A Framework for Black Girl Transitions Across Space and Time:
Sint Maarten as a Case Study

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Copyright
The purpose of this project was to examine whether there is a transitional period between Afro-Caribbean girlhood and woman/adulthood that is distinctly different from girlhood and from woman/adulthood. Herein I examine at what point in the lives of Afro-Caribbean girls, do they feel like they have entered adulthood. I also examine what kinds of media the girls find representative of this current stage of their lives. This dissertation is an extension of my master’s thesis, which explored the ways in which Afro-Caribbean girls from the island of Sint Maarten narrate, navigate, and negotiate their girlhood experiences. Speaking as a Black woman from Sint Maarten, I affirm that this project is important due to the lack of sociological scholarship surrounding Black girls in the Dutch West Indies. This project utilized a qualitative approach that involved self-selected research participant media and semi-structured audio and video recorded in-depth interviews with 5 out of the 9 girls who originally participated in the master’s project. At the time of the interviews presented in this dissertation, the participants were 19 and 20 years old. I developed a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework which I use to analyze and interpret the interview data. This framework draws from and builds upon Black feminist theorizing, girlhood studies, and transnational feminisms. It demonstrates how traditional sociological theory such as life course theory, and studies on emerging adulthood and development do not account for the lives of Black girls from the Caribbean. The data reveal that there is a transitional period between girlhood and womanhood and adulthood, and how the girls experience this period is particular to their own lived experiences. The findings reveal that the overarching themes of this period are “it’s complicated,” and that the girls are claiming their agency. The research participant media indicate the overarching theme of this period of the girls’ lives is what we are coming to know as a “soft girl era”. Other primary themes which emerged from this study include attention to and prioritization of self-care, love, and self-affirmations. These data serve as a starting point and experiential reference to understand transitions of Afro-Caribbean girlhood in the Caribbean broadly, and specifically in the Dutch West Indies. Much is left to be explored regarding the life course and transitions Afro-Caribbean girls experience. This research will continue as a longitudinal study where I will continue to engage with the framework I have developed and re-engage with the girls as they continue along their life transitions.
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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project was to examine whether there is a transitional period between Afro-
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that this project is important due to the lack of sociological scholarship surrounding Black girls 
in the Dutch West Indies. This project consists of self-selected research participant media and 
audio and video recorded interviews with 5 out of the 9 girls who originally participated in the 
master’s project. At the time of the interviews presented in this dissertation, the participants were 
19 and 20 years old. I developed a theoretical framework which I use to analyze and interpret the 
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continue to engage with the framework I have developed and re-engage with the girls as they 
continue along their life transitions.
Dedication

This work is dedicated to my big sister, Akilah Stewart, who was instrumental in getting me into college. My father, Alvin King Murrell Sr., who had always prioritized education for me growing up and Mr. Charlie Norman Williams who treated me like his own. I hope I have made you proud and may you both continue to rest in peace. I also dedicate this work to the girls who I started this research with: Aimee, Anna, Brittany, Khloe, Felicia, Kianna, Loyalty, Nirvana, and Zola, and all the Dutch Caribbean feminists before me who have started this work in the region. I follow in your footsteps.
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Chapter One

Black Girls Beyond, From Margin to Center

Introduction

I begin this dissertation with a quote from French social theorist and feminist Simone De Beauvoir’s influential text:

Once she enters puberty, the future not only moves closer; it settles into her body; it becomes the most concrete reality. It retains the fateful quality it always had; while the adolescent boy is actively routed toward adulthood, the girl looks forward to the opening of this new and unforeseeable period where the plot is already hatched and toward which time is drawing her. She is already detached from her childhood past, the present is for her only a transition; she sees no valid ends in it, only occupations. In a more or less disguised way, her youth is consumed by waiting. She is waiting for Man. [emphasis mine] (De Beauvoir 1949, 341)

In this passage, De Beauvoir (1949) discusses what she considers to be the facts and myths of the woman as the inferior second sex and how these impact women’s lived experiences throughout their life course. The girl and woman that she references is a particular kind of girl and woman: white. She does not look like me – a Black Afro-Caribbean girl/woman – or any of the women and girls in my life who are not white, nor does she share similar lived experiences. All the authors discussed in The Second Sex are white and all novels mentioned are written by white people. Black girls and women were not included in De Beauvoir’s analysis of a woman’s formative years. This kind of white universalization creates epistemic violence, specifically what philosopher Miranda Fricker (2007) coined as hermeneutical injustice. In using the experiences of white girls to create a social collective interpretation of the experiences of girls in general, nonwhite girls cannot accurately begin to make sense of their own social experiences, thus putting them at an unfair disadvantage of acquiring knowledge (Fricker 2007). With Black

1 Herein, the term Black is capitalized to specify that the term is in reference to people of the African diaspora and not just a color as in with a lowercase (Tharps 2014).
girls specifically, this kind of epistemic violence further marginalizes them as they are not viewed as girls or women in the same ways white girls are viewed.

**Not Yet Girl, Not Yet Woman**

Black girls have always lived the challenge of being both Black and woman, even before they are legally declared so at eighteen years old. Historically, Black women and girls existing in anti-Black patriarchal societies have been ungendered (Spillers 1987) and dehumanized (Wynter 2003) such that De Beauvoir’s use of a one-dimensional analysis as opposed to an intersectional (Crenshaw 1998) approach misses how the lives of girls and women are different at various intersections of their identities. Black women and girls must contend with the marginalization of being both Black and female. Professor of African American and Africana Studies, Nazera Wright in her book *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* (2016) contends that Black girls in America have always existed in an in-between space where they did not belong. She writes, “[a]s raced, gendered, and youthful figures, Black girls occupy a space of inbetweenness, like Hortense Spillers (1987) labels “notyet” subjects: they are not yet citizens and not yet women” (11). They encounter what historian Crystal Webster calls the metaphysical dilemma which means “Black girls have and continue to move through the world as Black children and girls while white hegemonic society fails to recognize them” (Field and Simmons 2022, 30). At the same time De Beauvoir (1949) contends that “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (283). I have found this fact to be one that transcends global boundaries in various non-white girlhoods.

**The Girl, Globally**
The classifications of *girl* and *woman* and how they are treated as such have never been universal due to the ways in which these classifications re conceptualized differently beyond the global north. In transnational South Asian history scholar Ashwini Tambe’s (2019:6) research, she contends that historically “in Indian settings, as in other contexts, girlhood has been much circumscribed by marriage practices” (6). In India a girl becomes a woman once she has married. As such, a single Indian woman who is 50 years old would hypothetically be considered a girl since she has never married. On child marriage in India, lawyer Jaya Sagade (2005) states that “rarely is there a stage of carefree adolescence in the life of girls. They are forced to step from childhood to womanhood directly” (xxvii). Over the years, Indian girlhood has become extended in time as the age of child marriage was raised in 1891 and 1929, and then prohibited altogether in 2006 (Tambe 2019). In the Caribbean, Trinidadian Feminist Patricia Mohammed (1998) found that when it comes to sexual difference in the Caribbean, “the girl must be beaten into a young lady…” (22) whereas boys are considered man at birth based on their manhood (read as genitals). As such, the ways in which girls are treated and how the classification of girl is conceptualized, have real implications that materialize into the experiences of Black girlhood. Social historian of Caribbean childhood Shani Roper (2019) acknowledges that scholars are doing the work to address why Black girls are penalized for matters that other girls and boys would not be penalized for in Jamaica. The above examples demonstrate that there are differences in the ways societies across transnational boundaries define girl and “proper”2 girlhood.

Despite these differences, what is clear is that cisgender girls are othered from birth within patriarchal societies which attach value to the phallic. The absence of a penis results in

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2 Here the term proper is used to refer to the societal expectations of girlhood.
their lives being constrained by societal expectations of who they should be, how they should act, and what they should do with their bodies. These constraints are further exacerbated when girls are not white. Though De Beauvoir is considered legendary for young feminists, emerging feminists, sociological thought, and particularly foundational for girlhood scholars, her work did not engage with the issues of nonwhite girlhood, specifically Black girls, and Black girlhood. Philosopher Elisabeth Paquette (2020) recognizes that “one could also consider Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) as providing an account of the epistemic situatedness of (white) women in a male-centered society” (178). This also recognizes that de Beauvoir’s (1949) analysis of white women and girls being in the margins, ignored Black women and girls who were already at the margins. As such, Black scholars today are still grappling with the question: What does it mean to be a Black girl? How do Black girls transition into adulthood if their childhood is not even recognized and Black girls are adultified very early in anti-black societies? Black girlhood scholars in the U.S. are working to better answer these questions, but this work has yet to consistently address the experiences of Black girls outside of the geographical borders of the U.S., including the Dutch Caribbean region, which is where this research is conducted and focused.

For example, in contextualizing, challenging, and theorizing the concept of *Black Girl Magic*, Black feminist and professor of women’s, gender and sexuality studies Julia Jordan-Zachary (2019) asserts that “the…term *girl* serves as a means of intragroup communication and is not bound by chronological age or society’s conceptualization of moving into adulthood. Instead, the term often deployed colloquially as ‘gurl,’ ‘homegirl,’ ‘sista-girl,’ etc., represents a way of acknowledging commonalities among Black femmes, girls, and women (15-16). Professors of women’s and gender studies Corinne Field and Lakisha Simmons, along with other
critical girlhood studies scholars, have attempted to answer the question of what is the meaning of “girl.” At the intersections of race, gender, and age, Black girls are “always in the process of growing older” (Field and Simmons 2022, 40). Field and Simmons (2022) contend that a significant difference between age and other categories of identity is that “…people move through age categories over time, thus linking Black girlhood to Black womanhood” (40). Field and Simmons (2022), however, do not provide answers in helping us to understand the transitions that can happen between girlhood and womanhood. The significance of this scholarship on Black girlhood and age categories of identity cannot be overstated and provides a foundation for theorizing about Black girls transnationally, particularly for developing scholarship about any differences between Afro-Caribbean girlhood and Afro-Caribbean woman/adulthood. This project takes on this task by extending the research of these Black feminist theorists to explore whether there is a period that links Afro-Caribbean girlhood to Afro-Caribbean woman/adulthood.

Afro-Caribbean girlhood is a topic that remains largely underexplored across disciplines, especially from a place of resilience and acknowledgement of Black girls as agentic beings (Evans-Winters 2019). Much of the research on Afro-Caribbean girls are based in the Anglophone Caribbean and tends to focus on violence (Muturi & Donald 2006), school exclusion (Demie 2019), and caricaturing the girls as barrel children3 (Crawford-Brown 1999). Deficit models of research can be beneficial with regard to making changes for the population in question; however, the primary focus should not be deficiency. There is a need for more research to include a lens of resilience so that what we know and come to learn about Black girls is robust. The term *resilience* has been under scrutiny for perpetuating caricatures of the Black

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3 Defined by Crawford-Brown (1999) as children who are left behind by their parents in the migration process so that the parents can make more money and send back to their family in the home country.
woman and the ways in which pathways to resilience are constructed during Black girlhood.

“Too often, these experiences veer so far from their creators that they become constructions of other people. When this occurs in public discourses on blackness and resilience, girls are seemingly celebrated for their capacity to survive harm instead of the joy they manifest in spite of that harm” (Moore 2019, 113). Therefore, I use the term resilience in the same way Kimberley Moore (2019) does in her chapter “Ah Suh Yuh Bad?: How Bad Gyal s are Revolutionizing How Black Girls Resist and Transend Toxicity during Girlhood,” to mean all of the positive emotions that Black girls manifest in spite of, rather than because of, the various forms of harm and trauma they may experience throughout their girlhood years. As such, my Afro-Caribbean girlhood research centers resilience.

**Afro-Caribbean Girlhood: A Longitudinal Study**

In the first iteration of my research study, I explored the ways in which Afro-Caribbean girls from the island of Sint Maarten narrated, navigated, and negotiated their girlhood experiences within the racialized and gendered structures in which they have been socialized. In the summer of 2019, I interviewed nine girls, aged 14, 16, and 17. The findings of this initial project showed that the girls navigated their social world in Sint Maarten by negotiating different aspects of their hair, appearance, and food consumption to, in various ways, resist heteronormative standards which align with sex, sexuality, gender identity and roles. In this second and current iteration of the research study, I examine whether Afro-Caribbean girls/women experience a transitional period between girlhood and woman/adulthood⁴ and, if so, how do the girls narrate, navigate, and negotiate this liminal period. I also examine whether the

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⁴ I specifically refer to woman/adulthood as I do not assume that the participants identified as a woman.
girls engage with social media as a way to help navigate this transitional period, and if so, how. To answer these inquiries, I conducted in-depth, follow-up, semi-structured interviews and discussions about their transition from girlhood to legal adulthood and where they currently are in their life journey.

Since 2019, the girls are on the cusp of legally defined adulthood, and I examine this transition period. At different points throughout the past four years, I have been able to keep in contact – via social media platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp – with five of the girls and I am aware that they are all at various transitions in life. The girls/women are now legally constructed as adults by having reached the age of 18, and I am interested in examining the complexities of this period where girls have been in transition from girlhood into legal adulthood, any tensions and intricacies they have had to navigate during this transition, as well as the ways in which they negotiate and narrate these. As such my research questions for this dissertation are:

1) Is there a period the girls describe between girlhood and woman/adulthood that is different from girlhood and different from woman/adulthood?

2) If so, how do the girls define (narrate/navigate/negotiate) this transitional period? If not, when do the girls recognize that they have entered adulthood?

3) If so, do the girls engage with social media as a way to help navigate this transitional period? If so, in what ways? If not, are there alternative methods that the girls utilize to help them navigate this period?

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5 A finding from the first iteration of the study revealed that social media was an important part of the girls’ social worlds.

6 Here I am specifying legal adulthood as opposed to local social and cultural constructions of adulthood because in the Dutch Caribbean understandings of adulthood are complex and based on a number of factors including socioeconomic, household arrangements and others.
Fields and Simmons (2022) recognize that scholars have asked the following questions: “what makes someone a girl? What is the stuff of girlhood? Who counts as a girl and when does girlhood end for Black girls? These are not simple questions” (41). Since the field of girlhood studies cannot fully answer these questions at present, it is important to continue to create ways to answer these questions. Because girlhood can end and begin again at various stages of life for Black girls, I argue that girlhood is not a matter of ending but a matter of transitioning both from and with their girlhood.

Because Black feminist, and girlhood studies are limited mainly to the US in their cultural and geographical scope, to do this research, I combine these theories with transnational feminist theorizing. For example, I use the work of Patricia Hill Collins (1990) and Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) on reflexivity and intersectionality, respectively; and other theorists like Chandra Mohanty and M. Jaqui Alexander (1997), Gloria Anzaldua (1987) on borders and boundaries, and Amanda Lock Swarr and Richa Nagar (2010) on bridging various gaps across borders to create what I am calling a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework, which I propose can be used to examine Black girls and girlhoods across borders. This framework will be defined in detail in chapter two and is inspired by Kia Hall’s (2016) transnational Black feminist framework as a model, in which she provides “a coherent feminist framing” for activist work in general, and the Black Lives Matter Movement specifically (89). A transnational Black girlhood feminist framework provides six tenets/guiding principles: intersectionality, reflexivity, paying deep attention to Black women and girls cross-culturally, focusing on Black girls as agentic beings, Black girl solidarity building, and paying attention to boundaries and borders. In applying this framework to my specific interest in studying Afro-Caribbean girls in the Dutch Caribbean and their transitions, I engage with the work of Caribbean feminists pulling from the
work of scholars like Eudine Barriteau (1995) and Patricia Mohammed (1998); as well as the work of sociologists Jeylan Mortimer and Phyllis Moen (2016) on the sociological theorizing on life course (life course theory).

As I transition this work from an exploration of Afro-Caribbean girlhood to a longitudinal study that considers girlhood experiences in tandem with how the liminal space between womanhood and adulthood are not only experienced but can be felt as both a space and place, it is imperative that I (re)situate myself in this work. To do so, I explain how I am positioned in this research, I re-introduce you to the girls, and provide a summary of how this dissertation will transition across the chapters that follow.

Me, Myself, & This Research

A transnational Black girlhood feminist framework mentioned briefly above (and detailed in Chapter Two) calls for the researcher to consider their positionality within their research. For example, Evans-Winters (2019) asserts:

…one comes to understand her place or positionality within a community and the social world. Our place in the world shapes how we consume and produce knowledge as well as how we choose to disseminate knowledge. (3)

My father received custody of me when I was four years old and brought me to the US from the island of Sint Maarten which at that time comprised a part of the Netherlands Antilles. I remember being told throughout my childhood that he wanted better opportunities for me, school being one of them. As I reflect on my girlhood, there are different points in which I felt that I became a woman, multiple times: when I started my period the summer before my 11th birthday; when I started my first job at 14; when my virginity was taken away at 14; when I became homeless at age 20; when I signed my first apartment lease at 22; when I moved out of the state I
was raised in to go to graduate school at 23. Throughout these periods of my life, I continue to return to the days of my girlhood by remembering times that bring back a sense of innocence, peace, and love. Even throughout my time as an undergraduate student and graduate student, I have always been financially responsible for myself, yet I still did not feel like an adult. In this current stage of transition from a Ph.D. candidate to soon, a Black queer woman with a Ph.D., I think about my next level of adulthood including finding out who I am outside of being a student, progressing in an academic career, traveling the world, and creating the life I want for myself. I feel that I will soon be able to say I have reached a different level of adulting. As stated above and previously in the first iteration of this research, every girl who participated in this research represents for me a possibility of who I could have been if I had grown up on the island and I too represent just one of the many possibilities of who they can become as many of the girls are currently embarking on similar pathways that I have taken. When I was growing up, I often wondered how my life would be if I was in Sint Maarten instead of the US. For me, the girls represent those possibilities. During our interviews in summer 2019, the girls shared several goals with me. Between the 2019 interviews and the most recent 2022/2023 interviews – which inform this study – they have been doing well and are all working towards their goals.

The Girls Are Doing Well

Before the second iteration of this research began, I visited Sint Maarten during the summer of 2022. I was able to meet up with Aimee, Brittany, and Zola7 at a coffee lounge where we were able to catch up in person. I had given them the letters that they had written to their future selves in the summer of 2019. I discuss more about what I call “future writing” in chapter

7 The girls’ names are their chosen pseudonyms from the first iteration of the research study.
four. Because I was not able to get in contact with Kianna, Zola—who is close friends with Brittany—was able to deliver Kianna’s letter. At that time, I had reached out to Anna, but did not receive a response and I did not have contact information for Loyalty, Felicia, or Khloe. Since 2019 I have been able to keep up with all the girls in different capacities, except for Kianna and Loyalty. Felicia and Nirvana were not consistently on Instagram and would either deactivate their account or create a new one altogether with a different handle which made it hard to be able to keep up with them on social media.

In December 2022, I returned to Sint Maarten to reconnect with the girls who participated in the first iteration of this research project. I was able to re-engage with and interview five out of the nine girls. I was unable to interview the remaining four due to not being able to get in contact and scheduling issues. I now follow all the girls on the social media platform Instagram except for Loyalty. I was able to connect with Felicia on Instagram through Nirvana and I was able to connect with Kianna and Khloe on Instagram through Zola. I messaged both Anna and Felicia but did not receive a response. Khloe had scheduling issues and ended up traveling, which led to us not meeting. In the end, I conducted interviews with Aimee, Brittany, Kianna, Nirvana, and Zola.

These interviews included a round of initial conversations where the girls and I were able to catch up and update each other on what has happened in our lives since we last interacted in summer 2019. For the girls whom I was able to catch up with in summer 2022, a lot of the information from then was repeated during the interviews. A lot had happened since 2019; for one, the girls were now older. Additionally, they had undergone some significant transitions in their lives since 2019 and in order to get an idea of any transitions that may have taken place, I needed to know what, if anything, had changed. To help make sense of their transitions for this
iteration of the research, it is appropriate for me to re-introduce the girls, how they described themselves, what they were doing at the time of the most recent interviews, and what they were looking forward to as they thought about their futures.

_Aimee_

When I met Aimee in 2019, she was 17 years old, an only child, single, self-identified as Blindian (her mother is Black, and her father is Indian), and had just graduated from high school. She lived with both her mom and dad and had an overall good relationship with both of her parents. She had a lot of personality and described herself as unique, very approachable, creative, and open-minded. Aimee was interested in dancing, singing, and pursuing a degree in health sciences or forensics. At the time of our second interview Aimee was 20 years old, still an only child, and is a content creator. Since our interview in 2019 she has earned a certificate for completing the International Baccalaureate (IB)\(^8\) program and is currently in The Netherlands studying creative business, which is a major change from what she wanted to do when we first met. After completing IB, she took a year off of school to get some work experience at a large grocery store chain in Sint Maarten. Her relationship with her mom has gotten stronger, but the same cannot be said for her relationship with her father. Aimee is now in a relationship and lives with her boyfriend, who is also in college. They have been in a relationship since March 2020. She also stated how much she has matured since 2019 and that being in a relationship has enabled her to learn a lot about herself. The Dutch government assists in paying her college tuition and her boyfriend receives assistance for their housing. Aimee’s father sends her money monthly, and she does a good job of saving most of the money. In thinking about her future, she

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\(^8\) IB is a global leader in international education which offers four programs: primary years program, middle years program, diploma program, and career-related program in over 150 countries.
plans to graduate with her bachelor’s degree in creative business in 2026, work toward earning her master’s degree from a different university, focus on entrepreneurship, get married and raise children.

*Brittany*

When I first met Brittany, she was 16 years old, was in the fifth form\(^9\), single, and lived with both her mom and dad. Her favorite subject in school was math, she loved sports, and hanging out with her family and friends. She described herself as kind, supportive, and caring. Brittany wanted to go to school in Canada to become a business data analyst. At the time of the most recent interview, Brittany was 20 years old. Since our last interview in 2019, she graduated high school, took the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Education (CAPE)\(^{10}\) exams, received her associate degree in economics, and moved to Canada, where she is continuing to study economics. She lives in a residence hall with roommates and her college education is paid for through scholarships, the Dutch government, and help from her parents. Like Aimee, she attends a predominately white institution (PWI), but she has been able to navigate this space as she says “like normal” because she finds that the school is supportive of minority students, and she has also found a community of Caribbean students. Brittany wants to get her master’s degree in economics at another university in Canada, after taking a gap year to travel before graduate school. In thinking about life after college, Brittany would like to work in firm consulting and reside in Canada. She does not currently have any plans for the future regarding a family, but she definitely wants to invest in real estate—specifically, affordable housing.

