

University of Denver

Digital Commons @ DU

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Graduate Studies

---

1-1-2018

## Girl of Color-Power: Resisting the Neoliberal Girl Power Agent

Raisa Fernanda Alvarado

*University of Denver*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd>



Part of the [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#), [Mass Communication Commons](#), and the [Speech and Rhetorical Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Alvarado, Raisa Fernanda, "Girl of Color-Power: Resisting the Neoliberal Girl Power Agent" (2018). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 1421.  
<https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/1421>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact [jennifer.cox@du.edu](mailto:jennifer.cox@du.edu), [dig-commons@du.edu](mailto:dig-commons@du.edu).

---

# **Girl of Color-Power: Resisting the Neoliberal Girl Power Agent**

## **Abstract**

Girl power is a complex and multi-dimensional phrase. It is a term that celebrates the positive development of girls' self-esteem, while simultaneously recognizing the shifting social positioning of girlhood in the late twentieth century. It is a call to re-write girls' passivity but simultaneously a discourse that encourages consumerism via entertainment, artifacts, and merchandise. A social movement, a catch phrase, a motto: girl power is a representative caricature of evolving conceptualizations of girlhood. This dissertation is critical of the homogeneity implicit in girl power as its hailing disproportionately centers white, middle and upper class girls. As such, this project examines the myriad of ways that diverse girls of color make alternative forms of girl power, what I call girl of color-power. Using rhetorical and textual analysis this dissertation argues that low-income, girls of color transform neoliberal, postfeminist, and postrace iterations of girl empowerment for the purpose of changing power relationships. Through a critique of domination and freedom through three case studies: *The American Girl BeForever* doll line (which problematically infuses whiteness through five characters of color, in the name of empowerment); musical icon Beyoncé; and the advocacy of the social justice oriented group, The Radical Monarchs, this project analyzes the exclusivity of girl power regardless of girl of color presence and posits girl of color-power as an inclusive framework that centers the diverse embodiments of girlhood. Through the promotion of sisterhood bore from difference, an embrasure of cross generational alliances, and through the active inclusion of critical pedagogy (based in marginal history), girl of color-power promotes agential practices aimed at cultivating social justice.

## **Document Type**

Dissertation

## **Degree Name**

Ph.D.

## **Department**

Mass Communications

## **First Advisor**

Christina Foust, Ph.D.

## **Second Advisor**

Armond Towns

## **Third Advisor**

Kate Willink

## **Keywords**

American Girl, Beyonce, Girl empowerment, Girl of color power, Girl power, Girl power neoliberalism

## **Subject Categories**

Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication | Mass Communication | Speech and Rhetorical Studies

## **Publication Statement**

Copyright is held by the author. User is responsible for all copyright compliance.

This dissertation is available at Digital Commons @ DU: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/1421>

Girl of Color-Power: Resisting the Neoliberal Girl Power Agent

---

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of Arts and Humanities

University of Denver

---

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

---

by

Raisa Fernanda Alvarado

June 2018

Advisor: Christina Foust

©Copyright by Raisa Fernanda Alvarado 2018

All Rights Reserved

Author: Raisa Fernanda Alvarado  
Title: Girl of Color-Power: Resisting the Neoliberal Girl Power Agent  
Advisor: Christina Foust  
Degree Date: June 2018

### Abstract

Girl power is a complex and multi-dimensional phrase. It is a term that celebrates the positive development of girls' self-esteem, while simultaneously recognizing the shifting social positioning of girlhood in the late twentieth century. It is a call to re-write girls' passivity but simultaneously a discourse that encourages consumerism via entertainment, artifacts, and merchandise. A social movement, a catch phrase, a motto: girl power is a representative caricature of evolving conceptualizations of girlhood. This dissertation is critical of the homogeneity implicit in girl power as its hailing disproportionately centers white, middle and upper class girls. As such, this project examines the myriad of ways that diverse girls of color make alternative forms of girl power, what I call girl of color-power. Using rhetorical and textual analysis this dissertation argues that low-income, girls of color transform neoliberal, postfeminist, and postrace iterations of girl empowerment for the purpose of changing power relationships. Through a critique of domination and freedom through three case studies: *The American Girl BeForever* doll line (which problematically infuses whiteness through five characters of color, in the name of empowerment); musical icon Beyoncé; and the advocacy of the social justice oriented group, The Radical Monarchs, this project analyzes the exclusivity of girl power regardless of girl of color presence and posits girl of color-power as an inclusive framework that centers the diverse embodiments of girlhood. Through the promotion of sisterhood bore from difference, an embrasure of

cross generational alliances, and through the active inclusion of critical pedagogy (based in marginal history), girl of color-power promotes agential practices aimed at cultivating social justice.

## Acknowledgements

This project was made possible by the unwavering support of my family. Gracias Tía Micos y Mamá, por cuidar a Kamila con todo corazón. La seguridad que sentía cuando Kamila estaba con ustedes aseguro que me pudiera enfocar completamente en este proyecto. Thank you Papá and sister/editor Nancy for your moral and grammatical support. I could always count on you both to uplift my spirit.

I also owe a great deal of gratitude to my advisor Christina Foust. Thank you for engaging my work and helping me develop this project. I continue to “trust the process.” Thank you Deb Ortega and Armond Townes for pushing me. I am a better scholar and educator because of it. Thank you to my ride-or-die, academic hermano, Jaime Guzmán. Our collaboration throughout the program and everyday check-ins gave me life.

Thank you to Michelle Holling and Dreama Moon for your unwavering support throughout my academic journey. Your mentorship and guidance at every educational and professional milestone have shaped who I am today.

Finally, thank you Kasey Uchima. We’ve both sacrificed so much for this. I love you.

## Table of Contents

Chapter One .....	1
The Evolution of Girl Power.....	5
Postfeminism, Whiteness, and Postracism.....	12
Empowerment in the Context of Girl Power .....	15
Identity and Agency.....	24
A Critique of Domination and Freedom .....	29
Domination and Freedom, A Case for Girl of Color-Power.....	33
Chapter Two.....	36
Minimizing White Supremacy and Settler Colonialism.....	42
An Emphasis on Progress: The Postrace Character of Color .....	49
The Neoliberal, Girl Power Agent.....	53
Conclusion .....	56
Chapter Three.....	59
Dominant and Free Representations .....	64
Empowerment Through Consumption and Respectability.....	66
Queen B: Okay Ladies Now Let’s Get in Formation .....	72
Sisterhood through a Shared Struggle.....	75
A Cross-Generational Enterprise .....	78
An Ethic of Hope .....	80
Conclusion .....	83
Chapter Four .....	86
Background: Radical Monarchs History, Mission, Vision.....	89
Free Discourses and Activism .....	92
Conservative Backlash.....	94
A Promotion of Collaborative, Critical Pedagogy.....	97
Centering Marginal Education.....	102
A Return to Do-It Yourself Empowerment .....	106
Conclusion .....	109
Chapter Five.....	111
Girl of color-power .....	120
References.....	126



## Table of Images

### Chapter Three

Figure 3:1: An image from the opening scene of <i>Boodylicious</i> .....	70
Figure 3:2: An image of the quintessential <i>Nasty Girl</i> .....	73
Figure 3:3: Beyoncé pictured with four of her dancers during the Super Bowl 50 halftime performance.....	77

### Chapter Four

Figure 4.1: An image of the Radical Monarch’s advocating against displacement and gentrification.....	102
Figure 4.3: An image of the Radical Monarchs protesting the presidential election of Donald Trump.....	103
Figure 4.4: An image from the Radical Love unit depicting an affirmation mirror created by a Monarch .....	110

## Chapter One

I was born in the 80's yet my sense of self, relative to gender and race, really developed in the 90's. While I cannot attribute any singular influence to fully shaping my identity formation, my evolving sense of self was undoubtedly shaped by the girl power discourses of the 90's. Girl power, as a catchphrase and motto especially as it was bolstered by the Spice Girls had a profound effect on my early feminist consciousness. Some of my earliest memories consist of getting together with friends from the same apartment complex to mimic the Spice Girls. Like so many girls in the late twentieth century, we would memorize lyrics, copy their choreography, and would, to the best of our ability, replicate their image. Yet, while I reveled in the pro-girl messages espoused by the group, even at a young age (long before I could articulate it) I was deeply conflicted. Specifically, I remember how the girl power brand populated by the Spice Girls made me feel extremely *Brown* and *Other*. I could not see myself in any of the group members or their hyper-feminine aesthetic and the single Black woman in the group, Scary Spice, represented a body type and image that felt extreme and *Other* in and of itself. I also remember feeling extremely poor, for Spice Girl brand girl power required you to preform your fandom by purchasing albums, clothes, posters, and merchandise, things that were not accessible to a first generation, low-income Chicana. At a young age I felt the effects of neoliberal girl power, a brand of empowerment that omitted the experiences of low-income, girls of color. Far from thinking that I was the only girl who

had experienced isolation and exclusion relative to girl power, I looked outwardly toward the prevalence of girl power in the twenty-first century. Girl power remains a dominant force within popular culture, yet its expression has changed considerably given the increased influence of technology in our daily lives and corporate marketing that benefits from targeting girls and young women, a lucrative demographic. Yet, when I first heard of the American Girl *BeForever* series, when I first listened to Destiny Child's music, and further when I encountered popular culture that appeared to actively include girls of color, I was hopeful that diversity was becoming the standard. Upon closer examination I was confronted with the same discourses that had shaped my development of self. My engagement with this material began long before I wrote this dissertation, yet to fully understand girl power's contemporary dissemination it is important to consider its origins, evolution, and the outside forces that have shaped its contemporary hailing.

Girl power is a complex and multi-dimensional phrase. It is a term that celebrates the positive development of girls' self-esteem, while simultaneously recognizing the shifting social positioning of girlhood in the late twentieth century (Gibbons, 2011, p. 858). It is a call to re-write girls' "passivity, voicelessness, and vulnerability," but simultaneously a discourse that encourages consumerism via entertainment, artifacts, and merchandise (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005, p. 19). Yet, in all its complicated and seemingly contradictory manifestations, girl power remains at the forefront of American consciousness. A social movement, a catch phrase, a motto: girl power is a representative shift in evolving conceptualizations of girlhood. While these manifestations of agential girlhood have varied significantly over the last thirty years, the persistence of girl power offers a great deal of insight into how girls have been historically perceived and further

speaks to significant exclusions relative to representations of U.S. American girlhood<sup>1</sup>. I argue that while the ethos of girl power discourses, as propagated in popular culture, encourages and boasts the presence of feminine agency and empowerment, these discourses promote whiteness via neoliberal, postfeminist, and postrace representations of empowered girlhood. By analyzing contemporary, twenty-first century girl power discourses for and by girls of color, this dissertation posits a framework for girl of color-power that departs from dominant representations.

Girl of color-power is an inclusive framework relative to empowerment discourses, as it recognizes the diverse embodiments of girlhood that fall under the category of girl. Through a recognition that girls navigate the world distinctly based on their identity standpoints, girl of color-power centers girl agency aimed at transforming power structures. With a commitment toward social justice and a simultaneous investment in self care and developing a political consciousness, girl of color-power is an inclusive category of agential practices aimed at cultivating equity. This dissertation analyzes three empowerment discourses relative to girlhood at the forefront of the twenty-first century, the American Girl *Be Forever* collection, Beyoncé as a liminal character, and The Radical Monarchs. Through an engagement with each text I argue that dominant uses of girls of color continue to ascribe to postrace, postfeminist, and neoliberal ideologies for the purpose of maintaining the status quo. Conversely, Beyoncé's latter career and the Radical Monarchs embody characteristics of what I posit is girl of color-power.

---

<sup>1</sup> U.S America is identified so as not to imply that girl power discourses are applicable to diverse geographic contexts

What follows is an overview of the history of girl power, from its appropriated Riot Grrrls inception in the 1990s to its contemporary neoliberal, postfeminist, postrace hailing. I trace the influence of third wave feminism, post-feminism, and post-racism on evolving conceptualizations of girlhood and further outline the influence of neoliberalism on consumption-driven perceptions of girl power. Throughout this chapter, I mark significant omissions within girl power literature, noting the ways it “reflects the ideologies of white-middle-class, individualism and personal responsibility” without an account of how race and class impact embodied girlhood (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005, p. 30). I review the theoretical and disciplinary orientation from which my dissertation operates, and emphasize how my work fits within the nexus of rhetorical and critical intercultural Communication Studies scholarship. This chapter additionally details the methodology, an analysis of domination and freedom as posited by McKerrow (1989), that I utilize to piece together girl power artifacts that are representative of our current historic moment. Finally, I conclude by briefly describing the three case studies of girl power that I center in the dissertation (the American Girl Doll *BeForever* series, Beyoncé as a resounding girl power icon, and The Radical Monarchs).

The American Girl *BeForever* dolls stand as the representative embodiment of postrace, neoliberal iterations of girl power, Beyoncé is explored as existing within the nexus of empowerment discourses, and The Radical Monarchs are analyzed for the unique ways girls of color are reinventing girl power. This dissertation makes the claim that girl power, as it has dominated popular culture, is an exclusionary project, one that has long excluded girls of color, yet by looking inductively at how girls of color are

performing “empowerment” outside dominant ideologies, we can tailor empowerment discourses to represent the agential needs of low-income, girls of color.

### The Evolution of Girl Power

The origin of the term girl power is overwhelmingly traced to the punk rock antics of the Riot Grrrls in the late 1990s, and the iconic gatherings of “young, mainly white and middle-class women, a large proportion of who identified as queer” in Washington DC and Olympia, Washington to protest elitist and masculinist punk rock scenes (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005, p. 20). An anti-capitalist collaboration, the Riot Grrrls embraced the creative production of material goods via music, texts, clothing, and zines, and believed strongly that empowerment was attainable through the creation of counter-culture spaces (Hains, 2014, p. 33). Groups such as Bikini Kill, Heavens to Betsy, and Bramobile, to name a few Riot Grrrls musical assemblages, centered issues such as rape, incest, slut-shaming, and eating disorders through music and aesthetic choices, insisting on the recognition that these are larger political problems affecting all girls and women (Zeiler, 2016, p. 175). Through the proliferation of materials that centered feminine resistance to patriarchy and aggressive lyrics that dared to re-envision femininity, the Riot Grrrls became representative of the girl power movement. Discursively embodied in their 16-point manifesto (1991), the Riot Grrrls were about “doing/reading/seeing/hearing cool things that validate and challenge” girls to deconstruct “bullshit like racism, able-bodiedism, ageism, speciesism, classism, thinism, sexism, anti-semitism and heterosexism” (p. 1).

While the Riot Grrrls are credited with introducing girl power as a call-to-arms and for their discursive inclusivity respective to diverse manifestations of girlhood,

Aapola, Harris, and Gonick (2005) importantly note that girl power and its use as a phrase did not completely originate from the Grrrls—“girl power” instead is a co-opting of the 80’s Black female, hip hop vernacular; “You go girl” (p. 33). Further, the girl power attitude promoted by the Riot Grrrls was long present in Black female rappers from the 80’s such as Salt ‘N Pepa, MC Lyte, and Queen Latifa. Relative to hip hop, Rose (1994) notes the “contradictory modes of resistance” women rappers operated and operate from, using their gender and sexuality in expectant and subversive ways as oppositional strategies in a male-dominated, hip-hop genre (p. 149). Particularly, Black female rappers have long used aggressive posturing with a highly feminized aesthetic to call attention to sexist practices and express feminine agency. MC Lyte’s 1988 video “Paper Thin” stands out as a notable example as she tactfully uses an inner city, subway scenery to rap about her indifference to male pursuits, all the while dressed in a feminine track suit and gold hoop earrings. Aapola, Gonick, and Harris (2005) substantiate the contributions of Black hip hop artists, writing, “[t]he girl power phenomenon is not unique in its cultural appropriation and re-articulation of images and discourses of black women’s strength, power and agency to serve a mainly white middle-class young women” agenda (p. 33). While girl power had “a White girl’s face” the movements origins were far more complex and were “in no way a particularly nineties thing” (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005, p. 33). However, the girl power that began with a highly politicized agenda (as influenced by both 80’s hip hop and 90’s punk rock) would rapidly change via a further co-opting by the international British group, The Spice Girls.

Where the Riot Grrrls are regarded as the creators of girl power, the Spice Girls are credited with cementing the slogan internationally, aiding the transformation of its

ethos into a consumerist venture. More specifically, rather than reject normative femininity and position girls as producers, as the Riot Grrrls did, the Spice Girls welcomed a highly feminized aesthetic through the celebration of girls' purchasing power (Newson, 2005; Zaslow, 2006; Hains, 2014). Girl power became attainable through the collection of albums, posters, clothes, and wardrobe choices that mimicked the five Spice Girl group members. Further, while girls and women alike adopted the Spice Girls' pro-girl lyrics and "Girl Power!" catch-cry, the performance of girl power became about the individual rather than the collective. Girls could recognize "positive feelings" associated with being a girl—"girls rule"—but the discourses centered the individual and her ability to meet the image boasted by the Spice Girls (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005, p. 30). Further, the musical group continued to have a predominantly white face as the singular woman of color group member, "Scary Spice," was relegated to a supporting role, starkly juxtaposed to the varied and softer white group members (Posh Spice, Baby Spice, Sporty Spice, and Ginger Spice). The influence of the Spice Girls on girl power has been heavily explored in academic literature (Newson, 2005; Zaslow, 2006; Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005; Hains, 2014; Zeisler, 2016). Interestingly, scholars disagree on the influence of the musical group on conceptualizations of girl power. An overwhelming amount of scholarship condemns the Spice Girls for their "commodified" "feminist-lite discourses" while other scholarship critiques the dismal of the group as feminist icons, especially when juxtaposed with the Riot Grrrls. Particularly, authors (Newson, 2005; Zaslow, 2006; Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005) argue that while the Spice Girls are vested in materialism, girls who grew up with their messages have articulated a "pathway" to feminism. So though problematic, the Spice Girls allowed many fans to



develop a feminist consciousness that would later be more thoroughly nurtured (Keller, 2014, p. 143). While the influence of the Spice Girls on girl power is contemplated and often regarded as strictly positive or negative, their influence on the motto is undeniable. Rather, the tensions that frame the group are representative of another major discourse within girl power literature, the feminist transition of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century—the shift from second to third wave feminism.

Third wave feminism, like the waves that preceded it, was a diverse manifestation of feminist expression that addressed and in many, expanded upon the limitations of second wave feminism. On a literary and political front, third wave feminism was a response to the exclusionary, white, heterosexual, middle class exigencies of second wave feminism. It was a movement bore from women of color (Gloria Anzaldúa 1997; Toni Morrison, 1999; bell hooks' 2000) who centered the diversity of women's experiences relative to oppression beyond the axis of gender. More specifically, third wave feminism as intersectional was a recognition of the "prejudice and denial of differences within the feminist movement" that too often relegated low-income, queer, women of color to the margins (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981, p. xxiii). Yet, while great literary and socio-cultural strides were made relative to the diversity of feminism(s), third wave feminism also has notable markers respective to class and whiteness that distinguish it as a feminist wave. Particularly, popular culture representations of third wave feminism marketed "consumer culture as a place of empowerment," a place where women can assert their femininity via purchasing-power while still remaining "committed" to gender equity (Banet-Weiser, 2004, p. 123). This commitment is in stark contrast to second wave perceptions of consumerism which tended to be "critical of the

misogyny of popular consumer culture,” preferring instead to assert power through collective organizing and protests (Banet-Weiser, 2004, p. 123). Consumerism, then is a notable characteristic of third wave feminism, an ideological shift that is historically situated at the same time as girl power, the late twentieth century.

Several scholars (Banet-Weiser, 2004; Duvall, 2010; Harris and Dobson, 2015) have noted the connections between mass representations of third wave feminism and girl power and the contradictory, consumerist tensions characteristic of both populated movements. This can be understood through the strategic marketing of girl-affirming messages and products that embrace “media visibility” as a means to promote feminine empowerment while being aware of the male-dominated, corporations that benefit from such representations (Banet-Weiser, 2004, p. 121). For example, in 2013 Hasbro released “Rebelle” a Nerf gun line for girls that promoted “active play” and “collaboration,” yet was characteristically pink and purple with accompanying names such as the “Heartbreaker bow” (Buis, 2013, p. 1). As Duvall (2010) argues, increased positive media portrayals framed feminism as “unnecessary” as girls were overwhelmed with portrayals of feminine achievement and success (p. 147). Further, while U.S American culture at large celebrated pro-girl messages, these messages continued to privilege white, heterosexual, middle class manifestations of girlhood. Historical, social, and political inequalities persisted and girl power became a celebration and endorsement of the exceptional American girl, a meritocratic agent that is able to succeed despite substantial social and cultural opposition. A theme that will be discussed in detail via American Girl representations. In the next section I speak to the neoliberal, postfeminist implications of contemporary iterations of girl power.

Neoliberalism is “a form of Western liberal government that reconstitutes the welfare state and relations with its citizen,” promoting the belief that the individual is “fully self-responsible” (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005, p. 36). Structural responsibility is denied and, specific to the context of girl power, girls (and their parents, guardians, and other adults in their lives) are encouraged to see themselves as fully accountable for problems that can be solved “via marketplace choices” (Kearney, 2015, p. 265). There is a strong connection between white liberal feminism and neoliberalism: both are “mutually reinforcing discourses that discount structural constraints” and reduce structural impositions that impede women’s ability to participate equally in governance (Desai, 2016, p. 261). More specifically, through a homogenous accounting of girlhood and womanhood, neoliberal discourses celebrate girls’ ability to succeed academically and socially via individuated choices and gumption. Among the research that connects neoliberalism with girl power (Banet-Weiser, 2004; Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005; Kearney, 2015), attention is given to contemporary marketing via clothing, magazines, toys, and products (to name a few mediums) that boast all girls’ ability to defy obstacles and achieve excellence via material products and wealth. For example, NikeWomen’s 2017 campaign “What are girls made of” begins with a girl singing a traditional Russian song about girls being made of “flowers” “gossip” and “marmalade.” Slowly, Nike draped athletes appear before the singer ice skating, boxing, and running to which the girl changes the lyrics to girls being made of “battles” “perseverance” “accomplishments” and “achievements.” Banet-Weiser (2015) writes that this neoliberal co-opting of girl power, and by extension feminism, “encourages a feminist subject who is aware of gender inequality, but whose feminism is so individuated that it has been completely

unmoored from any notion of *social* inequality” (p. 183). Girl power literature (Gonick, 2006; Zaslow, 2006; Pomerantz, 2011) consistently notes consumerist markers of girl power that situate the movement as a superficial corporate agenda; one that works toward disseminating affirming messages of girlhood while simultaneously placing white, capitalist interests at the forefront. Thus, at the start of the twenty-first century images of “empowered” girlhood became representative of a neoliberal shift that simultaneously marked the introduction of post-feminism and what scholars have referred to as our current post-girl power moment.

While girl power as a 90’s social movement was deeply influenced by third wave feminist ideals, the movement’s neoliberal transformation into the early twenty-first century is also intimately connected to post-feminism. Post-feminism assumes, that “the women’s movement has accomplished its goals, and barriers facing women have been removed” (Ferber, 2012, p.67). The limited constitutional and legal victories attained by women, such as the Equal Pay Act of 1963, were indicative of gender equity and women and girls alike were and are encouraged to view themselves as fully self-responsible for succeeding. This postfeminist turn is significant for girl power discourses as it provides a contextual grounding for the overwhelming, individual orientation of the movement. Girls born at the end of the twentieth century had feminism in the water; “a political fluoride that protects against the decay of earlier sexism and gender discrimination” (Banet-Weiser, 2004, p. 122). Bombarded with images of feminist equity and accomplishment, girls, irrespective of race or financial status were and are inundated with personal-responsibility discourses that promoted the end of sexism and further marked girls as responsible for their subjugated position. At the start of the twenty-first century,

girl power more heavily transitioned into an individualized, postfeminist caricature, heavily promoted through popular culture artifacts that are thoroughly explored in this dissertation.

