

BUILDING THE WORLDS OF OUR DREAMS Author(s): JANAKA BOWMAN LEWIS

Source: *South: A Scholarly Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (FALL 2018), pp. 96-114

Published by: University of North Carolina Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26814216>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



University of North Carolina Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *South: A Scholarly Journal*

JSTOR

**BUILDING THE WORLDS OF
OUR DREAMS: BLACK GIRLHOOD
AND QUARE NARRATIVES IN
AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE**

On the one hand, my grandmother uses “quare” to denote something or someone who is odd, irregular, or slightly off-kilter—definitions in keeping with traditional understandings and uses of “queer.” On the other hand, she also deploys “quare” to connote something excessive—something that might philosophically translate into an excess of discursive and epistemological meanings grounded in African American cultural rituals and lived experience.

—E. Patrick Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother”

Black girlhood is inherently quare. It is, as E. Patrick Johnson argues, “something excessive” because it extends beyond the foundations of Black cultural experiences. It is to physically inhabit one experience while thinking of being in another, as many of the characters I discuss in this essay do. It is to represent multiple identities and ways of existence. As Jacqueline Woodson makes clear in *Brown Girl Dreaming*, dreams are also ways that Black girls move away from visions of Black girlhood that have been created for them and toward transformative justice, through dreams of freedom and imagining different pathways.

What is definitely “queer” in white patriarchal culture and perhaps “off-kilter” (to return to Johnson)

“More than survival” . . . looks like dreaming along with and beyond the circumstances of our children and specifically our girls whose notions of freedom on an ordinary day look like something extraordinary and even excessive.

even in Black culture is only a part of the representation of Black girl quareness. Quare encompasses the whole being (or being whole) while the individual self (or who society imagines or demands that Black girls be) remains just a part. Quare narratives are narratives beyond the ordinary. They are narratives that can be found in stories told to children but that resist the boundaries of “simple” childhood. They are stories that move us from southern to northern spaces and even to outer space. They are stories that transcend history and move through generations.

Black girls dream of different ways of being, of existing, and these dreams are represented in a literary canon of Black women writers. There are Isie Watts and Janie Crawford of Zora Neale Hurston’s imagination, who want to travel the world and escape bounds of girlhood and domesticity. There is Toni Morrison’s Nel Wright, who sees a future beyond her mother’s domination, and Pecola Breedlove, whose eyes finally become blue enough (if only in her own mind) to escape what she has seen. There is Sapphire’s Claireece “Precious” Jones, who dreams herself more than an illiterate teenage mother and incest victim. Other little girls are made of “sugar and spice and everything nice.” Black girls, however, can contain dark secrets. They are expected to grow into roles of parent and caregiver beyond their childhood too fast. There is no surprise when they do. They are lost and unwanted, trapped in systems of social welfare and foster care. But they are also representatives of Afro-futuristic visions of Black girlhood, of the “quare” routes and pathways of existence.

These pathways are invoked by Ntozake Shange imploring, “somebody, anybody, [to] sing a black girl’s song,” to “bring her out / to know herself / to know you . . . she’s been dead so long / closed in silence so long / she doesn’t know the sound / of her own voice / her infinite beauty” (4). They are shaped in Nikki Giovanni’s poetic representations in *Spin a Soft Black Song* of shared “desire to plant a masthead for doves . . . To spin a soft Black song . . . To waltz with the children . . . To the mountains of our dreams” (vi). In these stories, poems, and narrative spaces, imagined dreams of black girlhood are realized.

Giovanni wrote for “yvonne,” who “stood there unsmiling / with collar greens / and sensible shoes / on her way to becoming a good Black woman,” but she also wrote “barbara poems,” that “are round / and soft / with explosives inside.” Put together, these poems documented traditional pathways to grow into a “good Black woman,” but also suggested that typical senses and sensibilities are not the only paths to finding one’s way in the world. Shange’s desire for a “black girl’s song” becomes

an imperative that Giovanni takes up as she sings several songs of Black children, and specifically Black girls. It is not just anyone who takes this initiative, but a poet who remembers her own Black girl dreams from Knoxville, Tennessee, which Giovanni covers in “Knoxville” as she details the time she spent with her grandmother in the mountains making ice cream, to the eyes through which she sees the worlds of others.

Black girls dreaming becomes a trope especially in twentieth-century literature, and this essay will only discuss some of the many examples of Black girlhood that emerge in narratives of Black women’s empowerment from the late 1960s to the present. What is significant is the ways in which these stories connect Blackness to the quareness of girlhood. Black girlhood and its power to imagine and to celebrate what is and what is to become is already quare in the imagination of a life beyond the ordinary. Through these stories, I discuss the pathways and physical spaces that represent Black girl quareness and authors who “sing a black girl’s song” so that their voices are heard.