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\(^9\) Fifth form is equivalent to the junior year in high school in the US.

\(^{10}\) Designed to provide certification of the academic, vocational, and technical achievement of students in the Caribbean.
When I met Kianna in 2019, she was 16 years old, in the fifth form, single, and described herself as hardworking, headstrong, and beautiful. Throughout our first interview she was very expressive and used facial expressions, hand movements, and sucking of the teeth\(^\text{11}\) to make sure she was getting her point across to me. Kianna wanted to attend university in Holland\(^\text{12}\) to further her studies after high school and become a bank manager. At the time of the interview in 2023, Kianna was 19 years old and felt that the most changes that have occurred in her life since our last interview in 2019 were due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic\(^\text{13}\) that began in 2020. During COVID-19, there were curfews, and she was home a lot more. She graduated high school, graduated with a CAPE associate degree in accounting, and has cut her hair twice.\(^\text{14}\) She currently lives in Sint Maarten with her mom and dad, is single, and is working at an airport until she leaves for Holland to study accounting in Fall 2023. Kianna got a taste of adulthood once she started working at the airport and she gives it two thumbs down. In thinking about her future, Kianna wants to get a bachelor’s degree and maybe a master’s degree in accounting depending on how getting the bachelor’s degree goes, because CAPE was stressful enough. She does not want children, knows that she would like to move to Canada, and to buy a nice house and car.

\textbf{Kianna}

\textbf{Nirvana}

\(^{11}\) Also known as chupps, this is the imitative act of sucking one’s teeth as a gesture of annoyance or disapproval.  
\(^{12}\) Holland and The Netherlands (officially known as the Kingdom of the Netherlands) are used interchangeably.  
\(^{13}\) According to the World Health Organization, the Coronavirus disease outbreak is an infectious disease that affects the respiratory system and older people and those with compromised immune systems are more likely to develop serious illness from the disease.  
\(^{14}\) Hair was a significant theme of the data in the first iteration of the study.
When I met Nirvana, she was 17 years old, lived with both of her parents, was single, and had already completed high school. She described herself as very social, really friendly, comedic, straight-up, supportive, and easy to get along with. Since she was done with school her days consisted of cooking, sleeping, and watching movies. One the weekends she enjoyed going to the beach, going to the movies, and spending time with her friends. She knew that she wanted to be an event planner and caterer. At the time of the interview Nirvana was 20 years old, in a long-term relationship and, like Aimee, her relationship has helped her grow as a person and learn more about herself. She lives with her parents in Sint Maarten, and she has her own catering business making delicious food and baked goods. She sells some of her food at late-night pop-up events in town. A major event that has happened to Nirvana in the past three years included getting in trouble with the law and getting arrested. This was an eye-opening experience for Nirvana that made her realize that she was an adult and the only one responsible for herself and her own decisions. She has always had a positive outlook on her case and looks forward to making the best out of her situation. In thinking about her future, Nirvana wants to be more involved with life, consciously create healthy attachments, move to Europe to study culinary arts, and eventually raise children.

Zola

When I met Zola in 2019, she was 16 years old, very soft spoken, single, and was in the fifth form. She lived with her mom, dad, and younger sister and has a close relationship with all of them. She especially enjoys being a big sister. She loved swimming and described herself as funny, smart, and beautiful. Zola knew that after high school she wanted to go to university in Canada and get a degree in accounting. At the time of the interview in 2022, Zola was 19 years
old, and since our interview in 2019 she has graduated high school, taken the CAPE exams, earned an associate degree in accounting and moved to Canada. She is continuing to study accounting at a 4-year Canadian university along with Brittany. So, they have each other as a support system at a predominately white institution, especially coming from an island that is predominately Black and Brown. In thinking about her future, Zola wants to continue her education, get her master’s degree, and is even considering a PhD, but she wants to see how she does in graduate school before making that decision. Zola is in a relationship and her boyfriend is also studying in Canada, but in another province. She wants to get married and have two children. Zola sees herself continuing to live in Canada after she finishes school.

This reintroduction of the girls is important to put into context where the girls have been, where they are coming from, the various relationships in their lives, what they like to do, how they think of themselves, and what they find important in order to make sense of the transitions they have and are experiencing. When I first met the girls, they all had plans for their futures, and three and a half years later, the girls are still thinking about their futures and what they want for their lives. They are all doing well and are all working on the steps they must take to get to where they want to be. They all have the support from a combination of at least one parent, family, and friends, and are all working towards their goals. What follows is a layout and brief summaries of the following chapters.

**Dissertation Structure**

This dissertation is written in a non-traditional format comprising this introduction, separate stand-alone (but connected) papers which make up the three chapters that follow, and a conclusion which ties the study together. Chapter two, “Because All Black Girls Matter:
Theorizing Black Girls Across Borders,” is a theoretical paper that engages with theories such as Black feminisms, girlhood studies, and transnational feminism, to create a theoretical framework that I am calling a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework. As mentioned earlier, while Black feminisms and girlhood studies are critical to this study, they stop short at US geographical borders. Because I am interested in studying the lives of girls outside of the US, I needed a framework that could account for their lives. Transnational feminism allows me to do so. I borrow from and extend Kia Hall’s (2016) transnational Black feminisms framework, which is specific to Black women. Hall’s framework includes four tenets: intersectionality, which pulls from the work of Kimberle Crenshaw (1998); scholar-activism, which pulls form the work of Irma McClaurin (2001) and Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998); solidarity building, which pulls from the work of bell hooks (1984); and attention to borders/boundaries, which pulls from the work of Gloria Anzaldua (1987). In following Hall’s example for creating a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework, I pull from the work of Black feminists Patricia Hill Collins (1990), Audre Lorde (1984), and Christina Sharpe (2016), girlhood studies scholars Venus Evans-Winters (2019), Dominique Hill (2018), and Ruth Nicole Brown (2009), and transnational feminist scholars M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1996) and Gloria Anzaldua (1987) to create a theory that attends to the lives of Black girls within and across all borders.

In chapter three, “‘Yuh a Girl One Minute, Den Yuh a Woman the Next’: Transitions of Afro-Caribbean Girlhood in Sint Maarten,” I describe my methodology for this study and demonstrate how I apply the framework I develop in chapter two to transitions of Afro-Caribbean girlhood in the Dutch West Indies. In this chapter, I engage with the work of Caribbean feminists on Caribbean feminisms as well as life course, identity work, and emerging
adolescence theorists. I use Caribbean feminisms to describe the socio-historical context which shapes the region and culture where the girls live, which in turn also shapes them and their transitions. The Caribbean is described by some as the first modern society, a region which through the processes of colonialism and slavery became the engine of the global contemporary late-stage, anti-Black, and racist capitalist society (Gilroy 1993). Scholarship from Caribbean feminists like Patricia Mohammed (1998), Eudine Baritteau (2004:2003a:2003b), Rawwida Baksh-Soodeen (1993:1998), Rhoda Reddock (2001), and Gemma Tang Nain (1991) provide the context needed to apply the transnational Black girlhood feminisms framework discussed in chapter two to the region as a whole. The scholarship of feminists from the Dutch West Indies like Sonia Cuales (1998), Adaly Rodriguez (2015), and Rose Mary Allen (2010) helps to situate this work in the specific sub region of the Caribbean within which Sint Maarten lies.

Because this iteration of the research study focuses on participants’ transitions, I engage with and critique the literatures on life course theory and emerging adulthood to provide a socio-historical account for how transitions within one’s life have been theorized. While life course and identity work scholarship are important sociological theories to engage, their application to the Caribbean and to analyzing any transitional periods between Afro-Caribbean girlhood, womanhood and adulthood is limited. Many of the life course theories do not address or even contemplate the specific cultural and geographical particularities of the Caribbean region and therefore the girls’ lives. Herein I address how these theories hold potential, while also critiquing their limitations, in order to show how a different way of theorizing is necessary. The data gathered from interviewing the five girls mentioned above is presented in this chapter and is analyzed through the application of the above framework. I detail my findings on whether the data I gathered point to a transitional period between girlhood and woman/adulthood, how the
participants describe this period, and how they perceive womanhood and adulthood. This chapter ends with a discussion and conclusion about how the framework I have proposed worked for my particular research study and the different ways in which it can be applied to analyzing Black girls and girlhoods globally.

In chapter four, “A Soft Girl Era, Period: Black Girls in Digital Space,” I discuss my use of research participant media as well as its importance to studies that are interested in exploring the ways in which digital spaces are used as a means to improve the lives of research participants in various ways. As such, I outline an analysis of the self-selected research participant media that the girls have found to be representative of the current stage of their lives as described in chapter three. Lastly, I explain the importance of what I am calling future writing, where the girls have written a letter to their future selves. I will give the letters back to the girls when we meet again for the third iteration of this research study in approximately four to six years. This chapter answers the research question of whether the girls engage with social media as a way to help navigate this transitional period. If so, in what ways; and if not, is there alternative methods that the girls utilize to help them navigate this period?

In my concluding chapter, “The Future of Transnational Black Girlhood,” I discuss how the findings in chapters two and three are related, their importance, and the implications of my findings for future research. What this dissertation demonstrates is that due to the inadequate use of a single existing framework, creating a framework that brings transnational and Black feminisms and Black girlhood studies together is essential in studying a phenomenon such as transitions of Afro-Caribbean girlhood. What the study has found is that there is a transition between girlhood, womanhood and adulthood and that “it’s complicated,” temporal, and nonlinear. This transition is also marked by the girls claiming their agency, doing what they want
to do, and planning for their futures with liminality. Understanding the lives of these Afro-
Caribbean girls is critical to building a comprehensive field of girlhood studies that includes girls
from all backgrounds and geographic locations, because we cannot fully make sense of the
experiences of girls when some are left out of the discourse. It also expands the scope of Black
feminisms and Black girlhood studies by taking it beyond the urban cities, beyond the US, and
beyond hip-hop feminisms. It makes a significant contribution to the development of girlhood
studies in the Caribbean beyond the frame of deficit, as well as to life course theory, by showing
how cultural and geographical differences have always played a role in the nonlinearity of the
life course.
Introduction

Feminism cannot be monolithic in its issues, goals and strategies, since it constitutes the political expression of the concerns and interests of women from different regions, classes, nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. While gender subordination has universal elements, feminism cannot be based on a rigid concept of universality that negates the wide variation of women’s experience. There is and must be a diversity of feminisms, responsive to the different needs and concerns of different women and define by them for themselves. (Sen & Grown, 1987)

In 2019, I began the first iteration of my research on Afro-Caribbean girlhood in the Dutch West Indies. In that initial study I engaged in part with the theorizing of Black feminist, girlhood studies scholars and interviewed nine girls (ages 14, 16, and 17) who were living on the island of Sint Maarten to examine the ways in which they narrated, navigated, and negotiated their girlhood experiences. I found that the girls navigated their social worlds by negotiating different aspects of their lives, including their hair, appearance, and food consumption, to resist heteronormative ideas in Sint Maarten in various ways. Since then, I have been interested in the kinds of transitions the girls may have experienced while on the cusp of womanhood and adulthood. I wanted to explore whether the girls feel that they have experienced a transitional period between girlhood and woman/adulthood that is distinct from girlhood, womanhood, and adulthood. While doing this work, it became clear to me as a Black and Caribbean feminist that while these theories were critical to this longitudinal study, there were some limitations in how they could be applied to a study of Black girls in the Caribbean. In this chapter, I demonstrate

15 I also used the work of transnational and Caribbean feminists in that initial study.
both the importance and limitations of Black feminisms and girlhood studies to life course theory research with Black girls in the Caribbean specifically, and Black girls globally. Herein I seek to address these limitations by developing my own transnational Black girlhood feminist framework, which combines Black feminisms, Black girlhood studies and transnational feminisms. This framework combines key points of each theory that are important to analyzing Black girls and girlhood beyond borders, while considering the intersections of their identities, thus creating six tenets/guiding principles: (1) intersectionality, (2) reflexivity, (3) deep attention to Black women and girls cross-culturally, (4) Black girls as agentic beings, (5) Black girl solidarity building, and (6) attention to borders and boundaries.

The Importance and Limitations of Black Feminisms and Black Girlhood Studies

In creating a theoretical framework to analyze the lives of Black girls, it is essential to consider the many important contributions of Black feminisms to sociological theorizing including the ways in which Black feminisms center the lived experiences of Black people, especially women and girls, their attention to reflexivity and positionality, as well as intersectionality. It is also equally important to consider aspects of Black girlhood studies such as the researcher’s ability to trace their reliability in doing work with Black girls, listening, and centering Black girls’ needs and voices, and seeing Black girls as capable of claiming and owning their agency in all aspects of their lives through the kinds of things they enjoy doing in their childhood all while celebrating Black girls. While these theorizings are foundational to any study of Black girlhood, it is also true that they are US-centric; therefore, utilizing them poses some limitations in any attempts to study Black girls beyond US ideological and geographical borders. To address this, I have developed a framework which combines the above-mentioned
aspects of Black feminisms and Black girlhood studies with a transnational feminist attention to border crossings in order to develop a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework for studying Black girls and girlhood globally. Below I provide further detail about the specific aspects of Black feminisms, girlhood studies and transnational studies I pull from to create this framework.

**Black Feminisms**

Black feminist studies emerged as a field of study in the 1970s. However, Black feminisms can be traced back to over 100 years prior, to Sojourner Truth and her seminal speech “Ain’t I A Woman” which was given in 1851, but was first published by Frances Gage in 1863,\(^{16}\) as well as visionary Black feminist Anna Julia Cooper and her seminal text *A Voice from the South: By A Black Woman in the South* (1892) which was significant “in the development of Black feminist discourse and its theory-building around intersectionality” (Guy-Sheftall 2009, 11). Truth and Cooper both experienced what W.E.B. du Bois (2008) called “double consciousness.” The position they occupied as Black and female in US society rendered them “not yet” woman (Spillers 1987). Black women were not considered women, as the femininity that was extended and required of white women was not extended to Black women; they were caricatured as too strong and masculine (Collins 1990; Minister 2012). On this position and oppression of Black women, Cooper (1892) stated:

> The colored woman of to-day occupies, one may say, a unique position in this country. In a period of itself transitional and unsettled, her status seems one of the least ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which make for our civilization. She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both. (112)

\(^{16}\) Whether or not the written language of the published piece is racist or not and accurate is still in question (Gage 1863; Robinson 1851).
Cooper was one of the first Black women to theorize intersectionality by pointing out in her writing the importance of the connections between and among race, gender, and patriarchy (Minister 2012).

In developing a framework rooted in Black feminist traditions and thought, according to sociologist and Black feminist, Patricia Hill Collins (1990), Black feminism is “a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community” (7-8). This feminism is not just inclusive of women and girls of color, but also continues to raise the collective consciousness about the various oppressions that affect all women, including gender expansive and gender nonconforming people. Sociologist Venus Evans-Winters (2019) contends that “Black women interested in the lives of Black women, have much, herstorical, theoretical, and practical knowledge to contribute to contemporary qualitative inquiry and discourse” (14). As such, Black feminists continue to use Black feminisms to center the experiences of Black women and to better understand their intersectional position(s) in society.

The Combahee River Collective (CRC) (1977) was crucial to the Black liberation and gender equality movements in the US. The collective is made up of Black feminists who have met together since 1974 including Barbara and Beverly Smith, Audre Lorde, Demita Frazier, and Akasha Hull. The CRC used the understanding of their position in relation to intersecting social and political identities to begin the discourse on how structural and institutional racism have worked together to create systems of oppression. They also discussed how these systems of oppression continue to be investigated to resolve contemporary socio-historical, political and economic problems. Black feminism is communal, and the Combahee River Collective met together to do political work both within the group and other progressive organizations and movements. They have worked on fixing issues like domestic violence, inadequate health care
access, and abortion rights. They have also provided educational workshops on Black feminisms at different institutions as a group as well as individual feminists from the group. They not only developed theory but put it into practice to change the conditions of the most vulnerable, and it remains true that “until Black women are free, none of us will be free” (CRC 1977). Angela Davis and Audre Lorde agreed that one way to address issues in society has been to react. React in anger, show that anger, define your politics and do what needs to be done. As exemplified by action -- such as Charlene Carruthers and the Black Youth Project, Ruth Nicole Brown and Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT), and Tanya Denise Fields and The Black Feminist Project -- Black feminists have directly addressed issues in society. These have included, but are not limited to gendered and racialized power dynamics affecting Black girls, structured cycles of poverty affecting Black families, and the lack of political knowledge among young Black people. In many ways Black, Afro-Latina, and Latina sociologists – such as Mary Patillo, Eve Ewing, and Nancy López continue to address various social issues in their commitment to social action through research projects on the criminal justice system, cultural organizing, and public sociology on the effects of combining Hispanic ethnicity with race, respectively. BIPOC sociologists, who study and investigate social problems, continue to be the ones conducting research on/with/about marginalized communities. Recently, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs/departments/efforts, critical race theory (CRT), and intersectionality are being demonized and targeted by governors in various states. Similarly Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2020) explained how untethered the concept of identity politics has

17 The Black Youth Project “highlights the voices and ideas of Black millennials. We work to empower and uplift through knowledge, voice, and action” (Black Youth Project 2013, n.p.).
18 SOLHOT functions as theory, praxis, workshop, and studio… in the organizing and doing Black girlhood celebration” (SOLHOT 2006, n.p.).
19 Was created “as a response to sexist institutional policies, structurally reinforced cycles of poverty, and harsh inequities in wealth and access to capital that result in far too many women being unable to rise out of poverty and sustain their families (The Black Feminist Project 2009, n.p).
become from its original usage (Taylor 2020); white people in power are opposing DEI, CRT, and intersectionality because they have a limited conservative understanding of what these actually are and how they can be used to improve social conditions of marginalized peoples in US society. As such this furthers the importance of Black feminisms -- as well as other non-white feminisms -- as theory and praxis.

For the field of sociology, Black feminisms is an important sociological theory that is not only subjugated, but dialectical and oppositional (Collins 1986). According to The American Sociological Association (2014) sociology is defined as follows:

> The study of social life, social change, and the social causes and consequences of human behavior. Sociologists investigate the structure of groups, organizations, and societies, and how people interact within these contexts. (n.p.)

Because Black women have been relegated to the margins of society (hooks 1984), they have a special standpoint which has allowed them the ability to analyze issues such as race, class, and gender in ways that mainstream white sociologists have often been unable to do because of their own privileged standpoint at the center (Collins 1986). The lived experiences of Black people, and Black women specifically, have been argued to serve as important data that researchers would otherwise not have access to because of the limitations of their (white) sociological lens as well as their positivist and neoliberal views on what constitutes real science. As outsiders within, Collins (1986) asserts that “Black feminist scholars may be one of the distinct groups of marginal intellectuals20 whose standpoints promise to enrich contemporary sociological discourse” (S15).

Black feminisms remain important because Black women throughout the African diaspora continue to be an oppressed group in varying ways. Collins (1990) contends that “as

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20 Mannheim (1936) labeled the “strangers” that Simmel (1921) refers to as individuals in the academy as “marginal intellectuals.”
long as Black women’s subordination within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation persists, Black feminism as an activist response to that oppression will remain needed” (22). As such, Collins (1990) has established six distinguishing characteristics of Black feminist thought: 1) realizing the connection between experience and consciousness of Black women’s lives; 2) Understanding that Black women as a group are not a monolith and that there may be similar experiences, but these experiences vary; 3) Understanding the connections between Black women in America’s experiences as a “heterogeneous collectivity” and another group’s standpoint (29); 4) Understanding Black women as intellectuals and that they are in fact knowledge producers; 5) Understanding that Black feminist thought and Black feminism may remain dynamic; and, 6) Understanding that Black women’s issues are situated in and a part of a large social justice project. Black feminisms as a social theory have no doubt made significant contributions to helping us understand the ways in which our patriarchal, racist, heterosexist society is organized and works to oppress. Among their significant contributions I focus on intersectionality, reflexivity, and paying deep attention to Black women and girls as important contributions to my transnational Black girlhood feminist framework.

**Intersectionality**

In her 1989 essay, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black woman, coined the term *intersectionality*. Crenshaw (1989) argued – like Black feminists before her such as Truth (1863), Cooper (1892), Nikki Giovanni (1968), the Combahee River Collective (1977), Deborah King (1988), and Frances Beal (2008)— that the experiences of Black women are multidimensional and cannot be adequately analyzed using
unidimensional analyses. She described intersectionality as a way to analyze discrimination and oppression. Because a Black woman’s subjectivity includes being both Black and woman, she can experience both racism and sexism at the same time and her experience with sexism will be different than a white woman’s or Black man’s experience because of these intersections (149). Thus, Black feminism acknowledges that the various factors of one’s identities such sex, race, ability, gender, class, nation, religion, and other identities lead to discrimination and/or oppression and creates multiplicative effects of their lived experiences. Though intersectionality has been misused since its adoption by and within different professions, \(^{21}\) I adopt Collins and Blige's (2016) conception of intersectionality as defined as follows:

A way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people’s lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves. (2)

In utilizing an intersectional lens in analyzing and understanding the complexities of Black girls and girlhood, it takes into consideration how the structures in which the girls live throughout the world affect and influence their girlhood experiences as well as how they view themselves and the negotiations they make to navigate various spaces and places which they occupy. As a Black scholar and researcher, intersectionality is not only critical in analyzing research participants and data, but also provides reflexive space for analyzing power dynamics within the research process.