### Postfeminism, Whiteness, and Postracism

Several researchers (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000; Kearney, 2015; Koffman, Orgad, & Gill 2015) note the postfeminist implications of twenty-first century girl power, reflecting this influence with the label, “post-girl power” to signify our contemporary moment. Via post-girl power, the messages of feminine empowerment from the late twenty-century persist, however, girls are encouraged to dive head first into a “glittery wasteland of girly consumption,” blissfully under the influence that sexism is a thing of the past (Brown, 2016, p. 2). This is evident in Koffman, Orgad and Gill’s (2015) analysis of “selfie humanitarianism,” a humanitarian effort that encourages U.S American girls to “help” third world girls by posting a “selfie.” According to Koffman, Orgad and Gill (2015), U.S American girls are encouraged to regard their feminism as the epitome of worldwide gender equity and are further not encouraged to understand the geopolitical plight of disadvantaged girls. Instead, post-girl power initiatives encourage U.S American girls to “help” by participating in narcissistic, consumer driven ventures, i.e. purchase a bracelet and a percentage of money will be donated to girls in need. Post-girl power, like postfeminist motivated consumption, discourages the articulation of political claims; girls are rarely asked how resources should be distributed, and are instead encouraged to focus on the self via consumption.

The postfeminist implications of girl power can additionally be understood through the privileging of whiteness and middle class aesthetics via the simultaneous

endorsement of post-racism. Whiteness as a theoretical framework enables me to deconstruct contemporary representations of girl power and accentuate markers of girl of color-power that deviate from dominant culture. Whiteness can be understood as a symbolic and material force rooted in the ideological forwarding of European superiority. Bore out of the “nexus of capitalism, colonial rule, and the emergent relationships among dominant and subordinate groups,” whiteness is a pervasive force that situates white bodies in positions of economic, social, and cultural privilege (Trifonas, 2000, p. 149). Operating largely from a colorblind mentality that omits the historical significance of racial inequality, whiteness functions to deny “voice and agency... in the name of civilized humankind,” opting instead to evoke civility discourses that dismiss continued racial oppression (Trifonas, 2000, p. 149). As Trifonas (2000) articulates, “[w]hiteness constitutes the selective tradition of dominant discourses about race, class, gender, and sexuality hegemonically reproduced,” as the most widely articulated narratives around identity function to sustain those in power (p. 150).

In the context of girl power, whiteness functions as an ideological force that centers white girlhood, regardless of the physical presence of girls of color. Specifically, through a postrace ethic that feigns equality and sameness, girl power promotes agency—but it is a power to maintain the status quo. For example, purchasing a shirt with the slogan “Girl Power,” participating in sports, or buying a pair of shoes so another pair will be donated to a third world country, are regarded as ideal forms of empowerment, quintessential expressions of girl, power. Throughout this dissertation, whiteness is an instrumental force that I argue is ideologically promoted through dominant representations of girl power, such as the American Girl *BeForever* series and through

Destiny Child's early career. Particularly through the strategic use of diversity, equitable relations relative to race, class, and gender are paraded for the purpose of maintaining inequitable relations. This is further evident through the girl of color-power represented through Beyoncé's later career and the Radical Monarchs. Specifically, through an unapologetic centering of Otherness, girl of color-power exposes whiteness as a pervasive force for the purpose of reinventing social relations.

Posttrace discourses imply that racism is a thing of the past, a historically relevant topic that holds no merit in today's political and cultural landscape. While these discourses have been a "convenient tool of the political Right" since the creation of affirmative action policies in the 1960s and 1970s, contemporary events have led to the wider proliferation of their use (Teasley and Ikard, 2010, p. 413). More specifically, the election and re-election of Barack Obama, the nation's first Black president, marked a significant post-racial turn in U.S American history where the realities of racism were grossly minimized and the myth of meritocracy, or the belief that one is able to achieve anything, irrespective of race, became a prominent ideology (Teasley and Ikard, 2010; Ono, 2010; Dubrofsky, 2013). As applicable to feminism, legal and political rights attained by and for largely white, middle class women, during the twentieth and twenty-first century, ushered in an era of posttrace/postfeminist discourses or the belief that racial and gender equity had been attained. Endorsed through the heavy marketing of women such as Oprah Winfrey, a Black entrepreneurial billionaire, twenty-first century girl power parades token figures as examples for how the U.S America has moved away from its racist and sexist origins (Peck, 2010). Thus twenty-first century girl power, as influenced by post-racism and post-feminism, heavily privileges specific kinds of girls

and women that fit the ideological promotion of neoliberalism. It is for this reason that empowerment has been heavily marketed as an individual endeavor that bears no connection to structural inequalities for women and girls of color (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005, p. 36). Sibielsky (2011) writes, “the girl at the center of girl power discourse...is still almost uniformly conceived of as white, middle-class, heterosexual, feminine- identified, and able bodied” resulting in the impression that it is only this type of girl that is being advocated for within girl power discourses (Sibielsky, 2011, p. 11). The exclusivity of girl power is a reoccurring theme in literature as authors articulate the disparity and harm associated with disproportionately centering one type of girl as representative of all embodiments of girlhood (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005; Kearney, 2015; Harris and Dobson, 2015). Contemporary, twenty-first century representations popularize a static caricature of what an empowered girl is and could be.

#### Empowerment in the Context of Girl Power

Empowerment relative to the study of girl power, is a budding area in Communication Studies evident through the 2015 special issue on “Girl Power” in the *Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*. While the journal covers varying topics around girlhood studies, the neoliberal, postfeminist co-opting of empowerment is a major theme that reveals a great deal about our historic moment. Particularly as corporations hold unprecedented influence over the information and entertainment we consume on a daily basis empowerment has become a superficial signifier used to hail an ethic without a real engagement with what the term means. It is because of the superfluous usage of empowerment that scholars turn to its strategic usage in the twenty-first century. What follows is an overview of thematic clusters relative to work on empowerment and



girlhood: empowerment as equated to consumerism, empowerment as expressed via aid to third world girls, and empowerment as an exclusionary postrace construct. Each thematic cluster of scholarship reveals the exclusivity of the term and the necessity to critically engage its use.

Banet-Weiser (2004) centers consumer driven empowerment in her analysis of the popular children's network Nickelodeon, "an important producer of girl power politics" and culture in the nineties (p. 125). Through scripted programs such as *Clarrisa Explains It All* and *As Told By Ginger*, that center white, middle class girls, a journalism style program entitled *Nick News*, and the marketing of girl power products, Nickelodeon aesthetically represented girls as "empowered subjects in the social world" (Banet-Weiser, 2004, p. 125). Aligned with the subject position promoted by the Riot Grrrls, Nickelodeon carefully depicted girls as producers of news segments and influencers of their social environment. Yet, this strategic portrayal relied heavily on the consumer participation of girls. Rather than seek empowerment "outside the hegemonic mainstream" girls were taught that empowerment could be found within commercial culture via their engagement with Nickelodeon branded, girl power material (Banet-Weiser, 2004, p. 124). Banet-Weiser (2015) writes, "[t]he success of individual women within neoliberalism, then, becomes evidence of empowerment, where empowerment is constructed as a market" (Banet-Weiser, 2015, p. 190). While the widely advertised discourses of gender equity and feminine agency functioned to increase awareness of gender politics, the neoliberal influence of these discourses have contributed to empowerment being equated to consumption. Kearney's (2015) work on the aesthetic

significance of sparkle further speaks to how postracism is implicated in consumer driven manifestations of empowerment.

Whether in/on clothing, makeup, accessories, or cinematic film, sparkle functions as an aesthetic marker simultaneously representative of highly feminized girlhood and individualism. Yet it has not functioned as a neutral marker, as sparkle is rooted in a “racist epistemology of light” that has cinematically been used to idealize white women (Kearney, 2015, p. 264). Today, sparkle is manifested in diverse contexts yet it remains a ubiquitous signifier of white girl culture that is disproportionately marketed by white, middle class girls and yet “girls of all races and classes are encouraged to sparkle up to affirm their youthful femininity” (Kearney, 2015, p. 263). Kearney (2015) explicates this postrace functions in the film *Precious*. As Precious, a low-income, Black girl from the inner city has sparkle-themed daydreams to escape her toxic environment. A survivor of poverty, sexual assault, colorism, and a flawed educational system, the sparkle-themed daydreams within the film boast an idealized life aligned with whiteness. A far-cry from her reality, in her daydreams she is a star on stage, donning a gown and boa, being caressed by an adoring fictive boyfriend. Irrespective of institutional barriers that continue to commercially and aesthetically exclude Precious and by extension low income, girls of color, sparkle is marketed to all girls whereby the individual is held responsible for meeting neoliberal constructions of idealized girlhood. Kearney (2015) writes, “most female youth cannot achieve the spectacularity of popularized representations of girlhood given their non-normative bodies and lack of disposable income” yet low-income, girls of color are still encouraged to see themselves in representations rooted in whiteness (Kearney, 2015, p. 270). Ultimately, Kearney (2015)

argues that sparkle can also function as a subversive aesthetic marker for queer and feminist culture via camp, offering the example of sparkle in theatrical performance whereby glitter is used to accentuate “anti-normative gender politics” (p. 270). Yet this resistance remains at the fringes, subversive because of the overwhelming dominance of neoliberal, posttrace discourses around consumer-driven empowerment. As troubling and exclusionary as these implications are, they spread far beyond the borders of U.S America. The hailing of Western girls as the epitome of feminist excellence and further the strategic framing of third world girls as not empowered, is another substantial area of literature respective to empowerment.

Western constructions of feminism have long been depicted as the epitome of feminist exceptionalism, often framed in a troublesome binary, whereby “white, Western (read: progressive/modern)” and “non-Western [is] (read: backward/traditional)” (Mohanty, 2005, p. 48). The reoccurring strategies used to “codify others as non-Western” and therefore more oppressed, have contributed to harmful narratives that shape how third world women and girls are perceived (Mohanty, 2005, p. 18). This gross imposition of Western standards of empowerment is not new. Franz Fanon (1967) details the French administration’s efforts to “save” Algerian, Muslim women, by ridding them of their veil (p. 42). Particularly, for the French, empowerment was a construct informed by French values and customs (i.e. clothing options), not a term that was contextually informed by women in Algeria. Thus, rather than conceive of the veil as a symbol of empowerment for Algerian women, the French forcefully imposed their beliefs on the local context. Similarly, rather than interrogate the kind of empowerment required for diverse girls based on their race, class, and geographic location, Western conceptions of

empowerment are consistently cast as an overall goal, whereby white, middle class, heterosexual constructions of girlhood, are framed as superior and the feminism by which all girls should aspire.

While women and girls have been simultaneously historically implicated in these violent Eurocentric narratives, twenty-first century discourses have become increasingly focused on the transformation of third world girls. Where third world women are overwhelmingly portrayed as “fiercely bounded by tradition, and therefore requiring much undoing,” third world children are framed in a perpetual state of becoming and have thus become a more strategic target for Western, neoliberalism (Desai, 2016, p. 252). Desai (2016) illustrates this inclination through an analysis of the popular documentary, *Girl Rising* and its corresponding curriculum aimed at Western audiences. Specifically, through strategic “post-colonial” representations, third world girls are portrayed in a perpetual state of destitution and poverty for the purpose of inspiring empathy from Western audiences (p. 251). Here cinematic and narrative choices framed the girls featured on *Girl Rising* as in need of Western consumption which is conversely framed as “desirable, available, and a guarantee for individual and community ‘progress’” (Desai 2016, p. 260). Respective to girlhood, then, Western feminism is problematically presented as the “proffered norm” whereby girls in the third world are perpetually “shaped by patriarchy, poverty, and victimization” (Koffman, Orgad, Gill 2015, p. 160).

Trapped in contradictory discourses, the self-actualized Western girl is a postfeminist success story, an image of empowered girlhood that now bears the responsibility of modeling “contemporary citizenship more broadly” (Bent & Switzer,

2016, p. 129). Bent and Switzer (2016) write, “[w]ithin the postfeminist moment, individual girls become responsible for their own neoliberal empowerment and rights, as well as for other more ‘vulnerable’ girls around the world” (p. 129). The strategic rhetoric of empowered, Western feminism thus frames girls as “saviors of humanity,” distanced from the atrocities imposed on less fortunate girls, the Western subject is instead pressured to express sisterly solidarity (Bent & Switzer, 2016, p. 123). Importantly, this solidarity does not encourage a redistribution of power via a “makeover of subjectivity for all concerned,” rather neocolonial divides are reinforced via the oppositional perception that it is the Western girls’ responsibility to transform less empowered third world girls via consumerism (Koffman, Orgad, Gill 2015, p. 158). Thus another major theme in empowerment literature (Koffman, Orgad, Gill, 2015; Khoa-Moolji, 2015; Bent & Switzer, 2016; Desai, 2016) deals with notions of Western empowerment wherein girls are uniformly conceived of as self-actualized agents for less privileged and more impoverished third world girls.

The final theme of empowerment discourses addresses the inherent exclusivity and homogeneity in representations of agential girlhood within U.S. America. Low income, girls of color are berated with the acknowledgement and recognition bestowed upon girls who meet the narrowest models of race, socio-economic status, body, and beauty. Koffman, Orgad, and Gill (2015) write, “[i]t is striking that empowerment is cast as an equal goal for all girls thereby ignoring the radical difference” of girls from distinct identity positions (p. 164). Thus, another thematic area of literature reviews the exclusion of empowerment discourses in U.S America, specifically this literature, notes the gross mistreatment of girls who are not white, heterosexual, cisgender, and middle class. This

is especially evident in danger discourses directed at “vulnerable” twenty-first century girls.

Western girlhood with its postfeminist, postrace, and neoliberal influences is not without its self-change discourses as they pertain to contemporary dangers. Within discussions of bullying, mean girl syndrome, eating disorders, etc., girls are simultaneously framed as empowered but susceptible to internal and external dangers. Yet, these negative influences and by extension the aid associated with these dangers is heavily racialized and varies significantly depending on girls’ identity and geographic location. Taft (2011) writes,

[p]rograms for more privileged, middle-class North American girls tend to focus on helping these girls to navigate the treacherous water of falling self-esteem and aggressive peers in order to become empowered. Low-income or ‘at risk’ girls of color are instead told that they must overcome the supposed dangers of their upbringing and make ‘healthy choices’” (Taft, 2011, p. 29).

Here middle-class, white girls are framed as deserving of protection to maintain their perceived innocence, while low-income, girls of color are viewed as already victims of the pressures imposed on twenty-first century girls (Harris & Dobson, 2015). A major theme in empowerment literature thus deals with who deserves to be empowered and how that empowerment is distributed (Gonick, 2010; Taft, 2011; Sibielsky, 2011; Bent & Switzer, 2016).

In the early twenty-first century, girls of color are heavily influenced by a contentious tension between the continued use of postrace rhetoric by conservative parties and a greater proliferation of intersectional injustice. From the postrace perceptions that dominated amid Barack Obama’s two terms as President, to the increased influence of social media and the wide broadcasting of raced, police brutality;

girls of color are being called into action in distinct and creative ways. Further, with the victory of Donald Trump over candidate and epitome of white feminist girl power, Hillary Clinton; the state of girl power exists in a contradictory moment. For corporations continue to benefit from token images of strong and independent women, for example the wide commercial success of *Wonder Woman*, yet legislatively, we're seeing a more visible displacement of girls who do not fit white, cisgender, citizenry standards. Particularly, Trump's ban on Middle Eastern immigrants, the refusal to accept trans-identified service people, an attempted rescinding of the Differed Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), Trump's usage of "Pocahontas" to belittle Senator Elizabeth Warren, among other discriminatory practices. The most recent legal exclusions have called into question past illusions of equity, mobilizing populations at the margins. Specific to girl power, girls who do not fit white, middle class representations remain largely understudied in terms of how they're reacting and resisting discriminatory policies. This dissertation addresses this exclusion, centering what I call girl of color-power, a nuanced approach to empowerment that affirms and validates the lived experiences of diverse girls. Contrary to exclusionary iterations that promote consumption, girl of color-power represents a unique brand of empowerment that does not function as a whiteness project. This dissertation unpacks the attributes of girl of color-power, accentuating attributes of empowerment that defy neoliberal representations and instead promote the collective action of diverse girls.

Girls of color exist in a unique position, largely regarded as powerless for a multitude of reasons. As minors, girls are still under the control of guardians, are too young to vote or run for office, and lack financial resources; yet instead of viewing these

limitations as impeding this population, scholars should recognize how these obstacles are shaping girl's "political choices in important and often unexpected ways" (Taft, 2011, p. 9). As we look toward the continued evolution of girl power, scholarship needs to address the strategic methods employed by girls of color who are responding to our historic moment by working toward socio-political change. As Taft (2011) notes in her transnational analysis of girl activism, girls are anything but apolitical often using methods that less clearly translate as "'social movement' practices" (p. 35). Whether its "shoreline clean-ups, visiting the elderly in nursing home...[or] volunteering at hospitals and soup kitchens" there is a plethora of girls of color who are placing social and political transformation at the forefront (p. 35). Further, they are using the limited resources at their disposal to subvert dominant representations of girlhood by organizing and centering the necessity of a political education. Girls do not exist in a vacuum, distanced from our historic moment, rather they feel the effects of exclusionary and discriminatory practices long before they have the vocabulary to articulate it. Further, they require unique support that does not fall within the exclusionary constructions that have, to date, dominated girl power.

Girl power and empowerment as conceptualized in Communication Studies scholarship has long referenced the exclusive nature of both terms, yet rarely are girls at the margins centered in such discourses except to reference their omission. This dissertation helps resolve this substantial gap, interrogating how girls impacted by contemporary iterations of girl power negotiate discourses that exclude them socioeconomically and racially. Further, girl power and empowerment discourses call our attention to the ways that young females face exigencies as a result of their standpoints,



and might respond to those exigencies in ways unique to their standpoints. As such, they raise questions of agency and identity: How do dominant iterations of girl power continue to exclude girls of color, irrespective of girl of color physical presence? How does a focus on low income, girl of color activism expand Communicative conceptions of identity and agency to account for diverse forms of social change activities, rarely conceived as social movements? What is girl of color-power and how does it differ from traditional girl power as a whiteness project? Through an analysis of contemporary girl power discourses this dissertation interrogates rhetorical and critical intercultural theorizations to account for diverse forms of resistance enacted by girls who have long been ignored in girl power scholarship. What follows is an overview of the thematic and methodological structure of my analysis.

#### Identity and Agency

Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva (2008) edited collection, *White Logic, White Methods: Racism and Methodology* functions as a methodological intervention, articulating the problematic habit of treating race as a static concept rather than a social construct influenced by a legacy of colonialism and imperialism. For Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva (2008), racial differences as studied in social scientific scholarship, often situate race as a “social status” informed by the individual (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008, p. 6). For example, through the individuated recognition that one identifies in a racial category box, via self-identify as Black/African American, Hispanic/Latina/o, Pacific Islander, etc., generalizations are made respective to the amount of individuals who identify similarly and report the same phenomenon. While this research seeks to control, measure, and predict findings that can then be generalized beyond the individual, they problematically

situate race as something that does not change across time (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Far from a static concept, race and perceptions of race are shaped by history and context, a significant point that has largely been overlooked when scholars attempt to operationalize race. This is largely a result of the historic and global privileging of white supremacy and the manner whiteness has functioned as an “unnamed political system,” shaping how we come to understand the world (Mills, 1997, p. 1). A raced center that situates itself as the status-quo, in theory and method, whiteness functions coercively to situate non-white individuals as the sole categories of raced people. Thus as scholars select theoretical and methodological positions, it is important to recognize that research choices are far from objective tools of study, rather they are ideologically situated and informed by the “interests and social position” of the scholar/researcher using them (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008, p. 7). While Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva (2008) work critiques this overwhelming whiteness in social scientific research, the argument can easily be extended to account for traditional theories and methodologies for studying persuasion. In the spirit of this critical approach, I interrogate my theory and method selection to account for the ways power and whiteness is implicated in their use.

Agency can be understood as the capacity for action, a force of possibility to effect change. As used by Kenneth Burke to conceptualize the pentad, agency is the means by which an act is achieved, accounting for the rhetorical strategies one employs to attain an outcome (Burke, 1945). Critical intercultural and rhetorical explorations of the relationship between identity and agency are diverse and varied (Cisneros, 2005; Sowards 2010, Enck-Wanzer, 2011; Rand, 2014) and while texts encompass a wide scope of communicative phenomenon, these bodies of work consistently draw from upon

Campbell's (2005) theorization: "Agency: Promiscuous and Protean." Particularly, Campbell's (2005) work provides an avenue to interrogate power structures implicit in agential strategies. Thus as I analyze agency in the context of girl power and girl of color-power, I draw from Campbell's germinal work as it informs my rhetorical and critical intercultural analysis. In her text, Campbell (2005) describes fundamental assumptions of agency in the form of five agential propositions: agency "(1) is communal and participatory, hence, both constituted and constrained by externals that are material and symbolic;" (2) [agency] is "invented" by authors who are points of articulation; (3) [agency] emerges in artistry or craft; (4) [agency] is effected through form; and (5) [agency] is perverse, that is, inherently, protean, ambiguous, open to reversal (p. 2).

Campbell's (2005) first proposition, agency is "communal and participatory," asserts the cooperative qualities of agency, as it is "constituted and constrained by the material and symbolic elements of context and culture" (Campbell 2005, p. 3). Rather than rely exclusively on how agency is being enacted, Campbell (2005) pushes us to consider who has access, and how socially constructed understandings of the world, shape both material and symbolic realities (Geisler, 2004). The second proposition asserts that agency is "invented" at the point of its expression, or that individuals are linked to "institutional powers" rather than original sources (Campbell, 2005, p. 5). Individuals are materially and linguistically influenced by standards of communication, yet far from being bound by these expectations. Individuals are also inherently rhetorical "inventors" able to "link the past and present" in such a way that creatively encapsulates contemporary understandings of life (Campbell, 2005, p. 5). The third proposition asserts that agency emerges in artistry or craft (Campbell, 2005, p. 6). Rather than expressed in

an expectant or formulaic fashion, agency as craft recognizes individuals' or communities' capacities to embrace and accept, that "things can be other than they are" (Campbell, 2005, p. 6). Ono and Sloop's (1995) account of vernacular discourse, or discourse that "resonates within local communities," is an example of agency's capacity to be artistry or craft as it accounts for discourse such as "music, art, criticism, dance, and architecture" that have not been traditionally regarded as discourse (p. 20).

The fourth proposition, that agency is effected through form, implies that "agency is textual or, put differently, texts have agency" (Campbell, 2005, p. 7). Operating through textual assumptions that the creator and audience share, a text allows listeners and audiences to understand signals being used so that they may "categorize" and understand "how a symbolic act is to be framed" (Campbell, 2005, p. 7). Finally, the fifth proposition, that agency is perverse, protean, ambiguous, and open to rehearsal is a consideration that agency "is the power to do evil to demean and belittle" (Campbell, 2005, p. 8). While agency holds the potential to be resistive and social justice oriented, it can also be used in service of exclusion and oppression.

In sum, Campbell's (2005) propositions foreground the role of power in how people choose to enact agency. For groups that have been historically displaced and remain marginalized respective to their identity standpoint, what is at their disposal relative to expressions of agency and how is a lack of access to mainstream public forums shaping their rhetorical strategies? I now turn to theories of identity to supplement this discussion of agency.

Identities are far from static, essential notions; rather they are the outcome of historical influences, manifested daily through interactions. An important marker of how

identity is reinforced and made to appear intrinsic, repetition or the re-creation of identity ensures categorical affiliation and a sense of belonging. Yet too often, identity is treated as a contemporary marker without an account of the historical and institutional sites “within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific modalities of power” that shape its production and continued hailing (Hall, 2000, p. 7). Here, white supremacy is a significant historical influence that has worked to strategically mark “difference and exclusion” as a greater sign of identity than a recognition of what is identical (Hall, 2000, p. 7). Thus identity, like agency, is not a static possession of a group or individual; rather it is constituted in rhetorical performances taking shape based on contextual influences that both “enable and constrain rhetors to speak and act” (Cisneros, 2012, p. 565). Further, the performative relationship between agency and identity emphasize their construction in relation to one another, whereby both concepts are manifested in rhetorically performative moments (Sowards, 2010). Respective to non-dominant identity groups then, the recreation of identity, for the purposes of enacting agency often function collectively to subvert and challenge dominant positioned groups. The relationship between identity and agency is closely linked, particularly Communication scholars studying social change note that identity:

can be synonymous with agency (the sense that one is capable of acting, effectively making social change) with collective consciousness (as one identifies with shared values, meanings, or/and goals), with standpoint (one’s positionality within and without different material discourses, such as race, class, gender, sex, sexuality, and nation), and with unique forms of social relationality (including the friend-enemy relationship, networks, or figures of collective subjectivity) (Foust et al., 2017, p. 8).