To quote Charlene Carruthers in *Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements*, these voices are heard as we write and think about “Black radical, feminist, queer, and anti-capitalist theories and practices” (ix) for and about Black youth. These readings uncover our potential to move from radical and even ordinary visions of Black girlhood (including the ability to dream) toward freedom and justice. The texts in this essay (and many that are not mentioned) allow Black girl characters and their readers to dream of different places and ways of being while understanding the reality of what it means to exist where we are.

FREEDOM DREAMS AND UNDERGROUND IMAGINATION (BLACK WOMEN WRITERS)

Echoing Isie Watts’s wish to simply go up the road to Orlando in 1920s rural Florida in Zora Neale Hurston’s “Drenched in Light” are enduring narratives and recent retellings of girls and women migrating to other cities “and beyond.” Desires and demands for education and mobility (both social and physical) that were thought of as “queer” in early narratives of the twentieth century became necessary for national progress in arguments for civil rights. Margot Lee Shetterly’s best-selling *Hidden Figures*, and its concurrently published Young Readers’ Edition (2016), chronicle the experiences of African American women Katherine Johnson (mathematician), Dorothy Vaughan (supervisor and mathematician),

and Mary Jackson (who sued to gain entrance to night school to become an engineer), who assisted in NASA's efforts to launch its first space missions from the Langley Research Center in Virginia from 1958 to 1963. Dreams to go to outer space were not yet real for these women, but they were essential in advancing the United States' race to keep up with the then-Soviet Union's 1957 launch of Sputnik 1. Arguments in these texts for the rights of Black women, whose ideas for their own incredible narratives began as early as childhood, span across southern and northern spaces, including segregated Hampton, Virginia, where the "hidden figures" stories begin.

Yet, as Shetterly argues, everyone knew the stories of African American involvement and employment at Langley (i.e., the figures were only "hidden" to outsiders). I posit that this is also a metaphor for quare Black southern girlhood. It is a given that Black girls have dreams and desires that cannot be stifled simply by telling them what they cannot do, including defining their social positions and relationships. Shetterly emphasizes that the stories of Black women's capabilities within the realm of science, thought strange or unprecedented by outsiders, were well known within the Black communities where Langley was located. Although Black women as scientists in the 1950s and 1960s may seem a queer notion today, these women's quare dreams to help the United States get to outer space were not.

Stories of Black women's aspirations from childhoods (extending beyond what those within and outside their communities can imagine for them) are told by and for all ages, including the very young. The Langley story is retold by Shetterly for an even younger audience in her recent picture book, *Hidden Figures: The True Story of Four Black Women and the Space Race* (2018). And the narrative of migrations beyond even our planet is told and retold in narratives about the first Black woman astronaut, Mae Jemison. Children's stories like *Mae among the Stars* (2018) detail for four- to eight-year-olds the narrative of "Little Mae" as a dreamer. Roda Ahmed writes: "They say that daydreamers never succeed, but little Mae was different" (3). Mae wants to see Earth, as she tells her parents (who support her dream). She reads about astronauts and makes her own costume, even though her teacher tells her the best she can aspire to be is a nurse. Ahmed writes, "Mae went on dreaming, believing, and working really hard. And guess what—She went to space and waved to her mom and dad on Earth." Ahmed concludes with the real-life story of Dr. Mae Carol Jemison, who was born in 1956 in Decatur, Alabama,

and always had a love for science before going on to enroll at Stanford University at the age of sixteen and earning her MD from Cornell Medical College. Jemison was accepted into NASA's astronaut training program and became the first African American female astronaut and the first African American woman in space.

What we now know as Afro-futuristic representations of girlhood are evident in the nineteenth-century nonfiction narratives, as Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Tubman, and others designed individual and collective journeys to freedom. After bearing two children fathered by a white politician—and finding that their births did not, as she had she expected, free her and them from a predatory master and jealous mistress—Jacobs escaped to a garret in her grandmother's attic in Edenton, North Carolina, where she remained for seven years, subject to seasonal elements, vermin, and a paralyzing lack of physical movement. Painful representations of what Jacobs's family suffered and the emotional and physical violence committed by the Norcom family who enslaved her make the horrific events and the audacity of the freedom dreams she depicts in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* seem incredible. Indeed, Jacobs's book (published under the pseudonym Linda Brent) was read as fiction until research by Jean Fagan Yellin definitively established the veracity of Jacobs's story and authorship.