\(^{21}\) Intersectionality has been co-opted to fit into research across different disciplines and has become a “buzzword” and heavily contested where people use without defining or engaging with the concept as a theory, praxis, or analysis (Nash 2017).
**Reflexivity**

Reflexivity requires that researchers move beyond the intersections of their own identities and the identities of their participants by consciously engaging in internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation and not only recognizing but acknowledging that the position of the researcher may affect the outcome of the research process (Berger 2015). It also requires the recognition of the researcher’s positionality in terms of both oppression and privilege (Hesse-Biber 2007). As such, reflexivity is achieved through the telling and documenting of our personal histories and stories which is crucial in doing work with Black women and girls. The researcher’s positionality should be explicitly stated within their research to show that they have interrogated their own social position, power, and privilege from the beginning to end of their research. This is particularly important for a transnational Black girlhood feminist theorizing to prevent engaging in oppressive research practices that restrict knowledge production. Engaging in Black feminist reflexivity in research methods helps to deconstruct white racism. In doing work with Black women and girls, the examination of one’s life is a part of the co-creation of the knowledge process. “Allowing personal experiences to challenge and extend pre-determined understandings of power, inequality and difference is firmly supported by the epistemological foundations of intersectionality” (Carstensen-Egwuom 2014, 266). The ways in which one has positioned themself in their work helps to take seriously the lived experiences and self-descriptions of the women and girls while at the same time considering their “subjectivity and bodily experience” (Carstensen-Egwuom 2014, 267). When reflexivity is adopted as not only theory but praxis, we are then able to pay deep attention to Black women and girls across various contexts around the globe.
Black feminists like bell hooks (1992), Audre Lorde (1984), Saidiya Hartman (2008), and most recently Christina Sharpe (2016) have all written about the importance of deeply paying attention to the lives of Black people generally and Black women and girls specifically. In Hartman’s (2008) “Venus in Two Acts,” she subverts the discourse of the archives that have historically exhibited the Eurocentric, male-centered, and violent institutions that continue to dehumanize Black women and girls through a deep search. Recognizing Sylvia Wynter’s (2003) assertion that Black women have never been seen as human and Hortense Spillers’ (1987) claim of their ungendering, Black feminists like Hartman seek to make Black women visible despite the violence of abstraction and erasure. Hartman (2008) uses what she calls “critical fabulation” to “jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done” (11). In other words, Hartman is re(imagining) a life that cannot be accounted for as she does the deep work of trying anyway. As such, Hartman is doing what Black poet and writer M. Nourbese Philip states is the necessity of “telling the story that cannot be told” (Saunders, 2008). Hartman (2008) explains that she is not giving voice to Venus, since dead Black girls cannot speak, but rather imagining what we are unable to verify (12). There is a lack of closure, particularly when the first time we hear about a Black girl is when she is already dead. Critical fabulation is a method that allows Hartman to make Venus - the Black girl - visible. In this vein, Black feminists attempt to wrestle the narratives of Black girls from contemporary iterations of
violence that would continue to dehumanize young girls in our present social institutions, such as schools.  

Like Hartman, Sharpe (2016) engages in the work of critical fabulation. Sharpe (2016) connects the technologies of power employed during slavery to dehumanize Black girls, and turn them into property still being made into things to be counted and marked today, through the work of the wake or wake work - a careful work of breathing life into the Black body. Sharpe (2016) discusses the ways the logic of the slave ship continues to secure the realm of the human against Blackness. The result is a set of racializing codes and frameworks where Black people, Black girls in particular, appear as nonpersons, essential to the operating mechanisms of modernity, but always under limited conditions. Sharpe examines what she has coined as anagramatical Blackness, where Blackness shifts the meaning of language and how it is used -- such that Aiyana Stanley Jones, a Black girl killed by police violence while sleeping in her grandmother's home, can be described as “an unarmed seven-year-old” (81). This is but one example of paying deep attention to the ways in which violence impacts the lives of Black women and girls. For Black girls who become Black women, children who become femmes, and transwomen, I argue that it is not only their invisibility, but their hypervisibility of involuntarily being other(ed) that makes society invisibilize and ignore their humanity, which also has the potential to influence variously their lived experiences during their girlhood.

Limitations of Black Feminisms

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22 “Literature on the structure of dominance and the socially reproductive function of schools tells us that schools may reinforce and reproduce social hierarchies that undermine the development of people who occupy a lower society status” (Morris 2018, 188).
23 Andrea Ritchie (2017) also engages in this in Invisible No More.
In developing a framework rooted in Black feminist traditions, to move towards theorizing about Black girls’ experiences and girlhood, it is important to address that there are limitations in utilizing Black feminist theorizing on Black girls and girlhood. For example, Black feminisms tend to be US-centric, and paying attention to the historical and cultural conditions Black women experience in the US, as opposed to the experiences of Black women beyond the geographical borders and boundaries of the global north. In addition, while Black feminisms have, as demonstrated by the work of some of the scholars mentioned above, engaged with Black girls and girlhood, the primary focus has been Black women. Black girlhood scholars, recognizing this limitation, as well as the limitations of girlhood studies in general, developed scholarship for and about Black girls and their girlhoods.

On theorizing Black girlhoods, Black girlhood scholar and professor Ashley Smith (2019) calls for the expansion of Black girlhood theories stating that:

Stereotypes like the hypersexualized Jezebel and the loud Black woman, the Sapphire, can be applied to the treatment of Black girls as they are also hypersexualized and negatively stereotyped based on Black cultural traits. Yes, we are missing something that is specific to Black girlhood from these narrow, limiting analyses. These tropes limit our understanding of why Black girlhoods are viewed and understood as deviant. (34)

Black girls are often viewed as loud if they are social and stand up for themselves and others; they are viewed as ghetto if they wear big hoop earrings, eat certain kinds of snacks, are expressive with their hands, mouth, and face; are considered fast and sexualized once their pubescent bodies start filling out; and are considered white or not Black enough if they do not fit the stereotypical Black girl trope. How Black girls are viewed depends on their cultural background, geographical location, and overall environment. Black girlhood theorizing should be specific to Black girls, rather than Black feminist theorizing which focuses heavily on the adult woman. Even so, Black feminist theorizing serves as a starting point as emerging Black
girlhood scholars continue to engage in this work. Black feminists like Audre Lorde (1982) and bell hooks (1997) have returned to their girlhood through memories as adult women in their books *Zami*, and *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood*, respectively. Though both texts are influential, I cannot help but think about the implications of these works if Lorde and hooks were Black girls writing about their girlhood during their girlhood years. I believe that as Black women reflecting and writing about their Black girlhood experiences, we the readers are limited to what Lorde and hooks are able to remember. What could we learn about Black girlhood experiences from Black girls currently living through this period? This thought is an example of how Hartman (2008) reimagines the life of Venus.

*Black Girlhood Studies*

Historically, the innocence attributed to children during their childhood years has not been extended to Black children in general, and Black girls specifically. Unlike the innocence of white girlhood in the nineteenth century, “Black girls are often seen as adults at very young ages—as without youthful innocence” (Fields and Simmons 2022, 42). Black girls are often considered mature for their age and the expectations of their behavior are not the same as for white children (Seaton and Carter 2020; Carpan 2022). Though the expectations of Black girls are different outside of the home, even within Black families from different cultural backgrounds, there are different expectations for them as opposed to the expectations for Black boys in the same family.24

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24 In the first iteration of the study the girls talked about how more is expected of them than boys in the Caribbean; this was across the board regardless of having siblings, being the only child, or lacking male siblings.
Little literature exists on this discourse which is just one reason for a call for more theorizing of Black girls and girlhood. The mistreatment of Black girls, especially in school,\(^{25}\) is evident in the treatment of Black girls by adults in positions of power such as teachers and police officers. This is an issue that negatively effects the lived experiences of Black girls who become Black adults and we should be addressing the issues that allow for their mis/maltreatment. For example, the current social conditions have allowed for a police officer to physically assault a 12-year-old Black girl named Mikia, for writing “Hi” on the school wall with her friend who was a white girl, who, \textit{unsurprisingly}, did not get arrested (Sharpe 2016, 120). In theorizing about the lives of Black women and girls, we must remember how race and racism, as well as other parts of their identity may lead to experiences of discrimination and oppression, and how this specifically impacts their experiences. The initial stories of the experience of Mikia came from media news sources, and not from Mikia herself, further stressing the importance of writing about Black girls, for Black girls, by Black women.

We no longer have to imagine how the lives of Black girls can be, when we can do the work in asking them about their lived experiences now. Just like Hartman (2008), Wynter (2003), and Sharpe (2016), Black feminist girlhood scholars like Venus Evans-Winters (2005:2019), Ruth Nicole Brown (2009), and Dominique Hill (2018) have been producing scholarship that rehumanizes Black girls and centers their experiences. As such, in developing a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework, it calls for the following six tenets/guiding principles: (1) intersectionality, (2) reflexivity, (3) deep attention to Black women and girls, (4) Black girls as agentic beings, (5) Black girl solidarity building, and (6) attention to borders and boundaries.

\(^{25}\) Data from first iteration of study showed that school is an important part of Black girls’ social world.
Focus on Black Girls as Agentic Beings

In developing a framework rooted in Black girlhood studies, I adopt Black girlhood studies pioneer Ruth Nicole Brown’s (2009) conception of Black girl as “the representations, memories, and lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful, Black, and female” (x). This definition is one that can be applied to Black girls within and outside of the US context. Brown (2009) and other Black girlhood scholars, like Oneka LaBennett (2009) and Christina Carney, Jillian Hernandez, and Anya Wallace (2016), use a hip-hop feminist pedagogy in theorizing Black girlhood, which can inspire scholars who are wanting to do work with Black girls to consider how different genres of music which are influenced by the girls’ culture has the ability to pave the way for new discourses and theorizing Black girlhoods. Brown (2009) argues for the creation of a girlhood that puts Black girls at the center rather than trying to fit Black girlhood into the leading discourses on girlhood studies such as “Reviving Ophelia” and “Girl Power” (x). Brown’s (2009) intervention into the field of girlhood studies sheds bright lights on the lived experiences of Black girls in raw form where the girls could come and learn, show confidence in themselves, be bootyful, create meaningful connections, get their boogie on, be themselves, find a big sister, learn from women, where women can learn from girls, make friends and so much more. This exemplifies the concept of focusing on girls as agentic beings, and creating the space for the encouragement of Black girls’ ability to express themselves and be agents in control of their own lives and decisions. Brown (2009) was intentional in creating a space for Black girls by Black girls and Black women. I share her belief that:

theorizing Black girlhood with Black girls can tell us everything about all kinds of worlds- those made and yet unmade. I really believe research as being in consistent conversation with Black girls to collectively practice our most radical visions of Black girlhood shifts the center of gravity to make felt exactly the
magnitude of what is at stake in our doing, research, writing, and creative work that are most transformative and more just. (Girl Museum Interview, 2019)

A focus on Black girls as agentic beings in developing and conducting research with Black girls creates different pathways of understanding Black girls from a place of resilience, space making, celebration, and Black girl solidarity building.

**Black Girl Solidarity Building**

In developing a framework that centers the lives of Black girls globally, there must be an emphasis on what I call Black girl solidarity building. We can support Black girls, but what does it mean if that support is not sustained? As such, I adopt bell hooks’ conception of solidarity as defined as:

Solidarity is not the same as support. To experience solidarity, we must have a community of interests, shared beliefs and goals around which to unite, to build Sisterhood. Support can be occasional. It can be given and just as easily withdrawn. Solidarity requires sustained, ongoing commitment. (hooks 1984, 64)

As such, Black girl solidarity-building is twofold. It includes Black girls being in community and building solidarity with each other and it requires Black women who do work with Black girls to be actively engaged in building solidarity and be committed to improving the social conditions of Black girls. In creating scholarship with girls, not on girls (Hill 2018), Black childhood scholar Dominique Hill asserts that being what she calls Black girl reliable demands that you must see yourself in the girls you work with and them being able to see themselves in you. It also requires that the spaces we are creating and holding for the Black girls is “expansive, imaginative, and thoughtful enough” to celebrate Black girls. Lastly, being Black girl reliable “requires” intimacy with Black girls and the self which shares Evans-Winters (2019) sentiments on Black women doing
research on and with other Black women (400). This is one way of holding themselves accountable for not distorting the voices and experiences of the girls with whom they are doing this work and being conscious of not making them a spectacle for others. One limitation of Hill’s concept of Black girl reliability is that it is not realistic to demand that we see ourselves in the girls and the girls sees themselves in us. This can perpetuate the narrative that Black girls are a homogenous group who look, act, and are interested in the same things, when the reality is that Black girls are different in all aspects of life. In my own work, I have seen myself in some of the girls, but not all, and likewise the girls may not see themselves in me, and that is okay. Hall (2019) asserts “it is important to recognize that solidarity does not presume sameness. Rather, it is the context of bonds across diverse communities of solidarity” (94) and there are diverse communities within the community of Black girls and women. As such, I too adopt the characteristics of solidarity as defined by Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) as the:

mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities. Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together. Diversity and difference are central values here—to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances. (7)

Holding ourselves Black girl reliable should focus just as much on the differences between the girls and the researchers to prevent from subconsciously blinding ourselves to important findings which also requires us to be intersectional and reflexive in our analyses. Professor of communication studies Kisha McPherson (2019) asserts that “the experience of Black girls is nuanced and, in many ways, further complicated by the intersectionality of race, gender, age, and class” (235). As such I propose the characteristic of Black girl solidarity building for a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework.
In recognizing both the importance of and the cultural and geographical limitations of using Black feminisms and Black girlhood studies to the study of Black girlhood globally it is imperative that we engage with a feminist theorizing which is able to help these theories travel (Lugones 1987) across socially and theoretically constructed borders. This theory is transnational feminism.

Transnational Feminisms: Theorizing Black Girls Across Borders

Considering the limitations faced by Black feminists and girlhood studies as mentioned above, a transnational feminist framework “that is critically aware of its own historical, geographical, and political locations, even as it is invested in alliances that are created and sustained through deeply dialogic and critically self-reflexive processes of knowledge production and dissemination” (Lock Swarr and Nagar 2010, 3) helps us to account for Black girls as we grapple with the limitations of geographical, linguistic, space/place (Mohanty 2003). Transnational feminisms can help researchers include the specific context of the lives of Black girls who reside on the African continent, in the Caribbean, Asia, Europe, Latin American and other places around the globe. It requires that we pay attention to borders and boundaries to make connections between the lived realities of Black girls in these geographical spaces, while also being attentive to their specific historical, social, and cultural context and dissimilarities (Lock Swarr & Nagar, 2010) to develop a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis of Black girls globally. Transnational feminisms can bridge the gaps between individual and collaborative knowledge production, the academy and activism, and between theory and method (Lock Swarr and Nagar 2010) which aligns with the Black feminist tradition of theory as praxis. As such I adopt the working definition of transnational feminisms by Lock Swarr and Nagar (2010) as:
an intersectional set of understandings, tools, and practice that can: (a) attend to racialized, classed, masculinized, and heteronormative logics and practices of globalization and capitalist patriarchies, and the multiple ways in which they (re)structure colonial and neocolonial relations of domination and subordination; (b) grapple with the complex and contradictory ways in which these processes both inform and are shaped by a range of subjectivities and understandings of individual and collective agency; and (c) interweave critiques, actions, and self-reflexivity so as to resist a priori predictions of what might constitute feminist politics in a given place and time. (5)

Transnational feminism also provides the researcher with an understanding of how we need to engage ethically in research across borders both geographical, hierarchical, and otherwise. This is particularly important for researchers like me who reside in the West and do research with the support of Western academic institutions. Although I am in some ways familiar with Black girlhood outside of the West, having been born and spending a significant part of my girlhood in the Caribbean, I must consider the ways in which I have been influenced by borders and boundaries.

Attention to Border and Boundary Crossings

Transnational theorizing reminds me to pay apt attention to these fictive and literal borders (Anzaldúa 1987). The divisions that can arise in doing this kind of work are influenced by how I am perceived by participants in my own research, as can be the same for those who engage in border and boundary crossing for their research. In developing a framework rooted in transnational feminist traditions, I adopt transnational feminists M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s (1996) three elements of the definition of transnational:

1) a way of thinking about women in similar contexts around the world, in different geographical spaces, rather than as all women across the world; 2) an understanding of a set of unequal relationships among and between peoples, rather than as a set of traits embodied in all non-U.S. citizens (particularly because U.S. citizenship continues to be premised within a white, Eurocentric, masculinist, heterosexist regime; and 3) a consideration of the term international
in relation to an analysis of economic, political, and ideological processes which foreground the operations of race and capitalism (for instance, those which would therefore require taking critical antiracist, anti-capitalist positions that would make feminist solidarity work possible. (xix)

This definition acknowledges the nuances of identities and power relations within and across women’s lives in their specific geographical spaces. As a Dutch Caribbean born, U.S.-raised Black woman citizen, transnational feminism urges me to think, understand and consider other girls, women, and femmes in different geographical locations. When it comes to border crossings into the so-called global south, crossing these various borders oftentimes is a matter of choice. Rather than permission given willingly, this choice is sometimes engaged violently for those who have the ability to cross. Lastly, how these borders are crossed is influenced by how the borders are perceived. Anzaldua (1987) describes borderlands as follows:

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its residents. (3)

Historically, borders have been socially constructed and are in “a constant state of transition” (Anzaldua 1987, 3) as the economic and socio-political, as well as the environmental conditions of a given geographic region are in flux at different periods of time. For example, the island of Sint Maarten, where part of my research is focused, has a literal border that separates the French side from the Dutch side, but without any gatekeepers. Residents of either side can come and go freely on any given day. Other examples can also include borders throughout continental Africa as well as Asia, and throughout the African diaspora. Transnational feminisms, when used in conjunction with Black feminisms and girlhood studies, allows me to

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26 For example, changes in river flows and land erosion as with the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic (Sheller, 2016).
take account of global colonial legacies as well as the flexibility to understand how these legacies have shaped specific cultures and the contemporary lived experiences of Black girls in various places around the globe.

A Transnational Black Girlhood Feminist Framework

Inspired by Black and transnational feminist traditions and Black girlhood theorizing, the transnational Black girlhood feminist framework offers six tenets/guiding principles: intersectionality, reflexivity, paying deep attention to Black women and girls, focusing on Black girls as agentic beings, Black girl solidarity building, and paying attention to borders and boundaries. A transnational Black girlhood feminist framework can be applied to an array of research studies that involves engaging with, analyzing, and theorizing the lives of Black girls located in all regions of the world. These tenets/guiding principles are designed to bring together some of the critical feminist elements of addressing social issues of the past so that scholars can continue to do the work of understanding Black girls, their lived experiences, including various transitions within their lives, and improving their social conditions that can change as they cross various geographic borders and boundaries. A transnational Black girlhood feminist framework requires researchers to pause to examine the different areas for Black girls and Black women that deserve a closer look and should be given more attention, especially since Black women and girls must learn to navigate and negotiate within systems that were not created for them.

A transnational Black girlhood feminist framework is a framework that allows researchers to theorize the lives of Black girls by acknowledging how their socio-cultural, spatio-temporal, and historical backgrounds, environments and contexts impact their girlhood experiences, which also influence their transitions to womanhood and adulthood. This is specific
to the first, third, fourth, and sixth tenets/guiding principles of the framework: intersectionality, deep attention to Black women and girls, Black girls as agentic beings, and attention to borders and boundaries. The second tenet/guiding principle of reflexivity is a required specification of all research engaging with Black girls and utilizing a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework. The fifth tenet/guiding principle of Black girl solidarity building is always specific to Black girlhood scholars doing work with Black girls and can be modified by the participants of a study depending on the specific research questions.

For example, a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework can provide the theoretical grounding for researchers from interdisciplinary fields who are interested in examining how, for Black girls, music that is specific to their geographical region influence their girlhood experiences. For example, this can include exploring Black girls and Bachata in the Dominican Republic, Reggae in Jamaica, Konpa in Haiti, Soca and Calypso in Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago, and Afrobeats in Nigeria. This is one way of extending what Ruth Nicole Brown and Oneka LaBennett have done with Black girls and hip-hop in urban areas of the US.

This framework calls for an extension of Brown and LaBennett’s hip-hop feminist theory application to Black girls in the US. The tenets/guiding principles of a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework not only provides Black girlhood scholars with the theory to examine different music genres outside of the US, but also within the US, ultimately crossing cultural boundaries, especially for Black girls who enjoy alternative rock, indie, and other genres of music beyond hip-hop. For Brown and LaBennett, their positionality was essential to and for their own girlhoods, therefore influencing their exploration of the ways in which the same could have been done for other Black girls in urban areas throughout the US. As a Black woman who has had a transnational girlhood back and forth between the US, Sint Maarten and the Dominican
Republic, music genres important to my girlhood included alternative rock, emo, indie, and pop music, as well as bachata, when I would visit my mother in the Dominican Republic.

Because a transnational feminist framework allows me to consider my own reflexivity and positionality in how I approach my own research, it required me to extend Brown and LaBennett’s hip-hop feminist theorizing of Black girlhood to consider the complexities of Black girls and their cultural backgrounds within and outside of the US. As such, this framework also implores Black girlhood scholars to consider different aspects of Black girls’ cultural backgrounds and lives. For example, in extending and moving beyond music, a consideration of the girls’ geographical, cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts, such as physical environments, food, extracurricular activities, books, friend groups, and personal relationships, just to name a few, should be included in research studies to determine how these aspects work together to influence their lives and girlhood experiences into womanhood/adulthood.

The fifth and sixth tenets/guiding principles of the framework—Black girl solidarity building and attention to borders and boundaries—can also be used to explore the ways in which Black girls using today’s technology can access and utilize different spaces/places, such as digital spaces. How Black girls navigate these digital spaces can be influenced by their geographic locations and the restrictions different countries have. For example, in the island of Sint Maarten, residents have limitations on the content they can access on Netflix and Amazon. The girls can learn about a new movie or show on Netflix that they would want to see, but because of restrictions to the region, they may not be able to stream it. A transnational Black girlhood feminist framework opens the door of possibilities for researchers to be able to interrogate the various aspects of Black girls in the global north and global south by paying attention to the decisions the girls make for themselves, the physical and nonphysical spaces they
occupy, move within, and transition with/to/from, and creating work with Black girls as knowledge producers to help improve their social conditions and improve societies’ understanding of Black girls, globally.