Herein lies the intricacies of identity situated agency, in that strategies and tactics are influenced by identity categories and vice versa as individuals seek rights, restitution, etc., through the simultaneous recognition and resistance of dominant identity categories.

Drawing from the work of Campbell (2005), my dissertation theoretically fleshes out the role of identity in girl power discourses noting the agential tactics used by a population that has been heavily overlooked in communicative scholarship. Theoretically and methodologically, the exclusivity and inherent whiteness of traditional academic inquiry is a major consideration as I'm critical of recreating colonial and dominant perceptions of the Other. Thus, I mark the implications of power and whiteness in my theorization of agency and identity, and further, influenced by the critique of white methods by Bonilla Silva and Zuberi (2008) I utilize a rhetorical method, McKerrow's (1989) critique of domination and freedom, in addition to Ono and Sloop's (1992) consideration of telos, to examine how girl power discourses operate from a position that privileges homogenized representations of girlhood. Specifically, through an analysis of repeated discourses that situated whiteness as a unifying standard to girl power and through an analysis of the distinct features of girl and color-power, this dissertation critically interrogates power-laden dynamics that shape how girls of color express agency.

#### A Critique of Domination and Freedom

Methods for studying public address, such as Aristotelian criticism within Communication Studies, have enabled scholars to analyze public address in diverse historical and political contexts. However, this traditional tool largely privileges a Eurocentric understanding of the world. Specifically, several of these methodologies

operate from the assumption that audiences experience phenomenon similarly without an account of how race, class, and gender (among other identity intersections) shape rhetorical texts, audiences, and what is considered persuasive. Further, the role of white supremacy in shaping what rhetorical address has been historically deemed worthy of analysis is another major consideration. Marginalized populations have long been forced to use diverse and creative rhetorical mediums that have been traditionally dismissed as inferior for not meeting traditional conceptions of what constitutes rhetorical address. Thus as I work to center the experiences of marginalized girls of color, I follow the work of decolonial scholars who question their “theoretical, critical, and interpretive choices” and further make it a priority to reveal how these political choices challenge dominant conceptualizations of Eurocentric knowledge (Wanzer-Serrano, 2015, p. 183). Through a consideration of Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva (2008) work I remain critical of theoretical and methodological choices, choosing to mark how whiteness operates and how this acknowledgement allows for a richer analysis of how power manifests in discourse.

McKerrow (1989) develops critical rhetoric as a methodological stance for analyzing discourse via fragments. Through an analysis of dimensions of domination and/or freedom the critic works as an inventor, piecing together texts to illuminate “hidden or taken for granted social practices” (McKerrow, 1989, p. 101). Further, the critic seeks to expose how power is implicated in discourses, to “unmask” taken for granted assumptions and to reveal “what intervention strategies might be considered appropriate to effect social change” (McKerrow, 1989, p. 91). According to McKerrow (1989), there are commitments that orient the rhetorical critic, as they: “critique as transformative practice rather than as a method, recognize the materiality of discourse,

reconceptualize rhetoric as” influenced by beliefs rather than epistemic, and view discourse as an activity that is “performed” (McKerrow, 1989, p. 91). Each consideration functions as a guiding principle in analyzing the relationship between discourse and power, refining the critic’s purpose in remaining critical of taken for granted manifestations of dominance. For McKerrow (1989), these fragments can be classified as either serving the purpose of the dominant group or dominated group and it is the job of the rhetorical critic to remain skeptical of each via a critique of domination and a critique of freedom.

A critique of domination is an analysis of the role of dominant social practices, which sustain and control “the dominated” (McKerrow, 1989, p. 92). Discourse “as it contributes to the interests of the ruling class, and as it empowers the ruled to present their interests in a forceful and compelling manner” is uncovered, and the critic is committed to exposing how dominant discourses are often framed as the status quo (McKerrow, 1989, p. 93). A critique of freedom is an analysis of the ways individuals “undermine and expose the discourse of power in order to thwart its effects in a social relation” (McKerrow, 1989, p. 98). In response to overwhelming, power-laden discourses from the dominant group, a freedom-centered analysis seeks to challenge taken for granted assumptions. For McKerrow (1989) an analysis of domination and or freedom, via a consideration of discourse fragments, present the critic with an account of how power manifests in discourse and further how it is subverted.

However, the implicit bifurcation in delineating these two categories present several problems that Ono and Sloop (1992) identify in their response piece to McKerrow (1989) “Commitment to Telos- A Sustained Critical Rhetoric.” For Ono and Sloop



(1992) the perhaps “unintended” polarization of domination and freedom is problematic in that they can be interpreted as distinct practices rather than two sides of the same coin (Ono and Sloop, 1992, p. 49). Ono and Sloop (1992) write, “[b]y critiquing domination, the critic responds to the oppression of institutional power, and by critiquing freedom, the critic engages in a self-conscious, skeptical critique of writing and thinking” practices that are inextricably linked and a response to one another (p. 50). Thus for Ono and Sloop (1992), it is important to view these fragments as different perspectives of “a single discursive struggle” that reveal a great deal about how power is manifested (p. 52). In my dissertation I respond to this consideration by simultaneously analyzing dominant girl power discourses and freedom-oriented responses, illustrating how these fragments of discourse are interconnected and a response to our historic context.

In addition to remaining critical of the implicit separation between a critique of domination and freedom, Ono and Sloop (1992) extend McKerrow’s (1989) work, arguing that the critic cannot treat herself/himself as existing outside the social systems s/he critiques. Arguing for a renewed commitment to telos, what they define as a “worldview or utopia,” Ono and Sloop (1992) emphasize that criticism must be situated closely to the social and cultural communities from which the criticism originates (p. 53). This emphasis on the potentiality of the future manifests as critics remaining reflexive of the social and cultural communities from which they themselves operate and how that in turn shapes the analysis of domination and freedom.

Operating from a position that is highly critical of the manner white supremacy has shaped traditional scholarship, I utilize McKerrow (1989) and Ono and Sloop’s (1992) conceptualizations of domination and freedom to pin point the manner whiteness

functions as a coercive discourse within girl power texts, shaping which manifestations of girlhood are privileged and how low income, girls of color are recreating girl power; what I call girl of color-power. Treating these discourses as heavily interrelated I demonstrate how girl of color-power is subverting posttrace, neoliberal iterations of girl power to more actively represent the potentiality of diverse girls. What follows is an overview of the three case studies I analyze in my dissertation, the American Girl *BeForever* series, the trajectory of girl power icon Beyoncé, and an analysis of a contemporary social justice, girl-oriented, activist group The Radical Monarchs. Each case study functions as an analysis chapter in the dissertation, demonstrating the interrelationship of dominant and freedom-laden girl power discourses and further drawing attention to the unique attributes to girl of color-power.

#### Domination and Freedom, A Case for Girl of Color-Power

American Girl is a widely popular conglomerate, that's made a substantial fortune marketing girl power through their large assortment of luxury dolls and accessories. A profitable brand and product, American Girl has come to symbolize Western discourses of girl power that are populated internationally. While the brand boasts numerous doll lines and products, the brand is notable for their marketing and heavy display of the *BeForever* series. Sold as a line "with a purpose," *BeForever* allows young girls to learn about unique historic settings via dolls, artifacts, and book series that represent diverse historic periods. To date the *BeForever* line consists of eleven dolls, five of which are girls of color: Addy Walker, a Black girl escaping slavery, Josefina Montoya, a Mexican girl living in what is now U.S. American territory, Kaya, a Native American girl from the Nez Percé tribe of the Northwest, Melodee Ellison, a Black girl in the midst of the Civil

Rights movement, and most recently Nanea Mitchell a Hawaiian girl growing up in the midst of World War II. Chapter Two focuses specifically on American Girl's representation of these five historic characters and the raced implications behind how these characters are marketed and sold. Rather than neutral, historic figures, I argue that Addy Walker, Josefina Montoya, Kaya, Melodee Ellison, and Nanea Mitchell are visual and historical "others," representative of historical contexts that are completely informed by whiteness or Western conceptions of time. Through a critique of domination, I argue that the discourses surrounding the dolls function as postrace, neoliberal representations of girl power that continue to overwhelm U.S. American popular culture.

The second case study I analyze (in Chapter Three), is on the prominent girl power artist Beyoncé and her considerable career, spanning the evolution of girl power discourses from 1998 to our present time. Beyoncé is a notable figure in regards to girl power as her image, music, and politics have significantly transitioned as she gained popularity and, with it, a greater role in dictating her artistic choices. From dissatisfaction with her "Bootylicious" image, to her most recent subversive Black woman manifesto "Lemonade," Beyoncé's career is a rich exemplar that lends itself to a critique of domination and freedom and how both are related discourses. Within the dissertation, I trace Beyoncé's musical career from her early postfeminist, postrace constructions of girl power, as exemplified in the lyrics and musical video's for *Bills, Bills, Bills* (1999) *Bootylicious* (2010) and *Nasty Girl* (2000) to her transgressive, Black-centered girl power discourses as exemplified in the 2016 release of her visual album *Lemonade* and her Black Panther inspired 2016 Super Bowl performance. I delineate the role of identity in

her past and contemporary constructions of agency and analyze the implications of her transformation respective to girl of color-power in the twenty-first century.

The third case study (offered in Chapter Four), centers The Radical Monarchs, a grassroots group loosely modeled after the Girl Scouts of America. Founded in Oakland, California in December of 2014 by Marilyn Hollingquest and Avayvette Martinez, the group takes a radical, women of color feminist approach to girl-education, putting social justice at the forefront of their curriculum and collaborative practices. The Radical Monarchs are invested in centering girls of color through affirming lessons (related to race, ethnicity, gender, and body image) and ethnic studies informed curriculum. Rather than recognizing girls for individuated achievement via badges for cookie sales or philanthropy, the Radical Monarchs, award badges for topics such “Black Lives Matter,” and “Radical Pride.” Placing collective engagement at the forefront of their politics, the *Radical Monarchs* are transforming girl power’s neoliberal orientation to instead “empower young girls of color so that they step into their collective power, brilliance and leadership” (Radical Monarchs, 2016, p. 1). Further, beyond focusing on becoming self-actualized individuals, the Radical Monarchs are invested in “radically” transforming their communities by disrupting “societal pressures to conform to mainstream ideals of girlhood” (Radical Monarchs, 2016, p. 1). The dissertation focuses on this group as a space for possibility in response to white, middle class representation of agential girlhood and an exemplar of the defining features of girl of color-power. In conclusion, and as summarized in Chapter Five, this dissertation expands upon traditional constructions of knowledge by centering the discourses affecting girls of color and further celebrating subversive responses aimed at recreating the world.

## Chapter Two

The American Girl store in Denver, Colorado is a spectacle. A celebration of pre-adolescent opulence with carefully coordinated vantage points and color palettes. Upon my first visit, I was overwhelmed by the orchestrated splendor: a beauty salon with doll-sized rotating stylist chairs, identical doll-and-me dresses, a *Truly Me* brand of dolls with varying skin shades and hair textures, the widest range of accessories I've ever seen (from horses to crutches), and it all worked so strategically with The Temptations singing "My Girl" in the background. Yet, the undeniable center of the American Girl world was the *BeForever* doll collection, a line of historical figures placed at the entrance of the store in large glass encasements. At the time of my visit, there were ten dolls surrounded by books and articles that matched the dolls' historic period. Among the ten was Samantha Parkington, a Victorian era white character from 1904 advertised with an ice cream parlor and tea set, Kitt Kittredge, a 1934 white character growing up amid the Great Depression accompanied by an orange crate scooter and chocolate making kit, and Julie Albright, a "flower power" white character from 1974 wearing bell bottom pants and positioned on an egg chair. The accessories were high quality, detailed, and held a nostalgic remembrance that is all too prevalent in popular culture: they were a celebration of white Americana. An homage to a "simpler time," romanticized in popular culture texts such as *Leave it to Beaver*, Norman Rockwell paintings, and Shirley Temple films.

My attention, then more acutely focused on the dolls of color within the line. On the surface, it appeared that American Girl went through great lengths to offer a diverse representation of American girlhood. At the time, the dolls of color consisted of Addy Walker, an enslaved Black character from 1864 advertised with a blue dress, white stockings, and accompanied by a detailed Civil War era quilt. There was Josefina Montoya, a Mexican American character growing up in Mexican territory New Mexico, 1824. Josefina wore a reboso, faux-leather moccasins, and was advertised with an outdoor oven typical of ranchos. Finally, there was Kaya, a Native American character from 1774 adorned with a pow-wow fringed dress, embroidered boots, and teepee with a fire pit that makes “crackling sounds.” The displays gave the impression of being culturally informed, yet upon closer inspection the carefully crafted images were in stark contrast to the uplifting historical remembrance hailed by the white characters. For unlike the white characters in the series, the narratives or more specifically historical accounts of the dolls of color were marked by discrimination, displacement, and second class citizenry. Their culture and the cultural artifacts that accompanied them are not prevalent within contemporary U.S. American culture, leaving me to wonder how girls of color make sense of their displaced historical counterparts. For unlike the varied white characters, the characters of color exist in dated contexts that are starkly different from our present moment.

The origin story of American Girl is well documented. In 1983, educator and history enthusiast, Pleasant Rowland, was frustrated with the limited and non-educational gift options available for girls. Rather than settle and purchase a Barbie or Cabbage Patch

doll, she set out to create a product that was personal, educational, and that American girls could relate to. Rowland wanted something that was “high quality,” but could also sustain the wear and tear from daily play (Morgenson, 1997, p. 124). The American Girl doll collection was born, a toy line that would simultaneously serve as entertainment *and* historical education. Her brand would differ from available dolls, as each doll would represent a U.S American historic era through a tailored narrative, the stylized representation of the character, and accessories that would coincide with the character’s historic context. Rowland proudly boasted that she aimed to put “vitamins in the chocolate cake” as girls would learn about the past by playing in the present (Morgenson, 1997, p. 125). Initially sold through catalogue marketing, the American Girl line would rapidly gain momentum, becoming a “250 million enterprise” just a decade after its inception (Morgenson, 1997, p. 126). In 1998, the line would attract a buyout from corporate giant Mattel Inc., and the brand would begin its ascent into American consciousness. Since 1986, “[o]ver 30 million American Girl dolls” have been sold through retail stores, the company website, and their ever popular catalogue (Fast Facts, 2018, p. 1). Specific to the historical narratives that accompany each doll, over “155 million” books have been sold to date (Fast Facts, 2018, p. 1). The *BeForever* line is an expensive commodity (an average doll accompanied by her introductory text sells for \$115 U.S American dollars), yet it appears their historical framing is often regarded as justification for their substantial cost. A notable influencer in the world of toys, American Girl stands as a cultural signifier of girl empowerment, heavily marketed as a celebration of past and present girlhood and coveted by an international audience.

Today, the American Girl brand has evolved from its original lineup boasting a multitude of highly profitable products and doll lines, yet the original series, renamed *BeForever* in 2014, remains at the forefront of the brand as evidenced through store displays, catalogue placement, and website visibility (American Girl Unveils BeForever, 2014, p.1). Further, while the lineup has transformed considerably throughout the years, the archiving of some characters and addition of others, at the time of this analysis the *BeForever* line consists of eleven characters: five white characters (Samantha Parkington, 1904, Caroline Abbott, 1812, Rebecca Rubin, 1914, Kitt Kittredge, 1934, and Julie Albright, 1974) and five characters of color that stand as the sole representatives of their race, with the exception of a second Black character added in 2017. The characters are: Addy Walker, an enslaved Black girl from 1864; Josefina Montoya a Mexican girl from 1824, Kaya, a Native American girl representing 1764, Melody Edison a Black girl growing up amid the 1963 Civil Rights Movements, and most recently Nanea Mitchell a Japanese/white character growing up in 1941 Oahu during the attack on Pearl Harbor. Unlike the varied lines offered by American Girl, throughout the years (such as Truly Me<sup>2</sup>, Bitty Baby Dolls<sup>3</sup>, and Girl of the Year<sup>4</sup>), the *BeForever* line stands apart for its detailed, historical-orientation. While a lot can be drawn from the cultural significance of American Girl branded girlhood, this analysis focuses on the five characters of color, within the

---

<sup>2</sup> Truly Me dolls are customizable from head to toe

<sup>3</sup> The Bitty Baby Doll line is comprised of eleven baby characters

<sup>4</sup> Girl of the Year dolls are exclusive characters heavily marketed and only available for a year before retirement



*BeForever* series and the strategic, solitary representations that situate them as perpetual Others. From the way the dolls are represented to the historical context they embody, this analysis looks toward the ideological impact of dolls of color for girls who seldom see themselves represented throughout history.

While some people might be tempted to reduce play materials as uninfluential, I join others in arguing that dolls function to socialize children by allowing them to act out developing notions of self and other. Dolls are pervasive, ideological influences that have historically served to develop a child's sense of self (Kagan, 1964). The freedom to play, however, has been grossly limited in part due to marketplace interests and the systemic normalization of classism, racism, sexism, etc. While a doll *can* still be used as a neutral play thing, contemporary versions are heavily designed to promote consumption via the familiarization of brands and the structuring of play scenarios. For example, a doll will be sold in a grocery store setting with a Wal-Mart shopping cart, thereby influencing what the child is consuming and the kind of role-playing taking place. As Campbell (2006) identifies, “[p]roduct placement affects children’s attitudes towards products” as they may be too young to discern the marketing of the product and instead play into inequitable power structures promoted through the placement of advertisements (p. 448). In this example, children will play into consumption and the posterity of Wal-Mart. Within the *BeForever* collection, an attribute not exclusive to the narratives of girls of color, American Girl provides advertisements, encouraging the purchase of their products. The books were never meant to stand on their own as American Girl promotes the collective purchase of products that can allow girls to *authentically* perform the texts.

This is evident in an advertisement within Addy's text: "While books are the heart of The American Girls Collection, they are only the beginning. The stories in the Collection come to life when you act them out with the beautiful American Girls dolls and their exquisite clothes and accessories" (Porter, 2001, p. 371). What implications do these dolls have when accompanied by "factual" historical narratives aimed at bolstering identification? Further, the agential choices enacted by the characters reveal a great deal about the actions girls of color are encouraged to take part in, within society at large. Although the girls' live in distinct historical settings and further navigate the world differently relative to their identity makeup, actions that promote neoliberalism and postracism can be interpreted in their decisions and actions. A dominant representation of girl power discourses, I argue that the characters of color within the *BeForever* series, although appearing inclusive, hail exclusionary discourses that do not account for the lived experiences of girls of color in the twenty-first century. In the larger context of this dissertation, this chapter is a representation of the discourses girls of color are exposed to as visual inclusion of Otherness is used to promote discourses that benefit white supremacy.

For the purpose of this chapter, I focus on the introductory narratives of Addy Walker, Kaya, Josefina Montoya, Melody Ellison, and Nanea Mitchell and the "Looking Back" sections of each text, a portion that lends credibility to the girls' stories by providing supplementary historical context. While there are numerous texts assigned to each of the *BeForever* dolls, the introductory text is significant in that it is provided when one purchases a doll, thereby providing the most detailed account of the character, her

setting, and the historical context surrounding her experiences. Further, in analyzing the “Looking Back” sections of each text, I am critical of historical anecdotes meant to provide “objective” accounts of the past. Far from unbiased discourses, I argue that the “Looking Back” sections work strategically to downplay the continued existence of racism, sexism, classism, etc. For unlike Addy Walker, Kaya, Josefina Montoya, Melody Ellison, and Nanea Mitchell, racism and its impact on all intersections of one’s positionality is not situated solely in the past.

McKerrow’s (1989) assessment of dominant discourses actualized in a relativized world, provides the methodological grounding for this chapter. More specifically, I utilize his assessment of critical rhetoric to understand social practices that benefit dominant groups. Where at face value the historical accounts and aesthetic markers promote identification, the constructed packages ascribe to dominant iterations of agency whereby girls are encouraged to focus on individual accomplishments rather than structural conditions that affect the lived conditions of girls of color. Upon coding and analyzing each character’s introductory texts three themes were identified as they appear throughout each narrative: the negation of white complicity within white supremacy, an emphasis on progress, and the celebration of the meritocratic agent of color. Each theme was present in the character of color texts despite the diverse geographic and spacial time they occupied.

#### Minimizing White Supremacy and Settler Colonialism

The stories of Kaya, Josefina Montoya, and Addy Walker most readily represent the strategic coding of white supremacy within the texts, particularly as each character

came to represent a geographic and historical context completely shaped by colonial violence. White supremacy can be understood as the “underlying social machinery” that perpetually places whiteness on top of hierarchical designations of race (Martinot, 2010, p. 3). Emerging from a historical legacy of coloniality, or “criminality, including kidnapping, false imprisonment, forced labor, murder, contempt for personhood, assault, torture, and theft of land,” white supremacy is an unnamed system that has secured its dominance through prejudiced systems of social and cultural control (Martinot, 2010, p. 20). Evasive, and with the ability to transform in the face of opposition, white supremacy operates through perpetually shifting strategies that encourage its dismissal and instead deflect responsibility for unjust practices on individual groups. Further, the perpetuation of settler colonialism, as a project of white supremacy, is notable within American Girl texts, as the stories rhetorically omit the role of settler colonialism in shaping discriminatory practices for bodies of color. Settler colonialism can be understood through European colonization and British rule over U.S America. As early European colonial subjects resistant British rule, white people “initiated a process of colonizing” indigenous people (Hoxie, 2008, p. 1157). Through the destruction of indigenous populations, culture, and identity, settler colonialism fortified the institution of white supremacy, securing its prominence in contemporary U.S. American sovereignty. In the context of American Girl, this evasiveness can be understood through the tactful reduction of white supremacy within historical contexts completely shaped by settler colonialism. Particularly, instead of implicating white bodies in the historical conquest of land and destruction of bodies of color, the texts isolated parts of “the machine” as solely

responsible for the injustices experienced by characters (Martinot, 2010, p. 10). This is evident in Kaya, Josefina, and Addy's texts.

Kaya and Josefina stand apart from other American Girl dolls of color in that their characters represent historic periods that predate conquest, yet instead of being represented as autonomous people with cultural practices and values that predate European influence, their lives remain informed by the inevitable colonization of their homelands and the superiority of European culture. Kaya, or Kaya'aton'my, is a Native American member of the Nez Perce tribe within the 1760 Pacific Northwest, a setting that predates direct contact with the "pale faces" (Shaw, 2002, p. 41). Yet while the story centers Kaya's gendered pursuits, grappling with her ego, wanting to be the best horsewoman, and watching her sister come of age via a courting ritual, the concerns reflect more of a 1999s/2000s consciousness wherein one could replace cultural signifiers with those of white culture, and the gendered pursuits would remain the same. The geographic setting, time, and gendered order of the Nez Perce tribe are used to package a girl power that is relatable to a homogenized caricature of girlhood, the white, middle class subject. Additionally, colonialism is a looming presence strategically coded throughout the story. Through quick references to impending colonialism, readers are only able to understand Kaya's existence in relation to whiteness. For example, Kaya's grandmother references the "terrible sickness" brought on by European invasion:

Then she ran her hands across her cheeks. 'You see these pockmarks on my face,' she said. 'I was one who got the sickness. My own mother died of it—I've told you that, too. These pockmarks remind me how few of us survived. They remind me that not just good things came into our lives with the horses. But the marks also remind me to be strong and help others (Shaw, 2002, p. 41).

Here “the sickness” functions as a euphemism for the death and destruction brought by Europeans. The deliberate use of disease by European invaders is erased and readers are instead encouraged to view sickness as a neutral result of migration patterns (Shaw, 2002, p. 41). This evasive coding of white supremacy is further evident in the “Looking Back” section of Kaya’s text, a portion of the text meant to substantiate the fictional narrative with historical context. Shaw (2002) writes, “[d]espite the friendliness Nez Perce showed to whites, the United States government took away most of the Nez Perce’ homeland in the mid-1800s so that white pioneers could settle on it” (p. 68). Here, the United States government functions as a nameless entity inflicting discriminatory legislation and displacing people from their homeland. This reference in conjunction with mention of “white pioneers” functions rhetorically to bifurcate white people and minimize the implications of white supremacy. For it was select whites in governing positions who enacted these injustices not white *pioneers*, explorers of a new geographic setting. White supremacy remains illusive and “the government” becomes culpable for an entire system of discriminatory practices that benefit white people. While Native American girls might see the cultural authenticity of the character’s garb, the discursive dismissal of European violence works towards the maintenance of white supremacy.