Jacobs's story begins in childhood, watching her mother serve her own white sister until her early death, seeing her brother not be able to go to their father when also called by their master, and becoming subject to her master's advances prior to reaching adolescence. One might argue (and arguments have been made) that she had to adopt her own notions of freedom to substitute for the lack of consent that she actually had in her life. A quare framework helps us better understand both Jacobs negotiations of her sexuality and the resistance she encounters from white and black adults. Quare notions come to represent the plan to arrange her own path to freedom (which her grandmother opposed, ripping away her mother's wedding ring when Jacobs confesses her first pregnancy) and to endure the time spent enclosed in a space in which she could not even stand (but which she imagined and knew would be better than the experience of enslavement from which she came).

Contemporary retellings of journeys that began as dreams of freedom have been carried through narratives specifically about children and specifically Black girls as well. Stories of travel that allow these girls to leave fixed identities and even time periods include Faith Ringgold's *Aunt*

Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky (1992), which she dedicates to her great-great-grandmother Susie Shannon, who “survived very difficult times so that [Ringgold] could be free.” Alongside such retellings of oral narratives such as *The People Could Fly* (Virginia Hamilton), which tells the story of enslaved people rising up and taking to the sky, *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad* tells the story of a girl, Cassie, and her baby brother Be Be “flying among the stars, way way up, so far up the mountains looked like pieces of rock candy and the oceans like tiny cups of tea” (1). They find an “old ramshackled train in the sky” and a tiny woman in a conductor’s uniform announcing the schedule to “Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Niagara Falls, Canada” (2). The narrator describes the “hundreds of bedraggled men, women and children [who] filled the sky and boarded the dusty old wooden train” like “watching a silent movie” (2). And as a quare Black girl is prone to do, Cassie leaves her prescribed space, first following her brother Be Be onto the train, then seeing through the clouds a message, “Go free North or Die!”—a message she seeks to obey.

As Cassie tries to navigate this journey, the voice of Harriet Tubman, “Aunt Harriet,” teaches her about the passengers brought from Africa, many dying on ships, those who survived being subject to violence and/or sold. Cassie learns about how couples had to jump the broom instead of legal marriage, how it was against the law to learn to read, write, meet, or preach. Aunt Harriet tells Cassie to “Follow the North Star” with instructions to find Underground Railroad agents for lodging, clean clothes, and food, adding, “But until you reach Canada, you are not safe. Go and don’t turn back” (11).

Following her own journey from a childhood and adulthood in the institution of slavery, Aunt Harriet becomes a model for a young girl’s freedom as well. The metaphor of the “railroad,” physical pathways through thousands of miles and a number of states, becomes a futuristic vision of faster mobility that also halts time, as it only follows the same route every one hundred years. Aunt Harriet states, “Sometimes the train is a farmer’s wagon. Sometimes it is a hearse coved with flowers—inside, a live slave hides in a coffin. You missed this train, Cassie. But you can follow, always one stop behind” (11). Cassie has the benefit of being able to fly (a nod to her ancestors who took to the sky). But Aunt Harriet warns: “Though you can fly, being a slave will suck you to the ground like quicksand. You will have to walk many miles through the woods and waters on blistered feet” (11). In its retelling of a freedom narrative, this story

connects past desires for and designs of collective freedom and present/future needs to know that history for new understandings of freedom.

Like Aunt Harriet's real-life narrative, Cassie's story also ends in freedom: she is reunited with her brother Be Be, who has a real live Baby Freedom tied to his back. The celebration of the reunion culminates in a big feast in honor of the one hundredth anniversary of Harriet Tubman's first flight to freedom in 1849: Aunt Harriet "[took] us from slavery to freedom and [was] the Moses of her people" (25). Knowing that a world could and would be better was the drive for Harriet Tubman and the passengers on the Underground Railroad, and the connection of the children, like the author herself, to their great-great-grandparents.

As this essay begins, quare journeys, including those that are foundational in Black girlhood, inspire quare narratives of freedom written by Black women authors. These narratives cover a wide span of time from the nineteenth century (and even earlier if we imagine original narratives thought of, if not written, by Black girls in the South from the circumstances of their enslaved childhoods). They are told in stories like *The Patchwork Quilt*, by Valerie Flourney, where a young girl, Tanya, connects to her grandmother in making a patchwork quilt from scraps of worn clothing and material. "Sometimes the old ways are forgotten" (3), Grandma says as she tries to explain the significance of making and keeping old quilts. Like quilts, stories are the ways of passing on individual efforts toward freedom and mobility. Tanya has to wait an entire year while she and Grandma collect pieces for the quilt.

Through Halloween and Christmas, and through Grandma's illness when she closes her tired eyes, leaving the family to work on the quilt, Tanya stops working when she feels someone (Grandma) is missing from the quilt. Tanya removes a few squares from Grandma's old quilt and adds them to theirs, which magically gives Grandma new life. She is able to add the last row of patches, dedicated to Tanya from her "Mama and Grandma." The end of this story is representative of Black women's narratives of resilience but also a reminder that a story is not over until it is passed on (to recall a phrase from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in which the necessity of not repeating a painful history of enslavement and infanticide is found in telling stories to begin with).