Paying deep attention to Black women and girls requires that we look at all aspects of their identities and how they are intertwined. This tenet/guiding principle with intersectionality, allows researchers to discuss Black women and their girlhood experiences in tandem with Black girls and their girlhood experiences. Paying attention to borders and boundaries as Black girls live and travel across various geographical and digital spaces/places, interlaces with the two above tenets/guiding principles. In exploring the different aspects of Black girls’ lives, globally, we have to be able to focus on the girls as agentic beings who are able to make decisions for their lives from a place of resilience as opposed to a deficit model of analysis. Black girl solidarity requires that we focus on the differences that allow for solidarity building and inclusion across identities rather than similarities which can be restrictive, especially if one similarity is race. Black girl solidarity building can happen across and within borders and boundaries. These two tenets/guiding principles connect and require that we pay deep attention to Black women and girls. Black girlhood scholars ideally must be intentional as they build and maintain solidarity with Black girls and encourage the girls to reach out and sustain one another. In engaging in work and knowledge production with Black girls, researchers must be reflexive from the beginning to end of their research as well as acknowledging how their power and privileges can influence and impact the research process.

A transnational Black girlhood feminist framework is specific to Black girls at all stages of girlhood, one that can extend well into womanhood/adulthood, and considers the various transitions that they may experience throughout such a liminal space/place/period. This
framework asserts that girlhood is not a level of the life course that is reached and then left, but one that can in various ways carry over into womanhood and adulthood. This framework pays attention to borders and boundaries across opaque spaces (McKittrick 2006), can be applied to Black girls and girlhood globally and cross culturally, and considers the lives of Black girls that can be applied across age, space, place, and time. An example of what I have done in this chapter, and will do in the following two chapters, can be found in Kia Hall’s (2016) work in “A Transnational Black Feminist Framework: Rooting in Feminist Scholarship, Framing Contemporary Black Activism.” As such, I am applying my theoretical framework to my case study on transitions of Afro-Caribbean girlhood in Sint Maarten, Dutch West Indies as well as how the girls engage with digital space as an example of another transnational space/place they navigate during their girlhood transitions.
Chapter Three

“Yuh a Girl One Minute, Den Yuh a Woman the Next”:
Transitions of Afro-Caribbean Girlhood in Sint Maarten

Introduction

In this chapter I examine whether Afro-Caribbean girls who have grown up in the island of Sint Maarten experience a transitional period between girlhood and womanhood/adulthood. I use the transnational Black girlhood feminist framework I developed in chapter two, to argue that this framework can be used to study the lives of Black girls globally by paying attention to socio-historical, contextual, and cultural boundaries. Herein I apply this framework using data collected from interviewing five girls in Sint Maarten to answer the following questions:

1) Is there a period the girls/women describe between girlhood and woman/adulthood that is different from girlhood and different from woman/adulthood?

2) If so, how do the girls define (narrate/navigate/negotiate) this transitional period? If not, when do the girls recognize that they have entered adulthood?

This research is a part of a longitudinal study I began in 2019 to fulfill the requirements for my master’s thesis,27 for which I interviewed nine girls between the ages of 14 and 17 to explore the ways in which they narrated, navigated, and negotiated their girlhood experiences. The findings revealed that the girls navigated their social worlds by negotiating different aspects of their lives, including their hair, appearance, and food consumption to, in various ways, resist heteronormative ideas in Sint Maarten. Since then, the study has evolved as I have remained in contact with the girls over the last four years. As I observed them approach the cusp of legal

27 My master’s thesis, Esucha Nuestras Voces/Luister Naar Onze Stemmen: Afro-Caribbean Girlhood in the Dutch West Indies, was a three-part project that consisted of semi-structured in-depth interviews, research participant photography, and a Black girlhood celebration.
adulthood – and reflecting as a Black feminist on my own entrance into womanhood/adulthood -- I became interested in whether Black girls experience a transitional period between girlhood and womanhood/adulthood that is distinctly different from either. At the time of my dissertation, the girls were all legally considered adults.

For this current and second iteration of the longitudinal study I re-engaged with and interviewed five out of the nine girls from the original study - Aimee, Brittany, Kianna, Nirvana, and Zola28 - approximately 3-3.5 years later. I attempted to contact and reengage the other four girls for this iteration of the study on multiple occasions but was either unable to get in contact with them or unable to interview them because of scheduling difficulties. Throughout the study I refer to my interview participants as “girls”. This is a form of endearment that I continue to use. Women’s, gender, and sexuality studies scholar Julia Jordan-Zachary (2019) asserts that using the term girl colloquially, is a way of recognizing and acknowledging the commonalities amongst and between Black girls, women, and femmes. My use of the term girl in reference to the participants throughout the chapter in no way demeans how the participants view themselves. I will discuss later how the girls self-identify.

Overall, the findings show that, in general, the girls agreed there is a transitional period between girlhood and womanhood/adulthood. There was only one participant who did not feel like she had experienced a transition. The ways in which the girls defined this transitional period varied depending on how they perceived their personal experiences thus far. The findings from the interviews show that the girls’ experiences of the transitional period consist of two overall themes: “it’s complicated” and claiming their agency. The themes consist of the following subthemes: temporality, nonlinearity, support for it’s complicated and “I can do what I want,”

28 All names are the girls’ chosen pseudonyms from project one.
and planning for their future with liminality for claiming their agency. What follows is a brief explanation of the theoretical and conceptual framework, methodology, data analysis and findings, and conclusion of the research study.

**Theoretical Framework**

This section discusses the transnational Black girlhood feminist framework paired with Caribbean feminisms. Together, these make up the theoretical framework that informs this research study. The transnational Black girlhood feminist framework speaks to the importance of Black girl/girlhood research outside of the geographic global north, but Caribbean feminisms is specific to the region in which this research is focused.

*The Transnational Black Girlhood Feminist Framework: Studying Black Girls Globally*

I use a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework that consists of six tenets/guiding principles: intersectionality, reflexivity, paying deep attention to Black women and girls, focusing on Black girls as agentic beings, Black girl solidarity building, and paying attention to borders and boundaries to engage in a study of Afro-Caribbean girls from the Dutch West Indies. This framework allows me to theorize and conceptualize the transitions within girlhood experiences without being constrained by the geographical and theoretical borders of Black feminisms and girlhood studies. The transnational in this framework allows the applicability of these theories to travel and take on new significance and to use new language as researchers engage with the differences and similarities that emerge from cultural specificity. For example, Black girlhood theorist Ruth Nicole Brown’s (2009) theorizing of hip-hop as important to Black girlhood in the US might not be directly applicable to Black girls in the Caribbean who may
prefer soca, bachata, calypso, or reggae, but Brown’s observation about the importance of music to Black girls in the US provides reference points about the importance of music, which take on a different significance in the Caribbean.

*Caribbean Feminisms*

The Caribbean exists as a place where borders and boundaries have been created to separate people into groups, yet this separation turned into a conglomerated space of diverse people and have “positioned the Caribbean as a creolized place that undoes the usefulness of thinking about identities in terms of origins, binaries, guaranteed lineages, and culturally discreet groupings” (Donnell 2022, 1). Caribbean feminists have for decades been theorizing about the ways in which patriarchy and colonialism have developed in the context of the region to produce politically and culturally specific gender power dynamics in the region to influence differently the ideas of masculinity and femininity, and how they intersect with racial identity, class, and age to impact women and girls in particular ways. Caribbean feminist Tonya Haynes (2017) states “Caribbean feminisms are heterogenous: transnational and diasporic, academic and activist, at once heteronormative (even homophobic) and queer,” that have emerged strategically and interdisciplinary (27). Caribbean feminism is a deep historical and contemporary interrogation of the lives of Caribbean people, particularly of Caribbean women and gender expansive folks, at all their intersections.

Caribbean feminists have addressed issues affecting women such as, but not limited to, “plurality, privilege, and multiple axes of oppression” (Haynes 2017, 29) even though this work may not have been initially called feminisms. The term “feminism” itself while introduced to the Caribbean from the global north as opposed to being derived from the socio-historical, political,
cultural, and economic situatedness of the region, has since been developed by Caribbean feminists into a culturally distinct epistemology and movement (Soares 2006). Caribbean feminisms are now specifically discussed in relation to the socio-political conditions of Caribbean societies as a result of colonialism, plantation slavery, indentureship, structural adjustment, and neoliberal global capitalism.

Caribbean feminist V. Eudine Barriteau (1995) for example defines gender as follows:

complex systems of personal and social relations through which women and men are socially created and maintained and through which they gain access, or are allocated, status, power and material resources within society. (26)

According to Barriteau (2004) Caribbean feminisms has never been about “women’s freedom but more about what needs to be done to reduce the obvious inequalities between women and men in public” (441). As such, Caribbean societies are still grappling with issues of women’s autonomy and authority over their bodies and lives (Barritteau 2003a; Barritteau 2003b). If it is about women’s autonomy, then it is important to understand how girls who transition into womanhood come to learn about, embrace, and negotiate this transitional period. Therefore, the period between girlhood and womanhood/adulthood is ripe for investigation.

Caribbean feminist theories have developed to explain why injustices were happening, why Caribbean women generally are treated as less than men, less than human, less than just, and less than agentic beings. Politically, Caribbean feminisms call for “a radical engagement for radical change in power relations in society” (Vassell 2004, 690). In this vein, Caribbean feminisms has as its goal to advocate and work toward achieving justice, humanization and agency for all people including men, women, and gender expansive folks across all aspects of their lives including law, economy, social, political, etc. For Caribbean feminists, justice looks like all women and gender expansive folks having the right to exist and the right to a good life
unencumbered by the need for any set of pre-qualifying conditions. According to Barriteau (2004) Caribbean feminisms “satisfies a condition of gender justice for the states to abandon the position that women need to satisfy a set of criteria to qualify for the state’s attention or benefit from its considerable resources” (439). As such, “it becomes difficult to insist that the state maintain an interest in women’s lives” (Barriteau 2004, 443). The state should pay attention to women and girls in the Caribbean without needing to meet an established set of criteria, as this predetermines who should and should not receive any form of care. The criteria are established through a heteronormative lens which disproportionately affects Caribbean women from various racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds.

**The Dutch West Indies**

Though Barriteau focuses on the Anglophone Caribbean, her theorizing is applicable to the heteronormative structures in Sint Maarten that the girls must navigate and negotiate, as both the Anglophone and Dutch Caribbean have similar histories with colonization. As part of the Dutch West Indies, Sint Maarten was originally claimed in 1493 by Spain and by 1631 was occupied by the Dutch. The Spanish and Dutch went back and forth on claiming the land until 1648, when Spain relinquished the island to the French and Dutch, who divided the island into two fifths Dutch (Sint Maarten) and three fifths French (Saint Martin). Sint Maarten became a part of the Netherlands Antilles in 1954 along with Saba, Sint Eustatius, Aruba, Bonaire, and Curacao. On October 10, 2010, Sint Maarten became a part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands along with Curacao, The Netherlands, and Aruba as a result of the dissolution of the Netherlands Antilles.
To this day, Sint Maarten remains the smallest land mass to occupy two nations and is one fifth the size of Washington, D.C. As of 2021, Sint Maarten has a population of 42,846 people and the United Nations has estimated the population to reach 44,222 by the end of 2023. The population consists of over 120 nationalities and the country’s official language is English, but it is very common for locals to be multilingual including Spanish, French, Haitian Creole, and Dutch. Approximately 67% of the island is between the ages of 15 and 64. It is an island with a deeply rooted colonial past and not much research has been conducted regarding race, gender, sex, sexuality, and class. Curaçaoan feminist Sonia Cuales (1998) states that the history of race, class, and gender in the [former] Netherlands Antilles has been largely under researched, and this has remained the case more than 25 years later. As such, I use the following information from Curaçaoan feminist and scholar Dr. Adaly Rodriguez about women’s rights in the region, specifically in Curaçao, because Curaçao and Sint Maarten have deeply rooted colonial histories with the Dutch.

In her book *The Rise of Women’s Rights in Curacao*, Rodriguez (2015) provides much information on general, social, and economic characteristics of Curaçao, the socio-economic and historical view of the Curaçaoan society and its women, and various frameworks of women’s human rights on local and international levels. She engages with NGOs, executives, and international laws on improving rights for women and gender relations. Rodriguez (2015) asserts that “the lack of (extensive) socio-historical sources on women and gender-relations in the colony of Curaçao makes any assessment on the position of women quite difficult” (46). This remains the same for Sint Maarten. In visiting the Jubilee Library in Sint Maarten, nothing could be found regarding women’s issues, rights, and gender relations in Sint Maarten, the

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29 This is the only library on the Dutch side of the island. Information on women and gender relations in Sint Maarten is important to be able to access how the current gender issues of the region have developed.
former Netherlands Antilles, or the Dutch Caribbean region. If there are sources lacking on and about women, we can assume little or nothing would be found on Black girls, which furthers the importance of this work. My research on Afro-Caribbean girlhood that continues to engage with original participants can set the foundation for further research and discourse on the life course of Afro-Caribbean girls who become women and adults.

**Literature Review**

Research about Afro-Caribbean girls’ experiences are based in the Anglophone Caribbean and tends to focus on violence (Muturi & Donald 2006), school exclusion (Demie 2019), and caricaturing the girls as barrel children\(^3\) (Crawford-Brown 1999). However, there are a few Afro-Caribbean girlhood scholars, like Cobbett (2013) and McKenzie (1986), who have produced research about girls and their education, gender, and sexuality. Cobbett (2013) puts into perspective three broad types of gender performances used by the students themselves to “other” girls who did not conform to normative ways of “doing girl”: “beauties,” “geeks,” and “men-john” (251-252). In her study, Cobbett (2013) describes the ways in which the girls use these names to describe other girls, themselves and what I theorize as how they narrate, navigate, and negotiate these gender performances in school. Because education is a large part of many girls’ childhoods in the Caribbean, understanding the different experiences within an educational context is important in how the girls understand themselves. Cobbett (2013) also finds a correlation between the type of school and social class the students in her study belong to. In contrast to Cobbett (2013), McKenzie’s (1986) purpose was to record the girlhood memories from adult women *about* their educational experiences to better understand the difficulty they faced.

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\(^3\) Defined by Crawford-Brown (1999) as children who are left behind by their parents in the migration process so that the parents can make more money and send back to their family in the home country.
had in accessing opportunities and seeing what programs they would be able to access now, evidence that girlhood experiences affect and inform womanhood experiences. In my research I am able to pull from these cultural and contextual studies on Caribbean girlhood. I apply my framework to expand beyond the school experience and to be more creative by exploring how the girls experience transitions and the inclusion of research participant media to explore how they engage with social media as a digital space to help them navigate transitions.

Within life course theory, there is a heavy emphasis on chronological age as a determining factor for various transitions, but they also make a distinct difference between biological age, psychological age, and social age. When I examined the literature on life course theory scholars focused on age as a condition while also acknowledging that “massive cultural and social changes…raise new challenges, often resulting in a reworking of the character of the life course” (Mortimer & Moen 2016, 111). Life course theory proposes the following:

that each person experiences a number of transitions in roles and statuses across the life course. Many transitions relate to family life: marriages, births, divorces, remarriages, deaths. Each transition changes family statuses and roles and typically involves exits and entrances of family members. (Hutchinson 2011, 1587)

The theory lays out the major transitions in life, but does not consider other transitions such as moving, various educational graduations, being in the work force, or that the transitions listed above in life course theory do not have to happen in a specific order. Life course theorists have long looked at the various periods of childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, adulthood, and old age. For example, in Erik Erikson’s (1950) Childhood and Society he first developed and introduced the eight stages of psychosocial development of the life span. The sixth and seventh

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31 There are other more recent studies where other Afro-Caribbean girlhood scholars focus on historical childhood, specifically in Jamaica, in various time periods as in Roper (2017 & 2019). The discourse on girlhood in education is usually in comparison to boys in the Caribbean and as such, little remains known of “girls’ qualitative experiences of school” (Cobbett 2013, 251).
stage of his psychosocial development theory was the early and middle adulthood period characterized by 20-44 years of age and 45-64 years of age, respectively. Erikson attributed the virtue of love to be achieved during the early adulthood stage and the virtue of care to be achieved during the middle adulthood stage after successfully overcoming conflicts. This has since been updated to the sixth stage being the young adulthood stage characterized by intimacy versus isolation between the ages of 19-40. As a psychologist, Erikson focused on and characterized the transitions during the life course in various ways but did not take into account how the structures of these transitions can change throughout different cultures and geographic locations, as his work was focused on European and American thought.

According to Mortimer and Moen (2016) “the American Sociological Association, the Section on Children and Youth, examines childhood and the transition to adulthood” (111) however, the complexity of this transition has yet to be given a name. In the gendered and racialized global society in which we live, it is important to examine how transitions from childhood to adulthood for girls, boys, trans, and nonbinary children are affected and influenced. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2023), the literal definition of the term transition is defined as the process or period of changing from one state or condition to another. In this research I explore the usefulness of transitions as a figurative, and metaphorical concept between girlhood and woman/adulthood. British geographer Gill Valentine (2003) acknowledges that “the life course is no longer organised around employment history with the consequence that the possible pathways young people can follow after school are becoming more diversified” (40). The uncertainties of the transitional period from childhood to adulthood can leave young people vulnerable to becoming further marginalized as Allatt (1997) argues that vulnerability is implicit in transitions.
While some of this, such as love and care being virtues in young adulthood and life course transitions no longer being seen as linear, is applicable, girlhood scholars point to a more complicated and nuanced understanding of Black girls and their transitions since they are not viewed as being girls or women. This means that analyzing Black girls’ lives and their girlhood transitions with the above theories cannot be fully applied since it remains that there is still a lot that we do not know and more that needs to be investigated. As such, the following section describes the methods I have used to explore whether for Afro-Caribbean girls, who have grown up in the island of Sint Maarten, there is a transitional period between girlhood and womanhood/adulthood that is distinct from girlhood and distinct from womanhood/adulthood.

Methods: A Different Approach to Afro-Caribbean Girlhood and Womanhood Knowledge

From December 2022 to February 2023, I returned to Sint Maarten and interviewed Aimee (20), Brittany (20), Kianna (19), Nirvana (20), and Zola (19) about the changes that have happened in their lives since we met for the first iteration of this girlhood research in summer 2019, and to determine whether they have experienced a transitional period from girlhood to womanhood/adulthood. In thinking about the current stage of my life as a graduate student, I became interested in transitions. I thought about how there are ways that I feel like an adult, yet in other ways I am occupying this liminal space where I do not feel like an adult. This thinking has led me to wonder about what the girls have been up to within the past 4 years and what influences the changes they experience. I also wondered whether they feel like they have left girlhood behind or how they see themselves navigating womanhood/adulthood.

The Process
I conducted two sets of semi-structured in-depth interviews. Some interviews were held in-person, and some were held via Zoom, due to the girls either not being on the island during school break, or having to leave to go back to school after winter break. This chapter discusses the first set of interviews, which answer two of my three research questions. The next chapter uses the second set of interviews to answer the third research question. The interviews conducted via Zoom were video and audio recorded, while the in-person interviews were primarily audio recorded due to technological difficulties with my digital camera. The first set of interviews averaged one hour in duration and all the in-person interviews were held at a coffee lounge. The frameworks brought to bear on the data combined elements of a transnational Black feminist framework, Caribbean feminist theorizing, and sociological life course theory.

Evans-Winters (2019) criticizes the scientific research space as historically created and conceptualized by white men and using a white-centric lens. As such, “Black women seek to question, understand, and challenge, via the formal inquiry process, contemporary social injustice, like the imposition of deficit-thinking, white supremacy, and racialized gender bias in society as well as the research process itself” (Evans-Winters 2019, 15). As a Caribbean-born, American-raised Black woman, in this research I must consider the ways in which the processes and conditions under which knowledge has been created in the Caribbean serve as examples of “hegemonic ideologies masquerading as objective research” (Kempadoo and DeShong 2021, 2).

In re-engaging with the girls, I follow up with some of the questions asked in the initial research study. Small and Calarco (2022) define the follow-up as the “extent to which the research collected data to answer questions that arose during the data-collection process itself. Following up is not just a feature of interviews; it plays a role in ethnographies as well, and it in fact can describe an orientation to the entire data-collection process, representing a foundation of
true scientific discovery” (99). I chose qualitative interviews as a way of collecting data that is
grounded in Black girlhood studies, which uses audio interviews and video recording of
interviews as ways of tracing reliability. Historically, feminists in the Dutch West Indies have
relied on videotaping their interviews with women as a method to create an archive for oral
traditions (Cuales 1998). This is an alternative way to be able to physically remember the stories
of these girls. Irma McClaurian (2001) discusses Black feminist decolonizing and the importance
of creating innovative qualitative methodologies that do not reinstate a Eurocentric center.

I am dedicated to my work in creating knowledge with and of the lives of Afro-Caribbean
girls. I want to share their stories as a witness as not only a Black woman, but one whose
Caribbean girlhood was involuntarily limited. I can imagine my own transnational girlhood
being different by listening to and recording their lived experiences with an agenda to amplify
their voices for the people who act like they are invisible and try to refuse to see and honor them.
In examining how Black girls narrate, navigate, and negotiate not only their girlhood experiences
but the transition from girlhood to adulthood, my transnational Black girlhood feminist
framework allows me to focus on them as agentic beings in the same ways that Brown (2009),
Evans-Winters (2019), Hill (2018), and Sharpe (2016) do. In the spirit of transitions, I also view
this research project as transitioning along with the girls who are the focus of this study, in that I
intend to continue this study post-dissertation, transitioning it into a study that presents multiple
levels of transitions in girlhood, between girlhood and womanhood and adulthood. I am hopeful
that I will see a through line from girlhood to womanhood/adulthood and how Afro-Caribbean
girls/women navigate their socially constructed racialized, gendered, and sexualized worlds.

