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## Let's Say A Word About the Girls

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## Let's Say A Word About the Girls

### Cover Page Footnote

Many thanks to my mother, Althea Odom, and Bank Street Graduate School of Education Dean, Cecelia Traugh, for their many readings and generous feedback on this writing.

# Let's Say a Word About the Girls

Wendi S. Williams

*The laugh that is too loud; the enunciation a little too round; the gesture a little too generous. They hold their behind in for fear of a sway too free; when they wear lipstick, they never cover the entire mouth for fear of lips too thick, and they worry, worry, worry about the edges of their hair.*

—Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

Attention to Black girls' experiences in academic settings is often set against a backdrop of gendered-male and racially-white norms. Notions of normalcy, acceptability, and, ultimately, respectability are aimed at Black girls to shape not only the ways they are perceived and treated by others but also how they see themselves. Whether in esteemed private, independent institutions, or poorly resourced urban or rural schools, a Black girl's presence bodes a misplacement. Physically, the presence of her actual body is in defiance of the norms of academic space, but also her sense of self and personhood become a site for the misplacement of stereotype projection. Beneath the gaze of educators, policymakers, administrators, and school law enforcement, the articulation of Black girlhood becomes contested space on which articulation of her selfhood is challenged.

The title of this piece and opening quote were carefully chosen. In 1970, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* was published. Morrison's writing was a first glance into the psychological machinations of Black girls' coming-of-age beneath the White gaze. The White gaze is the tendency to look at the world through a white person's racial point-of-view (Abagond, 2009). The gaze can be direct, occurring in public spaces, such as the supermarket or the school, but it is also often filtered through the lens of those viewing Black girls within their homes or communities. In these cases, oppression and racism are internalized (Bailey, Williams, & Favors, 2014). I utilize Morrison's quote to articulate the impact of that gaze on Black girls.

The title of this piece is drawn from the late Gwen Ifill's (2007) response to the radio commentator Don Imus's insult targeting the Rutgers University Scarlet Knights on the occasion of their 2007 NCAA championship victory. His words don't bear repeating now. However, their intention toward

disparagement, and the potential to derail focus from the girls' victory, spoke to the need to re-center the discourse on the girls.

In a similar vein, I seek to center attention on the psychological phenomenological experience of Black girls. Specifically, I will use this space to describe stereotype projection and enactment in the context of the White gaze. I will then discuss the ways this gaze makes specific impact on the educational experiences of Black girls, utilizing Broderick and Leonardo's (2016) frame of smartness and goodness as properties.

## **Stereotype Projection and Enactment**

Stereotypes are gross, oversimplified ideals attached to groups of people, with little connection to their phenomenological sense of self. Historic stereotypes, such as the Mammy/Matriarch/Superwoman, the Sapphire/Angry Black Woman, and the over-sexualized Jezebel, are rooted in the categorization of Black women according to functions or duties they performed in service to whites during American enslavement (Collins, 2000, 2005).

The Jezebel stereotype has evolved to include types of women such as the video vixen and crack whore, which serve explanatory functions to support and validate capitalist enterprises of women and sex as objects and for transactional exchange. Similarly, the idea of Black women as holding perpetual caretaking roles, and being perfectionistic and emotionally strong (stoic) have been articulated through the ideal of the Strong Black Woman stereotype and validate the role of Black women to take up socially sanctioned "women's work."

Though stereotypes were derived from women's roles in society, they serve to shape the ways Black girls are perceived. Rather than being viewed through a developmentally- appropriate lens, Black girls are perceived through stereotyped notions of Black womanhood. Thus, they are seen as older and perhaps more mature than they actually are, and as able to respond to these projections when they have yet to develop the ego strength to set psychic and emotional boundaries to protect themselves in the face of these misplaced projections. Consequently, these stereotypes can be internalized and enacted, becoming a part of the ways Black girls may come to see themselves (Williams & Moody, 2017).

## On Being Good Girls

Quite often, Black girls fall outside of the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable, respectable, and even good. In her critical work, Morris (2016) highlighted that the most troublesome thing about the over-surveillance of Black girls in schools is that common expressions of Black femininity (e.g., the ways Black girls talk, dress, and wear their hair) are deemed unacceptable, even bad. In fact, Morris highlighted that Black girls' ways of being might even be targeted through school policy. For example, as recent as the summer of 2016, a Louisville, Kentucky high school had a policy banning "hair in cornrows, braids, twists and dreadlocks." (Quinlan, 2016). For this reason, a critical look at race, gender, and class helps to frame and lend understanding to the challenges Black girls face in schools. In fact, a closer look is required to appreciate how Black girls are hypervisible yet not seen, problematized and not helped, and deemed bad for simply being NOT white and NOT male.

Though Morris's work addressed girls designated "at risk," the fact is, Black girls attending school in affluent private and independent settings, and even into higher education contexts, are constantly fighting for their version of themselves to be the standard by which they are judged. In a recent writing in the Huffington Post, contributor Cara Thompson (2017) discussed the undue stress typical of campus life for Black girls entering college. Describing her own experience, she highlighted how the strong black girl/woman stereotype came tumbling down as she recognized "words like 'sassy' and 'strong' were no longer compliments," but "dismissals of the depth and dimension of my emotional capacity" (para. 3). Her actual experience of herself held the potential for much more than had been made available to her throughout her academic life.

We encourage Black girls to be "good" when the opportunities to be perceived as such exist on a very narrow band of possibilities. If, in some schools, to be "good" (e.g., to sit still, listen, follow instructions, and not question) is to be smart, then Black girls, for their variability and verve, will not be deemed smart. Rather, they are more likely to be categorized under the umbrella of emotional/behavioral disability—a designation disproportionately assigned to Black children (Gillborn, Rollock, Vincent, & Ball, 2016).

Broderick and Leonardo (2016) asserted that "goodness" associated with smartness is "a performative, cultural and ideological system that operates in the service of constructing the *normative* center of schools" (p. 57). You read normative. I see race, class, and gender prescriptions that exclude Black girls, and perhaps make them the antithesis of goodness and smartness with two effects: (a) their "NOT

goodness/smartness” defines the goodness/smartness accessible to others who are least racially/genderwise like them; and (b) their positionality as the antithesis of being good and smart impedes our ability to substantively and ardently attend to the actuality of their socio-emotional and educative needs in academic context. This impediment has direct and negative bearing on educational policy and practice debate related to Black girls.

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