Narratives of Black girlhood also expand historical narratives for more contemporary audiences, as Margaree King Mitchell writes in *Granddaddy's Gift* (1997), about a girl who witnesses her grandfather being treated unfairly, threatened, and even assaulted for trying to

register to vote and her own narrative of being able to register and vote when old enough because of his efforts. For many Black girls in real life and in fiction, daring to dream is built on the foundation of other's struggles and comes from the ability to witness and offer testimony to those journeys as well.

WE DREAM OF DIFFERENT PLACES OF BEING (HURSTON AND MORRISON)

Mah Tongue is in Mah Friend's Mouth
—Janie Crawford, in Hurston 6

I have long been fascinated, even a bit obsessed, with the line in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in which Janie reflects on her return to the town of her younger womanhood (Eatonville, Florida) and declares that her tongue is in her friend Pheoby's mouth. Colloquial for the idea that her friend knows her well enough to tell this story, this statement also suggests a more personal knowledge of Janie's life than the reader can perceive from the male-identified relationships that we often focus on. Janie's physical story moves through three husbands (Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods), but Pheoby is a friend of her mind as well. Janie goes to Eatonville and returns as an adult, but her relationship with Pheoby is a girlhood knowing that she did not have growing up: "So when we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn't nobody left except a real dark girl with long har standing by Eleanor . . . Ah don't see me . . . Everybody laughed, even Mr. Washburn . . . don't you know yo' ownself?" (9).

In Hurston's representation, Janie already knew that she was different before she dreams of her own inner sanctum under a pear tree. As Janie looks at a picture of herself and sees the "real dark girl with long har standing by Eleanor," her classmates laugh because she doesn't see herself at all. Finally identifying her image, Janie realizes, "Aw! Aw! Ah'm colored! . . . But before Ah seen de picture Ah thought Ah wuz just like de rest!" (9). Janie seeing herself as others see her begs the questions of how Blackness is represented in "quare" southern spaces such as the excessively hot settings in Hurston's representations of Black childhood.

When Nanny sees Janie kissing Johnny Taylor under the pear tree, only an external manifestation of what Janie has already felt inside, when Isie's grandmother sees her perched on the gatepost in an effort to leave domestic spaces for freer pastures up the road in Orlando, we see how

quare dreams of Black girlhood are represented. What we don't see is the restrictions upon these desires in spaces deemed private, dark, dank and not publicly celebrated, especially in southern spaces where narratives of Black queer childhood abound. Janie can only represent and celebrate her sexuality outdoors in public spaces, and these are also the spaces that others can see and restrict her activity.

It is also in southern terminology such as "kissin'-friends" ("Pheoby, we been kissin'-friends for twenty years, so Ah depend on you for a good thought" [6]) that representations beyond black kinship are explored. "Kissin'" allows other possibilities than blood relation but include the proximity that kinship allows. It also allows additional ways of knowing: as Janie puts it, "If they wants to see and know, why don't they come kiss and be kissed" (6). Although Hurston illustrates Janie's childhood as one of coming into her own identity, this identity is not shaped in common with other children's identities. Prior to Pheoby years later, there is no group of girlhood friends represented in Janie's life. It is Johnny Taylor (and, specifically, the proscriptions placed on Janie's sexuality) who becomes the reason for Janie's first marriage to the much older and more financially stable Logan Killicks. After her second marriage, to Joe Starks, her relationship with Pheoby (who remains Janie's "kissin'-friend for twenty years") allows her to expand her representation beyond partnership with (or possession by) a male figure. For her southern communities, this expansion into a girlhood circle (or even relationship with a singular figure who is not a spouse) seems both excessive and irregular for one who should aspire to be a good wife.

This excess is represented from the beginning of the text in the many ways Janie moves through the world and specifically through the natural world. It takes the natural "golden dust" of pollen to turn Johnny Taylor into an object for Janie's desire, and even their exchanged kiss does not compare to how Janie engages her own sexuality. On the one hand, Janie's version of not being "jus lak de rest" (9) might release her from the expectation of blending in. This realization takes her outside of traditional circles of friendship into a "blossoming pear tree in the backyard that . . . stirred her tremendously" (10). Janie's dream then is to leave the fixed frame of the class photo, where the expectation is to blend in, for the inner spaces of a free black girlhood, where she experiences the transcendence of her body into a desire for something else, something better. She both wants to blend in (and even be surrounded by a circle of friends) and stand out by having a unique experience that transcends

ordinary girlhood. This opportunity comes through Janie's connection to nature, to outside southern spaces of Florida in springtime. Under her grandmother's near-watchful eye, Janie "saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace . . . Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid" (11). She wishes "to be a pear tree—any tree in bloom" and wonders, "Where were the singing bees for her?" (11).