In the field of sociology, how many research participants is “enough” has been contested.
The sample population goal at the first iteration of this research was 20 girls. Through the
sampling process I ended the project interviewing nine girls who provided rich, thick
descriptions (some of which I will re-engage) of how they navigated, narrated, and negotiated
their girlhood. The nature of the second iteration of the project calls for interviewing and
reengaging with the original population sample as opposed to recruiting more participants. I
reached out to the girls via email, their social media accounts, and sent consent forms (Appendix
B). Qualitative and mixed methods sociologists Mario Small and Jessica Calarco’s (2022)
research focuses on how to identify and evaluate quality in qualitative field research. Small and
Calarco (2022) argue that exposure rather than numbers is more important in qualitative
research. Exposure refers to the amount of time one spends with their respondents, whether it is
in the field or interviews (Small & Calarco 2022). As such, though my population sample is
small in comparison to other research projects, the nature of my research inquiries required that I
re-engage with my original population sample, and I was conscious about staying in contact with
as many of the girls as possible after the first iteration of the project ended in August 2019.

From a Black feminist perspective, Christina Sharpe’s (2016) conceptual methodology of
Black annotation and redaction demands that we read and see something in excess of what is
being shown. In other words, there are certain aspects of the Black girl experience that can get
lost in numbers as opposed to the fullness of the context in which their experiences are being
heard. For example...

Evans-Winters (2019) contends that “the human experience is dynamic and so should be
our analyses in telling/writing tales of it” (2). I present the girls' voices as they are. I transcribed
the audio recordings so that the girls’ accents are captured and will not change the structure and
syntax of the sentences to make it easier for others to read the first time through. This is what
French Caribbean novelist Maryse Condé (1998) refers to as a way of deconstructing the
language of power. There is a history within the Caribbean, particularly the Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean, where writers have used the languages of the region as a tool to “liberate their language from English hegemony” (Condé 1998, 104). Though this is a way of trying to stay true to the girls’ voices, I understand that as Evans-Winters (2019) writes, my worldview colors “how [I] interpret data or what [I] see, hear, touch, smell, and taste” (2). The interviews were interpreted using a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework and Caribbean feminisms. The data was analyzed using qualitative data analysis and abduction.

**Data Analysis and Findings: Transitions of Afro-Caribbean Girlhood**

In developing the idea of transitions of Afro-Caribbean girlhood, I took into consideration the literal dictionary definition of the term transitions. However, I was also interested in the ways in which the usefulness of transitions exists as figurative and metaphorical concepts. This allows room to examine transitions within our life course and the spatio-temporal to think through what it means to exist, move across and within time/space paradigms and socially constructed boundaries. As such, my first and second research questions were: 1) Is there a period the girls/women describe between girlhood and woman/adulthood that is different from girlhood and different from woman/adulthood? 2) If so, how do the girls define (narrate/navigate/negotiate) this transitional period? If not, when do the girls recognize that they have entered adulthood? Findings show that overall, there is a transitional period that is distinct from girlhood and distinct from womanhood and adulthood, but certain factors may determine if there is a distinct transitional period and how that period is described. Here I would like to mention that I combined both woman/adulthoods initially because I did not want to assume that the girls in fact identified as women. Nirvana specifically mentioned that womanhood and
adulthood were two distinct hoods. The girls had much to say about their experiences and transitions to womanhood.

In this research, the girls find themselves navigating a liminal space during the transitional period between girlhood and womanhood/adulthood. This period is characterized by two overarching themes that I discuss further below. The first overarching theme is “it’s complicated,” with several contributing elements: temporality, nonlinearity, and support. The second overarching theme is claiming their agency, with the contributing elements “I can do what I want” and seeing the future with liminality. This project operates from the idea that the participants can transition from and with girlhood into their womanhood and adulthood. Transitions within the context of this dissertation are not static or linear, but a process that can change as micro-level interactions and meso- and macro-level institutions affect their lived experiences. It is also important to note the following themes found in the data are not exclusive of each other and there will be overlaps of the themes throughout the data and analysis.

“*It's Complicated*”

When we find ourselves not able to give a clear answer in explaining how we experience a certain part of lives, we may feel like we are doing it wrong because society has their own expectations of how we should be living our lives and where we should be at a specific time in our lives according to our age. However, life is complicated and so are the transitions we navigate. For the girls, the transitional period between girlhood and womanhood/adulthood is complicated. Aimee, Kianna, Nirvana, and Zola agreed that they experienced and are still experiencing a transition that is different from girlhood and different from womanhood and adulthood, whereas Brittany did not notice a distinct difference. This period changes depending
on temporality -- that is the relationship someone has with time or moving through time particularly with regard to societal expectations of time-- its nonlinearity, and the support the girls receive from their family and friends. The following sections explain why for the girls this period is complicated.

**Temporality**

Throughout the girls’ experiences, they not only transition *from* girlhood, but they transition *with* their girlhood. The ways in which they describe their transitions though vary from how transitions are defined by life course theory which, as mentioned above, has historically been organized and socially constructed by age and with an emphasis on the (white) family. These transitions are marked by age, and if certain transitions do not happen during the expected period of time in one’s life, according to life course theory, transitions will be considered “off-time or on-time, based on social norms or shared expectations about the timing of such transitions” (Hutchinson 2011, 1589). However, for Black girls, it appears that the transition was not solely about age, but about their personal experiences and the situations they found themselves navigating and negotiating. I found that temporality is not an aspect of the girls’ lives that they find themselves hyper fixated on or one that causes them much anxiety. Aimee, Kianna, Nirvana, and Zola agreed that transitioning to womanhood/adulthood depends heavily on the situations they find themselves in and the decisions that they have to make. Yes, this is influenced by age, but also by time.

Though all the girls understand that they are legally considered adults, they do not feel as though they have reached adulthood. For example, when it comes to feeling as though she has reached adulthood, Brittany feels like she is in some ways still a teenager because she is in
school, has more free time, and hangs out with her friends. When I asked her how she thinks the transition is from girlhood to adulthood for other girls she stated:

*It depends on what you have going on in your life. So, like for me I don’t feel like it’s a big transitions, but for someone who has big changes for their life I feel like their transition, they will feel it more. For example, like if you have a child young or if you go to college and you have to work to pay the tuition, I feel like that transition will feel like more, because you have more responsibilities.*

Brittany’s understanding of transitions throughout the life course depends on the situations that you find yourself in, not based on your age, and this is similar to Collins’ (1990) concept of situatedness. A teenage girl who is 16 years old, is not legally considered an adult, but if she has a child, she would be expected to enter the transitional period between girlhood and womanhood/adulthood, much like how a girl in India who marries before the age of 18 is considered a woman or an Indian woman who is 50 who has not married is still considered a girl. Black girls in the Caribbean who experience such a transition with becoming a young parent as a teenager, were likely expected, from as early as the age of five, to do chores and domestic work as opposed to male children who are allowed to play more and have more freedom (Powell 1984). Brittany is away at college, but her transition has not been noticeable for her because luckily, she does not have to work to pay tuition. This is not particularly attributed to Brittany’s socio-economic status. Because the Dutch government covers a large portion of higher education for students, many do not have to work to pay their tuition. Any amount that is not covered by the government is paid by scholarships received or parents. However, if a student’s parents were unable to afford to pay the balance remaining, this could negatively impact the student’s chances of going off to college or completing their degree. As such, occupational or class positions of families in the Caribbean, does not fully determine the chances of a child being able to go to college, but their socially and culturally constructed resources.
Once Aimee, Kianna, and Nirvana graduated high school, Aimee attended the International Baccalaureate (IB) and received a certificate for completing the program; Kianna completed the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Education (CAPE); and Nirvana began working with her passion for cooking and baking. Aimee decided to take a year off to work before going off to university. Kianna did the same thing; she did not see a reason to rush off to university until she felt that she was ready. In stating how she felt through the process of getting her associate degree she stated

*By the time I reach to my final yeah that I know I suppose to finish graduate, I was just over it. I was like I need to hurry up and get dis ting outta da way...I didn’t want to go straight back into school. I felt like I needed a breather and then jump back into school.*

In thinking about their futures, whether they decide to go to graduate school also depends on how they make it through undergraduate school. The girls are not pressed to follow anyone else’s timelines but their own. Since the girls find themselves moving through time without any constrictions, this means that they also experience the nonlinearity of the temporal, in that they do not feel like they have to reach a goal at a specific time or age but can do it when they feel that they are ready rather than doing what is expected of them by others because of their age. As such, life course theory alone does not explain the ways in which transitions can be nonlinear, but a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework can explain why and how. Life course theory focuses on events that should happen at or by a certain age, therefore perpetuating a linear line of events. However, a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework takes into consideration the cultural and historical context in which a Black girl lives. As such, we know that events throughout the life course do not have to be linear. For example, a girl can decide that she wants to go to college and adopt a child rather than getting married after high school, getting married, and starting a family. In many ways, the girls experience various transitions within the
transitional period between girlhood and womanhood/adulthood, that allows them to almost seamlessly move back and forth from girlhood, womanhood and adulthood.

**Nonlinearity**

When I asked Nirvana if there was a period when she realized she was a woman and no longer a girl, she states:

*I does be conflicted, becoz I also undastand dat what happens now is just the beginning of what is there to come. So, like I could say I’ve been in a lot of womanly situations, but I have a lot more womanly situations to go tru in life. So, I don’t know. I don’t know if I could give a answer clear fa dah one. Cos yuh a girl one minute den yuh a woman the next, in a sense. You can go back and fort. You go tru sometin, then...woman.*

With this statement, Nirvana does not see the transitional period between girlhood and womanhood and adulthood as a linear process, which is contrary to life course theory. A transnational Black girlhood feminist framework views the transitional period as a process that begins and is always in process as it depends on the different lived experiences, such as working, taking care of younger siblings or older parents, attending college, or having a child young, that one has that can make them fluctuate between transitions or go through various transitions between a period. For example, returning to Brittany’s statement of a girl having more responsibilities and the possibility of experiencing a tough transition period to womanhood/adulthood by having a baby as a young teenager, the girl may still be in school and receiving support from her family, so though she may be in a “womanly situation” by being a mother, she can still experience girlhood-like situations by hanging out with her friends from school, completing her studies, and receiving different forms of support from her family.

For Kianna, the changes that happen during the transition from girlhood to womanhood involves your “*mindset, looks, [and] everything changes.*” She does not
believe that this transition was hard for her because she has the support of her parents, coworkers, and friends who play a role; she emphatically believes she learns different things from different people. Kianna describes this as an “exchange of experiences.”

Kianna believes that this transition for other girls:

Could be easy and it could be hard because some girls don’t have their parents or people to guide them through the period of transition.

I find that the girls follow their own timeline with no parameters from others. However, how difficult they find the transitional period depends on whether and what kinds of support they receive from their parents/family, not on what the girls decide for themselves.

When it came to how the girls thought other girls experienced transitions from girlhood to womanhood and adulthood, they all agreed that it depended on their situations and experiences, not age. There is not a universal event, such as starting your menstrual period, that automatically makes a girl a woman and this, too, also happens at different ages. The girls conceptualize adulthood as a time and space where you have more responsibilities, make your own decisions, are financially independent, live on your own, and have experienced situations that have made you stronger as a person. However, adulthood can be reached at different points in time. For example, you can live with your parents, but be financially independent or live on your own, but still depend financially on your parents. As such, these findings show that though the girls are legally considered adults, they know that they are responsible for themselves but they do not have responsibilities yet as far as having to pay rent or other bills because they either live with their parents, are away at college, and still receiving some form of financial support. This also shows that there is not a specific age in which they become financially responsible for themselves and move out to live on their own. Valentine (2003) asserts that if age is conceptualized as a performative process rather than a biological process, we can understand
how certain actions a child takes can make them appear to be more mature or more childish. As such, this helps serve as an explanation as to how different responsibilities a child has can blur the boundaries of a child and an adult. Valentine (2003) argues:

…while we may only be legally defined as children for a set period of our lives—0–18—our childhoods are present in all of us. Our experiences as children, and memories of this period, can shape who we become. Children’s geographies should not therefore just be about the lives of those defined by a particular age. Rather than conceptualising childhood as a fixed or static category that we grow out of, it is important instead to understand childhood as a process that shapes us throughout the life course. (39)

For example, this helps us understand why Nirvana believes that she has been in womanly situations, but that does not mean that she has reached adulthood, which speaks again to the nonlinearity of womanhood and adulthood.

During the interviews I asked the girls two similar questions: how would you describe adulthood? How would you describe womanhood? Immediately after Nirvana provided the description of adulthood, she wanted to describe womanhood as well because she viewed them as similar, yet different. Nirvana states:

*Um, womanhood now, I still feel like I have to touch on dah cos das a little different than adulthood. Womanhood, um, you don’t have to be an adult to be a woman, ya know? Like, women go through adult situations at a young age. So, dah why I don’t tink I would classify it as the same but still very simila. Cos women go through adult situations, but you don’t have to be an adult to go tru—I-I don’t know. OK…um, So, womanhood…that’s also a nice question. I like questions that does make me tink because forreal, Um, it’s really on the keep ya head on ting. You will take on a lot being a woman regardless of your age or what your circumstance is. Keep ya head up cuz it ain’t easy. So really it go hand in hand. Cuz as a woman you go tru different-what is the word I’m looking for? You have to remain focus. Gotta remain focus.*

In describing the transition from girlhood to womanhood Nirvana also states:

*I feel like the only transitions are the situations you’re in. I feel like your mindset can remain the same if it wasn’t fa the situation. So, there’s a transition, but it depends on what you go tru and how you decide to build your own character.*
Life course theory places a heavy emphasis on chronological age as a determining factor for various transitions, but a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework would require that you pay deep attention to Black girls Nirvana specifically states that the situations you find yourself in at your chronological age can advance your social and psychological age through an emotional and mental process. To this point, Aimee explained how in comparison to our interview in 2019, she is much more mature now, and she was referencing her psychological age.

Unlike Nirvana, Aimee believes that adulthood and womanhood are essentially the same.

_Hm. Okay, let me define them first and then that will help me. I think, um, I think adulthood is taking on responsibilities, but taking on responsibilities and making decisions on your own. So, at this point you don’t have to be independent but you’re somewhat independent. You technically do not have to ask for permission. This is your decision and you’re responsible for your own well-being. I think adulthood and womanhood is the same. Cuz I’m gonna describe womanhood being literally finding your true self. Getting rid of toxic relationships, toxic friendships, anything toxic, you know, that is hindering you from growing as a woman, doing the things you love and prioritizing yourself. So, I think that’s important for me as a woman, in growing still as a woman and I think I would stick with that til the rest of my life. I don’t think there’s any specific age where it’s like okay, I’m just going to stop thinking about this. I think I always need to prioritize myself. I always need to don’t entertain any toxic people, you know, don’t let them into your life or your personal life, at least, you know. Always continue to mature. And I think that also correlates to being an adult, you know, going through adulthood._

For the girls, I am learning that adulthood is not synonymous with womanhood. The girls have described adulthood as coming with more responsibilities, less time, more personal decision making, and accountability. Though both adulthood and womanhood come with being responsible for yourself, adulthood is more a place that is reached due to external factors such as working, school, and making your own appointments—Kianna still wants and asks her mom to make her doctor and dental appointments—and womanhood is reached due to more internal factors such as emotions, maturity, self-reflection, self-growth, and prioritizing yourself. I have determined that from the girls’
conceptualization of both womanhood and adulthood, they become an adult by the virtue of the things that they do based on a societal construction of what adulthood is; as an adult they should work, pay bills, and make their own appointments. Whereas, they view womanhood as self-reflexive and less about the externality and more about the affective. It seems to be more of an internal clock rather than an external clock influenced by white and western time. The girls have described womanhood and adulthood as similar but also distinctly different. Either way, for the girls, the transitional period between girlhood and womanhood/adulthood has been positively influenced by the support they continue to receive from their family and friends.

**Support**

Aimee, Brittany, and Zola are all away at college. They are all attending a PWI which has been an adjustment, being from an island that is predominately Black and Brown. Kianna and Nirvana are both currently in Sint Maarten. Zola and Kianna have described the transition from girlhood to adulthood as smooth. Kianna stated specifically that “it is smooth…for now.” Kianna has started working as she waits to go off to college in fall 2023. She lives with her parents, and states that she has not experienced any significant changes in general. Brittany and Zola’s parents traveled with them to help them get adjusted to their first year being away at college. Brittany feels like not much has changed other than her physical location. She is very good friends with Zola, so that helps with the adjustment. Brittany stated that moving locations was easy, it was a smooth transition, and she feels like she has more responsibilities knowing that her parents are not there to wake her up for class and she can decide to go out without having to ask or worry about being back at her dorm at a specific time.
Fortunately, Brittany does not have to work a job while in college to support herself because she receives assistance from her parents; however, she is looking to find part-time work because of how much free time she feels that she has. Similarly, Zola said some girls definitely have it hard transitioning from girlhood to adulthood. In asking what makes it hard for them, she states:

*I think parents just- when you reach 18, they just let go and they don’t stay focused on their child’s well-being.*

She does not feel like that should be the case and regardless of age, parents should help their children and states “parenthood -- parenting is forever.”

I asked the girls if there was a time when they realized that they were no longer a girl, but a woman or adult. Their answers varied, but they all had a specific experience that made them come to this realization. Brittany states

*mmmmmmmm...probably when my parents left. When they came with me to Canada, and I had to go back to my room by myself. OK, this is real life.*

One of the distinctions between girlhood and adulthood is that when you are a child, someone else is responsible for you and you are usually not alone. As an adult, you are expected to be responsible for yourself and the decisions that you make. Kianna stated that the transition from girlhood to adulthood has been “smooth…for now, until I go [to college].” She graduated with a CAPE associate degree in accounting just like Zola. This was a stressful process, and she knows the stress will return when she goes away to college. Kianna realized she was an adult when she started working two months prior to our first interview for this project and she had to ask herself, “Wow, is this life? This is adulthood? Nmmm mmm.” In a way, Kianna feels like she is *experiencing* adulthood, but she has not quite *reached* adulthood. She states:
Not really. I still…ya know, I still around my parents a lot. So, I feel like once I-
finally be on my own, I really goin’ to know the tru meanin’ of adulthood. I just
getting’ a little taste now.

The continued support from her parents allows her to focus more on herself, and without this
support the adulthood that she has experienced thus far may have been more challenging than
she has already described. In Caribbean households, it is customary for children to continue to
live at home after the age of 18 and are not usually required to pay their parents rent, which is
not customary in most Western households. Like Kianna, Zola describes her transition from
girlhood to adulthood as “seamless.” Knowing that her parents are always there, and she never
has to feel like she is alone, and she can ask them for both monetary and emotional assistance.
An example that she gave was that children will not go to their Caribbean parents to talk about
certain topics like sex, but her parents have created the kind of relationship where she can go to
them to discuss such a topic, which can be considered taboo among Afro-Caribbean families.
Zola takes pride in being able to have parents who are open and willing to talk with her and hold
her accountable.

Claiming Their Agency

The second overarching theme of the findings is the girls claiming their agency. As
legally considered adults due to being over the age of 18, the girls have described the ways in
which they navigate this period between girlhood and womanhood/adulthood as one where they
are able to claim and exercise their agency. This aligns with and emphasizes the importance of
the sixth tenet/principle of my transnational Black girlhood feminist framework where it requires
that we focus on Black girls as agentic beings. The contributing thematic elements to the girls
claiming their agency are “I can do what I want” and seeing their future in liminality.

“I Can do What I Want”
When I asked Zola if she would consider herself a girl, a woman, or something else, she stated:

*hesitantly* Probably a girrrrrll-or. What’s like- I don’t know what is considered a girl and like a woman?

I told her that this was really a great question. There are various ways in which we have come to determine who is a woman and who is a girl. We tend to separate the two by age, but as the girls have articulated, it depends on the individual experience. Kianna stated that for other girls

*Once you get a taste of that taste of freedom, some girls does go crazy.*

With this sentiment, Kianna understood that she would have more freedom once she turned 18, but she also knew that with freedom came more responsibilities and that she had to make decisions that were in her best interest which meant not engaging in behavior that would propel her into adulthood earlier than she wanted. Similarly, Zola does not feel like she has reached adulthood and believes she will feel like she has reached adulthood once she receives her bachelor’s degree and her parents tell her that she must now fend for herself, especially financially. For her, being an adult is as she states

*Knowing I can do what I want.*

Though financial responsibility and living away from parents would mark a new stage for all genders, in the Caribbean specifically, this transition is highlighted because girls are taught to be subordinate when it comes to the household, but to also be financially independent of men.

Zola states that even as a child and teenager she was given a lot of freedom by her parents, but the difference now is that instead of having to ask for permission, she can just tell them what she is going to do. And like Brittany, Zola stated that she realized she was an adult once she moved away and had to do everything on her own like figure out the Canadian bus system and go grocery shopping. She feels like her parents prepared her for being an adult, but
she was not prepared for how she has found the cost of everything to be expensive. Luckily, her parents send her a monthly allowance and she finds that she can save the majority of the money. However, unlike Brittany and Zola, Nirvana and Aimee do not consider their transition into adulthood to be as positive.

Nirvana defines adulthood by stating:

'It’s really a yin and yang affeck. Like wit out the bad, you could neva have good. So, dah kinna jus like helps with the whole “life goes on” mindset as well when it comes to adulthood. Like there’s more to what yor’re going tru or your current situation whetha it’s good or bad. Betta days will come. An it not gone be easy. Like- cuh das the next ting I’ve learned too. We does make it seem like life so haahd, but nobody said life wuh gone be easy. Like, NOBODY, said that. So yeh, it not gone be easy.