Similarly, Josefina Montoya is a Mexican character from 1824 in what was still Mexican land, New Mexico. While her narrative centers the experiences of her family after the passing of her mother, references to a European hierarchical designation are coded throughout her text. Particularly, in reference to her more “progressive” Tia: “Fransisca whispered, ‘Isn’t Tia Dolores’s dress beautiful? Her sleeves must be the latest

style from Europe” (Tripp, 1997, p. 32). Where Josefina’s rancho life is depicted as antiquated and devoid of “grand people and grand houses,” Tia Dolores’ European garb and ability to play the piano are positioned as pioneering and superior to Mexican rancho life (Tripp, 1997, p. 65). The violent conquest of Mexican land by U.S. America is reduced to a narrative of progress and girls are encouraged to view the conquest of Mexican land in an exclusively positive light. This is further evidenced in the “Looking Back” section of Josefina’s text where Manifest Destiny, a belief in the structural, cultural, and religious conquest of North America by Europeans, is rhetorically occulted: “Today, New Mexico is one of the 50 states in the United States. But in 1824, when Josefina was a girl, New Mexico was part of the country of Mexico. For New Mexico—belonged to Spain” (Tripp, 1997, p. 76). Here, “belonged” grossly undermines the Spanish conquest of Mexico, a significant feature that continues to have implications relative to language, culture, and colorism for Mexican American girls in the twenty-first century. Instead, girls of color are encouraged to align with white supremacy through the celebration of geographic conquest.

The strategic reduction of white supremacy is perhaps most evident within Addy Walker’s narrative, one of the first American Girl characters and the representative figure for the atrocities of slavery. Situated in 1864, on the eve of the Civil War, Addy’s narrative follows her and her family’s courageous escape from slavery in North Carolina and her negotiation of a prejudiced world, despite her eventual “free” status. Yet, even as Addy’s complete existence is blatantly controlled by racism and violence, the author contributes to the minimization of white dominance by only representing white

supremacy through the most violent characters. Particularly, racism is only evident through overt displays of violence from master Stevens (the owner of the tobacco plantation) and the overseer, a character who supervises enslaved Black children. By isolating the atrocities of these characters and only representing white supremacy in its most blatant manifestation, readers are encouraged to overlook the everyday manifestations that contribute to its institutional presence. Even as Addy attempts to process the violence inflicted upon her family, her mother contributes to the illusive nature of white supremacy:

Addy, all white people don't hate colored people. Not all of them do us bad. Master Stevens was wrong to sell Sam and Poppa and to whip you. But Addy, people can do wrong for such a long time, they don't even know it's wrong no more. What's worst is when people hurt each other and don't even care they hurting them. Like that overseer. He a mean man. That's what hate do to people. I don't want you to ever be that kind of person (Porter, 2001, p. 25).

A 2018 report entitled *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery*, meant to be an intervention toward the way slavery is taught in the U.S American public education system, reveals key problems with the way slavery is discussed in academic settings. Among the problems identified, the report found “[t]extbooks and teachers” accentuating the positive via tokenized figures, such as Harriet Tubman, a major issue as the focus on uplifting narratives problematically occults “the full, painful context of slavery” (Turner, 2018, p. 1). The report further found a dangerous resistance toward teaching that “slavery depended on the ideology of white supremacy” as teachers and students choose to avoid the pain and embarrassment associated with whites perpetuating this violence (Turner, 2018, p. 1). Aligned with the need to protect white feelings and avoid discussions of the continued benefits bestowed on white people, American Girl boasts a softened account of



the past wherein a few bad people perpetuated the evil. This is further evident in the singular reference to the African slave trade. When Addy and her mother escape from slavery, her mother gifts her a cowrie shell that belonged to her grandmother:

This cowrie shell belonged to Poppa's grandma. She was stole from Africa when she was no bigger than you. None of her family was on the ship with her when she came here from across the water. She wore this shell on a necklace (Porter, 2001, p. 40).

The strategic wording, "she was stole," works to rhetorically shift focus from the bodies enacting violence to the victim of the violence, in this case Addy's grandmother. While some may argue that the book presents an age-appropriate account of the atrocities of the middle passage, no mention is made toward who inflicted the harm and benefitted from the enslavement of Black people. In a separate literary outlet, creator of American Girl, Pleasant Rowland commented on the inclusion of Addy Walker to the collection, "[t]hrough Addy we made a black doll an object of status and desire for white girls. Not just black girls, but white girls, too" (Morgenson, 1997, p. 150). Addy Walker, as literary character and doll, remains an object to be consumed by white girls, a figure completely shaped by white violence yet represented as victim to the violence of a select few. Ultimately the negation of white supremacy within historical contexts, shaped by its violence, functions to perpetuate the existence of white domination; particularly for girls of color who continue to face the institutional, economic, and cultural limitations of its legacy. In American Girl world, the benefits allotted to whites as a result of colonization and enslavement are ignored in favor of evasive rhetorical tactics and postrace sentiments.

## An Emphasis on Progress: The Postrace Character of Color

Where the texts work strategically to code the influence of white supremacy, a celebration of progress is undoubtedly at the forefront of every character's story. Here, racism and discrimination are treated as antiquated belief systems that American Girl heroines are able to rise above. Postrace sentiments, or the belief that U.S. America has progressed beyond its racist and discriminatory past, is promoted through sentiments that almost completely ignore the continued effects of racism for bodies of color (Teasley and Ikard, 2010). This is true of Melodee Ellison and Nanea Mitchell's texts. Melodee Ellison is a Black girl growing up in 1963 amid the Civil Rights Movement. Daughter and sister to a musically inclined family, her narrative is unique in that it centers her growing awareness of discriminatory practices and the national protests that emerged as a result. Yet, what is notable is the twenty-first century postrace position in which her growing awareness of racial injustice is situated within. Melody's developing consciousness around race comes from a naive position. This is evident when Melody's sister Yvonne explains the violent tactics used to prevent Black folks from voting: "Melody sighed. Maybe the lady Yvonne mentioned didn't want to risk losing *her* home if she 'spoke out' by voting...—it was hard to understand how that could happen in the United States of America in 1963!" (Patrick, 2016, p. 17). Rather than present Melody as a character grappling with an evolving sense of self and what it means to be Black in her historic context, she is a character that adheres to postrace sentiments of progress, operating from a position of naivety that caters to white audiences who have not been raised with racism in their blood. For her to only now feel the effects of racism is

suspicious given the pervasive nature of inequity for bodies of color, particularly for a Black girl in 1963. This emphasis on progress and erasure of difference is perhaps most evident when Patrick (2016) references the hardships Melody's parents and grandparents have had to bear before her generation.

In reference to the discriminatory practices Black people have had to historically endure, the text offers examples from Melody's grandparents and parents relative to work and everyday life, such as her grandfather being undersold for his crops. Yet in spite of these examples, the emphasis of Melody's text remains on progress and an eventual erasure of difference, in this case, color. Patrick (2016) writes:

Melody thought about how her grandparents usually said 'colored.' They were older and from the South, and Big Momma said that's what was proper when they were growing up. Mommy and Daddy mostly said 'Negroes.' But ever since she went to college, Yvonne was saying 'black people.' Melody noticed that Mommy and Daddy were saying it sometimes, too. She liked the way it went with 'white people,' like a matched set. But sometimes she wished they didn't need all these color words at all. Melody spoke up. 'What about 'Americans?'' she said (Patrick, 2016, p. 18).

Here, Melody becomes the embodiment of postracism, operating from a colorblind mentality that situates prejudice firmly in the past. Colorblindness functions as a tool within postrace ideology, promoting the belief that differences, such as race, are irrelevant because we've reached an equitable plateau. Yet, these discursive practices serve to benefit those in power, ignoring a historical legacy of discriminatory practices that have allowed select groups to possess power. In this case, white Americans. Thus, through the recognition of historical markers of difference, "colored" and "Negroes," Melody frames the future as an idyllic space that is absolved of difference, a space where people can just exist as "Americans" (Patrick, 2016, p. 18). The agency exercised by

Melody's character is the type of agency American Girls are encouraged to strive for as it is aligned with white supremacy and not intent on hailing the atrocities of the past that white Americans continue to benefit from. Instead, Melody is speaking up, finding her individuated voice to then stress messages of unity and sameness. Aligned with dominant representations of acceptable manifestations of agency, empowerment is about the individual advocating for themselves. The text was not written for girls of color who continue to contend with a historical legacy of racism and prejudice. It was instead written for the unknowing girl who can revel in how far U.S America has come, and its effects are to perpetuate whiteness through a postrace erasure of difference.

Nanea Mitchelle is the latest addition to the *BeForever* lineup. A *hapa* character, half Hawaiian and half white, she was released in 2017 and is representative of Oahu, Hawaii during the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor. Aware of her mixed race upbringing and often noted in context to her white father ("His hair was carrot-red and hers was black; he had blue eyes, she had hazel"), Nanea is vocal about the cultural and racial diversity on the island as represented through her Japanese friends, the Portuguese mailman, and references to Chinese shop owners (Larson, 2017, p. 5). Yet, whiteness as a colonizing influence within Hawaii is strategically coded or omitted in favor of postrace sentiments. Perhaps most noticeable is Nanea's passing reference to the overthrowing of Queen Lili'uokalani, the last Hawaiian queen:

Nanea knew that way back then, the rich sugar plantation owners decided they would make better rulers than the queen. They made a plan to take over the government. But those men didn't care about the Hawaiian people the way the royal family did. It had been a long, long time since Hawaii had been ruled by royalty, but Nanea felt proud that her school—Lunalilo—was named after one of its kind (Larson, 2017, p. 17).

This version of history completely omits the role of whiteness in overthrowing the Hawaiian monarchy. For the “rich sugar plantation owners” were comprised of wealthy white men, such as Sanford Dole, who recognized the colonial benefits of overthrowing a beloved Hawaiian queen. A contentious political and social act that has resulted in the displacement of native Hawaiian and Polynesian people and a disruptive cycle of tourism that Hawaii continues to depend on, Larson (2017) instead presents an image of cohesion that ignores the implications of white supremacy. Further, through comments such as “those men didn’t care about the Hawaiian people the way the royal family did,” the text discursively disconnects the “men” from the systemic forces that enabled them to overthrow Hawaii. Readers are instead encouraged to see how this historical occurrence was the result of one group of people imposing law on another group of people. Whiteness is erased from the historical record and tourism is instead painted as a positive institution that *everyone* benefits from.

Specific to tourism, the text mentions the presence of “haoles,” the Hawaiian word for white people, in an almost exclusively positive light, skimming and downplaying the effects of tourism to Native Hawaiians (Larson, 2017, p. 11). Specially, readers are offered a glimpse into the prevalence of haole visitors as Nanea travels to the beach shore. Larson (2017) notes, “[Nanea] watched island boys diving for the coins that tourists tossed into the water as the Royal Hawaiian Band played” (Larson, 2017, p. 21). Further, commenting on the environment Larson (2017) writes, “[n]oting the long line of tourists waiting to buy leis from her neighbor. A woman with two children waited at the very end of the line. The little girl held on to her mother’s skirt. The boy wore a cowboy

hat and spun a lasso, trying to catch something” (Larson, 2017, p. 22). Similar to the references to rich sugar plantation owners, the raced power dynamics that came to control Hawaii’s economic landscape are obliterated through the strategic negation of whiteness in scenes such as these. Island boys diving for expendable income thrown into the water, becomes a calming sight as opposed to one informed by economic disparities, as Hawaiian people were largely forced to work in industries that catered to tourists. Further, references to the “Royal Hawaiian band” and the purchase of “leis” by a family, but more specifically, a boy donning a cowboy hat and lasso, alludes to the sale of Hawaiian culture for the benefit of tourists. The historical account being shared through American Girl diminishes the commodification of Hawaiian culture and the damage the selling of culture has caused for Native people who struggle to preserve traditional ways of life outside of tourism (Lukasz et. al., 2007, p. 1). Instead, readers are encouraged to exist and act in a colorless landscape of difference, whereby whiteness is ignored and Nanea seeks to share the “aloha spirit” amid the attack on Pearl Harbor and subsequent militarization of the island (American Girl Catalogue, 2017, p. 26). This is further evident in the hailing of meritocracy within *BeForever* narratives.

#### The Neoliberal, Girl Power Agent

Meritocracy ascribes to the belief that everyone has the “opportunity” for upward mobility and that success is reliant on individuated effort and gumption (Littler, 2013, p. 52). Aligned with the ideology that one is able to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and rise above their disenfranchised state, meritocracy functions as a tool within neoliberalism servicing a culture that benefits “government by a wealthy elite” (Littler,

2013, p. 53). As a recurring, and pervasive narrative within U.S American culture, meritocracy validates middle and upper class values, framing them as the epitome of what people should aspire to rather than privileges disproportionately bestowed as a result of colonial rule. A prevalent ideology, meritocracy works to reproduce a neoliberal culture, providing justification for an inequitable power distribution that is maintained through capitalism. Melody's text offers a rich exemplar for how neoliberalism and meritocracy are promoted within the context of American Girl. First, Melody's text stands out for its numerous corporate references and the manner they encourage marketplace identification with twenty-first century girls. This attribute may be specific to Melody's text as her 1967-time frame presents the opportunity to use products that are still being manufactured. Specifically, references are made to "Kool-Aid," "Cheerios," and "Mickey Mouse" in the service of marketplace consumption (Porter, 2001, p. 96, p. 98, p. 182). References to brands within *BeForever* historical narratives function to normalize and encourage consumption and the identification it provides. In this context, girls are encouraged to identify with a character who also eats Cheerios and consumes popular culture rather than a girl who is capable of existing outside the confines of capitalism. This embrace of marketplace solidarity is not the only manner the neoliberal, girl power agent is celebrated. Throughout stories that center issues of racial injustice, meritocracy is hailed whereby prejudice is deemed most violent when applied to exceptional characters of color.

The characters within Melody's text are by all accounts exceptional. Whether by vocation or skill, Melody's narrative represents the most advantageous of circumstances

for Black people living within oppressive conditions. While one could argue that the beneficial circumstances make the stories palatable for their intended demographic, for girls of color continuing to live under oppressive conditions the stories place damaging expectations on what people of color should be able to accomplish in spite of a legacy of discrimination. Melody's father represents this pattern, as evident when he discusses the limited employment available for Black people after World War II:

Daddy said, 'There we were fighting for freedom for the world, and we didn't have it when we got back home.' 'But you two were Tuskegee Airmen!' Dwayne said. 'I mean, you got a medal, Dad!' 'Yes. I was the most highly trained mechanic in my unit. I kept those planes in top flying condition. But when I left the service, I couldn't get a job in my hometown. I had to move all the way to Detroit, and even here I had to start at the bottom doing the most backbreaking jobs at the auto factory (Patrick, 2016, p. 70).

Melody's father is the embodiment of meritocratic success. An exceptional Black one who served his country as a Tuskegee Airmen (a celebrated group of Black military pilots), was awarded a congressional medal of honor, and was a highly trained mechanic in his unit. An individual who was able to rise in spite of substantial opposition and yet was still unable to find work when he returned from war. Here the implications are that injustice toward exceptional people is wrong. Had Melody's father been an unemployed civilian, the narrative by which he deserved equal rights would have been vastly different. Aligned with twenty-first century narratives of meritocracy, Melody's father was not depicted as deserving equality for simply being human. Instead, a focus on his exceptional nature became justification for why he deserved rights. Similar to discourses around immigration rights, only the most successful people under capitalism are depicted as worthy of equality. Humanity is not regarded as viable justification. Ultimately,



American Girl is firmly aligned with capitalism and the ideology that promotes its survival. Rather than depict a girl of color character who can recreate the world in ways that aren't aligned with corporate interests, purchasing power and a meritocratic belief that maintains those in power is coded throughout the *BeForever* world.

## Conclusion

The girl power espoused through American Girl is predicated on a homogenous caricature of what it means to be a girl in the twenty-first century. For not only is this caricature fixated on posttrace narratives of progress, she also ascribes to neoliberal manifestations of agency whereby problems can be solved through participation in a market economy and through individuated advocacy. Aligned with dominant representations of girl power in the twenty-first century, the homogenous consumer of American Girl products is white, middle class and lives in an idyllic present devoid of the racism and prejudice from the past. Yet girls are far from homogenous. Specific to low income, girls of color who contend with a political environment that continuously threatens their well being and existence, empowerment cannot exist within a world that continues to adhere to markers of white supremacy. Where dominant manifestations of girl power feign inclusivity with the superficial presence of bodies of color, it is necessary to be critical of representations and the depths through which diversity is being hailed. For as American Girl, *BeForever* dolls illustrate, the presence of difference can still be in service to the overwhelming whiteness within girl power.

The tension between visual and ideological diversity is at the forefront of twenty-first century girl power discourses. Particularly, visual representations of diversity are

widely used in popular culture with a disproportionate engagement with practices that subvert the maintenance of white supremacy. While there are numerous social and cultural practices that one can attribute to this superficial hailing of diversity, the educational system is a major contributing factor as students are overwhelmed with Eurocentric accounts of the past. Specifically, though the strategic minimizing of colonialism and imperialism, and through a superficial engagement with how these forces continue to benefit white people, students are not given the tools to understand contemporary power relations. The “Looking Back” sections of the *BeForever* texts illustrate this point, drawing attention to the types of historical anecdotes normalized in public education. While the atrocities of the past are referenced via references to “white settlers” and an individuated account of the horrors of slavery (for example) girls are encouraged to view these practices as firmly situated in the past with no influence on reoccurring inequitable practices. Girl of color-power deviates from girl power as it represents an alternative framework of history wherein the development of girl’s political consciousness is at the forefront.

Girl of color-power moves beyond the aesthetic identification boasted by American Girl to instead engage histories of people of color. Specifically, through a historical centering of groups such as the Black Panthers, the Brown Berets, and The New York Young Lords, girl of color-power is a radical departure from historical accounts that perpetuate white supremacy. Instead, histories of resistance are centered and put in conversation with the institutions of colonialism and slavery. Within chapter four and chapter five I more thoroughly explicate the manner in which critical pedagogy

is enacted for the purpose of developing girls' political consciousness. Far from promoting agential efforts aligned with dominant power structures, girl of color-power, as a framework, works toward developing the self to then participate in actions that promote social justice. Where there is something to be said about the intricate visual identification crafted by American Girl, there is an imperative to move beyond the visual and instead engage the role of white supremacy in shaping Western culture(s). A failure to engage these social and cultural practices promotes a landscape of vapid empowerment narratives wherein girls echo positive sentiments that are detached from the world at large.

### Chapter Three

Since the proliferation of “girl power” as a feminist motto and catch-cry, in the twentieth century, music has been a principle source of its dissemination. While the origins of the term are firmly situated with the punk rock antics of the Riot Grrrls, it is important to note that the inspiration for girl power came from eighties Black hip hop artists, such as, Queen Latifa, Salt-n-Pepa, and MC Lyte, who used pro-girl messages, “i.e You go, Girl!” and aggressive posturing to enter exclusively male hip hop scenes (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005, p. 30). Yet girl power as the motto we have come to know in popular culture is predominantly attributed to the politicized action of the Riot Grrrls, a group of predominantly white, college educated feminists who were revolting against a sexist punk rock scene. Through lyrics that boasted revolution, sexual liberation, and an end to misogyny (among other themes) the inception of girl power was about girls controlling the production of their culture. Through music, a tactful aesthetic that defied feminine performances and the creation of material such as zines, posters, and music, the movement was about valuing the creative potentiality of girls who are inundated with messages of passivity and vulnerability. The ethic was, “if we start to value girls more and celebrate their culture, girls in turn will feel positive about themselves and will achieve higher self-esteem” (Riordan, 2001, p. 289). The girl power espoused by the Riot Grrrl scene would gain mass popularity and with it a co-opting by corporations looking to benefit from an appeal to female customers. In the late twentieth

to early twenty-first century, girl power became “reified into tangible commodities,” re-packaged and sold with a postfeminist ethic that boasted individualized empowerment absent of institutional change (Riordan, 2001, p. 289).

Post-feminism assumes that “the women’s movement has accomplished its goals, and barriers facing women have been removed” (Ferber, 2012, p.67). Relative to music, the Spice Girls most notably adopted the postfeminist girl power motto as part of their brand and would continuously use the label to sell music and products. Evidenced through the Spice Girls’ vast corporate sponsorship for example, the group participated in an international Pepsi campaign where they sang the slogan “Generation Next” and danced with a wardrobe that accentuated their breasts, torsos, and legs. As music progressed into the twenty-first century, the pop revolution would see the continuation of a postfeminist ethic as artists such as Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, and Jessica Simpson would adopt diluted feminist messages that reduced feminine empowerment to appearance, the material, and a girl’s ability to capture the male gaze. The Spice Girls postfeminist hailing and the subsequent music that followed was a far cry from Riot Grrrl representations, as they were clearly aligned with hetero-patriarchy, reducing empowerment to individualized efforts predicated on a hyper sexualized aesthetic.

From the Riot Grrls to the source of this chapter Beyoncé, the evolution of music from the end of the twentieth century to the early twenty-first century marks ideological shifts respective to feminism, what constitutes feminine empowerment, and importantly, representation. Specifically, while the Riot Grrrls boasted an inclusive ethic relative to girl empowerment, as exemplified in their manifesto:

Because doing/reading/seeing/hearing cool things that validate and challenge us can help us gain the strength and sense of community that we need in order to figure out how bullshit like racism, able-bodieism, ageism, speciesism, classism, thinism, sexism, anti-semitism and heterosexism figure in our lives,” the movement was predominantly white (Riot Grrrls Manifesto, 1990, p. 1).

Similarly, as the music industry continued to construct and commodify female beauty into the twenty-first century, empowerment remained predicated on whiteness and the ability to fit rigid beauty standards.

As I worked toward selecting a prominent musical figure representative of an alternative to the whiteness and commodification represented through the pop revolution, Destiny’s Child and Beyoncé were a clear choice. The incredible popularity of Destiny’s Child’s early career amid the pop revolution and the profound Black-oriented music transformation of Beyoncé, represented free and dominant discourses relative to girl power. This chapter thus traces the evolution of girl power from the early twenty-first century to our current politicized moment through music icon Beyoncé and her substantial girl power career. While Beyoncé’s early career with Destiny’s Child, and as a solo artist, ascribed to neoliberal, postfeminist iterations of girl power, I argue that the politicized transformation of her music and image, in light of the Black Lives Matter movement and the wide broadcasting of police brutality, represents nuanced markers of girl power aimed at affirming and uplifting girls of color. As a popular culture presence throughout the evolution of girl power, Beyoncé’s musical and political evolution mark both dominant and freedom laden fragments respective to girl power that I analyze. By analyzing these fragments, I expand upon the visual diversity analyzed with the *BeForever* dolls (in Chapter Two). Where Beyoncé’s early career was aligned with the

historical representations of neoliberalism, postfeminist, and post-racism evident through the characters of color within *BeForever*, her later career and artistic centering of Black femininity represent a radical departure relative to empowerment discourses.

Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter first gained musical popularity in 1996 with the all-girl hip hop and rhythm and blues group Destiny's Child. Consisting of herself, Kelendria (Kelly) Rowland, LaTavia Roberson and Letoya Luckett, the group received some success when their self-titled debut album peaked at 67 on the Billboard 200 Albums chart (McKinney, 2015, p. 1). However, shortly after their debut, the group would experience turmoil respective to membership, and after a public breakup and line-up change, the group would emerge as the iconic trio we know today: Beyoncé, Kelly, and Tenitra Michelle Williams, who like Kelly, went by her middle name (Michelle) to appeal to a whiter audience. As a trio, Destiny's Child found immense success with #1 hits such as, *Bootylicious*, *Survivor*, and *Independent Women, Part 1* and throughout their expansive career would sell "upward of sixty million records over the next decade, supplanting both Salt-N-Pepa and SWV as the go-to black-girl group" (Als, 2016, p. 1). In 2003, the group would briefly separate to pursue solo projects. During this break, Beyoncé earned her first solo number one hit with "Crazy in Love," solidifying her solo stardom. In 2004 the group would reunite for a final album "Destiny Fulfilled" before permanently dismantling and paving the way for Beyoncé's ascent to being a solo girl power icon.