On the other hand, Janie still must pursue traditional pathways of marriage in order to fulfill others' desires for her regulation. Janie wants, and only gets, to see the world outside of the land that Nanny and Logan Killicks designate as safe spaces for her with men and through the legal construct of masculine protection, an idea continued through subsequent marriages. The marriage to Logan fixes her domestically to the land she is made to tend with him. She then moves to Eatonville with Joe and is fixed in domestic spaces, both their home and more publicly, the store, for decades until his death. After venturing onto "da Muck" with Tea Cake, which ends tragically for him and for their relationship, Janie comes back to Eatonville in a reverse migration to reclaim not only her physical childhood space but also her youth.

Hurston also represents an excessive physical location as she centers Florida, Hurston's designated home state after her birth in Notasulga, Alabama. For Janie, the trees bloom in excess. Her pain, described as "remorseless sweet," is excessive for others as well, and every time she reveals aspects of her femininity (including the length of her hair, which is quickly covered up by Joe Starks's demands), she is pulled back within social boundaries. Even with Tea Cake, Janie is too much, and one instance of violence in which he slaps her is an attempt to trap her in regulated womanhood. Janie's exploration of her own identity first with others and then with her idea of a "kissing friend" (even metaphorically) represents the ways in which she first embraces then resists the containment of a regulatory would-be patriarch and continues to dream as she moves throughout southern spaces and physical locations.

Southern spaces that drip beyond regulation becomes the central locale of not only Janie Crawford but also Hurston's other characterizations of southern children—John Redding in "John Redding Goes to Sea," whose "queer notions" of wanting to see the world leave him impaled on a wooden stake while helping to build ships, and Isis "Isie" Watts in "Drenched in Light," who sits on the gatepost and watches the cars drive off to Orlando, much to her grandmother's chagrin. Isie's desire to

leave the rigidity of her grandmother's domestic space to see the world up the road in Orlando and beyond echoes John Redding's queerness, represented as wanting to leave a space of defined masculinity for a place with unknown repercussions for African Americans. Isie climbs up the gatepost to watch cars going up the road; doesn't want to stay in the house; uses her grandmother's new tablecloth as a skirt, which she drags through the mud on the way to a dance; and begs a couple who is passing by to take her away so she won't be punished (they in turn talk to her grandmother and offer to take her anyway).

Stories that focus on Black girl figures often model the supervision of a family or a matriarchal figure, who try to protect girls from the dangers of growing up Black in spaces that don't celebrate Blackness. Janie's and Isie's grandmothers, Nel's mother, and even Mrs. McTeer of the family who takes Pecola in, are examples of the maternal figures who seek to protect their girls from racism, harassment, and social abuse. Hurston and Morrison also, however, incorporate African American notions of a "queer" childhood and how the dreams of girlhood are themselves quare. Isie's desires for both physical and social mobility as a girl deem her different and render Hurston's representation of southern girlhood as a particularly queer enterprise. Janie's attraction is not specifically to Johnny Taylor, but to the potential to bud under the pear tree and to explore sexuality outside a heterosexual framework and along with the natural occurrences of blooming taking place.

These representations are not isolated to Hurston's work; they also connect to Toni Morrison's migratory narratives of Black girlhood to Lorain, Ohio, where Pecola wishes for blue eyes (a trait that exceeds the normal appearance or identification of Black girlhood in order to change what she is able to see) and Sula and Nel's "quare" friendship in the Bottom of Medallion, Ohio. In the lives of the women in *The Bluest Eye*, quare girlhood migrates from southern spaces to pervade every inch of the text and across class spaces as well. Even upper-middle-class women such as Junior's mother Geraldine (whose cat Junior throws violently to frighten Pecola) move from Aiken and Mobile to Ohio and also represents travel from rigid to fluid, seemingly more beautiful spaces. Pecola's dream for blue eyes, the bluest eyes, in front of which people won't do "ugly things," is also represented as excessive, as the ability to make and realize her own dream is her only escape from the fixedness of poverty and abuse. The magic of the eyes is transformative for her even if only she believes that she has received them. The arguments that these

examples and these texts make in a larger canon of Black girlhood are that girlhood spaces, and specifically dreams and desires realized within them, represent a different model of being.