For Nirvana, there was a serious incident that happened involving law enforcement in Sint Maarten that made her realize, she is officially an adult. When she was arrested, she knew that the authorities could not call up her parents to come get her. The expectations were different, and she would have to be the one responsible for her actions. She said that being an adult is hard and it comes with a lot of pressure because we now must take accountability for ourselves and no one else. She states:

_I don’t tink dere’s anyting dah could have prepared me fa adulthood. Like even now, what I feel I know, I still feel like I don’t know nuttin. Like, it’s really as it come._

This was like Aimee’s description of adulthood. She finds adulthood to be rather challenging and a very emotional period with life’s adjustments and changes. Aimee states that adulthood is

_Taking on responsibilities. But taking on responsibilities and making decisions on your own._

The girls know that they can call their parents, siblings, and friends to receive guidance on what they should do, but they also understand that they are the ones who ultimately must make the
final decision, whatever it may be. As such, this period is also marked by figuring out and imagining their future lives with liminality.

**Seeing the Future with Liminality**

The concept of traditional liminality from the field of cultural anthropology is a state of transition between one stage and the next, especially between major stages in one’s life or during a rite of passage and refers to an in-between period usually marked with uncertainty (Turner 1969). Afro-Caribbean philosopher Sylvia Wynter (1984) defines liminality as

[It is the] experience [of] a structural contradiction between [one’s] lived experience and the grammar of representation which generate the mode of reality by prescribing the parameters of collective behaviors that dynamically bring that “reality” into being. The liminal frame of reference therefore, unlike the normative, can provide . . . the outer view from which perspective the grammars of regularities of boundary and structure-maintaining discourses are perceivable. (39)

What I am learning from the girls is confirmation that liminality for them is a period marked with both uncertainty and certainty, and that this is a more applicable concept as opposed to life course theory. The girls find themselves certain about various aspects of their futures, while uncertain about other aspects. Wynter is saying that liminality is the “structural condition of marginality that offers the possibility of a multiple and different view of reality” (quoted in Di Mino 2021, 249). During this transitional period, the girls are able to create their own realities despite what society has predetermined for them. Wynter’s analysis means that we as humans have historically and collectively behaved in the ways that we have been socialized. We are socially constructed to be human, and we act as if it is the only way to be, and the only reality we are engaging. We need to move away from the frame of normality and enact liminality where we can move outside of this frame of being. Black girls are constantly told how to be, how to act, how to move, how to talk, and how to look. There is the double consciousness (Du Bois 2008)
that Black girls navigate in ways that white girls do not. Black girls step outside of what is considered normative for them and move outside the preconceived notion of their frame of being. “The liminal position is thus situated so that it marks the lives of those whose experiences are in contradiction with that dominant group” (Paquette 2020, 177).

The girls believed that their parents did their best in preparing them for adulthood. They supported what the girls wanted and desired for themselves, rather than imposing what they wanted the girls to do with their lives. They were not pushed into any one direction. It has been evident through the findings that the girls have not ascribed to whiteness of time and space (Cooper 2019: McKittrick 2006), which could be due to living in a predominately Black space/place, but are on their own time without any guilt, on their own accord. A transnational Black girlhood feminist framework explains how space, place, and time can be analyzed by also exploring the context in which the girls live, and how space, place, and time are conceptualized outside of the global north to influence how these are experienced by the girls. These Black girls are living in their own freedom and truth while navigating heteronormative ideologies imposed from white spaces and places. After Aimee received a certificate and Kianna her associate degree, they both took a year off of school to work. Nirvana is working while she figures out her own timeline for her goals and Kianna is going to Holland for college in fall 2023. Brittany and Zola are in Canada at school, but Brittany specifically stated that she wants to take a gap year after receiving her bachelor’s to focus on herself and travel. None of the girls feel like they are pressed for time or should be living according to a timeline that was created to build white families.
Black feminist geographer Katherine McKittrick (2006) contends that time and space are social constructs, as is age according to life course theory. In understanding how time and space operate in the lives of Afro-Caribbean girls through the transitions within their life course, they need to be analyzed from the first and sixth tenets/guiding principles from a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework which are intersectionality and paying attention to borders and boundaries. Black feminist Britney Cooper in her Ted Talk,32 “The Racial Politics of Time,” makes it clear that history shows us that time is a social construct that has been stolen from people of color, as is McKittrick’s (2006) contention about space. Cooper argues that if time has a race, it would be white and as such the transition of time throughout the formation of the US has been to benefit white people. If time is white and controlled by white people, so is space. Though Cooper and McKittrick make great points, they are operating from an assessment of space and time in predominately white spaces. A transnational Black girlhood feminist framework would require the cultural and historical contexts of the geographical space specific to the participants. McKittrick, in her seminal text, Demonic Grounds (2006) writes about the ways in which space never just is which is also connected to Wynter’s definition of liminality.

On liminality, the ritual process, and life course theory, cultural anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) states that the transition between one stage to another is usually a period marked by uncertainty and because of this uncertainty which leads to vulnerability, the girls are much more susceptible to being further oppressed (Allatt 1997). I argue that both during the girls’ childhood and the current liminal space they occupy has been filled with clear certainty about who they are and what they want for their lives, especially regarding their education, careers, and

future families. This certainty has been influenced by the many more possibilities and pathways they have after high school (Valentine 2003) as well as using social media to find affirmations and advice from people who look like them to help keep them on the path they have chosen and are choosing. They no longer must settle for the option to find a suitor, get married, have children, and take care of their families all while putting themselves last. Even the girls who want a marriage and children for their futures are focused on themselves right now and intentionally practicing self-care and self-love. In reading the letter that she wrote in 2019 to herself in 2022, Zola had written to her future self, asking if she had a boyfriend yet. Even though Zola is in a long-distance romantic relationship and Aimee and her boyfriend live together, the girls are still in college and focused on themselves first and foremost.

Conclusion

In this research study, I explored 1) whether for Afro-Caribbean girls there is a transitional period between girlhood and womanhood/adulthood. 2) If so, how do the girls narrate, navigate, and negotiate this transitional period. If not, how do the girls know they have reached womanhood/adulthood. I used a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework that consisted of six tenets/guiding principles: intersectionality, reflexivity, paying deep attention to Black women and girls, focusing on Black girls as agentic beings, Black girl solidarity building, and paying attention to borders and boundaries, to analyze the data. The findings show that the girls have defined a transitional period between girlhood and womanhood/adulthood and it consists of the following themes: it’s complicated, temporal, nonlinear, and is a period characterized by support. They also
have been able to claim their agency, do what they want, and plan for their future with liminality.

Nirvana stated that the transitional period between girlhood and womanhood and adulthood consists of multiple transitions and as I have stated, as well as other scholars like Sonia Cuales (1989), we can return to our past through our memories. We can also adjust as we see fit because we are in control of ourselves. The girls stated that their childhoods were fun, loving, activity-filled, and good. Zola stated that one of the things she liked/likes the most about being a girl is that we can do anything men can do. The girls believed that their parents did their best in preparing them for adulthood and not a specific destination, but more so what the girls desired. They were not pushed into any one direction. Although patriarchal traditions are upheld in the Caribbean, it still remains a matrifocal society. The girls still navigate patriarchal traditions within a heteronormative society in Sint Maarten. Barriteau’s (year) concept of Caribbean gender systems asserts that in the Caribbean there are both ideological and material dimensions of gender where there is an expectation that women should conform to responsibilities of caring only for and in the home which in reality has never been the case in the Caribbean. Women are the one’s supporting the family financially as well as emotionally. Families raise girls to be subordinate when it comes to the household but to also be financially independent of men. Even though the girls in this study all come from two parent households in theory, an assumption cannot be made as to the roles each parent plays.

It has been evident through the findings that the girls have not ascribed to whiteness of time and space (Cooper 2019: McKittrick 2006). They are on their own time without any guilt, on their own accord, and this aligns with the tenets/guiding principles
of intersectionality and paying attention to borders and boundaries in the transnational Black girlhood feminist framework. Mortimer and Moen (2016) have stated that for some young adults, the transition to adulthood can be delayed. Though this delay in transition can occur for a plethora of reasons, I argue that rather than a delay, it is a part of the process of the transitional period, and the transnational Black girlhood feminist framework, which asserts that girlhood transitions are not a linear process. The girls are still able to experience aspects of adulthood, as expressed by Kianna when she said that she has experienced just a little taste of adulthood. Arnett (2015) created three criteria for adulthood: responsibility of self, independent decisions, and financial independence. Aimee specifically described adulthood as being responsible for yourself, but also making decisions for yourself. Each participant mentioned that being an adult comes with more responsibilities. The girls in this study receive some kind of monetary assistance from their parents whether it is receiving cash monthly or still living with parents and not having to pay rent. The findings show that the girls agree that these are the major criteria for adulthood. None of the girls feel as if they have fully reached adulthood and this is due in part to three being in college and receiving assistance from parents, and two still living at home with their parents.

The key distinguishing features of Arnett’s concept of emerging adulthood include identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities and optimism. The findings show that the girls are exploring their identities, with Brittany specifically describing adulthood as an exploration and Kianna saying that it is an experience. However, the concept of emerging adulthood for the girls is not distinguished by instability. The girls are all working towards their goals and have consistent support from their family and friends. None of
the girls described this period as unstable; in fact, the support they receive helps to stabilize this period. The girls would agree that this period is marked with self-focus. There is certainly a feeling of in-betweenness, as none of the girls feel as though they have reached adulthood, yet. Lastly, this period for the girls is filled with endless possibilities and they are definitely optimistic about their futures. Black girl magic at its finest.
Chapter Four

A Soft Girl Era, Period:

Black Girls in Digital Space

Introduction

In this chapter I examine whether Afro-Caribbean girls use social media as a way to help navigate the transitional period between girlhood and womanhood/adulthood. I found that the girls experienced a transitional period between girlhood and womanhood/adulthood. As with any transition, my interview participants described this period as complicated in that they have to take into consideration multiple experiences such as starting a new job, changes in their relationships, learning more about themselves, and that even though they have matured and have more responsibilities they do not yet feel like an adult, but as the girls grapple with the complexity of this period, they shared that this complication has been made easier with the support from their family and friends. In this chapter I expound on one of the specific research questions from the larger project: Do the girls engage with social media as a way to help navigate this transitional period? If so, in what ways? If not, are there alternative methods that the girls utilize to help them navigate this period? Herein I use the transnational Black girlhood feminist framework I developed in the larger project, to focus on and analyze research participant media as a method, to answer these research questions.

This is the third part of a larger project in which I examined whether there was a transition period between girlhood and womanhood/adulthood. For the larger project I interviewed five Afro-Caribbean girls, Aimee, Brittany, Kianna, Nirvana, and Zola, from the island of Sint Maarten, ages 19 and 20, using in-depth open-ended questions as well as research

33 In the first iteration of this research study, I found that social media is an important part of the girls’ social worlds.
34 Pseudonyms chosen by participants in first iteration of research in summer 2019.
participant media. Sociologists like Wendy Luttrell (2012) and Marisol Clark-Ibanez (2004) have used research participant photography and photo elicitation as a method of data collection, but I extend this to other forms of media beyond photography, such as videos, poems, music, and images from the internet. I am calling this method research participant media. Research participant media is a method used to collect data where a prompt is provided for the participants, and they select different kinds of media that they feel answer the prompt.

Overall, the research participant media findings reveal that the girls engage with social media as an act of self and community care through love and self-affirmations to help them create a life characterized by a “soft girl era.” The primary themes of the media are self-care, self-affirmations, and love. In this chapter I provide a brief theoretical framework and literature review on digital sociology, digital feminisms, social media, and radical self-care. This is followed by a description of the methods, data analysis and findings, and conclusion of the research study.

A Transnational Black Girlhood Framework

In this chapter I continue to utilize a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework that consists of six tenets/guiding principles: intersectionality, reflexivity, paying deep attention to Black women and girls cross culturally, focusing on Black girls as agentic beings, Black girl solidarity building, and paying attention to borders and boundaries. I describe this transnational Black girlhood feminist framework as a useful theoretical framing for interpreting transitions and liminal space in the lives of Black girls throughout the global north and the so-called global south. The framework can also be used to explore other aspects of Black girlhood experiences from Black girls within and across different borders and boundaries. I use the framework in this
chapter to explain the ways in which the Black girls in this research study utilize digital space in various ways help them navigate the liminality of girlhood and womanhood/adulthood.

According to the Migration Policy Institute, approximately 9.1 million Caribbean-born people currently live outside of their countries of birth. In addition, since the beginning of the 21st century, there has been a ubiquitous use of digital technologies to connect people around the globe. These trends indicate the ways in which people travel physically and connect digitally across borders every day. In my research I have found this to be the case as the majority of girls who I interviewed physically reside in countries not of their birth -- for example, Aimee was born in New York, grew up in Sint Maarten and is currently attending school in the Netherlands; Brittany and Zola were born in Sint Maarten and are both attending school in Canada; and Nirvana was born in Guyana, grew up in Sint Maarten and has plans to move to Europe to attend university in the near future -- and all of them are globally connected through digital technologies.

The sixth tenet/guiding principle of my transnational Black girlhood feminist framework pays attention to these border and boundary crossings, and in this essay, I focus specifically on how the girls use digital space in a specific way during the transition period from girlhood to adulthood/womanhood. As the girls move within and across geographical borders, they have had to adjust to their changing environments, and it is important to consider how different parts of the girls’ identities, including their cultural identities and experiences, work together to shape and influence, and are in turn shaped and influenced by these adjustments. It is also important to pay deep attention to the ways in which, during this transition, Black girls cross culturally engage with digital media as a tool that aids them in their transitions.
**Literature Review**

In our contemporary world, engagement in digital space has become increasingly common as new applications and platforms are created and utilized for various tasks, such that it is no surprise that in a study of Afro-Caribbean girls from Sint Maarten social media is an important part of their social worlds. Many people, including the girls in the study, use social media for many reasons including entertainment, advocacy, learning, community building, and self-care. How the girls in this study navigate and negotiate this digital space requires them being intentional about the content they view, and they narrated this to me by explaining why they chose the media and content they engage.

I discuss below how the increasing use of digital technologies in the past two decades has created the newly emerged subfield of digital sociology, the importance of digital feminisms including digital Black feminisms and digital Caribbean feminisms, the limitations of social media research, and defining how care operates in this research study. Herein I engage with the work of digital sociologists and feminists, including Black and Caribbean digital feminists to show the important role that technology plays in people’s social worlds, especially those from various cultural backgrounds and geographical locations. Because I am analyzing self-selected research participant media to explore how Afro-Caribbean girls engage with social media as a digital space to navigate the transitional period between girlhood and womanhood/adulthood, it is important to include digital feminisms literature in this chapter. In using a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework in analyzing the research participant media, digital space operates as a transnational space that transcends geographical boundaries and connects the girls to knowledge which they may not have otherwise had access to, as well as to people located in other places of the world.
Digital Sociology

The increased access and utilization of digital technologies in the past two decades has been instrumental in the emergence of digital sociology as a new subfield of sociology. Because people within and across different societies and geographical spaces are using digital technologies and engaging with digital space, it has become an increasingly important part of the fabric of our social worlds. According to sociologist Deborah Lupton (2014), digital sociology is defined as:

A means by which the impact, development and use of these technologies and their incorporation into social worlds, social institutions and concepts of selfhood and embodiment may be investigated, analysed and understood. (n.p.)

Digital sociology is used to explore, access, analyze, and theorize the social impact of digital technologies for people across and within various borders and boundaries. Lupton (2014) has found that digital sociology encompasses four typologies: professional digital practice, analyses of digital technology, digital data analysis, and critical digital sociology. Though digital sociology includes the ways that sociologists themselves use digital and social media within their own work, as a Black feminist and sociologist, I engage in exploring how other people use digital technologies. As such, it is important that I engage with digital feminisms in general, and digital Black and Caribbean feminisms.

Digital Feminisms

What we now know of as digital feminisms was known by early “digital” feminists as cyberfeminism. Cyberfeminism was a term coined by Sadie Plant, director of the Cybernetic

35 Findings revealed that social media was an important part of the girls’ social worlds in initial iteration of research study.
Culture Research Unit at the University of Warwick, “to describe the work of feminists interested in theorizing, critiquing, and exploiting the Internet, cyberspace, and new-media technologies in general” (Consalvo 2002, 109). Donna Haraway (2016), in *A Cyborg Manifesto* – which was first published in 1985 – conceptualizes the part human, part machine cyborg, theorizing a future where technology proficient and politically aware women use technology to subvert systems of oppression. Haraway’s vision that cyborgs would be able to transcend differences tied to the body at that time did not consider how racial, gender, and transnational inequalities could be reproduced online, thus upholding the structures we have been called to dismantle (Daniels 2016: DeCook 2021). As such, it is important to understand where the roots of digital feminisms originated, but more important to understand the kinds of feminisms that have been used to extend its beginnings that were still centered on whiteness.

Digital feminisms introduce access to new and different ways of knowing, knowledge production, and information across space and time to people who may have otherwise not have had a means to this knowledge. Similarly, it also critiques hashtag activism and neoliberal self-promotion including by women of color passing as feminist innovation in order to single out those women of color who are more radical in their online selves (Saraswati 2021). However, it still acknowledges that there are people throughout the global north and global south who have limited access to digital technologies and tools. Digital feminisms can best be described as feminist activism that achieves their goals by utilizing digital platforms. Black and Caribbean feminists have done much work in digital feminist space and because this work focuses on Black girlhood, and specifically Afro-Caribbean girlhood transitions, I focus on these two sets of theorizing that centers Black women in digital studies rather than for its inclusion (Steele 2021).
**Digital Black Feminism**

Digital Black feminism was created as a separation from cyberfeminism discussed above to delineate from the lineage of white cyberfeminism. Digital Black feminism is defined by Black feminist Catherine Knight Steele (2021) as “a report of the cultural shift happening in Black feminist discourse and society’s relationship with technology” (8). Black women intellectuals have always existed outside of the academy and unfortunately, online platforms have been a space and place that have not taken them seriously. “Lifestyle bloggers, natural hair tutorials, online snark, and perfectly placed memes do not mark digital Black feminists as superficial or untethered to serious scholarship” (3). If anything, digital Black feminism has been able to disperse and disseminate knowledge and create dialogue among activists and lay persons.

Black queer feminist, Feminista Jones (2019), in her *Reclaiming Our Space*, asserts that Black feminist scholars, activists, and scholar-activists, have had a strong presence on social media where they have been dedicated to cultivating and maintaining spaces for not only their voice, but others to be heard. She particularly focuses on Twitter as a platform for communication for Black scholars and activists as a great call-and-response, storytelling, and dissemination of information. For example, sociologist and Black feminist Tressie McMillan Cottom, uses Twitter to communicate scholarship, as well as her opinions on topics, to broader public audiences. I follow Cottom on Instagram, and I notice that she engages with Twitter significantly more than Instagram. I gather that this could be due to the ability to tweet in conversation with someone else and follow it in a narrative/storytelling format. Beyond Steele, Jones, and Cottom, it is also important to note that before digital Black feminism was conceptualized as such, there existed a history of Black women who have utilized digital technologies and tools and engaged in digital Black feminism even if they did not self-identify as
a feminist. Steele (2021) explicitly states that when it comes to the discourse of digital Black feminisms, digital Black feminists are not acknowledged because not everyone considers themselves a feminist and you do not need to be a Black feminist to do digital Black feminism (Steele 2021, emphasis original).

Steele (2021) created five principles of digital Black feminism that include (1) agency, (2) the right to self-identify, (3) gender nonbinary spaces of discourse, (4) complicated allegiances, and (5) a dialectic of self and community interests. Black feminist Moya Bailey (2021) exemplifies these five principles in her book *Misogynoir Transformed* on the ways in which Black women have and continue to engage in digital resistance of misogyny on social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. Bailey (2021) defines misogynoir as the following:

The visual representation of anti-Black misogyny not only through caricature and false representations of Black women that inform how Black women are treated, but also through the omission of Black women and girls from view altogether. (6)

While Black women, girls, femmes, and gender expansive people navigate the white space of social media, they use this same space to in different ways subvert the negative stereotypes that circulate through platforms (Bailey 2021). Bailey uses case studies that explore how Black queer and trans’ women’s digital resistance have influenced content creators to share stories about their lives that counter the mainstream trauma-informed narratives of their lives (Bailey 2021). This is an example of Steele’s (2021) first and third principles of digital Black feminisms, agency and gender nonbinary spaces of discourse, respectively, as Bailey goes to the source to receive first-hand accounts of their experiences as well as scholarship and activism, therefore acknowledging and recognizing Black queer and trans women as agentic beings.
Similarly, Steele’s first, second, third, fourth, and fifth principles coincide with the following tenets/guiding principles of a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework: (1) intersectionality, which allows space for gender nonbinary discourse; (3) paying deep attention to Black women and girls cross culturally and (4) focusing on Black girls as agentic beings, which requires that we acknowledge and recognize that Black women and girls have agency and allow them room to use their agency; and (5) Black girl solidarity building, which can include the cultivation of and sustaining complicated allegiances among Black girls and between Black woman and girls. Steele’s theorizing asserts that digital Black feminists “confl ate the professional with the personal and wrestle publicly with a complicated relationship to capitalism” (17). However, despite these similarities, a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework is intentional on its focus on border crossings. While it might be implied in Steele’s work that the digital allows users to engage with other users from other geographic areas, a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework makes this explicit by requiring that we pay attention to different aspects of Black women and girls’ lives cross culturally and how other parts of their identity influence how they engage with digital space. What is more, Steele’s theorizing specifically focuses on Black feminism and Black women in the US, which leaves Black women, girls, femmes, and gender nonconforming folks globally, out of the discourse.

