character possesses both. Thus, the characters in Okorafor’s texts redefine what it means to be and exist in a Black female body, reconstructing racist notions that restrict Black girls to dominant norms that confine speech, behavior, and social interaction. Moreover, her characters reconfigure the ideology that confines Black girls to one trait or another because her characters are both ratchet and respectable. More importantly, though, her characters challenge readers to rethink the categories ascribed to real Black girls.

Love (2017) argued that the BRI provides a lens to map the emotional flexibility and creativity needed to survive various oppressions. Further, she contended that the BRI offers an imaginative place for youth to embrace identity fluidity and challenge normativity. Although Love argued for the BRI as part of educational research with queer youth, I advocate for its use with all Black girls. Too often, Black girls are forced to modify their culturally sanctioned ways of being and adopt standards of “racelessness” (Fordham, 1988), or assimilation into White culture while distancing themselves from Blackness, to avoid ostracization in secondary classrooms. When they do achieve academic success, their accomplishments are belittled as some educators focus more on their social decorum, rather than their academic triumphs (Morris, 2017). Thus, education, in general, often attempts to relegate Black girls to specific identity positions that isolate and compromise their identities.

Black girls have challenged this oppression in ways that are authorized by dominant stakeholders, including peaceful protesting and silence. However, some Black girls choose to subvert oppression in ways that are not currently sanctioned by dominant

stakeholders, and their subversion is often met with physical or emotional violence. The violence is shown through Shakara, an adolescent Black girl who was flipped to the ground, dragged across the floor, and handcuffed by a school police officer because she did not put her cell phone away quickly enough and refused to leave the classroom due to her perception of an unfair punishment (Jarvie, 2015). It is also shown in six-year-old Salecia Johnson, who was handcuffed for throwing a temper tantrum in school (Boone, 2012), and in 11-year-old Zakiyah, who was handcuffed and taken to a juvenile detention center for engaging in a fight against a bully on a school bus (Martinez-Valle, 2018). Additionally, the silencing of Black girls is represented in Niya Kenny, who refused to stand by as Shakara was being assailed by the officer and was arrested for creating a school disturbance (Blad, 2017). It is also depicted in Deanna and Mya Scot, adolescent Black girls who were removed from their sports teams and banned from prom when they refused to remove their box braids (Williams, 2017).

Essentially, even though Black girls have attempted to use their voices and actions to subvert injustice, their age, combined with their race, gender, and other social identities, relegates them to the margins of activism. When they do speak out against their oppression, they are often met with vitriol and overt violence. Thus, Black girls are experiencing a barrage of violence, silencing, and erasure from all sides, and their bodies exist as sites of struggle, where their very being stands in opposition to the discourses that attempt to erase them. When they are obedient and silent, like Zahrah was in her interaction with Ciwanke, then they are respectable. If they choose to fight against their oppressors, like Sunny and Ejii, then they are ratchet.

In numerous ways, then, the treatment of Black girls in schools results in spirit murder, with bullets of rejection, silence, and disrespect (Johnson & Bryan,

2016) attempting to kill the parts of Black girlhood that do not reflect the middle-class values and behavioral patterns that are deemed respectable (White, 2001). However, young adult Afrofuturist literature, represented in this analysis by Okorafor's works, are examples of the ways in which Black girls can embody both ratchet and respectable traits within one body. They show how Black girls use their magic to call upon a specific form of resistance when they need it most. Further, Afrofuturist authors use the BRI to show readers that Black girls are aware of oppression and act against injustice in various ways, including silence, physical violence, yelling, talking, and crying. Each of these actions must be validated. To ensure the support of each side of the diamond that represents the nuanced nature of Black girls' identities, all literacy stakeholders must acknowledge that, just like Zahrah, Ejji, and Sunny, Black girls are multifaceted. Black girls call upon the politics of respectability and they call upon the BRI. Black girls can do both.

Complicating #BlackGirlMagic and Ratchetness

This analysis does not imply that all Black girls who fight or speak out against oppression have made the choice to identify as ratchet. Additionally, although this paper focuses on Black girls and #BlackGirlMagic, it does not assume that only Black girls can be ratchet, for various minoritized communities have used the term as a way to emphasize personal traits that counter mainstream respectability. The term has a complex history in the United States, and to assume that the term or this method of analysis can be used uncritically and unchecked would be an egregious error. As Love (2017) contends:

this methodological perspective [the BRI] should only be used by researchers with a robust historical and present-day understanding of their participants'

community and how it has been impacted by racism, capitalism, transphobia, classism, rigid ideas of gender, heteronormativity, and homophobia. The lens necessitates that researchers approach their work through a social justice, intersectional, and anti-racist framework, whereas intersectionality is utilized not just as an analytical tool for recognizing multiple intersecting identities but also as a tool to examine overlapping systems of oppression. (p. 545)

In other words, using the BRI as a term or as a methodological tool requires an anti-oppressionist stance that considers historical and modern effects. To ignore the necessary criticality required in doing this work could result in more violence against a community that already disproportionately experiences spirit murder (Johnson & Bryan, 2016) in educational systems.

This analysis does, however, imply that Afrofuturist novels necessarily expand notions of Black Girl Magic and challenge the ratchet vs. respectability binary. Okorafor's works suggest that Afrofuturist authors are situating knowledge within Black and Brown girls' bodies, validating their "narratives of survival, transformation, and emancipation" and "reclaiming [their] histories and identities" in new and nuanced ways (Cruz, 2001, p. 668). Afrofuturists use various speculative components to consider unbound Black girl identities. Similarly, all literacy stakeholders—including students, teachers, researchers, policy makers, parents, principals, superintendents, school board members, and resource officers—could use speculation and imagination to refuse damaging stories that erase the complexity of Black girlhood, to examine spaces of dissonance and tension that situate individuality as negativity, and to envision new ways of conceptualizing Black girlhood now and in the future. Essentially, by working with and for Black

girls and using imagination as a critical social practice (Enciso, 2017), we can expand our understandings of who Black girls are and who they can be. More importantly, though, we can and should ask them who they want to be.

Six years ago, CaShawn Thompson told the world that Black girls are magic. However, instead of using the hashtag to encompass all Black girls—no matter who they are, how they act, where they live, what they say, or what they wear—a debate began about who is and who is not included under the umbrella of magical Black girlhood.

Of course, Thompson's response should ameliorate some of the tension, as she claimed that all Black girls should celebrate their magic. Yet, the only way to completely dismantle the oppression that confines Black girls to specific identity positions is to ensure that questions about which Black girls can and cannot celebrate their Black girl magic cease to exist. Using the BRI as a methodological and onto-epistemological approach to research is one way to assist Black girls in guaranteeing that the binaries dissipate and the fluidity of Black girl magic and Black girl identities are acknowledged and celebrated.

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