Quare routes of existence are represented by physical movement but also by the excess of leaving one's own prescribed space for somewhere better and more beautiful. New pathways are often the results of dreaming beyond one's world spiritually, physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Morrison's second book, *Sula*, also focuses on dreams that failed to materialize in the Bottom of Medallion, Ohio (named for a trick that a slavemaster played, telling a slave the best land was in the "bottom" of Heaven as God looked down). Although *Sula* begins by focusing on the dreams that don't come true in the rocky, hilly soil of the Bottom, we then move through Shadrack's dreams of suicide, and Helene Wright's dreams that fixed her daughter Nel into her own vision of a satisfactory life. Similar to the way Shadrack transforms his death-wish into National Suicide Day (a solitary parade of one every January 3), Nel moves from under her mother's fixed hand to imagined visions of a different life after a southern journey to visit her great-grandmother on her deathbed. Morrison writes:

[Helene Wright's] daughter was more comfort and purpose than she had ever hoped to find in this life. She rose grandly to the occasion of motherhood—grateful, deep down in her heart, that the child had not inherited the great beauty that was hers: that her skin had dusk in it, that her lashes were substantial but not undignified in their length, that she had taken the broad flat nose of Wiley . . . and his generous lips.

Under Helene's hand the girl became obedient and polite. Any enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground. (18)

Helene was a conservative, impressive, regimented woman, who "loved her house and enjoyed manipulating her daughter and her husband" (18). She smiles dazzlingly when made to move into the Colored car on a train to see her ailing grandmother, where they would ride for two days. Morrison writes, "When they changed trains in Birmingham for the last leg of the trip, they discovered what luxury they had been in through Kentucky and Tennessee, where the rest stops had all had colored toilets. After Birmingham there were none" (23). When Helene finally asks another Black woman where she can go, she begins the journey to

“yonder” to squat with Nel and the other women in the fields of Meridian, Ellisville, and Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and Slidell, Louisiana, into New Orleans.

This train that takes Helene to her grandmother is one not of the freedom from matriarchal power that Helene desires, but of the freedom for Nel ultimately to shed the restrictions of social conduct. The two reach Helene’s grandmother’s house the day after her death, and there a woman in yellow strikes a match and blows it out to darken her eyebrows: “All the while Helene and Nel watched her. The one in a rage at the folded leaves she had endured, the wooden benches she had slept on, all to miss seeing her grandmother and seeing instead that painted canary” (26). But Nel sees something different after being hugged by Rochelle in a “a quick embrace tighter and harder than one would have imagined her thin soft arms capable of” (27). Nel reflects, “‘She smelled so nice. And her skin was so soft,’” to which Helene responds, ‘Much handled things are always soft’” (27). Although neither she nor her mother speaks the language (Creole) that will let them fully understand their environment, Nel imagines that New Orleans, her great-grandmother’s house, is freedom itself before that freedom is revoked temporarily by Helene.

Nel dreams, even as her mother tells her to pull her nose (a southern practice to make sure one’s nose is long instead of wide), of “the smell and tight, tight hug of the woman in yellow who rubbed burned matches over her eyes” (28). She dreams of her trip, “the urine running down and into her stockings until she learned how to squat properly; the disgust on the face of the dead woman and the sound of the funeral drums” (28):

She got out of bed and lit the lamp to look in the mirror. There was her face, plain brown eyes, three braids and the nose her mother hated. She looked for a long time and suddenly a shiver ran through her.

“I’m me,” she whispered. “Me.”

Nel didn’t know quite what she meant, but on the other hand she knew exactly what she meant.

“I’m me. I’m not their daughter. I’m not Nel. I’m me. Me.”

Each time she said the word me there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear. Back in bed with her discovery, she stared out the window at the dark leaves of the horse chestnut.

“Me,” she murmured. And then, sinking deeper into the quilts, “I want . . . I want to be . . . wonderful. Oh, Jesus, make me wonderful.” (29)

Nel's dream before she slept of the experiences of leaving Medallion then prompted her to

imagine other trips she would take, alone though, to faraway places. Contemplating them was delicious. Leaving Medallion would be her goal. But that was before she met Sula, the girl she had seen for five years at Garfield Primary but never played with, never knew, because her mother said that Sula's mother was sooty. The trip, perhaps, or her new found me-ness, gave her the strength to cultivate a friend in spite of her mother. (29)

And so Nel's wishes to move outside of the neatness of her mother's space then led to a place of her own in Sula's.

Sula, the daughter of a "sooty" mother, loves Nel's "oppressively neat" home and sits "still as dawn" on the red -velvet sofa (29). Nel, however, prefers Sula's Black, "woolly house," which is full of human activity and its detritus, and where Sula's grandmother, Eva, reads dreams (29). Nel, we can argue, finally finds the "excessive" freedom of self-identity, away from her mother's home and through her relationship with Sula. She is able to reconfigure her own limits through her ability to dream, just as Janie's return not to her original home but to the place that she made home becomes beautiful for her. The pathways are not easy and, as we saw with Cassie Louise, Aunt Harriet, and Harriet Jacobs, are dangerous and even treacherous as the girls, then women, search for beautiful spaces of freedom. However, the opportunity to transform one's own circumstances is worth the risk.