As a solo artist, Beyoncé has amassed six number one billboard hits and eighteen top ten hits. She has transcended the music industry and starred in popular films such as

*Dream Girls*, a role that earned her \$12.5 million, making her one of the highest paid Black actresses of the time (Gajanan, 2017, p. 1). Beyoncé has contributed to a redefinition of beauty ideals and has designed two ready to wear fashion lines: House of Dereon in 2005 and most recently Ivy Park in 2016. With millions in album sells, sell out tours and considerable accolades in the acting and singing world, she is a resounding musical figure who “proliferates the cultural circuit” (Durham, 2011, p. 35). While her brand and image have undoubtedly evolved over her expansive career, this chapter focuses on the transformation of her empowerment discourses respective to girls. Although it is safe to claim that “girl power has long been Beyoncé's Topic A,” the way she has expressed that power has starkly changed when one looks at her past and present work (Rosen, 2011, p. 68). Where she once proudly represented a “party-hearty feminism” that celebrated the male gaze, her 2016 Black girl manifesto *Lemonade* and her Black Panther inspired 2016 Super Bowl performance is a far cry from her early work (Rosen, 2011, p. 1). This chapter explores fragments of her musical career aimed at accentuating the symbolic and material implications of the two versions of girl power she has come to represent. Specifically, I trace Beyoncé’s musical career as a member of Destiny’s Child and her contemporary hailing of Black femininity for the purposes of affirming and empowering Black girls and women. As a Black musical artist who gained mass early fame through her adherence to dominant ideologies (post-racism, post-feminism, and neoliberalism), I argue that her later transformation accentuates markers of empowerment that center the struggles and empowerment needs of Black girls and women.



## Dominant and Free Representations

Critical rhetoric, as posited by McKerrow (1989), uncovers tangled and often concealed rhetorical forces that both sustain those in power and create new ways of being. For McKerrow (1989) these dominant and free discourses, respectively, function as social practices that reveal a great deal about society's relationship to "power/knowledge" and how people work creatively to expose and thwart its effects (p. 93). Specifically, McKerrow (1989) proposes the exposure of dominant and free discourses to both recognize those who benefit from such representations and how subversive practices work toward re-creating the world. Importantly, I utilize McKerrow's (1989) method as a stance rather than interpretive method as it allows me to the flexibility to analyze dominant and free discourse in nuanced ways that are informed by my selected artifacts. This chapter thus uses McKerrow's (1989) dominant and free conceptualizations as a perspective to analyze Beyoncé's past and present girl power rhetoric as expressed by her music and music videos. In addition to using the critical rhetoric forwarded by McKerrow (1989), this chapter considers Ono and Sloop's (1992) critique, as they expand upon McKerrow (1989) to argue that criticism should not end at the criticisms stage. Specifically, in the spirit of the method, Ono and Sloop (1992) argue that critical rhetoric must remain committed to *telos*, or "the social and cultural communities from which criticism derives" (Ono and Sloop, 1992, p. 51). It is not enough to critique, the critic must adapt to recreate the world and point to new ways of being. This analysis thus conceptualizes the free strategies used by Beyoncé to represent wider aspects of empowerment that are applicable to girls of color. This in no way

implies that Beyoncé is the originator of these politicized strategies, rather her substantial influence relative to girl power represents how girls are redefining empowerment in the twenty-first century based on a focus on race. I additionally accentuate the interrelationship of dominant and resistive discourses relative to Beyoncé. Speaking to the perhaps unintentional bifurcation of dominant and free discourses by McKerrow (1989), Beyoncé is a liminal girl power figure who continues to straddle both representations of girl power and girl of color-power, regardless of her contemporary politicized orientation. I thus recognize her liminal position and isolate those aspects that disrupt neoliberal, postrace representations to account for the experiences of girls of color.

To date, Beyoncé has a substantial discography and music video repertoire, thus in selecting exemplars of her dominant and free discourses I opted for exemplars that had a music video accompaniment as they provided visual and lyrical content to analyze. Further, I was purposeful in selecting her most popular work, as the likelihood of reaching mass audiences would have been greater. While there is no clear designation of time that delineates dominant and free representations, I was purposeful in selecting some of her earliest work with Destiny's Child, an exemplar from her solo career, and examples of her most recent work as they represent the stages of her career and the evolution of her girl power aesthetic. Finally, while Beyoncé's music covers a broad range of topics and themes, I opted for music that most explicitly addressed girls and women. Several exemplars were selected and after visually and textually coding, themes were selected within dominant and free representations. What follows is an analysis of

Beyoncé's adherence to dominant representations of girl power. Although her Black body infiltrating exclusive musical spaces was transgressive in and of itself, her early thematic hailing of empowerment was aligned with neoliberal, postrace representations of feminine empowerment.

#### Empowerment Through Consumption and Respectability

Beyoncé's early work with Destiny's Child most readily embodies a neoliberal caricature of an empowered girl. Specifically, while her early music can superficially be hailed as feminist for the financial independence it boasts, a closer look reveals an erasure of Otherness and alignment with capitalism wherein empowerment is reduced to the marketplace. For example, in the video for *Bills, Bills, Bills*, Destiny's Child is situated within a beauty salon, owners of the establishment and deeply disgruntled over "broke" men. While the group tends to clients' hair, the group sings about gendered designation of labor wherein the sentiment is clear, all men, but especially Black men, should materially provide for women: "Can you pay my bills/Can you pay my telephone bills/Can you pay my automo-bills/If you did then maybe we could chill/I don't think you do/So, you and me are through" (Briggs et al., 1999, p. 1). Operating from a postfeminist and postrace vantage point that assumes men and women (irregardless of race) operate on an even financial playing field, the message espoused through the song is not so much about financial liberation as much as it is about materialism. Love, intimacy, and trust, take a backseat to the things a man, can and should provide, as the feminist guise of independence is more about the possession of things than self-actualization. The song further operates from a postrace caricature of empowerment, wherein race is heavily

coded within the video and song yet never explicitly stated or addressed in relation to consumption. Lyrically, the group uses raced jargon (i.e brother, baller) to refer to their love interests and even depicts men of color in glass encasements accompanied by illuminated signs with the words: “Tired,” “Good for nothing,” “Triflin’,” and “Broke.” A drastic departure from the monetary contributions connected to white masculinity, the inability of men of color to provide financially is attributed to laziness, lack of desire, and promiscuity. Here racism and its impact on earnings are grossly minimized in favor of an equitable racial playing field wherein men of color are impoverished because of laziness and promiscuity. The group plays into popular culture tropes of the Other without an account of the structural conditions that produce inequitable income relative to gender and race. At this stage in Beyoncé’s career, feminism was about gaining the independence to consume and appeal to “ballers”.

Beyoncé’s corporate-aligned feminism would persist into the release of the chart-topping hit *Bootylicious*, a song and video released during Destiny’s Child’s considerable run. The song was an important release for Beyoncé’s career as shortly, after the word bootylicious was added to the Oxford English Dictionary, solidifying her impact on popular culture at large. Yet, while the song is at first glance about agency relative to male pursuit, the video and accompanying lyrics remain rooted in consumption driven feminism wherein the male gaze is lusted after and provides status and affirmation. For example, at the start of the video Beyoncé, Kelly (Kelendria), and Michelle (Tenitra), are vying for space in front of the camera, what the audience is led to believe is a dressing room mirror. After a fast moving montage of patrons posing, Beyoncé, Kelly, and

Michelle start shoving each other out of the camera lens, competing for the spotlight, the individual attention of the viewer. All the while, the trio is draped in gold chains, posturing with gold teeth, and Beyoncé dons a pimp hat (Figure 3:1).



Figure 3:1: An image from the opening scene  
Of *Bootylicious*.  
Taken from the *Bootylicious* music video.

What's notable about the introduction of the song, is the individualized empowerment it comes to represent. The trio heavily invested in how they look, view one another as competition in the embodiment of capitalism, a dressing room. Agency here is derived from not only appealing to the male gaze but doing so at the expense of other women. Further, while the video shared several montage scenes of diverse patrons relative to size, race, gender, the undeniable visual focus is the group's adherence to Western notions of beauty. Their thin, curvy bodies and weaves are framed as desirable and necessary to control men, the ultimate goal. Further, like *Bills, Bills, Bills*, Otherness is coded within the video through the strategic borrowing of symbols and style from Black communities. Specifically, through aesthetic markers such as gold chains, gold teeth, the pimp hat, and racialized back up dancers (consisting of men of color in do-rags and sagging jeans),

Otherness is only present within the video as accessories that lend just enough credibility to the group's Blackness. This is further evident through the title of the song, as *Bootylicious* invites us to consume Black femininity (under the guide of empowerment) all the while operating from post-race codes that ignore the sexual violence historically and currently inflicted on Black women. The systemic framework from which these symbols operate is erased in favor of a neoliberal hailing that bolsters their monetized image. Beyoncé's early work perpetuates the notion that empowerment is derived from consumption and appealing to the male gaze. Further, her commodity feminism is about strategically hailing Otherness with no compulsion to act toward the structural implication of these markers. This is further evident through Beyoncé's early alignment with respectability politics.

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) author of *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* unpacks controlling images rooted in slavery, that are strategically used to maintain "Black women's subordination" (Collins, 2000, p. 79). Of the four images (the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother), Beyoncé most readily evoked the fourth image, "the jezebel, whore, or 'hoochie'" during her early career (Collins, 2000, p. 89). Specifically, through her music and image, Beyoncé constructed an image of respectability that aesthetically played with sexuality only insofar that it clearly designated her morality. This is most evident in her video and song for *Nasty Girl*. A drastically different message from her contemporary work, *Nasty Girl* was co-written by Beyoncé and is a slut-shaming anthem meant to police and discipline "nasty, trashy, sleazy, classless" girls (Knowles et al., 2000, p. 1). The lyrics

are as follows: “Nasty put some clothes on, I told ya/ Don't walk out your house without your clothes on, I told ya/Girl what ya thinkin' 'bout lookin' that to' down, I told ya/ These men don't want no hot female/ That's been around the block female, you nasty girl” (Knowles et al., 2000, p. 1). The song operates from a place of moral superiority wherein the sexuality espoused through Destiny’s Child is aligned with chastity, monogamy, and conservatism; conversely the lyrics make it clear that revealing clothes are synonymous with loose morals and an insatiable sexual desire. Here, empowerment is a rigid performance of Black respectability, an exclusive club aligned with hetero-patriarchy and whiteness. More specifically, while the lyrics do not make reference to the racialized implications of the jezebel, the video and the representations of promiscuity, certainly do.

The video begins with a close up of Destiny’s Child's members’ judgmental stares as the quintessential nasty girl is viewed walking down the street. While the nasty girl is white, she has notably raced accessories that are so misaligned with white respectability, so as to position her in the same category of jezebels or promiscuous women of color. First, her G-string is positioned above her hips, she wears clear stiletto heels, she has gold hoops, a pink fur jacket, heavy eye and lip makeup, and obnoxiously chews gum (Figure 3:2).



Figure 3:2: An image of the quintessential *Nasty Girl*.  
Taken from the *Nasty Girl* music video.

This is further accentuated when three “respectable” women look on in disgust as the nasty girl struts and falls before men who are simultaneously intrigued and repulsed by her. Of the three “respectable” women, the camera zooms in on a white woman wearing a t-shirt, blue coat, and a short, pixie haircut. The scene represents two extremes relative to promiscuity and chastity, encouraging the audience to align with “respectable,” white performances. Further, it’s important to note that the music video works toward implicitly aligning respectable women of color (in this case Destiny’s Child) with white femininity wherein conversely white women who align themselves with raced accessories of Black sexuality can easily fall into the jezebel category.

This is further accentuated in the video when “nasty,” predominantly women of color, are led into the “Nasty Zapper” a machine that converts women into “respectable” versions of themselves. Women emerge gum-free, with relaxed hair, clothing that covers their breasts, and a sparkle effect that accentuates their newness. Further, once the women emerge they are welcomed into the Destiny’s Child fold, rewarded with hugs by the group members and invited to dance in community. According to Collins (2000), the



jezebel is evoked for the purpose of representing Black female sexuality as deviant, wherein “[h]er insatiable sexual desire helps define the boundaries of normal sexuality” (Collins, 2000, p. 92). In this case, adherence to “correct” performances of sexuality “characterized by cleanliness of person and property, temperance, thrift, polite manners and sexual purity” merit acceptance and solidarity with other appropriate women (Hopkins, 2017, p. 8). Conversely, jezebels that fail to ascribe to sexual expressions that promote white, hetero-patriarchy are outcast. Beyoncé’s early expressions of girl power operate in lieu with dominant expressions that reward consumption and operate from a postrace, postfeminist position. Specifically, through the implicit belief that gender and racial equity have been met, structural influences that continue to benefit white bodies are ignored and bodies of color are disciplined into complicit performances. Specific to girl power, Destiny’s Child creates a homogenous caricature of respectability that maintains the status-quo and furthers the message that appearance is a desirable route to power.

#### Queen B: Okay Ladies Now Let’s Get in Formation

The girl power promoted by Destiny’s Child would considerably evolve over time, yet the starkest difference to early iterations of girl power would occur as Beyoncé developed into a solo phenomenon that transcended the pop star label. With fame, fortune, and successful business ventures came greater control over her image, music, and more clarity respective to early career choices. Further with the growing awareness of racial injustices in the twenty-first century (i.e. national broadcasting of police brutality, the emergence of the Black Lives Matter social movement, etc.), Beyoncé’s influential platform held different stakes than her early postrace influenced career. Her

adherence to the music industry is exemplified in interviews wherein Beyoncé was vocal about her disdain for the word *Bootylicious*, “I hate ... hate that word at times...It was a song that I never took seriously” (Silverman & Hahn, 2003, p.1). It is unclear how many early career decisions were dictated by the music industry, yet the 2013 release of her self-titled digital album would mark a departure from earlier work through a renewed and unapologetic embrace of her Blackness, feminism, and sexuality—especially outside the role of jezebel. While there are notable markers of shifting girl power rhetoric within the *Beyoncé* album, this chapter focuses on her 2017 visual manifesto *Lemonade* and her accompanying performance at the 50th Super Bowl halftime show, as both performances most explicitly represent Beyoncé’s politicized orientation relative to Blackness, feminism, and empowerment. While she undeniably continues to tap into consumer culture, her political overtones represent nuanced markers of empowerment for girls of color who struggle to identify with postfeminist, postrace representations that ignore and deny their continued oppression.

On February 7th, 2016, during the 50th Super Bowl halftime show, Coldplay headlined the year’s performance. Their set was an uplifting, flower power spectacle, as children took center stage to provide an instrumental accompaniment to Coldplay via string ensemble and marching band. Yet, while Coldplay were the principal performers, Beyoncé would receive the most attention for her ensemble’s emboldened nod to the Black Panther and the Black Lives Matter movement, and for the performer’s confident celebration of Black women in all sectors of the music industry. White conservatives such as New York mayor Rudy Giuliani condemned the performance as “outrageous,”

and criticized the politicized nature of her work for what it represented and for the space it took up during one of the biggest sporting events in North America (Zaru, 2017, p. 1).

The performance prepared her fans and the public for the April 23, 2016 release of *Lemonade*, “a pioneering work in the visual album genre” that cannot easily be categorized (Kehrer, 2017, p. 250). Operating more as a short film with music videos spliced in between, the work is thematically guided by the poetry of Warsan Shire, the Kenyan 2014 Young Poet Laureate of London. A work of visual and lyrical art, Beyoncé’s recitation of Shire’s poetry frames the “womanist fairytale” into eleven chapters that trace the evolution of her experiences with infidelity (Kehrer, 2017, p. 250). Yet, far from an isolated account of her life, Beyoncé makes the personal political by exposing tropes of Black femininity in favor of sisterhood, solidarity, and representations of Black excellence. The work is a radical departure from representations of Black femininity within popular culture, particularly because Beyoncé co-directed, produced, and starred in the work, a rupture from a white dominated music industry. In closely analyzing *Lemonade* and the Super Bowl 50 performance, three themes stand out respective to girl of color empowerment that differs from early neoliberal, postfeminist representations: sisterhood through a shared struggle, an emphasis on cross-generational alliances, and operating from an ethic of hope. I analyze the presence of these themes and unpack the wider implications of these markers for girls of color, particularly as they evidence a critique of freedom.

## Sisterhood through a Shared Struggle

Where Beyoncé's early work celebrated independence, consumption, and power through one's ability to capture the male gaze, Beyoncé's recent work aesthetically and lyrically privileges sisterhood and solidarity among Black women. Specifically, where her early music videos predominantly center her body as the sole visual focus, her most recent work uses Black female bodies in synchronized ways that evoke a shared political orientation rooted in Blackness. For example, her Super Bowl performance opens with an all-Black female entourage of percussionists and dancers in the same Black Panther inspired aesthetic, consisting of black clothing, berets, and natural Black hair (braids and afros) (Figure 3:3).



Figure 3:3: Beyoncé pictured with four of her dancers during her Super Bowl 50 half-time performance. Taken from msnbc.com

The spectacle is uniform with a militant vibe that is brought to the twenty-first century with high energy synched dance moves. The dancers do not smile or rejoice in the performance. They are serious, in control, and command attention. This spectacle was made all the more influential with the accompanying lyrics from Beyoncé's song,

*Formation*: “Okay, okay, ladies, now let's get in formation, 'cause I slay/ Okay ladies, now let's get in formation, 'cause I slay/ Prove to me you got some coordination, 'cause I slay/ Slay trick, or you get eliminated” (Williams et. al., 2017, p. 1). Here the audible repetition of “let’s get in formation” along with the visual display of Black uniformity, work collectively to evoke solidarity, Black sisterhood, and agency. Keher (2017) writes, “Beyoncé’s appearance was as memorable for its political Black power invocations as it was for its display of commercial pop spectacle” (p. 250). Amid postfeminist sentiments that would have women competing among one another in an “equitable playing field,” the visual and lyrical expression of unity and Black power iconography work collectively to inspire identification amid structural conditions that transcend their time and space. This emphasis on sisterhood is further evident through *Lemonade*.

During the “Anger” chapter within *Lemonade*, Beyoncé unleashes a wrath bore out of her husband’s infidelity, but more broadly an anger that is deeply connected to the abuse<sup>5</sup> Black women have historically been subjected to in U.S America. During the video for *Don’t Hurt Yourself*, the music stops and a quote from a 1962 Malcolm X speech coupled with the imagery of everyday Black women appears. The quote spoken in Malcolm X’s voice is as follows: “The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman.” Everyday Black women look into the camera. Through the visual pairing of Black women, Beyoncé’s strong posturing within

---

<sup>5</sup> Abuse to hail the violence of slavery, subsequent discrimination, and contemporary structural and societal subjugation

the video, and a quote by Malcolm X, Beyoncé makes a statement regarding a historical legacy of oppression that affects all Black women. Beyond an anger rooted in infidelity, the theme of the song, Beyoncé hails a wider sisterhood of Black women to recognize the communal struggle and rejoice in the strength of their Blackness. This is further evident throughout the song as a coven of Black women is seen intertwined through the sleeves of their dress, dancing in a disjointed but connected fashion: A symbolic representations of Black women, working together, conjuring magic, and healing through a recognition and celebration of Blackness.

While there are other portions of the entire work that embody sisterhood through shared raced struggle, scenes within the “Resurrection” and “Hope” chapter perhaps most readily represents sisterhood as the chapters aesthetically center Black women in community with one another. More specifically, the chapters contain scenes of everyday Black women rejoicing in friendship as women within the video stand before a stage, dine together, and Beyoncé sits on a porch among other Black women in the entertainment industry, such as thespians Zendaya, Amandla Stenberg, and music artists Ibeyi and Chloe x Halle. Through recognition of the diversity and artistry of Black women, Beyoncé does not homogenize the Black experience or reduce it to a caricature she embodies; she instead celebrates the complexity of Black womanhood and rejoices in a sisterhood of difference and Blackness. This is further emphasized on a focus on cross-generational alliances. For unlike the sisterhood espoused through women who enter the “Nasty Zapper,” sisterhood within *Lemonade* is not predicated on Black women’s ability to fit white respectability.

## A Cross-Generational Enterprise

Dominant representations of girl power operate from an ageist position that disproportionately celebrates youth, a capitalist imperative as corporations benefit from youth and the products tailored to allowed women to attain youthful femininity. In contrast to representations that only hail youth in girl power discourses, Beyoncé actively evokes cross-generational alliances based on a mutual recognition of resounding discrimination and oppression. These cross-generational relationships, further, transcend familial relationships, as a shared recognition of oppression, functions to bond generations in a collective struggle. First, Beyoncé titles *Lemonade* as such based on a speech given by Hattie, Jay Z's grandmother. In the speech, Hattie recounts, "I was served lemons, but I made lemonade." The creation of something from nothing, the recognition that the material is connected to oppression, and further a celebration of Black feminine resilience, in spite of generational barriers, is the essence of the album. Further, it is significant that Beyoncé heeds the "lemonade from lemons" adage as it represents a resounding Black experience, the necessity to conjure from sour scraps, a sentiment that remains true today.

This regard and reverence toward elders is further exemplified during "Redemption" as Beyoncé speaks the poetry of Wasan Shire:

Grandmother, the alchemist, you spun gold out of this hard life, conjured beauty from the things left behind. Found healing where it did not live. Discovered the antidote in your own kit. Broke the curse with your own two hands. You passed these instructions down to your daughter who then passed it down to her daughter (Shire, 2016).

An extension from the sisterhood derived from a collective struggle, Beyoncé's espouses a radical cross generational empowerment that is stronger than blood for it unites past generations in a collective struggle. Particularly, while neoliberal girl power minimizes or ignores the impact of elders, empowerment for girls of color is framed around a welcoming and reverence toward elder communities who survived discriminatory practices that persist. Empowerment is about recognizing the past in the present. Yet, this cross-generational solidarity is not exclusive to elders; the empowerment espoused through *Lemonade* is constantly looking toward the future and the continued survival of Black girls.

During the "Hope" chapter, the poetry of Warsan Shire, read by Beyoncé, speaks to the generational emphasis of *Lemonade*:

The nail technician pushed my cuticles back ... turns my hand over, stretches the skin on my palm and says, 'I see your daughters and their daughters.' That night in a dream, the first girl emerges from a slit in my stomach. The scar heals into a smile (Shire, 2016).

The cyclical nature of life is evoked within *Lemonade* as women are encouraged to reflect on the future generations made possible from the struggles and survival of the past. Contrary to dominant representations of girl power, such as the *BeForever* series analyzed in Chapter Two, that would have girls believe they exist in a vacuum; a cross-generational ethic has girls simultaneously aware of the past and future, and the continued struggle that demands their present survival. This is further accentuated through the space *Lemonade* gives to the mothers of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown, as each mother is shown holding her son's photo under the chapter "Resurrection." A bold affirmation of the Black Lives Matter movement, the hailing of



three victims of police brutality and the centering of their mothers is a merging of struggles that invites girls and women alike to recognize a historical legacy that impacts the present. Further, in this context, women and girls alike do not look upon the slain Black bodies as distanced Others, instead they are hailed as sons of all woman, images of what has been. This cross-generational ethic can further be regarded through the Black Panther inspired Super Bowl performance as the aesthetic wardrobe is a direct continuation of past Civil Rights efforts but more specifically a hailing of the female, Black Panthers who are disproportionately regarded as followers within the movement. As contemporary Black (women) Panthers, the performers are espousing an empowerment rooted in gendered and racial otherness, evoking a cross-generational solidarity as women today continue to navigate patriarchal subjugation within their quest for racial liberation. Through an emphasis on cross-generational alliances, empowerment for girls of color is a communal experience that bonds beyond familial connections.