**Digital Caribbean Feminism**

The incorporation and usage of the internet for space- and placemaking and what is known as online Caribbean feminism is “multigenerational, multiethnic, transnational, and pan-Caribbean” (Haynes 2016, n.p.). Black feminist Nana Brantuo and Caribbean feminist Andrea N. Baldwin (2021) contend that: “digital space has played a role in archiving and curation,
knowledge production and sharing, and organizing and mobilizing and has facilitated increased amplification of the voices, experiences, and perspectives of Caribbean women, girls, femmes, gender nonconforming, and non-binary folks within and across the region” (n.p.). Haynes, Brantuo and Baldwin pay attention to the digital arena as a space of place making, one in which users can connect across generations, ethnicity (as with Haynes), and one that facilitates knowledge sharing and organizing regionally. Their theorizing makes three things clear, 1) the digital is its own unique space, 2) this is a space of connection, and 3) connections made in digital space have the potential to create change in various ways. Haynes (2016) contends that:

…as participation in digital cultures brings with it notions of progress, modernity, and a supposedly apolitical globalization, it is important for Caribbean cyberfeminism as a critical approach to attend to the ways digital cultures may be complicit in reinscribing inequalities. (n.p.)

Though it has been stated above that digital Black feminisms is separate from cyberfeminism, Caribbean feminists continue to use the term cyberfeminism, which is the term I will continue to use in this section. Unlike digital Black feminism, Caribbean feminism incorporates Caribbean feminists from all throughout the region, so this is not limited to Afro-Caribbean people. Feminists of the region have engaged with digital space as a means for activism to “build community, organize, and mobilize” (Haynes 2016, n.p.).

The arguments made by Haynes (2016), Brantuo and Baldwin (2021) are instructive. Their work applies more generally to movement building in the region and engage in many ways the questions of how digital spaces are used by Caribbean people to advance the causes of Caribbean feminists and to build solidarity while doing so. Similarly, my transnational Black girlhood feminist framework can be applied to the ways in which Black girls – and in this case Black Caribbean girls – use digital technology agentically (fourth tenet/guiding principle) to
build solidarity (fifth tenet/guiding principle) as they traverse this space (sixth tenet/principle). This framework allows me to travel between Digital sociology, as well as digital feminism, especially Black and Caribbean digital feminism, to bring together theorizing, which opens up the possibilities for examining how the girls in my study are able to use digital space as agentic beings as they navigate their transitions to womanhood/adulthood. What is more is that this framework allows me to bridge geographical gaps between the researcher and the methods they use, data collection, and data analysis. The framework also allows me to use digital sociology and digital feminisms to engage in Black girl solidarity building while exploring the ways in which I can build and sustain Black girl solidarity through the use of social media as a digital tool.

Social Media

In the age of technology, social media continues to be a significant part of our social worlds. Kaplan and Haenlin (2010) define social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (UGC)” (61). This simple definition includes two key terms, Web 2.0 and UGC. Web 2.0 is a platform that allows the Internet to be used in a fashion “where content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion” (Kaplan and Haenlin 2009, 61). Smart phones are considered essential and different social media platforms and applications such as WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, and now TikTok allow us to stay connected with family and friends. We are able to share various parts of our lives with the world as well as learn from watching others who engage
with the same social media platforms. Social media is a space and place where we can express ourselves, get motivation from and communicate with others.

In researching what scholars have theorized about social media use, I have found that the research is limiting and often centers deficiency. For example, social media research focuses on leveraging social media to support young adults weight loss (Allman-Farinelli and Nour 2021) and portion control (Sharps et al. 2019); whether attitudes toward engagement with digital technologies during adolescence have an impact on identity and at its core a feature of identity development in young adulthood (Stuart et al. 2022); and the challenges of utilizing social media regarding professionalism and communication in the healthcare field (Gijsen et al. 2020; Dejong 2014). In analyzing the extant literature on social media, there is a lack of discourse among scholars within and across various fields that study how social media can operate as a space and place where young adults are able to learn, be themselves, and engage with people who look like them. I argue that though there are disadvantages to social media use, there are also advantages to social media use that should be discovered and discussed. For example, some advantages include learning from hair and cooking tutorials, engaging with others with similar interests from different places in the world, and receiving advice from others who are going through similar situations. I am able to engage both the negative and the positive uses and impacts of social media because my framework requires looking beyond deficit models to focus on Black girls as agentic beings (tenet/guiding principle four), and if we believe that Black girls can make decisions for themselves and it be in their best interest, then we see them from a place of resiliency by fostering space for them to make their own decisions without being criticized or prevented from utilizing their agency. The framework allows me to examine the ways in which Black girls can use social media as a space of agentic crossing, self-care, and community
building by analyzing what the media are able to give the girls. As such, the framework helps me to analyze how digital space helps them navigate the transitional period between girlhood and womanhood/adulthood, rather than focusing on the how the girls can be negatively affected by social media.

Sociologist Diana Stypinska (2022) discusses for example influencers, trolling, and digital activism in what she calls a post-truth era in *Social Media, Truth, and the Care of the Self: On the Digital Technologies of the Subject*. In her work she discusses what she and others view as negative aspects of social media, that do not add to the realities of its users. What is glaringly absent in her work, however, is a discussion on the ways in which social media for example influences self-care, or how despite the negatives of being a victim of trolling, bullying, and influencer bias on social media, that people continue to engage whether passive or active users. There are reasons people are still engaging with it. Stypinska’s analysis of social media and digital technologies presents a limited version of how social media operates, is used, and influences the lives of young adults. This research on social media focuses on what social media takes away rather than gives to young adults. Stypinska (2022) argues that social media does not represent reality for younger generations, who she says could “not imagine a life without social media… and our very form of living has been altered” (13). For example, she amplifies the negative aspects of social media by using words/phrases like fun house, distortion, and perform self-exposure. As recently as May 24th, 2023, The New York Times published an article titled “For One Group of Teenagers, Social Media Seems a Clear Net Benefit” (Miller 2023). The surgeon general’s report stated that social media can operate as a “profound risk of harm,” but they also acknowledged that for LGBTQ+ youth, it can serve as a “lifeline” (Miller 2023, n.p.). This is in contrast from Stypinska’s argument that social media does not represent reality for
younger generations, yet for many LGBTQ+ youth, social media is a space where they can receive information, connect with others like them, and explore their identities (Miller 2023). Though this is one example of social media being representative of reality for LGBTQ+ youth, because of their identity, they can become victims to what Stypinka discusses as trolling and bullying. Because the discourse on social media research is limited to specific topics, it needs to be expanded beyond its to explore the ways in which it can be positive and beneficial for its users, such as how it can be used as a form of self and community care.

_Self-Care as Praxis_

Steele (2021) states that:

Audre Lorde wrote about self-care as a resistance strategy, as self-preservation, and as ultimately political. Self-care is not merely about remembering to do a kind thing for oneself. For Black women, self-care is a political decision to prioritize one’s health, safety, and care in a space where you are under assault. (90)

In this context, to be under assault, does not mean to be physically attacked, but to be verbally attacked – via the way in which someone is talking to you or through written text online – or severely criticized through the use of words both spoken and written/typed. The current social conditions in both the global north and the so-called global south have allowed for the mere existence of Black women, femmes, and gender nonconforming folks to be constantly under assault. As such, many people in these regions turn to social media as an escape and as a form of self-care. In this research I adopt the definition of care by Hobart and Kneese (2020) on “Radical Care: Survival Strategies for Uncertain Times” which they state:

Care refers to a relational set of discourses and practices between people, environments, and objects that approximate what philosophers like Adam Smith and Davide Hume identify as “empathy,” “sympathy,” or “fellow feeling.” (2)
As such, self-care is a relational discourse and practice that a person has with their self that is not based on capitalist and neoliberal ideas of consumerism. The authors focus on care as a critical survival strategy and define radical care as “a set of vital but underappreciated strategies for enduring precarious worlds” (2). What is considered precarious worlds for individuals are subjective and can vary depending on what and how they experience personal and structural situations and events. As such, social media can serve as a form of radical self-care, as “what it means for individuals and groups to feel and provide care, survive, and even dare to thrive in environments that challenge their very existence” (Hobart & Kneese 2020, 3). Taking these definitions into consideration, in my research I am interested in examining the ways in which Afro-Caribbean girls in the island of Sint Maarten engage with social media as a form of self-care as they transition from girlhood to womanhood/adulthood.

The above definitions point to the fact that it is possible for self-care to occur in digital spaces as a place where individuals and groups, according to Hobart & Kneese (2020) above, can feel and provide care and thrive. Below I examine whether the girls in my study use social media in this way as they navigate the liminal space between girlhood and womanhood/adulthood. I specifically look at self-selected research participant media submissions from the girls, which I have described above.

Methods

To investigate this question, in December 2022 to February 2023 I reinterviewed five of the girls from my larger project mentioned above, Aimee, Brittany, Kianna, Nirvana, and Zola, and I used what I called research participant media. Research participant media is a creative method, that can be both qualitative and quantitative, that helps to engage participants with digital spaces, where they choose media, such as but not limited to videos, songs, social media
applications/platforms, and pictures, that they feel answer the prompt provided by the researcher. I wanted to gain insight from the girls’ perspectives into the ways in which different forms of media are utilized as the girls navigate the transitional period between girlhood and woman/adulthood. For this research study the girls were to choose any kind of media that they felt were representative of the current stage of their lives.

Christina Sharpe’s (2016) Black annotation and redaction demands that we read and see something in excess of what is being shown. Sharpe (2016) speaks directly to the Black experience. In Sharpe’s (2016) In the Wake: On Blackness and Being she explains how the work that Black feminist scholars do in telling the stories of our lives, is what she calls wake work, and this is a work of care. Sharpe (2016) engages in what she calls a methodology of Black annotation and redaction, which are examples of wake work and new ways of seeing and imagining Black beings without violence, to remove all the external layers that would distract us from seeing Black girls as they really are, and that cause them to be caricatured and adultified. This method allows us to zero in on the Black girls and their needs, their angst, and their experiences. For example, Sharpe (2016) writes about two Black girls throughout, but specifically in chapters two and four to demonstrate how the external caricatures, antiblack racism, and patriarchy dehumanize Black girls. Through her work of Black annotation, redaction, and aspiration (withdrawal of fluid from body, into the lungs, breath), she asks “What happens when we look at and listen to these and other Black girls across time? What is made in our encounters with them? This looking makes ethical demands on the viewer; demands to imagine otherwise; to reckon with the fact that the archive, too, is invention” (51). The importance of this work is necessary in changing the current social conditions that negatively affect Black girls and those who become women and adults.
Research participant media as wake work has historically been used by Caribbean feminists such as Gladys do Rego’s video entitled *Mi sa Kon bo ta Sintibu* (I Know How You Feel) on sexuality and Marie Allen and Jeanne Henriquez’s research about the daily lives of women in the Dutch Caribbean (Cuales 1998) which consistently utilized audio interviews, photography, and video recording of interviews as ways of tracing reliability. Research participant media opens the door for a multidimensional perspective on how the girls conceptualize womanhood/adulthood. On archives in the Caribbean, Anthropologist Deborah Thomas argues that producing visual archives as a scholarly methodology, which is an example of what Evans-Winters (2019) calls a non-traditional qualitative method, is “a form of witnessing” and “encourages us to ask more questions” (Kempadoo and DeShong 2021, 373).

At the end of the first interview for this project, I gave the girls two weeks to find any kind of media that they felt were representative of this current stage of their lives. Each year when the new year arrives, many people think about what they want to do differently in their lives for the upcoming year. At the end of 2022 I noticed that on social media, specifically Instagram, I found myself listening to, watching, and engaging with Black women, girls, and femmes talking about a “soft life.” There are various ways to describe a soft life, but there is not one set definition. A soft life is characterized by prioritizing yourself, focusing on love, peace, and the parts of life that make you happy, as well as establishing and sustaining healthy relationships of all kinds. It is a life where struggle and toxicity are not tolerated nor accepted.

Research on social media and its usage focuses primarily on the use of social media and depression among teens and young adults (Primack et al., 2017; Petalas et al., 2021), comparing usage among adolescents versus adults (Kircaburun et al. 2019), and social media usage among college students (Zhao 2021; Lai et al., 2023). While research on social media and mental health
is important, social media research would also benefit from an analysis of how it positively impacts its users and the ways in which it can be improved.

The prompt for the research participant media was to choose media (photography, music, songs, poems, videos, etc.) that the girls felt were representative of this current stage of their lives. I did not give the girls a limit of media to submit, but I did ask them how they determined how many was enough to submit during the second interview. On average, the girls submitted 12 media items and determined this was enough until they felt that they had answered the prompt.

Table 1 below organizes the research participant media for each participant including the types of media formats, the number they submitted, hashtags when applicable, as well as the themes of individual submissions. The analysis of the findings that follow will show that these themes are not exclusive of each other but work together in embodying the girls’ goals that they have set for themselves. The data shows that the girls find other girls who are talking about similar experiences that they are personally going through, and the ways the girls engage with digital space and utilize social media applications/platforms as a form of self-care through TikToks that show a Black girl’s self-care routine for getting ready for bed, and TikTok videos of self-care reminders for Black girls.

Data Analysis and Findings: A Soft Girl Era, Period

The following section presents the data and discusses how Afro-Caribbean girls utilize social media as a form of self and community care through self-affirmations and love to help navigate the transitional period between girlhood and womanhood/adulthood. Social media is a significant part of the girls’ social worlds. Social media serves as a space and place where the girls can express themselves, get motivation from other girls on applications like TikTok, and
communicate with others. Important aspects of the girls’ social worlds include, but are not limited to their education, relationships, and social media use.

To organize and analyze the self-selected research participant media submissions from each participant I created the below table. For the table, I include the number and type of media the participants submitted, as well as the hashtags that were used to search for the media, and the themes of the submissions for each participant. The inclusion of the hashtags was important to show that the girls are well aware of how social media algorithms function and how they critically engage them to filter the content they want to view (Noble 2018). With the way in which the prompt was worded in the methods section of this chapter, the girls used their own agency in determining the kinds of media they wanted to submit. Using a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework which focuses on Black girls as agentic beings required that I gave the girls as much opportunity to make their own decisions for the research participant media part of the project.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Type of Media</th>
<th># of Media</th>
<th>Hashtags</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aimee</td>
<td>Website: photos, text, TikTok videos</td>
<td>20*</td>
<td>#daddyissues, #dad, #sad</td>
<td>Love, Growth, Health, Peace, Faith, Food, Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TikTok videos</td>
<td>10*</td>
<td>#blackgirltiktok, #blackgirlluxury, #blackgirlselfcare, #blackgirlselflove, #pwistudent, #blackatapwi, #blackhairtiktok, #blackcultureconversations, #blackgirl, #blackhair, #naturalhair, #blackpositiverepresentationuk, #diversityinthemedia, #representationmatters, #blackcollegestudent, #collegeadvice, #collegelife, #blackstudentz</td>
<td>Being Black at a PWI, Advice for Black girls, Self-care, Black Positive Representation, College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kianna</td>
<td>Poem, Music Video, TikToks</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>#womanhood, #forthegirls, #feminineenergy, #lightfemininity</td>
<td>Womanhood, Helping other women, Unapologetic, Love, Self-Love, Soft-Life, Self-Care, Food, Travel, Peace, Health, Affirmations, Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nirvana</td>
<td>Collage of Photos</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zola</td>
<td>TikTok videos</td>
<td>8*</td>
<td>#blackcollegegirl, #blackgirltiktok, #naturalhairtiktok, #selfcare, #selflove</td>
<td>Affirmations, Self-Care, Make-up, Hair, Fashion, College</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*1 TikTok video was unavailable for viewing

*Soft girl era*
Soft girl era is a concept that has had bourgeoning interest on the internet since the end of 2022, as people began to talk about what they wanted for themselves in the upcoming 2023 year. There is no real definition of the term soft girl era, but people who utilize this hashtag, or share related memes, use words like: life of ease, peace, comfort, happiness, healthy relationships, love without struggle, and self-care. Based on the general use of soft girl life and the ways in which my participants engage with the term, I would define a soft girl life as a life that is about creating and curating healthy relationships to oneself and community, prioritizing one’s wants and needs, and working towards their goals of living a life of peace and abundance.

After analyzing the media, I found “a soft life” to be the overarching theme among the research participant media submissions which consists of self-care, self-affirmations, and love. For example, Nirvana submitted a collage of the media she chose and in it included the definition of a soft life as follows:

Soft Life
A life of ease
**Peace**
Comfort
And intentional happiness.
It does not require struggle love,
Stress and distress.
It consists of mutual **Relationships,**
Clarity and,
**Self-care.**
~Quote from Nirvana’s collage, [emphasis in bold is mine]
Kalterfleiter and Alexander (2019) define self-care as “the practice of taking an active role in protecting one’s own well-being and happiness to preserve or improve one’s own health” (203) and they also assert that “self-care is a radical act that creates continuums of resistance for women and girls, especially Black girls” (200). When this definition is considered in tandem with Hobert and Kneese’s (2020) definition of care as defined previously, it helps put into context that self-care is essential for the girls in caring for themselves in the liminality of womanhood/adulthood. All the girls submitted media that included some form of self-care. This included media related to health, hair, routines, working out, food, and peace which exemplifies Audre Lorde’s conceptualization of self-care being a political decision of prioritizing their “health, safety and care” (Steele 2021, 90).
In Aimee’s website, she included photos of working out, food, and spiritual growth which are all relevant to health (see figure 1 and 5). She wants to improve in her physical health, eat better foods, and grow in her faith. Aimee states:

*Part of my growing is realizing that I am no longer going to be the same person I was yesterday. I need to acknowledge my pain/hurt and find healthy habits to help me cope.*

I find Aimee’s statement to be important to the finding of self-care and is an example of radical care described by Hobert and Kneese (2020) as part of this transitional period being challenging for Aimee has consisted of what I would also describe as being under assault as she has had to navigate difficult changes in her and her father’s relationship. She has learned as she has matured both mentally and emotionally since our first meeting in summer of 2019, that she is only in control of herself, her feelings, and her reactions to situations. In learning to let go of what she cannot change, Aimee has also learned to prioritize herself and her wellbeing. One important aspect of developing a conscious practice of self-care is understanding and acknowledging the areas of one’s life that need special attention in order to know what needs to be done to take care of it.

Zola and Brittany both submitted TikToks (see figure 2 and 4) that focused on natural hair maintenance and face care routines. Brittany submitted a TikTok video by TikToker Minnielist that was titled “Episode 6 self-care,” and it was a face and hair care video that stated the following: “Black girl, promise to always put yourself first, to be authentically yourself, and to always love yourself.” This video serves as not only a self-care practice, but also as an affirmation, one that serves as an example of Hobert and Kneese’s (2020) concept of radical self-care.
Similarly, through the act of self-care, I have found that the girls’ use of digital space is an example of the fifth tenet/guiding principle of a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework, Black girl solidarity building. For example, Kianna mentioned that on her “for you page”\textsuperscript{36} on TikTok, there is always girl-related content, such as what girls like to do. She stated that the media she selected were media that she agreed with, related to, liked, and found to be empowering. What she found to be the most empowering was the poem “And Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou (see figure 3). It was a poem she first read in one of her English classes. When it comes to this girl-related media she, as well as the other girls, find it important to be able to relate to people who look like them. She states:

\begin{quote}
You can’t relate to certain things wit boys. Just stay out of it [the boys].
\end{quote}

For the girls to be able to relate to and find people in digital space who look like them is just one aspect of Black girl solidarity building that can be done through social media. Including the sixth tenet/guiding principle of the transnational Black girlhood feminist framework, attention to borders and boundaries, the girls are able to relate to girls who not only look like them, but girls who like them who are located in different parts of the world and possibly from various different cultural backgrounds, and digital space connects them through a multitude of social media applications/platforms. As such, the first tenet/guiding principle requires and allows me to analyze the ways in which the different intersections of the girls’ identities must be considered in how they engage with social media.

As such, when it came to race (and gender), Brittany and Zola found that they had to intentionally put the word Black somewhere in the hashtag to get to the kind of material they wanted to view. One question that Black feminist Safiya Noble (2018) sought to

\textsuperscript{36} The “for you” page is a feed created by TikTok’s proprietary algorithm, adjusted and updated based on the videos each user chooses to “like” and follow.
answer in *Algorithms of Oppression* was “what happens when you google search ‘Black girls?’” and explains how the use of algorithms in the digital technologies we use continue to perpetuate anti-Black racism and misogynoir (Steele 2021, 4). If the girls want to see content from people who look like them, they must take an extra step to find them. This should not be the case, but at this point it comes naturally to the girls. A look back at the summary of research participant media submissions (Table 1) shows that three out of the four girls who submitted TikToks specifically referred to race and/or gender and two out of the four girls specifically referred to race. The girls have learned to work through the algorithms in order to get to the content they want to see. If the girls were not specific in putting in specific words in social media search bars such as #blackcollegestudent, like Brittany did, she would not have easily found content discussing Black college student experiences, but rather content filled with white college student experiences. These videos would not have helped her in her search of finding tips and advice on navigating a PWI as a Black female student. Part of the tips and advice she received came in the form of self-affirmations.

*Self-Affirmations*
Brittany, Zola, and Aimee moved away for college and found themselves having to transition and navigate predominately white spaces. These white spaces not only include the physical geographic location of being on campus and in class, but also white digital spaces. As such, the girls are using social media that is a white digital space to help navigate a white space such as a PWI. One of the ways in which the girls have dealt with this major change was finding advice and affirmations through social media. Brittany submitted three TikToks about being a Black girl/student at a PWI. The TikToks were titled “Your Black girl survival kit at a PWI,” “POV: you’re the only Black girl takin physics this fall,” and Freshman Advice: Black girl edition pt. 1.” Brittany submitted a TikTok by TikToker Blackballauk where she gave advice to generation Z Black women from millennial Black women. Some of the advice the women gave included the following: "don't rush...don't be pressured to achieve things based on someone else's
time schedule" and "explore your interests to the fullest." This speaks to the idea of what society thinks someone should have accomplished and by what age. For Zola, this is a time period of being mindful. She submitted a TikTok by TikToker Minfullfillness that stated, “look after yourself.” In going back to what the girls stated about the transition between girlhood and womanhood and adulthood, this is a period marked by being responsible for yourself, and from the research participant media, this also includes taking care of yourself, prioritizing yourself, and looking after yourself, all of which are a part of self-care. Self-affirmations can serve in a way to help remind the girls of this radical practice of care.