WE DREAM OUR OWN PATHWAYS

Warm autumn night with the crickets crying
the smell of pine coming soft on the wind
and the women
on the porch, quilts across their laps . . . That's when we listen
to the grown folks talking.

Then I let the stories live
inside my head, again and again
until the real world fades back
into cricket lullabies
and my own dreams.

—Jacqueline Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming*

The physicality of black girl bodies is rarely discussed in literature. These bodies are to remain private, whether being celebrated or desecrated. What communication there is, to return to Janie's story, is to be "respectable," to keep one's body not only from others but also from oneself. Narratives of play rarely include playing with one's own body or body parts. But for Black girls like me, our awareness of our own bodies was always there, as we existed in, and dreamed beyond, the spaces we lived. For Janie, this awareness of her body's sensuality comes through nature in her southern, childhood home. This is also the case for Jacqueline Woodson, who writes her own childhood story of dreaming between South Carolina (her mother's native state), Ohio (where her father lives), and New York (where her mother relocates). Dreaming allows the narrator to claim a home wherever she is but also embrace desires to return to home as a physical space as well.

Born at Fort Benning (in Columbus, Georgia), I spent the earliest years of my life traveling with my military family through Texas before settling in Augusta, Georgia. My mother's early memories of taking me to visit my grandparents (all in Georgia) and then moving back were my tears because my whole body was covered in sweat (I cried because I was "wet"). I didn't understand how it was different in Georgia's humidity than in South Texas's dry heat. I only knew that every time I walked outside and especially when I played in the summer, my body would drip incessantly. This unwanted feeling, wetness that could, according to my paternal grandmother, turn into funk if not washed in the right places (between all the folds as I went from a chunky baby to a slim elementary school kid into a round adolescent), was something that I then desired to avoid.

No one wanted to be "funky," especially not as a brown girl. Yet I still desired to move about the land. My grandmother owned several acres after growing up in a sharecropping family in South Georgia. She started her family and married young, then moved my father and aunt to Albany, Georgia, to attend Albany State College (now University) while my grandfather served in the army overseas. She earned an education degree and moved to Thomson, Georgia, where she started a nursery school, bought thirteen acres of land, and built a house of 3,000+ square feet, then advanced to administration at local elementary schools, built a day care center from the ground up with my grandfather, and even enjoyed a brief retirement before passing away at the age of sixty-four. The granddaughter of this esteemed woman could not be "funky."

I always wondered what she experienced picking cotton for money that would never truly free her family from experiences of peonage while she was a girl and just wanting to bathe in her own home. What brown girl dreams did she have of owning her own land that led her on this path to freedoms that she, in my eyes, certainly achieved? And how did she dream of raising other little Black girls to know their own freedom?

As young girl raised in the South, I spent many of the summer daylight hours outside. But playing outdoors came at the cost of extensive cleaning rituals at the end of each day. Baths were where we were instructed to touch every part of our bodies, as my grandmother said to get all of the places touched and untouched by the outdoor sun. When Black children are old enough to be left unsupervised, bathtime can also become playtime. Unlike showers, where the water is running and must not be “wasted,” bathwater was good until it got cold. For me, that water meant time to play freely, to travel to places where there is nowhere else to be.

Bathtime was my grandmother’s freedom from work in an unrelenting sun and then what she could provide for her grandchildren after a day of play in her own beautiful home. Baths represented joy, connection with self, and a space away from the outside world. They represented resistance to spaces where Black girlhood was public and could be disciplined and regulated. Baths, although often short in houses full of people, allowed me time and space to dream and imagine what my girlhood could be.

As an educator, both in university and K–12 classrooms and in community spaces, I have been called on lately to dialogue directly with youth on various forms of Black childhood, girlhood, and freedom that connect me back to these early experiences of my own childhood dreams. The connections have been through stories, although I continue to wonder what I have to say to this generation that is both different than and similar to my own. I am also a parent of a five-year-old dynamic girl-identified child and an eight-year-old tremendous boy-identified child who defy the ways that society fix their identities. How do I tell or teach them to be, as Carruthers describes it, “unapologetic” in this world?

My syllabus for my Liberal Studies course for first-year students, “Growing Up in America,” has tried to do this for the past three years by telling unapologetic stories of people and especially girls of color. Students of a variety of different racial, ethnic, class, and age backgrounds read *The Bluest Eye*, Sapphire’s *Push*, and Angie Thomas’s *The Hate U Give* to talk about what social justice is and whether it is even

possible for these fictional Black girls. Female characters in these texts see dynamics of violence around them in significant ways, including sexual and physical abuse. They use dreams or imagine other ways of being to move beyond the real or everyday trauma they cannot escape.