#### An Ethic of Hope

While *Lemonade* hails the pain, mistreatment, and abuse that Black women have and are subjected to, the representation of these conditions function to shape a future in which things can be better. Only after the collection takes viewers through: Intuition, Denial, Anger, Apathy, Emptiness, and Accountability can Black women emerge via Reformation, Forgiveness, Resurrection, Hope, and Redemption. The underlying message of the work is survival in spite of oppressive conditions that have shaped what it means to be Black in the twenty-first century. This is embodied aesthetically in the second half of the work as the viewer is taken to a utopian society filled with Black girls

and women, co-existing within community. Donning vintage clothing and natural hair, the cross-generational community exists in a place that cannot be spatially situated for it is something completely new. The camera then focuses on a candlelight stage where

Beyoncé sings *Freedom*:

Freedom! Freedom! I can't move/Freedom, cut me loose!/ Freedom! Freedom!  
Where are you?/Cause I need freedom too!/I break chains all by myself/Won't let  
my freedom rot in hell/ Hey! Ima keep running/Cause a winner don't quit on  
themselves (Coffer et al., 2016).

The song continues to play as ballerina, Michaela DePrince, takes the stage to an attentive audience. What is notable about the setting and music is the non-hierarchical tone of the scene. Beyond a stage for Beyoncé, the scene operates more as a communal space where women are invited to share their art, to contribute, and then importantly, step down to allow other to do the same. This is made all the more evident as the camera pans out, incorporates the audience in the performance and focuses on the diverse Black women that make up the community. A departure from the attention stealing spectacle before the dressing room mirror in *Bootylicious*, the songs lyrics and the album's representation of a utopian society represents an ethic of hope and potentiality. While the utopia created by Beyoncé remains elusive, *Lemonade* represents a space of radical potentiality that enlivens and motivates contemporary efforts. As we look toward the overwhelming barriers girls of color face in the twenty-first century, hope can be a transformative influence that shapes collective efforts. This is perhaps best embodied in the final scenes of the visual album.

The final scenes of *Lemonade*, depicts women collecting a harvest to Warshan Shire's poetry: "So we're gonna heal, we're gonna start again" (Shire, 2016). Black

women, look into the camera, breaking the fourth wall, beckoning those who are watching, insisting on the recognition of their existence. The male gaze is not hailed, not implicitly referenced as something to fight over, instead there is a designation of labor wherein all women are in community, working collectively to harvest, cook, and set up a feast. *Lemonade* ends with the music video for “All Night,” and a montage of diverse couples of color loving one another, interjected with videos from Beyoncé’s private life. The final melding of the personal and the everyday is a reconciliation of the private and political, a reminder that transformation is possible through everyday efforts. While Beyoncé metaphorically “led” Black women to a pastoral utopia, it is not presented as an exclusive space, rather it is one in which women are invited to gather, heal, and organize for the betterment of tomorrow.

This emphasis on becoming, solidarity, and hope can further be understood through the wide broadcasting of the Black Panther inspired Super Bowl half time show. The half time show was “the third most watched broadcast in U.S television history” amassing an audience of 167 million viewers who watched “all or part (at least six minutes of the game)” (Pallotta & Stelter, 2016, p. 1). For Beyoncé to center Black femininity, the Black Panthers, and for Beyoncé to hail the Black Lives Matter Movement in such a public arena, during a National Football League (NFL) championship, is to advance an ethic of hope and becoming that defies opposition. That same year 49ers player Colin Kaepernick would choose to kneel during the U.S national anthem, a political act to resist Black treatment in U.S. America, which would result in his suspension from the NFL. The setting is undeniable a hostile one that operates from a

postrace platform. Yet in spite of the context, Beyoncé unapologetically centered the artistry, power, and coalition of Black girls/women for the benefit of Black girl/women viewers. A radical representation of girl of color-power, Beyoncé recognizes continued discrimination to aesthetically and lyrically provide hope for the future, for the continued fight towards equality. The 2016 empowerment espoused through Beyoncé's music is a drastic shift from the exclusive, consumption-driven efforts of her early career.

### Conclusion

While Beyoncé's activist ethic is relatively new, she is using her mainstream platform to center Blackness and Black femininity in radical new ways that fall well beyond the "neoliberal feminism, hegemonic femininity and monetized motherhood" she has and continues to benefit from (Hopkins, 2017, p. 2). Particularly, as a leading Black artist in the entertainment industry her authorial power is a significant shift from a white-dominated music industry that has historically dictated Othered representations. With greater agency in regard to her image and music, Beyoncé has transcended past performances of empowerment to more acutely represent the strength and resilience of Black women. Contemporary critiques of her material success too often dismiss the raced implications of her status, wealth, and art and the nuanced ways she is manifesting an empowerment not predicated on whiteness. Particularly, raced presumptions around correct feminist performance police her contradictions, using them as reasons for why she isn't an authentic feminist. Documentary filmmaker Aishah Shahidah Simmons adds,

If Beyoncé were white, she would definitely be called a feminist. But mainstream culture often doesn't recognize women of color in that way...As black women, we aren't even viewed as acting, as performing. Everything we do is supposed to be based in reality. So, if there are any contradictions, you don't get to be the face of

feminism. Even though Bey is definitely in control of her image (Hobson, 2013, p. 43).

This analysis embraces the contradictions in her artistic work and recognizes the interconnection of dominant and free discourses relative of girl power. As a popular culture icon, Beyoncé exists in a liminal space that, regardless, presents nuanced markers for empowering girls of color.

Within this chapter Beyoncé's considerable career is explored as a trope or construction for girl of color-power. A carefully crafted figure that has come to represent twenty-first century feminism, Beyoncé's artistic trajectory is significant in that it is a response to our socio-cultural context. In the early twenty-first century, U.S. America was emboldened by the election of President Barack Obama, fully consumed in posttrace and postfeminist narratives of progress and consumption. Yet, as I've argued these superficial representations of diversity remained aligned with tropes of Black femininity that subjugate Black women. Through equating love with purchasing power and through disciplining Black women's sexuality, Destiny's Child was a caricature of empowerment that perpetuated whiteness. I argue, however, that this alignment with whiteness shifted during the later half of Beyoncé's career, as she came to represent a form of empowerment that drastically departed from previous iterations. The emphasis Beyoncé placed on feminism, her unapologetic expressions of sexuality and anger, and her inclusive representations of sisterhood offer markers for what I argue shape girl of color-power. Importantly, Beyoncé remains a trope of empowerment that is carefully constructed and monetized, yet this does not take away from her substantial influence. As I will argue in Chapter 4, her work is a major influence to girls of color who struggle with

girl power discourses that exclude their lived experiences. Specifically, through an embrace of Beyoncé's work and inclusive portrayal of sisterhood, girl of color-power as a framework takes the symbolic nature of Beyoncé's messages and materializes them through coalitional and activist works. Specifically, the actions of the Radical Monarchs (the focus of Chapter 4) demonstrate the applicability of Beyoncé's Black-centered empowerment to the lives of girls of color at large.

Just as Beyoncé imagined a utopia predicated on sisterhood, cross-generational alliances, and an ethic of hope so too can girls of color work toward creating affirming spaces for healing and transformation. Specifically, as our political and cultural context amid Donald Trump's presidency, is rife with expressions of sexism, racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia, I argue that girl of color-power is a framework for empowerment that centers the diverse, lived experiences of girls at the margins for the purpose of disrupting whiteness and white supremacy. Girl of color-power as materialized through the Radical Monarchs represents innovative empowerment strategies that do not rearticulate capitalist values and instead are focused on disrupting power.

## Chapter Four

On February 14, 2018, a teen gunman opened fire with an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, his former high school, in Florida. The rampage left 17 dead, 14 wounded and was initially perceived as another school shooting to add to an expanding list of massacres within U.S American educational institutions. The tragedy initially produced predictable television coverage and reductive blaming, as in when Donald Trump tweeted about the “mentally disturbed” white shooter. However, the tragedy also sparked a response that transcended previous reactions. The teen survivors turned to social media to amplify gun control discourses, sparking the viral hashtag #NeverAgain. They called out the inaction behind “thoughts and prayers” sentiments and held politicians accountable to National Gun Association (NRA) donations. The surviving students staged a national school walkout and national gun control protest, including rallies in Denver, Washington D.C., and New York. A radical departure from past responses to school shootings, the diverse students of Stoneman turned to activism to grieve. While several students have stepped up to lead the gun control efforts, senior Emma Gonzalez has emerged as the “figurehead of the movement” (Horton, 2018, p. 1): A queer, woman of color whose message and radical aesthetic (shaved head and patchwork jacket) are a drastic shift from neoliberal constructions of “the empowered girl.”

Gonzalez emerged days after the shooting to give a speech that would go viral on social media:

They say that tougher gun laws do not decrease gun violence — we call B.S.! They say a good guy with a gun stops a bad guy with a gun — we call B.S.! They say guns are just tools like knives and are as dangerous as cars — we call B.S.! They say that no laws could have been able to prevent the hundreds of senseless tragedies that have occurred — we call B.S.! That us kids don't know what we're talking about, that we're too young to understand how the government works — we call B.S.!

(Turkewitz, Stevens, & Bailey, 2018, p. 1)

Gonzalez's captivating speech and by extension, the passionate responses from surviving students of the shooting, have enlivened the country, drawing attention to the unique qualities that have enabled the survivors to turn grief into power. Yet, while media outlets have attempted to parade the unique talents that have enabled Gonzalez to be the face of the movement, Lithwisch (2018) recognizes the extracurricular education that has set up Gonzalez and Stoneman students, at large, to lead a movement in a technological driven twenty-first century context.

Contrary to popular culture narratives that would have one believe activists are prodigiously gifted and emerge fully formed, the student activists of Stoneman were beneficiaries of a socially conscious environment replete with adults invested in their educational and political development. From a debate program that teaches extemporaneous speaking, a forensics/public speaking-driven curriculum, an “exceptional” drama/theatre program, a broadcast journalism program, and an active school paper titled, “The Eagle Eye,” students have long had the opportunity to hone skills that bode well for activist efforts (Lithwick, 2018, p. 1). For example, activist and survivor David Hogg, a student news director and member of the broadcast journalism



program at Stoneman “was interviewing his own classmates as they hid in a closet during the shooting” (Lithwick, 2018, p. 1). Further, the students of Stoneman were preparing for a gun control debate at the beginning of the academic year, “which explains in part why they could speak to the issues from day one” (Lithwick, 2018, p. 1). The efforts embodied by the survivors of Stoneman are largely representative of activism that falls outside traditional curriculum and standardized approaches to teaching wherein students are perceived as “banks” to deposit information into (Freire, 1972). Instead the educational opportunities allotted to these student activists fostered their holistic development wherein they were treated as global citizens that could actively participate in domestic and international affairs.

Yet, while students have received mass praise and international support for their continued efforts, the attacks on the student activists speak to a larger push back from dominant entities that benefit from the continued availability and accessibility of firearms. In this case the pro-gun, conservative backlash<sup>6</sup> is notable for its age-based attacks wherein students are portrayed as not operating from their own volition and are instead framed as “infected” by a liberal agenda, puppeteered into protesting gun violence (Lithwick, 2018, p. 1). The benefits of a critical, active education, particularly for girls of color like Emma Gonzalez, are becoming apparent as Stoneman students are leading activism and inspiring hope.

---

<sup>6</sup> Republican Senators and NRA supporters, such as Marco Rubio condemned the activists’ efforts calling them “infected” and “arrogant” (Lithwick, 2018, p. 1).

Specific to girls of color, the treatment of Emma Gonzalez provides a contemporary representation of how alternative forms of girl power are resisted and strategically framed. In Chapters Two and Three, I analyzed popular culture representations of girl power, as postfeminist and postrace discourses that predominantly focus on the aesthetic representations of diversity. Beyoncé's transformation notwithstanding, these chapters raised the question: Where might we find a more robust, authentic girl of color-power—one that might be practiced by ordinary girls, regardless of their celebrity status or artist capacities? As Gonzalez's leadership in gun control activism suggests, local communities and different models of education hold a key. I turn to one such organization, the Radical Monarchs, to better understand the critique of freedom represented by girl of color-power. In the following sections, I review the Radical Monarchs and analyze the markers that shape girl of color-power: education as collaborative practice, an emphasis on a political education, and a return to a do-it-yourself approach to agency. Where Chapter Two represented attributes of girls of color-power, this chapter centers their tangible expression.

#### Background: Radical Monarchs History, Mission, Vision

The Radical Monarchs are a social justice oriented group loosely modeled after the Girl Scouts of America. Founded in Oakland, California in December of 2014 by Marilyn Hollingquest and Avayvette Martinez, the group operates from a foundation of social equity wherein issues that affect young girls of color are centered, deconstructed, and connected to large socio-cultural influences (Knowlton & Lee, 2017, p. 1). Inspired by Martinez's daughter wanting to join a Girl Scout troop wherein she would be the only

girl of color, Martinez, an Ethnic Studies masters student, recognized the importance “of education focused on the experiences of people of color and social justice for young women of color’s identity development and self esteem” (Beck, 2017, p. 1). After joining forces with Marilyn Hollingquest, a fellow Ethnic Studies graduate and leader in “Oakland’s social justice community,” the Radical Monarchs were born, originally under the name Radical Brownies (Cramer, 2015, p. 1). The mission and vision of the Radical Monarchs are notable for their collective orientation and unapologetic centering of girls of color, who too often are marginalized under banners of inclusivity that center middle class, white girls. The mission states: “The Radical Monarchs create opportunities for young girls of color to form fierce sisterhood, celebrate their identities and contribute radically to their communities” (In Radical Monarchs, 2014, p. 1). Further, under the vision of empowering “young girls of color so that they step into their collective power, brilliance and leadership in order to make the world a more radical place,” the Radical Monarchs are a drastic departure from consumption-driven expressions of girl power (In Radical Monarchs, 2014, p. 1). Through a simultaneous investment in nurturing the individual to then effect structural change, the Radical Monarchs operate as an intersectional collective invested in societal transformation.

The unique markers that set the Radical Monarchs apart are layered and largely reliant on their creative approaches to empowering and affirming girls of color. First, education as a collaborative practice is embodied through advocacy efforts in political venues and through a communal dictating of curriculum and topics of focus. The Monarchs collectively and actively protest policies that affect vulnerable populations.

Further, rather than have a prescribed direction for the troupe, the girls, troupe leaders, and community leaders work together to formulate discussion topics and develop badges. Additionally, group meetings and activities are framed around a political education that is not available to many until college. Through the centering of “herstory” that deviates from patriarchal, Eurocentric accounts, Monarchs are taught marginal accounts of the past that highlight inequity based on marginal positionalities. Finally, the Radical Monarchs represent a return to the do it yourself ethic popularized by the Riot Grrrls. A rejection of the marketplace participation promoted through neoliberalism, the Radical Monarchs promote a distinct type of agency through the creation of materials that represent their radical empowerment discourse and through the promotion of self-care.

The Radical Monarchs foster an inclusive ethic relative to intersections beyond sex. Through a sisterhood built around a shared recognition of struggle and survival they welcome girls who cannot actively participate because of monetary obstacles. Specifically, addressing pay inequity that disproportionately allows middle class girls to participate in extracurricular activities, the troupe operates through donations and through a sliding scale of membership dues, “from \$75 to \$200 for the year—and there are scholarships available for girls who need them” (Cramer, 2015, p. 1). A financially conscious organization, the Radical Monarchs are creating spaces of possibility for girls who have historically operated from a place of disadvantage and lack of resources. Through a simultaneous investment in personal growth to then effect structural change, the Radical Monarchs present a model of girl of color-power that address our twenty-first century context.

## Free Discourses and Activism

Within this chapter I continue to use McKerrow's (1989) conceptualization of dominant and freedom-laden rhetorical discourses that reveal and conceal society's relationship to power. However, I focus on the critique of freedom's intent to disrupt hegemonic representations of girl power. This is not to bifurcate both forces as I recognize their interrelationship. Specifically, I recognize that free discourses still operate from a position that defies and recognizes dominant iterations, yet I now center discourses aimed at recreating girl power to fit the unique needs of girls of color. Further, taking into consideration the critiques of critical rhetoric by Ono and Sloop (1992) and Cloud (1994), I move beyond the confines of academic spaces to more acutely represent forms of empowerment that are applicable to everyday contexts. As Ono and Sloop (1992) explain, for McKerrow (1989), "there is no possible end to domination, no right action for the critic outside of ceaseless critique," a problematic modernist implication for it does not move beyond an acknowledgement of free discourses (p. 49). Instead Ono and Sloop (1992) contribute to critical rhetoric a necessity to "move to a newly articulated future, conceived out of webs of traditional knowledges" (p. 58). Where traditional scholarship predominantly focuses on the academic expansion of a given topic, Ono and Sloop (1992) argue that the critic should move beyond recognizing dominant and free discourses, to accentuating "new forms of power" (p. 52). Through a commitment to telos Ono and Sloop (1992) account for the critic's role in forwarding their own critical beliefs for the purpose of transforming the world.

Cloud (1994) further problematizes McKerrow's (1989) critical rhetoric by critiquing his Foucauldian conception of power, wherein power exists outside "categories of oppressor and oppressed" (p. 149). For Cloud (1994) the unmasking of dominant and free discourses must come with an "understanding of reality and oppression" wherein power exists within a matrix of conditions that disproportionately situate specific bodies in positions of power (p. 149). Here, power does not solely exist within discourses but is regarded as interrelated to the material and to histories of domination affecting marginalizes bodies and groups. Moving beyond the exclusive focus on discourse presented through McKerrow (1989) and Ono and Sloop (1992), Cloud (1994) posits a turn toward activism wherein the emancipation of real people is heralded as part of the transformation process. Here material change is the focus, instead of an isolated representation of critical rhetoric that is regarded as transformative in and of itself. This perspective moves away from modernist positions that do not posit an end to domination and instead pushes for an activist focus that works toward material change. In the spirit of Cloud's (1994) considerations, I center the activist oriented practices of the Radical Monarchs to then theorize how the practices of the organization can be used in wider contexts to support girls of color who don't have access to the same resources. I argue that the group's simultaneous focus on structural transformation, relative to social justice, represents a significant shift to conceptualizations of empowerment. For just as Beyoncé's latter career hails markers of social justice and solidarity, the Radical Monarchs represent an empowerment model that fosters self-actualization for the betterment of society at large. After extensively researching the practices of the Radical

Monarchs, I isolate attributes of their organization that differ from traditional empowerment discourses that homogenize girls. For, like the students of Stoneman, the diverse and individuated curriculum practiced by the Radical Monarchs effectively situates girls of color—not through a simple inclusion of them as “diverse” girls, as in other postfeminist and postrace discourses analyzed in previous chapters—but as active agents ready to transform the world.

### Conservative Backlash

Where the unique attributes of the Radical Monarchs represent nuanced ways of thinking about empowerment, I first outline the conservative backlash the troupe has received as the response accentuates attributes of girl of color-power that deviate from dominant representations. Conservative network, Fox News, has been the most vocal critic of the Monarchs, devoting news segments to chastising the group for “indoctrinating” children. What’s notable about the criticism, however, is the similar discourses evoked to discredit the troupe leaders and devalue the social justice ethic of the organization. The first denigrating attribute of these segments is that conservative Black women, in this case Crystal Wright—editor of the blog, *Conservative Black Chick* and Daneen Borelli, were cast to make the disparaging comments about the group. Where white newscasters were running the segment and setting up questions, the most pointed criticism came from Black women operating from a similar vantage point as the network. As Daneen Borelli expressed on the Sean Hannity show,

Sean, here’s the thing we have these Black liberal establishment individuals who are continuing to perpetuate that America is a racist country...but we have a wonderful country, an exceptional country, and when you have children, I don’t

care what age they are, up to what age, even adults, we have people who are pushing the race card narrative, it's very dangerous (Viewing Liberty, 2015).

Through the discursive clustering of the “Black liberal establishment,” discriminatory practices based on identity positions are reduced to a “liberal” caricature and dismissed without an active engagement in their material manifestations. Further, through the visual signification of the Black experience, via the bodies of conservative Black women, racism and by extension discrimination is minimized in favor of patriotic discourses that benefit dominant groups, in this case white conservatives. Through a reductive hailing of Blackness, the experiences of people of color are problematically represented through singular women of color who boast racism's non-existence.

An additional tactic used to discredit the Radical Monarchs is evident through a reoccurring alliance with “traditional” female gender roles. In this case, the Radical Monarchs' critical pedagogy approach to empowerment is challenged for not helping girls achieve individual success that can then translate to prosperity in a white supremacist, patriarchal society. As Crystal Wright challenged,

Wouldn't it be better for them to join a Brownie troupe and learn leadership skills, learn how to sew maybe, survival skills, that would be to me more useful than raising little racists. That's what this it, you have adults raising little racists (MTP America, 2015).

Here, Wright pushes for a continued focus on gendered activities that maintain the status quo, and complement the whitewashing forms of empowerment promoted in the BeForever series. In this case, a focus on “friendship skills” that don't evoke the political, a quiet focus on aesthetics via sewing, and survival skills that romanticize a dangerous outdoor landscape; activities aligned with the white femininity espoused through the



BeForever dolls (as analyzed in Chapter Two), are far more productive uses of time than developing a political consciousness. Aligned with dominant girl power agency, wherein girls' are given tools to successfully navigate, not reinvent, their cultural and gendered landscape, conservative backlash equates youth activism with "social instability and disorder" for promoting agential tactics rooted in systemic change (Ting, 2017, p. 243). Where traditional forms of Western activism have been characterized by individuated markers such as "lifestyle politics" and "consumerist acts" (to encourage or protest a product), the promotion of critical pedagogy, the centering of marginal history, and a return to a do-it yourself girl power that promotes self-care, function as radical departures from activist efforts aligned with existing power relationships (Ting, 2017, p. 245). Exemplified through Wright calling troupe leader's "little racists," conservative backlash co-opts the term racism to signify the recognition that inequity exists as oppose to the presence of discriminatory practices. Finally, continued references to the age of troupe members are strategically used to discredit their political orientation. Through references to Monarchs being "young," "impressionable," and through claims that the organization is indoctrinating and exploiting youth, conservative opposition frames girls of color in a limited capacity, promoting the belief that they are too young, susceptible, and ignorant to have valuable insight into how the world should be (Viewing Liberty, 2015). In response to these claims, founder Martinez has said,

this is not about indoctrinating young girls but this is about opening their lens to see things a different way. Where do we get these ideas that a young man in a hoodie is inherently up to something bad? Where does that come from? Right, so I think we're asking the questions to the girls that they don't get in mainstream life (Knowlton & Lee, 2017, p. 1).

Rather than adhere to representations of empowerment that boast a postrace, postfeminist landscape, the Radical Monarchs challenge dominant ideologies that vilify bodies of color. It is important to note conservative backlash to the subversive tactics of the Radical Monarchs as it accentuates the interrelationship between dominant and free discourses.

#### A Promotion of Collaborative, Critical Pedagogy

Traditional education is embedded with individualistic discourses around achievement, progress, and societal transformation. Particularly as progress-driven education, relative to social transformation tokenizes individual figures, empowerment is framed as an individualistic endeavor to strive for. Further, through a recognition that traditional education functions to “sustain asymmetrical relations of power under the guise of neutral and apolitical views,” educational settings are rarely critical of power structures and instead boast individualism as a necessary precursor to being successful in U.S. America (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003, p. 11). Too often, historical figures of color, such as Rosa Parks, are tokenized through “flawed” historical accounts that exclusively recognize individuated efforts (i.e., Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat) without an account of the collaborative efforts that shaped their success (Rothman & Aneja, 2015, p. 1). As Brown (2016) writes, seldom, if ever, do girls learn the history of issues that shape their everyday lives, “from racial profiling, to sexual harassment to reproductive rights to pay inequities” (p. 64). This is further problematized when accounting for the “special girl” discourses promoted through individuated account of history, as girls are led to believe success is a product of individuated efforts and gifts (Brown, 2016). The Radical Monarchs depart from “special girl” discourses as they

embrace a critical pedagogy wherein educated is continuously “related to social agency, voice, and democratic participation” for the purposes of transforming power relationships (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003, p. 6). Through a commitment to critical pedagogy, the Radical Monarchs transcend individuated representations of success, opting instead to materialize the solidarity, community, and collaboration I argue (in Chapter Three) was present through Beyoncé’s visual album *Lemonade*. More specifically, founders Hollingquest and Martinez create spaces of possibility that foster the “collective brilliance” of girls of color (In *Radical Monarchs*, 2014, p. 1). Here no one girl is heralded as particularly special, rather space is created where girls can learn about histories of resistance and form bonds with adults and other girls. As a troupe of budding activists with a developing political consciousness, the emphasis on community and focus on developing agential tactics to then advocate for disenfranchised populations is a radical departure from individuated foci that would have girls focus on competition and personal development.

A commitment to critical pedagogy is further embodied through the Radical Monarchs recasting reality as a “process, in transformation” (Freire, 1972, p. 24). Through a critical perspective toward monolithic-appearing social relations, the Radical Monarchs deconstruct positions of power and subordination and the historical practices that continue to shape existing practices. For example, through an active engagement with their geographic context, Oakland, California, the Monarchs learned about the disproportionate displacement of people of color as a result of gentrification. Yet, rather than accept the classed and raced implications of gentrification, the Monarchs learned to

protest inequitable treatment through participation in legislative assemblies. As recorded and published in the group’s Facebook page, on July 19, 2016, the Monarchs attended a city council meeting (Figure 4:1) to advocate for Oakland renters who were being displaced by an inability to pay higher rent prices. In the published video Monarchs stand before elected officials and in a radical display of solidarity, mutually articulate the same sentiment: “Keep in mind that families here will not be able to afford living in Oakland and they will get kicked out. Thank you” (Radical Monarchs, 2016).



Figure 4.1: An image from the Radical Monarchs Facebook page, depicts Monarch’s advocating against displacement and gentrification

This is further evident on November 29, 2016 when Monarchs attended a city council meeting to protest the election of Donald Trump. In a similar, simultaneous expression of dissent, the Monarchs (Figure 4:2) say before the council in unison: “We are here because our voices count and we must protect and defend our communities from hate” (Radical Monarchs, 2016).



Figure 4:2: An image from the Radical Monarchs Facebook page, depicts Monarchs protesting the presidential election of Donald Trump

While the Monarchs have developed their political orientation considerably since 2016 (they now dedicate a unit to Radical Advocacy) published accounts of their advocacy accentuate a commitment toward transforming existing power relations. This commitment toward transformation is further evidenced through the collaborative orientation of the group. Collaboration is heralded not only through the protesting of exclusive policies that affect marginal populations but through the joint sharing of political messages. No one “special” Monarch was designated the responsibility to speak to political leaders, instead the Monarchs chose to read their statements in unison: a powerful display of coalitional work. Yet the collaborative ethic of the organization is not only expressed through their advocacy as the Monarchs are also active participants in their education, selecting what they want to learn and working toward producing rather than buying.

The units for the organization or the educational themes are not decided for the girls of color prior to meetings with the girls involved. Instead, members take an active role in dictating the content they want to learn and are further key players in producing material based on the unit. In a 2017 documentary about the organization, founder Martinez spoke about the development of units, noting the two considerations that shape their construction: “one we ask the girls like what do you want to learn about, what do you want to do, what kind of activities do you want to do together? And also, just looking at, what are social justice issues that impact their lives as young women of color” (Knowlton & Lee, 2017, p. 1). While troupe leaders guide the mission of the organization through the application of structural issues the girls might not be ready to vocalize, the modules remain collaborative as girls shape the development of lessons and the subsequent activities that arise to earn patches. For example, to earn the Radical Beauty patch,

the girls created their own lip balm and discussed unrealistic beauty standards presented in Disney movies. To earn the Radical Pride patch, they marched and created signs for the San Francisco Trans March. For the Radical Love patch, they analyzed a Beyoncé<sup>7</sup> video, read quotes from Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Maya Angelou, and discussed friendship (Beck, 2017, p. 1).

Here, girl of color-power is simultaneously embodied through the creation of conditions that allow girls to question and challenge their socio-cultural reality, while having supportive adults to guide their growing awareness. Per the ethic of critical pedagogy, the Radical Monarchs cultivate a “culture of schooling that supports the empowerment of

---

<sup>7</sup> The use of Beyoncé’s video and song “Pretty Hurts” to unpack “Radical Love” speaks further to the similar themes hailed by both representations of girl of color-power

culturally marginalized and economically disenfranchised students” in this case, girls of color (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003, p. 6)

Further, the girls within the troupe are not taught that a social justice ethic is meant to stop with their growing awareness. Instead, the lessons within the troupe are promoted as an “imperative to the political struggles against exploitation and domination,” wherein curriculum should be expanded and shared with people who do not have access (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003, p. 6). In a powerful display of sisterhood that transcends the troupe, the Radical Monarch documentary depicts Monarch Lupita discussing the overarching dream of the organization:

So my dream for the Radical Monarchs would be that they’ll be like troupes like in a lot of places, like I want it to like spread out cause the more troupes we get, the more power we’ll get to make Oakland and actually the world now, a better place. Well I should say a more radical place (Knowlton & Lee, 2017, p. 1).

The Radical Monarchs regard education as a collaborative, agential process that holds power. Where they recognize the marginal space they operate from relative to race and class (among other intersection), Monarchs acknowledge the influence and power that comes with awareness and size. By granting diverse, girls of color the agency to participate in political forums, dictate the curriculum, and further through the promotion of wider sisterhood, empowerment is recast as a collective endeavor, attainable when all girls are given access to self-affirming education.

### **Centering Marginal Education**

The historical accounts represented through the American Girl BeForever texts (Chapter Two) are largely representative of the history taught within U.S. American standardized curriculum. Through a Eurocentric lens that revolves around Western

conquest and industry, histories, or herstories, of discrimination, annihilation, and resistance by Others are either omitted or given limited space within curriculum. Outside of the token figures of color—i.e. Madame C.J. Walker, Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez—girls of color contend with a curriculum that omits their experiences in favor of postrace narratives of progress. It is largely because of these educational omissions that the Radical Monarchs center marginal herstory through diverse accounts of the past and guest lecturers. First, it is notable that the Monarch uniform is comprised of brown vests and berets (Figure 4:4), as it is inspired by the progressive efforts of the New York, Young Lords, the Brown Berets, and The Black Panthers—three people of color organizations that protested the judicial and socio-cultural treatment of their people and yet are rarely discussed in traditional curriculum.



Figure 4:3: A photo of a Monarch in uniform.  
Taken from the Radical Monarchs website  
website: <http://radicalmonarchs.org>

As Hollingquest expresses in the Radical Monarch documentary, through an aesthetic representation of radical opposition the Radical Monarchs align themselves with past movements “based in self-determination [that claim that] Black is beautiful, Brown is



beautiful” amid cultural influences that would have people of color continue to think otherwise (Knowlton & Lee, 2017, p. 1).

Yet, the alignment with these radical groups is not limited to aesthetics for Monarchs are also given extensive education on people of color activist efforts. For example, the Radical Monarchs take full advantage of their geographic region, Oakland, California, to center the subversive activism and social justice efforts of the Black Panther party. As evidenced in the 2017 documentary on the Radical Monarchs, the group is seen touring places significant to the party, noting the street lights and sidewalk signs the group advocated for (to protect the community), recognizing the necessity to publish Black owned material via a Black Panther newspaper, and discussing the breakfast program initiated to feed low-income children of color. This reclamation of history via an engagement with the social justice efforts of the Black Panther party, is a departure from U.S. American history that has heavily coded the group as the antithesis of “effective” civil rights advocacy efforts. As Brown (2016) writes, a reclamation and engagement with marginal history, arms “girls with stories of resistance, bravery, and daring, [revealing] the important connections between causes and tactics” (p. 71). As the Radical Monarchs share, an engagement with people of color histories situate their present position more intently, informing their respond and the necessity to continue to fight for equity. This embrasure of marginal education is further witnessed through the presence of diverse guest speakers that provide first person anecdotes to support curriculum.

The diverse units taught during troupe meetings are not dated accounts of the past but timely issues that are a result of unbalanced relations of power. Distinct from curriculum that would have one learn about these prejudices through written accounts from the past, guest speakers and elders are regularly invited to provide first hand accounts of given topics. For the Disability Justice and Transphobia units a disability rights advocate and transgender advocate were invited to discuss first hand accounts with discrimination and to provide the group with allyship strategies. During the Radical Roots unit, the Monarchs met with “Betty Reid Soskin, a 94-year-old National Park Ranger who has worked to recognize the contributions of African American women during WWII” (Cramer, 2015, p. 1). A departure from educational practices that exclusively regard teachers within schools as the experts of any given topic, the Radical Monarchs embrace the societal and educational contributions of those who live within the community and those who have first hand accounts of history. Similar to the cross-generational ethic within Beyoncé’s visual album *Lemonade* (Chapter Two), elders are considered a vital part of empowerment strategies because of their resilience and because of a recognition that inequitable practices persist. Here, community members become a valuable resource that girls of color may draw upon to further understand marginal history. Within the Black Panther unit, Cheryl Dawson a Black Panther party member was invited to share her experiences with the breakfast program. Touched by the presence of so many attentive and social justice oriented girls of color, Dawson shared her hopes for the organization:

It's my desire to plant seeds in the hearts of those who will take them, so that you will know as you grow up and you assume your place in womanhood that part of

your responsibility is to the people. It's wonderful that you have a chance to sit here and learn history but for every one of you who is sitting here there are fifty or a hundred that don't have this opportunity. So you have big work ahead of you (Knowlton & Lee, 2017, p. 1).

Education, within the Radical Monarchs, functions not as information to then be regurgitated on an exam, lessons are instead about fostering the political consciousness of girls of color who have inherited a legacy of colonialism and injustices relative to identity standpoints. As Dawson states, the Monarchs are taught that their responsibility "is to the people" and an account of discriminatory practices across history is necessary to continue to strive for the betterment of society. Where critics might claim that the political issues taught within the group are too complicated for the girls of color to fully understand, critics fail to consider how these issues impact the everyday lives of girls of color regardless of their being able to articulate it. Far from operating from a posttrace standpoint that boasts equality, the Monarchs recognize historical policies of discrimination to more intently understand the present and work toward a more equitable future. As Radical Monarch Amia articulates in the 2017 Radical Monarch documentary, "we get to kind of make history - or herstory, as we like to say it. Instead of just reading about it we get to be one tiny little part of it because a lot of tiny parts can equal one big part, but we need the tiny parts for us to make it one big part" (Knowlton & Lee, 2017, p. 1). The centering of marginal education is about allowing girls of color to develop a critical vocabulary to understand and challenge their lived experiences.

#### A Return to Do-It Yourself Empowerment

The overwhelming linking of girl power and neoliberal participation has created a caricature of empowerment wherein cultural ideas around agency have been grossly

reduced to ability to participate in the marketplace. In this respect, the Radical Monarchs depart from consumption-driven models of agency, placing an emphasis on a do-it yourself ethic popularized by the Riot Grrrls and further embracing self-care as essential to societal transformation. Particularly through anti-consumerist practices that stress a liberatory personal, social, and political agenda, the Radical Monarchs promote agential endeavors that can then be used to transform the world. For example, the Radical Love unit of the organization called upon girls to create and customize affirmation mirrors “to affirm [their] brilliance, magik, and power” (radicalmonarchs, 2017). As heavily shared on their social media, Monarchs used paint to write positive messages on small mirrors (see image 4.4) that interestingly obscured much of the reflective purpose of the mirror.



Figure 4.4: An image from the Radical Love unit depicting an affirmation mirror created by a Monarch. Photo taken from radicalmonarchs Instagram

The mirrors which depicted message, such as “Don’t compare, donut,” (Figure 4.4) “free spirit” and “magic,” are representative of the resistive agency promoted through the

organization, as girls developing consciousness can be expressed in an individual way that has structural implications (radicalmonarchs, 2017). Particularly the act of creating art and repurposing mirrors to protest an industry that benefits from feminine insecurity, allows Monarchs to deconstruct beauty standards and instead celebrate all bodies. The emphasis on agency can further be understood through the integration of self-care discourses within do-it yourself activities.

Within the Radical Love unit Monarchs learned about the “healing powers of herbs and scents” to then make their own aromatherapy sprays (Radical Monarchs Facebook, 2017). A departure from neoliberal representations that promote the consumption of highly feminized products (cosmetics, makeup, etc.), the Monarchs instead customized scents that stimulated the sense, products meant for their sole benefit. Further, through activities that promote an intimate connection with their bodies (prior to making sprays the Monarchs wrote about “how different scents and herbs” made them feel) the Monarchs promote an ethic of self-care that radically connects the body with action (Radical Monarchs Facebook, 2017). Particularly as the Monarchs advocate, “#TheRevolutionWillHaveSelfCare” the creation of aromatherapy sprays is an expression of wellbeing wherein agency can be manifested inwardly for the purposes of nurturing the self to then take action outwardly. Amid a girl power landscape which pays limited to no attention to the emotional well-being of girls of color driven to high levels of achievement, the Monarchs position self-care as a necessary component of structural change.

## Conclusion

To date, the Radical Monarchs have received considerable attention through social justice outlets and limited representation on national news. This is largely due to the Monarchs not fitting the individuated, special girl narratives that corporations continue to benefit from. The Monarchs are not marketing products and do not operate from a position that equates financial contributions to activism. Instead, they are an unapologetic group of collaborative activists that are learning marginal history, embracing the wisdom of community members and elders, and taking an intersectional stance when it comes to social justice. Yet, in spite of the limited national attention the group has garnered, they have struck a chord not only with their local Oakland community who warmly “welcomes”<sup>8</sup> their activism, but across the U.S. as the Radical Monarchs are currently working with collaborators to start more chapters of the organization (Radical Monarchs documentary, 2017). The Radical Monarchs are a needed response to our twenty-first century context, a continuation of past civil rights efforts, and a reminder of the continued social conditions that limit girls of color. As Hollingquest articulates,

We stand in the legacy of love and social justice that our ancestors and contemporaries are fighting for. The reason I can read is because someone risked their life so that I had the right to read. So we have to teach young people to follow in that tradition, to continue working towards social equality and social justice (Knowlton & Lee, 2017, p. 1).

---

<sup>8</sup> In 2016, the Oakland Digital Arts & Literacy center showcased billboards to promote their “Inspire Oakland” campaign. The Radical Monarchs were artistically depicted alongside Black Panther activist, Kathleen Clever and Black political activist, Angela Davis.

Yet where the Radical Monarchs may not be available to all girls of color, the resistive strategies they employ can be used in diverse contexts to affirm and validate the experiences of girls of color. In the concluding chapter I speak to the activist turn adults can promote to nurture girls of color growing up in the twenty-first century. The attributes represented through Beyoncé's later career and the varied methods employed by the Radical Monarchs come to represent a model for girl of color-power.

## Chapter Five

As girl power continues to permeate U.S. American culture, I was interested in deconstructing three manifestations that I encountered on an (almost) daily basis: American Girl dolls, Beyoncé as a girl power figure, and the Radical Monarchs, an organization that began and rapidly expanded during my doctoral studies. Informed by my experiences as a girl in the margins who was bothered by the postrace, neoliberal hailing of empowerment, I wanted to analyze whether contemporary representations of girl power, that visually boast the inclusion of girls of color, did so ideologically. This project thus sought to answer: How do dominant iterations of girl power continue to exclude girls of color, irrespective of girl of color physical presence? What is girl of color-power and how does it differ from traditional girl power as a postrace, postfeminist, neoliberal project? How does a focus on girl of color-oriented empowerment expand Communicative conceptions of identity and agency to account for diverse forms of social change activities? Through a theoretical engagement with agency wherein I interrogated power structures implicit in agential strategies, I unpacked how the capacity to act is framed distinctly based on dominant and free iterations of girl power. Specifically, dominant representations promote agential practices that are aligned with existing power relations, in this case neoliberalism, postracism, and postfeminism. Conversely, free manifestations of agency seek to reinvent empowerment discourses to address the needs of girls of color. As such, I posited girl of color-power, an alternative framework to girl



power that operates from an inclusive ethic intent on transforming power relations.

Utilizing Beyoncé latter career and the practices of the Radical Monarchs as exemplars, I accentuated symbolic and practical practices that shape girl of color-power.

Methodologically, the framework posited by McKerrow (1989) and expanded by Ono and Sloop (1989) and Cloud (1994) enabled me to deconstruct consumption-driven discourses that promote neoliberal girl power agents. Within the dissertation, I argued that homogenized representations of girlhood work strategically to center white, middle class femininity at the expense of girls of color who have distinct needs that correspond with their marginal positioning. Further, through the metaphorical and material centering of subversive approaches to girl empowerment, I isolated themes meant to carve space for girls of color. It is significant to note that the method I employed is limited particularly as McKerrow (1989) operates from a Foucauldian conception of power that it is devoid of “categories of oppressor and oppressed,” a gross limitation given the colonial implications that shape contemporary power relations (p. 149). Yet I use the method as a stance rather than interpretive theory as it allowed me to approach each girl power text in different ways. Further as Ono and Sloop (1989) focus on telos, critical rhetoricians consider the necessity to “aid subjects with the goal of liberating them from domination” (p. 49). As Cloud (1994) forwards material transformation via activism, the expanded critical rhetoric posited by McKerrow (1989) allowed me to unpack girl power for the purposes of identifying and promoting girl of color agency, partly through the vocabulary of oppressor and oppressed, but also as resisting this characterization (p. 49). For as the Radical Monarchs have demonstrated through their reformist hailing of difference, they

do not ascribe to stagnant categories of oppressor/oppressed and instead actively work toward symbolic and material transformation. I now review each analysis chapter within this dissertation to address the wider implications of this work for the continued study of girl power.

In Chapter Two of this project I centered the American Girl, *BeForever* series, a prominent girl power discourse with an educational orientation. Though an analysis of girl of color historical figures I unpacked the exclusive nature of girl power representations to highlighting the neoliberal, postrace, and postfeminist ideology behind the inclusion of characters such as Addy Walker, Josefina Montoya, and Kaya. As I argued in the chapter, where the dolls initially represent a diverse idea of girlhood, a detailed look at the accompanying narratives reveal the colonial ideology heralded by each character. Particularly through the negation of white complicity within white supremacy, an emphasis on progress, and the celebration of the meritocratic agent of color, American Girl promotes an exclusive brand of girl power that monetizes diversity without engaging the continued marginalization of girls of color. A pervasive representation of our twenty-first century landscape, the American Girl *BeForever* series is a dominant discourse of empowerment that promotes girl agency insofar as it maintains the status-quo.

More specifically, I argue that within the *BeForever* series, agency is cast identically for all girls, irrespective of race, class, etc. For example, through the representations of Melody Edison and Nanea Michelle, girls of color are encouraged to minimize and downplay existing racism and instead promote postrace ideology that

ignores the role white supremacy has in shaping power relationships. Here, the discriminatory practices Melody and Nanea negotiate within their texts (racism amid the Civil Rights Movement and inequitable land distribution as a result of U.S. American colonization of Hawaii, respectfully) are referenced without an account of settler colonialism and its influence on the lives of Melody and Nanea. Girls of color are instead encouraged to identify with the characters aesthetically and encouraged to see their plight as a function of neutral influences, firmly situated in the past. It's important to note that while there is a political focus to Melody Edison's Civil Right's story, her narrative revolves around her growing awareness toward raced injustices in the 1960s. Agency is not cast as something girls in the twenty-first century can and should practice amid reoccurring discriminatory policies.

In Chapter Three, I analyzed girl power icon Beyoncé and her considerable musical career. A liminal performer who is representative of the interrelationship between dominant and free representations of girl power, I argue that while her early career was aligned with neoliberal, postrace, and postfeminist representations, the artistic freedom she earned in the latter half of her career enabled her to shift her girl power discourses. Particularly, through an embrace of Black femininity, Beyoncé represents a departure from postrace representations in favor of centering continued discriminatory practices toward Black girls/women to then center Black power, resilience, and beauty. Through an evocation of sisterhood, an emphasis on cross-generational alliances, and through the strategic hailing of hope, Beyoncé aesthetically and lyrically represents a model of empowerment that implicates the marginalization of Black women for the

purpose of transcending existing relationships of power. Yet, while her message is clear it is limited in symbolically representing the agential capabilities of Black women.

Through Beyoncé, agency is cast distinctly as her early work with Destiny's Child is aligned with *BeForever* representations that promote neoliberalism, postracism, and postfeminism. Specifically, through the videos for *Bills, Bills, Bills*, *Bootylicious*, and *Nasty Girl*, Destiny's Child promoted agential tactics that were aligned with marketplace participation, a highly feminized aesthetic that centered the male gaze, and the adherence of postracism via an alliance with white respectability. Although the group was visibly comprised of Black women, Blackness and aspects of Black culture (for example: pimp hats and do-rags) were used for stylized purposes that worked to maintain existing race relationships. Conversely, during Beyoncé's latter career, action was cast as a necessary condition for the emancipation of Black girls/women. Through the centering of Black sisterhood, cross-generational alliances, and through the radical display of Black femininity (during the Super Bowl, a highly visible platform) Beyoncé insisted on the recognition of continued discriminatory practices. Where the agency promoted by Beyoncé was artistic, and limited to the stage and screen, the empowerment discourses she evokes are readily adopted by girls of color who see themselves in her display of Otherness and strength.

In Chapter Four I analyzed the Radical Monarchs, a social justice oriented collective actively working toward the empowerment of girls of color. A transgressive group that operates from an inclusive ethic beyond the axis of sex, the Monarchs represent a model of empowerment intent on supporting politically conscious global

agents. Through an analysis of material published by and about the group, I identified attributes that shape the girl of color-power discourses of the group: specifically, the centering of marginal history via a commitment to critical pedagogy and a return to anti-consumerist, do-it yourself practices. Both attributes enable the Monarchs to foster an inclusive ethic of self-care that simultaneously focuses on developing the self to then advocate for a more equitable world. For just as the conservative backlash suggests, the Monarch's empowerment transcends individual success and is instead about re-conceptualizing power relationships.

The Radical Monarchs represent a departure from agential tactics that maintain power relationships as their curriculum, aesthetic, and practices center marginal history and critical pedagogy for the purposes of taking action against discriminatory legal and cultural practices. Here agency is expressed two-fold as the Monarchs privilege well-being through the recognition that Monarch's negotiate a great deal as girls of color and through the promotion of agential strategies that will bring about cultural and social change. Specifically, through a do-it yourself ethic, the Monarchs create artifacts (such as affirmation mirrors) to promote self-love amid popular culture discourses that disproportionately equate whiteness with beauty. Further, through the centering of marginal history and through lessons that cultivate advocacy efforts in political forums, the Monarchs position girls of color as active agents in platforms typically occupied by adults. Empowerment, for the Radical Monarchs, is about validating and affirming the self to the spread their growing awareness and affect material change. Aligned with the commitments to critical rhetoric contributed by Ono and Sloop (1989) and the activist

turn promoted by Cloud (1994) I now move beyond discourses to highlight conditions represented through Beyoncé and the Radical Monarchs that can be applied to wider contexts.

As I stated at the introduction of this project, girl power is a complex and multi-dimensional phrase. While it's continued use hails the positive development of girls, its overuse within corporate marketing is testament to its ubiquitous and ambiguous qualities. What is girl power? Is there a tangible definition that is understood across cultures and contexts? While the answers to these questions remains elusive what is undeniable is that girl power remains at the forefront of U.S. American consciousness, a term with deep connections to the past and present state of feminism. As originally used by the Riot Grrrls, girl power held a second wave ethic that was critical of consumerism and hyper-femininity. It's use in the 1990's evoked a do-it yourself attitude respective to wardrobe, art, and publications and boasted sisterhood and a gendered coalition that defied white respectability. Specific to girls of color, the ethic of the Riot Grrrls was inclusive (per the Riot Grrrl Manifesto) yet they were largely a white, middle class collection with limited participation by girls/women of color.

Into the twenty-first century, the corporate co-opting of girl power is well documented (Newson, 2005; Zaslow, 2006; Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005) as having strong ties with the transition to third wave feminism. As a feminist wave, the movement had a contradictory ethos as it simultaneously marked an embrasure of intersectional feminism(s) *and* a return to consumerist manifestations of agency. Particularly women began to ascribe to marketplace participation, wherein their feminism could be expressed

through consumption. Relative to girl power, empowerment could be expressed through the purchase of clothing, accessories, and magazines that boasted girl power yet did not promote a political engagement with power relations. Here all girls were simultaneously faced with postfeminist and postrace discourses that erased continued discrimination and subjugation for bodies of color, in favor of progress narratives. The twenty-first century saw a visible alignment with postracism as girl of color placement within corporate campaigns rose, yet as I argue in Chapter One, a display of Otherness is not necessarily an engagement with the experiences and obstacles girls of color face.