I also, however, think back to my experiences of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*, both required in my eleventh-grade year. My classes usually begin with nineteenth-century African American women writers and move in some way to the present. Even what I represent as adolescent literature is usually about African American authors (including Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs in their quests for freedom) at adolescent stages. Students relate to these authors for their messages of what "success" looks like (learning to read, seeking freedom), but they don't necessarily relate the themes of Black girlhood to their own experiences.

And why should they? Do the texts we choose, texts that are increasingly canonized and popularized, speak to their lives, and if so, how? The framework of *quare*, of looking beyond typical experiences to responses that stretch both the characters and the society in which they live, enables this connection. For example, a *quare* reading facilitates a Black radical feminist critique in which Angie Thomas's protagonist, Starr Carter, cannot remain silent in the face of racialized violence. A *quare* critical reading of *The Hate U Give* can also allow White American students to see Whiteness in ways that don't necessarily idealize their experiences. The students at Garden Heights (Starr's White private high school) don't understand Starr's narrative, and even her White boyfriend Chris doesn't always "get" her, although the distance is closed somewhat by the end of the book, when Chris helps Starr and her family get out of the store that is being burned by King, who has a class-based vendetta against Starr's father, Maverick.

Students who come from Black communities also might not necessarily relate to Starr's option to go to a White private school. Likewise, some students find *Push* important but difficult to read, especially given its physical and emotional violence, with which they may or may not be familiar. Through these texts, I think about what students need to know and how we get that knowledge to them. How do we support those who experience what we may see in these texts? Do they have the context to talk about anticapitalism or theoretical framework when, like with Janie Crawford and marriage, the world is telling them the more they have, the better they are (or better able to achieve)?

Ultimately, how do we reaffirm the humanity of Black girls in our current social and political world with stories that are relevant to them? In *We Want to Do More Than Survive* (2019), Bettina Love names the “spirit murder” that takes place in classrooms and communities. “More than survival” looks like Black girls challenging educators to decolonize curricula that were not made for them and their own abilities to connect histories in which Black children created and found support even in segregated educational spaces into contemporary spaces where they can feel free. It looks like dreaming along with and beyond the circumstances of our children and specifically our girls whose notions of freedom on an ordinary day look like something extraordinary and even excessive to most people. It looks like believing in #blackgirlmagic while embracing the reality of Black girls’ quotidian lives. It looks like, from Ntozake Shange’s original and innovative choreopoem of the mid-1970s that is still relevant today, singing for and with “colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY, OR EXCERPTS FROM A BLACK GIRLHOOD READING LIST

- Ahmed, Roda. *Mae among the Stars*. Harper, 2018.
- Carruthers, Charlene. *Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements*. Beacon Press, 2018.
- Flournoy, Valerie. *The Patchwork Quilt*. Scholastic (by arrangement with Dial Books for Young Readers), 1985.
- Giovanni, Nikki. *Spin a Soft Black Song*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. “Drenched in Light.” *The Signet Classic Book of Short Stories*, edited by Dorothy Abbott and Susan H. Koppelman. New York: Signet, 1991.
- . “John Redding Goes to Sea.” Reprinted <https://www.narrativemagazine.com/issues/stories-week-2016-2017/story-week/john-redding-goes-sea-zora-neale-hurston>. Accessed 22 Mar. 2019.
- . *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Harper, 1937.
- Lewin, Sarah. “‘Hidden Figures’ Explores NASA and Civil Rights History.” *Space.com*, 5 Jan. 2017. <https://www.space.com/35225-hidden-figures-nasa-civil-rights-history.html>.
- Love, Bettina L. “Anti-Black State Violence, Classroom Edition: The Spirit Murdering of Black Children.” *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2016, pp. 22–25.
- . *We Want to Do More Than Survive*. Beacon Press, 2019.
- Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Ed. Jean Fagan Yellin. Cambridge: Harvard, 1994.

- Johnson, E. Patrick. "'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother." *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, edited by E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson. Duke UP, 2005.
- Mitchell, Margaree King. *Granddaddy's Gift*. Scholastic, 1997.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Knopf, 1987.
- . *The Bluest Eye*. Penguin, 1970.
- . *Sula*. Penguin, 1973.
- Ringgold, Faith. *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky*. Scholastic (with Crown Publishers), 1992.
- Shange, Ntozake. *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*. Scribner, 1975.
- Shetterly, Margot Lee. *Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race*. Morrow Paperbacks, 2016.
- . *Hidden Figures: The True Story of Four Black Women and the Space Race*. Harper, 2018.
- . *Hidden Figures Young Readers' Edition*. HarperCollins, 2016.
- Thomas, Angie. *The Hate U Give*. Balzer + Bray, 2017.
- Woodson, Jacqueline. *Brown Girl Dreaming*. Penguin, 2014.