In our contemporary moment, girl power scholarship is at a notable transition. Critical of the neoliberal hailing of empowerment discourses (Banet-Weiser, 2004; Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005; Kearney, 2015) yet underdeveloped when investigating the influences of these discourses on girls of color in the twenty-first century. A notable omission that has been engaged by scholars such as Taft (2011) in her transnational analysis on girl activism: *Rebel Girls: Youth Activism & Social Change Across the Americas*, this dissertation is a contribution to this scholarly gap. Particularly, through a centering of girl of color representations within U.S. America I centered the ideological perspectives promoted by dominant and free, girl power discourses. Further, through the recognition that girls of color continue to navigate a discriminatory landscape I engaged the distinct empowerment strategies that function to affirm and validate girls of color for the purpose of promoting social change.

The differences between how white girls and girls of color are treated in our contemporary moment can be understood through the social responsibility discourses generally attributed to each population. For example, Taft (2011) notes that middle-class, white girls are offered sympathy and aid for navigating “the treacherous water of falling self-esteem,” and conversely, low-income, girls of color are told they must “overcome the supposed dangers of their upbringing and make ‘healthy choices’” (Taft, 2011, p. 29). These prejudiced perspectives are deeply ingrained in U.S. American culture to the detriment of girls of color who must negotiate intersectional obstacles. This dissertation was a conceptual intervention to this recurring, unequal treatment of girls. Where contemporary scholarship on girl power is now critical of the neoliberal, postfeminist, and postrace markers of empowerment, the strategic application of these ideologies, within representations of “diversity,” has yet to be thoroughly engaged. Further, where communicative scholarship recognizes the need to center marginal positionalities of girlhood, the consideration is overwhelmingly an afterthought, a “directions for future research” anecdote. This dissertation was a contribution to this academic gap, a critical analysis of the ways girls of color are reinventing empowerment strategies to fit their personal, social, and cultural needs. What follows are attributes I isolate of girl of color-power. While present within Beyoncé’s later career and the politics of the Radical Monarchs, I argue that markers of girl of color-power can be applied to wider contexts to affirm and shape the political consciousness of all girls.



## Girl of color-power

Girl of color-power is not an alternative representations of girl power, a re-packaged iteration adapted from its neoliberal hailing. Rather, I label girl of color-power as such to pay homage to the revolutionary ethic of the movement in its earliest iterations. Aligned with the subversive spirit of 80's Black female hip hop artists and the Riot Grrrl do-it yourself efforts, I argue that girl of color-power is part of a feminist lineage that centers the lived experiences of girls at the margins. Expanding the individuated power inherent in girl-power, the plural designation, "girl of color" power is significant in that it hails the diversity of experience relative to non-white girls. Importantly, white girls are welcomed, included within girl of color-power, yet the centering of marginal bodies via "girl of color" designation works to establish an ethic of inclusivity wherein identity standpoints are engaged. What follows is an engagement with the unique markers shaping girl of color-power as a framework that can be applied to contexts outside of groups, such as the Radical Monarchs. Specifically, while the Monarchs work toward expanding beyond Oakland, girl of color-power is a framework that can be used in settings to help girls make sense of issues such as police brutality, the 2017 and 2018 women's marches, and the Flint, Michigan water crises, for example. Through engaging sisterhood bore from difference, embracing cross generational alliances, and through an active inclusion of critical pedagogy (based in marginal history), girl of color-power promotes agential tactics aimed at recreating the world.

Sisterhood bore from difference, is a principle condition in the empowerment discourses of Beyoncé's later career and the Radical Monarchs. Distinct from postrace

approaches to sisterhood wherein girls are encouraged to join together on the exclusive basis of sex, sisterhood through difference is an approach to coalition that importantly recognizes the diverse identity standpoints under “girl” as category. Through an inclusive ethic toward low-income girls, transnational girls, undocumented girls, etc., girl of color-power embraces difference beyond visibility and centers the socio-cultural issues that shape girlhood. Too often the diversity heralded in girl groups such as The Girl Scouts of America, ignores the manner in which identity standpoints shape everyday experiences. Instead white, middle class experiences are imposed on all girls as lessons around financial literacy, for example, are given without interrogating colonial influences that shape wealth disparity and access. Instead of having a disproportionate amount of girls of color quietly bear the reality of their working class status, an ethic of inclusive sisterhood recognizes structural influences (such as, race, class, sexuality, ability, and gender identity) that shape lived experiences. Through collaborative activities that promote an interrogation of one’s identity standpoints in relation to those in power, girls of color can embrace communal markers of Otherness that are a source of solidarity and strength. Sisterhood through difference affirms the lived experiences of all girls for the purposes of radical coalitional work.

An additional condition of girl of color-power can be understood through an embrace of cross-generational alliances. Amid ageist models of girl power that exclusively center youth, girl of color-power embraces girl as an inclusive moniker respective to age. Particularly as systemic inequality is addressed, earlier generations are regarded as an invaluable resource to draw upon. Whether through an educational

capacity that centers lived experience or through the sharing of skills and crafts, distinct generations are brought together in the spirit of continued survival. Importantly, cross-generational allyship should not operate from an authoritative model wherein adults control the space. Instead, generations come together in the spirit of sisterhood and community. Here, adults and girls alike can reach out to community and family elders and draw upon their varied expertise and experiences. A cross-generational ethic is further engaged through the inclusion of marginal literature from the past. Through the sharing of texts that center the intersectional plight of the civil rights movement and people of color labor movements (for example) girls can develop connections to past resiliency efforts they will forward their activism in layered and historically nuanced ways. The intentional inclusion of all-aged girls/women of color can be heralded so long as wisdom is valued as much as any accreditation or degree. A girl of color-power ethic recognizes the educational and communal imperative of women who have and continue to survive institutional discrimination.

Perhaps the most notable consideration when fostering girl of color -power is an embrace of marginal history and critical pedagogy. Distinct from traditional curriculum which engages history through a Eurocentric lens that disproportionately centers the accomplishments of white men, an account of marginal history offers girls an engagement with history that is not bifurcated into good/bad narratives. Through the centering of marginal resistance, for example, and though an account of the violence and discrimination white supremacy has historically imposed on bodies of color, girls can more intimately understand their social and cultural context. The critical pedagogy

component of this education is exemplified through the simultaneous fostering of “social agency, voice, and democratic participation” (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003, p. 6). Girls are not taught marginal history for its own sake. The education comes with a responsibility to then actively work toward the liberation and empowerment of disenfranchised communities. As represented through Beyoncé’s artistry via a historical and contemporary centering of Black girls/women and through the political actions of the Radical Monarchs (participating in protests, town hall meetings, etc.) critical pedagogy fosters the development of voice to then situate girls/women as global citizens with the capacity to act. Through the centering of marginal history and through the practice of critical pedagogy, girls of color learn that they are the descendants of people who have been present throughout history, a powerful realization that holds with it a responsibility to continue to work toward equal representation.

As research continues to expand evolving notions of girl of color-power it is important that researchers engage, politically conscious, communities of color for the purpose of receiving first-hand accounts of what makes members feel empowered. A collaborative engagement with diverse communities will provide richer accounts of agential strategies while allowing researchers to decipher empowerment cues that may not be evident to the community. Further, as politically conscious, girl communities expand, technology and social media are playing a larger role in disseminating marginal education and in promoting intersectional collaboration. Future work should engage the impact accessibility to this content has for girls who may not have had access.

When I finalized my comprehensive exam questions, questions tailored toward what would result in this project, I learned that I was pregnant. My (Chinese/Okinawan) cysgender-male partner and I were going to have a girl<sup>9</sup>. Where I recognize that sex is a biological category that does not necessarily align with gender, the cosmic relevance drove me to heaping tears. I would have the opportunity to raise a girl of color as I wrote about girl of color-power. This project then held different stakes. Where I was initially writing from the pain and isolation of a first generation, Chicana I more actively engaged girl power as a recurring twenty-first century discourse. As I wrote this project, as my belly grew, and as I raised my newborn into a one-year-old, t-shirts with girl power slogans were neon signs, compact makeup kits with labels such as “activist” were fog horns: the consumption-driven focus of girl power was never clearer. I entered this space with a newfound urgency, how would my childhood *and* child-rearing experiences shape my investigation of girl of color-power?

Truthfully, my intimate connection to this topic allowed me write from a space of healing and transformation. Through the recognition that diverse representations can and do ideologically promote neoliberalism, postracism, and postfeminism, I soothed my younger self and validated her pain. Through a recognition that a girl power icon, such as Beyoncé, could evolve, that social conditioning could be unlearned, I gave myself grace for the ways I had bought into popular representations of girl power. And through a focus

---

<sup>9</sup> Girl to designate sex. Gender is a social construct and I will love and support whoever my child identifies themselves to be

on the future and the brave, intersectional politics of the Radical Monarchs, I embraced hope for a better, more inclusive future: for Kamila and all girls of color.

## References

- Aapola, S., Gonick, M., Harris, A., & Hey, V. (2005). Young femininity girlhood, power and social change. *Gender and Education, 17*(5), 565-566.
- About Us (1990). In *Radical Monarchs*. Retrieved November 19, 2016, from <http://radicalmonarchs.org/about-us/>
- Als, H. (2016, May 30). Beywatch: Beyoncé's reformation. *The New Yorker*.  
*American Girl Catalogue* (2017, October). 1-55.
- American girl unveils beforever line and connects a new generation of girls to timeless stories, inspiring characters, and endless possibilities! (n.d.). In *Mattel*. Retrieved March 1, 2016, from news.mattel.com
- Amin, T. N. (2014). Girl power, real politics: dis/respectability, post-raciality, and the politics of inclusion. *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and the Popular Screen*, 255.
- Bale, M. (2016, April 25). Beyoncé's 'Lemonade' Is a revolutionary work of black feminism: Critic's notebook. In *billboard*. Retrieved February 21, 2018, from <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/7341839/Beyoncé-lemonade-black-feminism>
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2015). 'Confidence you can carry!': Girls in crisis and the market for girls' empowerment organizations. *Continuum, 29*(2), 182-12.  
doi:10.1080/10304312.2015.1022938
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2004). Girls rule!: Gender, feminism, and nickelodeon. *Critical Studies in Media Communication, 21*(2), 119-139. doi:10.1080/07393180410001688038.

- Baumgardner, J., & Richards, A. (1999). *Manifesta: Young women, feminism, and the future*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Briggs, K., Burruss, K., Knowles, B., LeToya, L., Robertson, L., Rowland, K. (1999). Bills, bills, bills. Destiny's Child on *The Writings on the Wall*. Retrieved from <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/destinyschild/billsbillsbills.html>
- Brown, L. M. (2016). *Powered by girl: A field guide for supporting youth activists*. Beacon Press.
- Burke, K. (1945). Introduction: The five key terms of dramatism. *A grammar of motives*, 226-229.
- Campbell, K. K. (2005). Agency: Promiscuous and protean. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 2(1), 1-19.
- Cisneros, J. D. (2012). Reclaiming the Rhetoric of Reies López Tijerina: Border Identity and Agency in "The Land Grant Question". *Communication Quarterly*, 60(5), 561-587.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.
- Cramer, M. (2015, December 17). Meet the women who run the raddest non-girl scout troop around. In *Buzzfeed News*. Retrieved March 26, 2018, from [https://www.buzzfeed.com/megcramer/radical-monarchs-feminist-heroes?utm\\_term=.bmmqDKnPB#.puYa3bKB5](https://www.buzzfeed.com/megcramer/radical-monarchs-feminist-heroes?utm_term=.bmmqDKnPB#.puYa3bKB5)
- Darder, A., Baltodano, M., & Torres, R. D. (2003). Critical pedagogy: An introduction. *The critical pedagogy reader*, 1-21.



- Darowski, L., Strilchuk, J., Sorochuk, J., & Provost, C. (2007). Negative Impact of Tourism on Hawaii Natives and Environment. *Lethbridge Undergraduate Research Journal*, 2(2).
- Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 1968. *Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos*. New York: Herder.
- Horton, A. (2018, March 26). A fake photo of Emma Gonzalez went viral on the far right, where Parkland teens are villains. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2018/03/25/a-fake-photo-of-emma-gonzalez-went-viral-on-the-far-right-where-parkland-teens-are-villains/?utm\\_term=.73c3c062bebd](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2018/03/25/a-fake-photo-of-emma-gonzalez-went-viral-on-the-far-right-where-parkland-teens-are-villains/?utm_term=.73c3c062bebd)
- Desai, K. (2016). Teaching the Third World Girl: Girl Rising as a precarious curriculum of empathy. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 46(3), 248-264.
- [DestinysChildVEVO]. (2009, October 25). *Destiny's child: Bills, bills, bills* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NiF6-0UTqtc>
- Dobson, A. S., & Harris, A. (2015). Post-girlpower: Globalized mediated femininities. *Continuum*, 29(2), 143. doi:10.1080/10304312.2015.1022943
- Dubrofsky, R. E. (2013). Jewishness, whiteness, and blackness on Glee: Singing to the tune of postracism. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 6(1), 82-102.
- Durham, A. (2012). "Check On It" Beyoncé, Southern booty, and Black femininities in music video. *Feminist media studies*, 12(1), 35-49.
- Duvall, S. (2010). Perfect little feminists?: Young girls in the US interpret gender, violence, and friendship in cartoons. *Journal of Children and Media*, 4(4), 402-

417. doi:10.1080/17482798.2010.510007.

- Enck-Wanzer, D. (2011). Tropicalizing East Harlem: Rhetorical agency, cultural citizenship, and Nuyorican cultural production. *Communication Theory*, 21(4), 344-367.
- Fast Facts (2018). In *American Girl*. Retrieved January 18, 2018, from <http://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/fast-facts>
- Ferber, A. L. (2012). The culture of privilege: Color-blindness, postfeminism, and christonormativity. *Journal of Social Issues*, 68(1), 63-77.
- Foust, C. R. (2010). *Transgression as a mode of resistance: Rethinking social movement in an era of corporate globalization*. Lexington Books.
- Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (A continuum book). New York: Herder.
- Fusari, R., Knowles, B., & Fusari, R. (2001). Bootylicious. Destiny's Child on *Survivor*. Retrieved from <https://genius.com/Destinys-child-bootylicious-lyrics>
- Gajanan, M. (2017, March 30). Beyoncé's Net Worth. *Fortune*. Retrieved from <http://fortune.com/2017/03/30/Beyoncé-net-worth/>
- Gibbons, S. (2011). *Comparative essay: Girls, women & media*. Columbia: Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.
- Hains, R. C. (2014). The significance of chronology in commodity feminism: Audience interpretations of girl power music. *Popular Music and Society*, 37(1), 33-47.
- Hall, S., (2000) "Who needs 'identity'?" from Du Gay, P., Evans, J., and Redman, P. (eds.), *Identity: A reader* (15-20). Sage Publications Inc.
- Harris, A., & Dobson, A. S. (2015). Theorizing agency in post-girlpower times.

- Continuum*, 29(2), 145-12. doi:10.1080/10304312.2015.1022955
- Hobson, J. (2013). Beyoncé's fierce feminism. *Ms. Magazine*, 23(2), 42-45.
- hooks, B. (2000). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. Pluto Press.
- Hopkins, S. (2017). Girl power-dressing: fashion, feminism and neoliberalism with Beckham, Beyoncé and Trump. *Celebrity Studies*, 1-6.
- Kagan, J. (1964). Acquisition and significance of sex typing and sex role identity. *Review of child development research*, 1, 137-167.
- Kanopy. (2015). *Beyoncé*. Icons Big Star Profiles.
- Kearney, M. C. (2015). Sparkle: Luminosity and post-girl power media. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 29(2), 263-273.  
doi:10.1080/10304312.2015.1022945.
- Kehrer, L. (2017). Beyoncé, Lemonade. Parkwood Entertainment, CD/DVD/Digital Download. *Journal of the Society for American Music*, 11(2), 250-252.
- Khoja-Moolji, S. (2015). Becoming an "intimate publics": Exploring the affective intensities of hashtag feminism. *Feminist Media Studies*, 15(2), 347-350.
- Knowles, B., Dent, A., Bassi, M., & Hackett, N. (2000). Nasty Girl. Destiny's Child on *Survivor*. Retrieved from  
<https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/destinyschild/nastygirl.html>
- Knowlton, L. G. (Director). Lee, G. (Producer). (2017). *Radical Brownies* [Online video]. The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2017/jan/06/radical-brownies-berets-badges-and-social-justice-video>
- Koffman, O., Orgad, S., & Gill, R. (2015). Girl power and 'selfie humanitarianism'.

*Continuum*, 29(2), 157. doi:10.1080/10304312.2015.1022948

Larson, K (2017). *Growing up with aloha. A nanea classic volume 1*. Middleton, WI:

American Girl Publishing.

Lithwick, D. (2018, February). They were trained for this moment: How the student

activists of marjory stonemason douglas demonstrate the power of a

comprehensive education. *Slate*. Retrieved March 27, 2018, from

[https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2018/02/the-student-activists-of-marjory-](https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2018/02/the-student-activists-of-marjory-stoneman-douglas-high-demonstrate-the-power-of-a-full-education.html)

[stoneman-douglas-high-demonstrate-the-power-of-a-full-education.html](https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2018/02/the-student-activists-of-marjory-stoneman-douglas-high-demonstrate-the-power-of-a-full-education.html)

Littler, J. (2013). Meritocracy as plutocracy: The marketising of 'Equality' under

neoliberalism. *New Formations*, 80(80), 52-72.

Martinot, S. (2010). *The machinery of whiteness: Studies in the structure of racialization*.

Temple University Press.

McKerrow, R. E. (1989). Critical rhetoric: Theory and praxis. *Communications*

*Monographs*, 56(2), 91-111.

McKinney, K. (2015, August 25). Beyoncé rhymes with fiancé: '90s reviews of Destiny's

Child. *Splinter*. Retrieved from [https://splinternews.com/Beyoncé-rhymes-with-](https://splinternews.com/Beyoncé-rhymes-with-fiance-90s-reviews-of-destinys-chi-1793850217)

[fiance-90s-reviews-of-destinys-chi-1793850217](https://splinternews.com/Beyoncé-rhymes-with-fiance-90s-reviews-of-destinys-chi-1793850217)

Moraga, C., & Anzaldúa, G. (Eds.). (2015). *This bridge called my back: Writings by*

*radical women of color*. SUNY Press.

Morgenson, G. (1997). *Forbes great minds of business*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Morrison, A. (1999). *Toni Morrison and Womanist Discourse*. P. Lang.

[MTPAmerica]. (2015, February 13). *Radical brownies troop focuses on social*

- justice fox & friends* [Video File]. Retrieved from  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dx4MNmH3JhM>
- Nielsen, F. (2002). American History through the Eyes of the American Girls. *The Journal of American Culture*, 25(1/2), 85.
- Newsom, V. A. (2005). Girl power enacted: A popular artifact as a metaphor for contained power. In *annual conference of the International Communication Association in May, New York, NY*.
- Ono, K. A. (2010). Postracism: A theory of the “post-” as political strategy. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 34(3), 227-233.
- Ono, K. A., & Sloop, J. M. (1995). The critique of vernacular discourse. *Communication Monographs*, 62(1), 19.
- Ono, K. A., & Sloop, J. M. (1992). Commitment to telos—A sustained critical rhetoric. *Communications Monographs*, 59(1), 48-60.
- Peck, J. (2010). The secret of her success: Oprah Winfrey and the seductions of self-transformation. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 34(1), 7-14.
- Porter, C. (2001). *Meet addy. An American girl*. Middleton, WI: American Girl Publishing.
- Pomerantz, S., & Raby, R. (2011). ‘Oh, she’s so smart’: girls’ complex engagements with post/feminist narratives of academic success. *Gender and education*, 23(5), 549-564.
- Radical Monarchs (2014). Retrieved from <http://radicalmonarchs.org>
- Radical Brownies documentary: Berets, badges, and social justice (2017, January). In *The*

- Guardian*. Retrieved March 23, 2018, from  
<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/jan/06/radical-brownies-documentary-berets-badges-and-social-justice>
- Riordan, E. (2001). Commodified agents and empowered girls: Consuming and producing feminism. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 25(3), 279–297.
- Riot grrrl manifesto. (1990). *Bikini Kill Zine 2*. Retrieved November 19, 2016, from  
[http://onewarart.org/riot\\_grrrl\\_manifesto.htm](http://onewarart.org/riot_grrrl_manifesto.htm)
- Ristock, J., & Pennell, J. (1996). *Community research as empowerment: Feminist links, postmodern interruptions*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Rose, T. (1994). *Black noise: Rap music and black culture in contemporary America*. Wesleyan.
- Rosen, J. (2011). Beyoncé: Back to Girl Power. *Rolling Stone*, (1130), 68.
- Rowlands, J. (1997). *Questioning empowerment: Working with women in Honduras*. Oxford, UK: Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Oxfam ; Humanities Press International.
- Shaw, J. (2002). *Meet Kaya: An American Girl*. Middleton, WI: Pleasant Company Publications.
- Shire, W. (2016). Redemption [Recorded by B. Knowles]. On *Lemonade*.
- Shome, R. (2009, May 18). Postcolonial or neocolonial? Defining the grounds of research in global communication studies. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 15(2), 203-212.
- Sibielsky, R. (2011). Becoming victim, becoming empowered, becoming girl: Discourses of girlhood in the U.S. at the turn of the millennium. *Rhizomes*, 22, 1-15.

- Silverman, S. M., & Hahn, L. (2003, November 13). Beyoncé: Don't call me 'bootylicious'. *People celebrity*.
- Sowards, S. (2010). Rhetorical agency as haciendo caras and differential consciousness through lens of gender, race, ethnicity, and class: An examination of Dolores Huerta's rhetoric. *Communication Theory*, 20(2), 223-247.
- Spanos, S. (n.d.). American girl unveils be forever line and connects a new generation of girls to timeless stories, inspiring characters, and endless possibilities. In *Mattel Newsroom*. Retrieved April 25, 2018, from <https://news.mattel.com/news/american-girl-unveils-beforeverTM-line-and-connects-a-new-generation-of-girls-to-timeless-stories-inspiring-characters-and-endless-possibilities>
- Taft, J. K. (2011). *Rebel girls: Youth activism and social change across the americas*. New York: New York University Press.
- Teasley, M., & Ikard, D. (2010). Barack Obama and the Politics of Race The Myth of Postracism in America. *Journal of Black Studies*, 40(3), 411-425.
- Trust, G. (2016, July 11). This Week in Billboard Chart History: In 2003, Beyoncé Scored Her First Solo Hot 100 No. 1. *billboard*. Retrieved from <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/7431239/this-week-in-billboard-chart-history-in-2003-Beyoncé-scored-her>
- Turkewitz, J., Stevens, M., & Bailey, J. (2018, February 18). Emma Gonzalez leads a

- student outcry on guns: 'This is the way I have to grieve'. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/18/us/emma-gonzalez-florida-shooting.html>
- Utley, E. A. (2017). What does Beyoncé mean to young girls? *Journal of Popular Music* video. *Feminist media studies*, 29(2).
- [Viewing Liberty]. (2015, February 13). *Teaching racism via 'Radical Brownies' – Daneen Borelli* [Video File]. Retrieved from <http://www.easybib.com/guides/citation-guides/apa-format/youtube-video/>
- Williams, M., Brown, K., Hogan, A., Knowles, B. (2016). Formation. B. Knowles on *Lemonade*.
- Zaru, D. (2017, August 16). Beyoncé gets political at super bowl, pays tribute to 'Black Lives Matter'. In *CNN politics*. Retrieved February 21, 2018, from <https://www.cnn.com/2016/02/08/politics/Beyoncé-super-bowl-black-lives-matter/index.html>
- Zaslow, Emilie, and Proquest (Firm). *Feminism, Inc.: Coming of Age in Girl Power Media Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Zuberi, T., & Bonilla-Silva, E. (Eds.). (2008). *White logic, white methods: Racism and methodology*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Zeisler, A. (2016). *We Were Feminists Once*. New York, NY: PublicAffairs. Retrieved from <http://www.ebrary.com>