The transitions within the transitional period between girlhood and womanhood/adulthood is also characterized by claiming and acknowledging peace within the girls’ lives. Peace is not only a noun, but an affirmation and a praxis. In the words of Auntie Maxine Waters (US Black woman senator), Aimee shared that in this period of her life she is “reclaiming her peace.” This was a phrase that she included in her website submission and under this section she had pictures of her and her boyfriend, her exploring the city, driving a scooter, and ice skating in neon lights. In each picture she was smiling, and she exuded Black girl joy. Peace looks like happiness, spending time with the people you love and who also love you and finding joy in life’s pleasures. Similarly, Nirvana submitted a collage (see figure 6) which she put into the shape of a heart, with various affirmations. Nirvana included in her collage a photo that read:

I am connected to the endless abundance of the universe.

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This affirmation asserts that she knows that she is deserving and in tune with all the possibilities of her future. She also included a picture of the word “Namaste” and its meaning which states:

My soul honors your soul. I honor the place in you where the entire universe resides. I honor the light, love, truth, beauty & peace within you, because it is also within me.

Nirvana also included a picture of various affirmations that sums up perfectly the girls’ themes of the media. It states

I am beautiful. I am healthy. I am wealthy. I am strong. I am protected. I am wanted. I am successful. I am worthy. I am free. I am independent.

The affirmations found within the various media submitted by the girls indicate that these affirmations serve as reminders for the girls to speak positivity over themselves, finding other Black women who are also sharing affirmations and speaking positivity to the girls, and as a reminder to work towards claiming those self-affirmations that can be manifested through their practice of self-care. Through the girls’ practicing self-care and being reminded to do so through self-affirmations, the girls are also involved in community care with those around them, through love.

Love
Aimee included a meme on her website where the boyfriend has his arm around the girlfriend and the girl is labeled as “me” and the boyfriend is labeled as “My man.” He is assisting her in drinking from an over-sized wine glass and this is her drinking what is labeled “Princess treatment & soft life. Reciprocated energy and love.” This is another form of self-care in which Black girls are refusing to settle for the bare minimum and are wanting to only engage in relationships in which they are also receiving the same amount of energy they are putting in. I am learning from the girls, through their media submissions, that care for them and for the people around them is reciprocal and communal, which is an element of a soft girl era. An example of the costs outweighing the benefits are presented in the TikTok videos that Aimee presented in her website. Her relationship with her father has changed in the past couple of years and it has taken a toll on her. She is currently in the healing process and grieving the relationship.
that she wants with her father, but she has accepted that she will never have it. Though she does feel like the love that she has for and extends to her father is not reciprocated on his end towards her, she has made the conscious decision to focus on what she is in control of, which is why she stated that focusing on her faith and growth as a person are the ways in which she chooses to cope with the pain that she experiences from this relationship. As such, I find that Aimee’s decision regarding how she handles the relationship with her dad has extended to community care including focusing more on how she shows up in her relationships with her family, friends, and her boyfriend.

Three out of the five girls (Aimee, Nirvana, and Zola) are in relationships. They have all described their relationships as happy and healthy. Nirvana and Aimee specifically stated that they have grown a lot through their relationships with their boyfriends and have also learned a lot about themselves. Both Nirvana and Aimee submitted photos that depicted relationships through traveling together and spending time together. Aimee specifically stated that her femininity has blossomed even more throughout her relationship. For all the girls, platonic relationships with their girlfriends were also very important and they take them seriously. Brittany, Kianna, and Zola are all a part of the same friend group. Zola mentioned how nightly facetime calls with Brittany, Kianna, and another friend are an important part of her routine. Digital space operates also operates as a transnational space where the girls are able to sustain relationships across physical and geographic borders. They can talk, video chat, message, and send relatable memes to each other, despite the distance between them. This kind of commitment is one rooted in both self and community care through the love she has for and shows her friends. For Aimee, though she is far from many of her friends, they are still able to connect through digital space such as social media applications and platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp, and different creative
projects. For Nirvana, one of the concepts that she lives by is love. Love for self and love for others. She believes that if you lead with love, everything else will fall into place and be as it should be.

Conclusion

Sociologically speaking, because of racism throughout the African diaspora, Black women (and girls) were not afforded the option of taking care of themselves but were expected to be the primary caretakers of others. Now, in the 21st century, Black women and girls have the option to choose to return to themselves, to focus on their wants and needs before others. Prioritizing themselves is a radical form of self-care that allows them to put their needs first in order to build community with others, such as Brittany and Zola are able to do at the university they attend and how Brittany, Kianna, and Zola, make sure that they hold space to be in communication with each other and their other friend even though they are in other geographical locations. This is an example of Black girl solidarity building as the girls are consciously choosing to sustain their friendships through digital space and technologies, even though they are separated by geographic boundaries. “Black girls owning self-love and self-care leaves them unwavering to the pressures and images others create for them. Self-care allows them to create futures for themselves larger than others can imagine and ultimately empowers them to build a better future for all” (Kalterfleiter and Alexander, 201). In Nirvana’s collage submission she included photos of food, traveling, money, relationship, and affirmations. Her social media usage is similar to the other participants, but because she was familiar with creating a collage from participating in the first iteration of this project, this was her preferred medium. In thinking about who she was 3.5 years ago, she states that:
The tings you prioritize really change with ya age, ya know.

I believe that the transitional period between girlhood and womanhood and adulthood have helped the girls to go through their own personal experiences to reach a fuller understanding of self-care and prioritizing themselves. Nirvana stated that her collage included things that she would like to put in place over the upcoming years, not just what she has in place now. When I asked her how she found the process of selecting the media, she stated that it was easy because she knew herself. All the girls found this part of the project to be easy, especially because social media is a large part of their lives.

During this transitional period between girlhood and womanhood and adulthood, the girls are primarily focused on themselves and have used social media as a tool to help keep them grounded. The internet remains a white space, and Black girls have to create and find their own spaces within these digital white spaces. As mentioned before, Brittany and Zola had to add the word Black to hashtags in order to find content that they could relate to. Kisha McPherson (2019) states that for Black girls “everyday experiences with oppression further complicate the already challenging process of negotiating self-concepts and understanding identity amidst powerful media representations” (236). One of the great things about algorithms is that the girls are able to weed out content that they do not want to see to improve content that comes up for them, such as with Kianna’s “for you” page on her TikTok account that always shows her girl-related content. Because social media remains a large part of the girls’ social worlds, they are able to look to social media and pick and choose what content they need to help them with their focus on self-care and affirmations in reaching their goals.
Chapter Five
The Future of Transnational Black Girlhood

Conclusion

In this dissertation I proposed a new framework: a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework that can be used to study Black girls and girlhood within and across borders and boundaries. This framework consists of six tenets/guiding principles: intersectionality, reflexivity, paying deep attention to Black women and girls cross culturally, focusing on Black girls as agentic beings, and paying attention to borders, boundaries, and bridging gaps. I then applied this framework in two ways to my own case study of exploring Afro-Caribbean girlhood transitions of girls from the island of Sint Maarten. The first application of the theoretical framework was in exploring and analyzing the transitional period between girlhood and womanhood/adulthood. The second application of the theory was in exploring and analyzing the ways in which the girls have engaged with social media as a digital and transnational space. The data herein serves as a referential starting point in exploring different aspects of Black girls’ lives throughout the global north, global south, and in the Caribbean region specifically. The girls are navigating this period of their lives with support from their family and friends, going through their own personal experiences, navigating school and work, learning more about themselves through various relationships with their families, friends, and romantic partners. The girls are able to do what they want, hold themselves accountable for the choices and decisions they make, and have a positive outlook on their futures.

In my exploration of Afro-Caribbean girlhood through research participant media, I found that the girls engage with social media to navigate the period between girlhood, womanhood/adulthood to help find ways to focus on themselves and to see and learn how other
girls/women who look like them are also navigating similar spaces and places. Social media applications/platforms as digital space have been essential for the girls in being connected across space, place, and time, building community, focusing on self, and (familial, romantic, friend) loving throughout the process.

For the next iteration of this longitudinal study, I would like to re-engage with the girls in 3-5 years as they will be entering other major transitions within their life, such as graduating from college. It will be important to see how their visions for their futures have changed from the first iteration of this research study. I hope that other Black girlhood scholars as well as social scientists will consider such a framework as a transnational Black girlhood framework that focuses and centers the lives of Black girls who become women and adults. I have learned that the girls are able to move through their life course with their girlhood, and it is not a matter of leaving it in the past, but carrying it with them throughout their own memories, as well as the activities that they participate in that remind them of their childhood. At the third iteration of this project, I hope to be able to get in contact with and interview all nine of the girls from the original population sample, as it will add a new layer to the research, data, and analysis. As the girls have stated, with adulthood comes more responsibilities, decision making, and less time. I look forward to seeing how the girls will continue to make the most out of what they perceive as limited time within adulthood.

Black girls across spaces—whether physical, geographical, or digital—are not fully represented. Engaging with Black girlhood studies and Black feminisms, which has been limited to the experiences of Black women and girls within US borders, required me to create a framework that captures the agentic, complicated, nonlinear, temporal, and liminal lives and transitions of Black girls as they transition in both digital and geographical spaces. In this study,
I looked specifically at Afro-Caribbean girls who grew up in Sint Maarten. The application of a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework not only takes into account the lived experiences of Black girls in Sint Maarten but can include the lived experience of all Black girls, globally. In this study I was able to apply this framework to the Caribbean region by pairing this framework with the theorizing on multiple Caribbean feminist voices including Barritteau (1995) on gender systems and issues of women’s autonomy and authority over their bodies and lives in the Caribbean; Mohammed (1998) on the differential treatments of boys and girls in the Caribbean; and Haynes (2017) on the development of Caribbean feminisms in the region. I also was able to use and critique life course theory and examine how it explains transitions within the life course with an emphasis on age. Since life course theory is discussed as a linear process, it does not take into consideration other life transitions beyond marriage, having children, and taking care of a family, and is a theory rooted in the global north, whiteness, and heteronormativity.

With regard to how Black girls engage in digital spaces, I examined the work of digital sociologists and digital feminists, including Black and Caribbean digital feminists looking at how the use of digital space affects people’s social worlds, and how digital feminisms began in a way to create and build solidarity and activism across borders and boundaries. I also engaged with research participant media, which I have defined as a research method where a prompt is given to participants and the participants are asked to select different kinds of media such as (but not limited to) photography, videos, poems, music, and images from the internet to answer the prompt. This provides another creative and unique way to not only understanding the girls, but a way for the girls to communicate the different “dimensions of their lives” (Clark-Ibanez 2004, 1507). In using this method, I found that Afro-Caribbean girls from Sint Maarten utilize digital
space as a form of self and community care to help navigate the liminality of girlhood, womanhood and adulthood.

While I was thorough in conducting this study, there are clear limitations including that the study sample size was small, which has the potential to prevent the findings from being applicable in other contexts, and the wording of the research participant media prompt. However, because this study is longitudinal, and the research questions relied on re-engaging with the original participants, a small sample size could not be avoided. As such, the small sample size does not impact the veracity of this research study. As sociologists Small and Calarco (2022) mentioned in chapter three, it is more about the amount of time and exposure between the researcher and participants. I wanted to give the girls as much free range as possible and with the least restrictions, however, this could also be seen as a limitation. I think that I could have mentioned or encouraged the girls to create content as well. In the second interview I did ask the girls if they created any media, but this was worded in a way that indicated they were not able to find media that was representative of the current stage of their lives. I do believe that for future research explicitly giving the participants an option to produce media has the ability to provide or reveal more complexity and depth. I particularly think this would have been great for Aimee as she is a content creator and she compiled her submissions into one website. Despite the limitations of this study, I was able to use a transnational Black girlhood feminist framework specifically to study Afro-Caribbean girlhood transitions in the Caribbean and in digital space. I believe that it can also be used by future researchers to study Black girls in various socio-cultural contexts, globally.

For this study there was a plethora of data gathered which indicated to me that deeper research needs to be done. I intend to dig even deeper into the data collected as well as continue
to explore further nonlinear, complicated, geographical, including digital and liminal, transitions in the lives of Black girls/women/adults.

**The Girls and I Look Forward by Looking Back, Again**

During the interviews I asked the girls and myself the following question: What would you say to your younger self? This is what we had to say.

Aimee: *Girl, I would say expect the unexpected. It’s good to set your expectations high, but at the same time you have to be real with yourself. And at the same time like, all darkness will come to light. Ya know, so, if you- you’re cries will turn into like, joy. Your pain will turn into a bliss eventually. Don’t stress over things that don’t need to- that you don’t need to stress ova. Get somebody else to do it, ya know?*

Brittany: *Just keep doin’ what ya doin’. *laughs*

Kianna: *Take ya time to grow up. Focus on the present. Breathe in. Breathe out. Don’t get frustrated too fas. Don’t be angry, irritated quick. Jus, take time and live life...Breathe and live.*

Nirvana: *referring to what she wrote in her letter to self in 2019* *Keep ya head on. And ya know, I does tell people dah still. And it’s a sentence dat I tink from a young age, I probly understood it literally, but keep ya head on, like stay focus. Don’t let the worl overwhelm you. I really tink dah is what I would keep tellin’ myself because really, I big on dat now especially. Like, just stay focus. Keep ya head on.*

Ocqua: *Lil baby, there’s nuttin’ ya can’t do. You will get it done!*
Zola: Everything will work out fine. It’s not that bad as it um- any problem that I face, it wasn’t as bad as I made it seem at the time. Be confident. Be bold. Don’t suppress my intelligence ta accommodate others…It will be OK. It will be OK. *laughs* Yeh, it will.
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Gijsen, Violette, Michele Maddux, Adam Lavertu, Graciela Gonzalez-Hernandez, Nilam Ram, Byron Reeves, Thomas Robinson, Victoria Ziesenitz, Valentina Shakhnovich, and Russ


Appendix A

Interview Schedule I

Section One: Demographics

1. How old are you now?

2. What are some major changes that have happened in your life since our last interview in 2019?
   - Are you in school? If so, what are you studying? How are you paying for school?
   - Do you live by yourself? If not, who do you live with?
   - Are you in a relationship? If so, how long?
   - Are you currently working? If so, where?
   - Are you financially responsible for yourself?
   - Do you have a car? If not, what is your major form of transportation?

Section Two: Re-engaging (building on the old interviews)

1. In 2019, when I asked you what your plans were after high school you stated that……. Have these plans changed? If so, in what ways?

2. In 2019, you wrote a letter to yourself. Go ahead and read the letter to yourself and tell me what you think about what you wrote.

3. In 2019, I asked you about what you liked the most and least about being a girl. You stated…. Now, 3 years later, would you say that these are the same for you?

4. How would you describe your girlhood?

5. What would you say to the young (name of participant) you?

Section Three: Transitions (transitioning to the dissertation)

1. How would you describe/define adult/womanhood?

2. What is one word you would use to describe your girlhood?

3. What is one word you would use to describe adulthood?

4. Do you feel like there is a transition from girlhood to womanhood? If so, how so? If not, why?
   - For yes, how has this transition been for you as far as hard or easy?
   - In general, do you think that transitioning from girlhood to adulthood is hard or easy for other girls? Why?
5. What is one word you would use to describe this transition?

6. Is there a moment when you realized that you were a woman/adult and no longer a girl? If so, can you explain?

7. Even though you are legally considered an adult, do you think or feel like you have reached adulthood? If so or if not, why?
   - If yes, what do you like the most about being an adult? The least?

8. At this stage of your life, do you still consider yourself a girl or do you consider yourself a woman or something else?

9. What do you wish you would have known about adulthood?

10. Now that you are legally in adulthood, what advice would you have given to your younger self.

11. What are some things you know now about adulthood that you wish you would have known earlier?

12. Who has helped you to transition and prepare for adulthood?

13. What has the transition to woman/adulthood looked like for you?
   - How do you see yourself navigating this transition?

**Section Four: Future transitions (setting up for future research)**

1. What are your plans for the future (career, college, family, etc.)?

2. Anything else you would like to add?
Appendix B

Interview Schedule II

1. Tell me about the process of selecting the media that you selected.
   a. Did you find it easy? How?
   b. Did you find it hard? Why?
2. How would you describe the different kinds of representations of woman/adulthood that you found?
3. Was there anything that you wanted to use, but could not find?
4. I did not give you a number of items to choose, so how did you decide how many items was enough?
5. In what ways do they represent woman/adulthood for you?
6. Do you think that Afro-Caribbean girlhood is well represented in media?
   a. If yes, why?
   b. If no, why not?
7. Did you personally create anything that was representative of your woman/adulthood?
   a. Tell me about it or describe it to me.
Appendix C

Research Participant Media Prompt

You have two weeks from the end of the first interview to choose different kinds of media that you feel represent the current stage of your life. You can choose items that have already been created such as movies, artwork, songs, videos, poems, books, pictures etc., or you can create them i.e., take photos. Be sure to have the consent of other people if you want to take pictures of other people to include in this project. There is not a limit of how many you can choose. That is solely up to you. Have fun!
MEMORANDUM

DATE: October 31, 2022

TO: David Brunsma

FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572)

PROTOCOL TITLE: We Can Always Return to Ourselves if We Choose: Transitions of Afro Caribbean Girlhood in the Dutch West Indies

IRB NUMBER: 22-957

Effective October 31, 2022, the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104 (d) category(ies) 2(ii).

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit an amendment to the HRPP for a determination.

This exempt determination does not apply to any collaborating institution(s). The Virginia Tech HRPP and IRB cannot provide an exemption that overrides the jurisdiction of a local IRB or other institutional mechanism for determining exemptions.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at https://secure.research.vt.edu/externalirb/responsibilities.htm

(Please review responsibilities before beginning your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Determined As: Exempt, under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category(ies) 2(ii)
Protocol Determination Date: October 31, 2022

ASSOCIATED FUNDING:

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this protocol, if required.
Title of research study: We Can Always Return to Ourselves if We Choose: Transitions of Afro Caribbean Girlhood in the Dutch West Indies

IRB #: 
Principal Investigator: Ocqua Gerlyn Murrell 1-540-250-6440 or ocqua@vt.edu

Key Information: The following is a short summary of this study to help you decide whether or not to be a part of this study. More detailed information is listed later on in this form. This research is an extension of the project in which you were a participant in 2019 titles Escucha Nuestras Voces/Luister Naar Onze Stemmen: Afro-Caribbean Girlhood in the Dutch West Indies. This project titled We Can Always Return to Ourselves if We Choose: Transitions of Afro-Caribbean Girlhood in the Dutch West Indies focuses on the complexities of the transitional period between girlhood and woman/adulthood. Girlhood is the word that is used to refer to the time in your life of being a girl and woman/adulthood as the time in your life where you consider yourself to be a woman/adult. You have been asked to participate as a participant face-to-face or via an online video meeting because of your previous participation. This research will be used for publication and to theorize girlhood and woman/adulthood transitions. Please read the below carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate.

Detailed Information: The following is more detailed information about this study in addition to the information listed above.

Who can I talk to?
If you have any questions or requests for information relating to this research study or your participation in it, or if you want to voice a complaint or concern about this research, or if you have a study related injury, you may contact Ocqua Gerlyn Murrell at 1-540-6440.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or complaints regarding this research study, or you are unable to reach the research staff, you may contact a person independent of the research team at

Dr. David Brunsma,
Email: brunsmad@vt.edu
Phone Number: 1-573-355-0599

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may communicate with them at 540-231-3732 or irb@vt.edu if:

- You have questions about your rights as a research subject
- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team
- You cannot reach the research team
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team to provide feedback about this research
How many people will be studied?
I plan to include 9 girls in this research study.

What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?

This research project, We Can Always Return to Ourselves if We Choose: Transitions of Afro-Caribbean Girlhood in the Dutch West Indies is a research project conducted by Ocqua Gerlyn Murrell about the experiences of Afro-Caribbean women transitioning from girlhood to woman/adulthood. This research will involve a first interview using interview questions to guide the conversation. The first interview should last approximately 1–1.5 hours in length. After the first interview is completed, you will be asked to choose a few media pieces such as books, poems, music, lyrics, songs, videos, pictures, etc. that are representative of what woman/adulthood is for you. You will have 1 week to choose the media pieces. At the end of the first interview, we will schedule the second interview which should happen no more than 14 days after the first interview. The second interview will take place to discuss the pictures taken and will last approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour in length. You will be asked to explain the media you chose, and why it represents woman/adulthood. Interviews will be held at a place of your choosing and where you are comfortable in talking openly about this topic. Interviews will also be held over Zoom video meeting as some participants are in different countries for college. These interviews will be audio and video recorded. After the second interview, you will receive a $50 visa gift card.

The direct benefits of this research to society are not known, you have been told that the study allows the participants to learn more about the benefits and drawbacks of Afro-Caribbean girlhood and woman/adulthood in the Dutch West Indies as well as the opportunity to be involved in the creation of new knowledge and impact the development of resources tailored to Afro-Caribbean girls and women/adults. No promise or guarantee of benefits has been made to encourage participation.

What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?

It is important for you to know that you are free to withdraw from this study at any time, for any reason, without penalty. You are free not to answer any questions that you choose or respond to what is being asked of you without penalty.

Please note that there may be circumstances under which the investigator may determine that a subject should not continue as a subject.

If you decide to leave the research, contact the investigator so that the investigator can dispose of the data collected, if any.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me? (Detailed Risks)
During this project you will be asked questions concerning your personal life. Some examples of these questions include questions about being a woman/adult, any challenges you may face, role models, and how you identify (race, gender, class)? You understand that if there are any questions you would rather not answer or do not feel comfortable answering, you can state so clearly, and I will move on to the next question. There is a risk that by being a part of this study you could experience psychological or emotional distress and that I will provide you with a list of techniques and resources to help you address any psychological or emotional distress and information about institutional resources that can assist you that are within close proximity.

By participating in this study, you may occur some costs. This cost would include travelling to the location that you choose to have the interview. Costs will include bus fare if you take the bus. You will not be reimbursed for travelling costs.

**What happens to the information collected for the research?**

I will make every effort to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information only to people who have a need to review this information. I cannot promise complete confidentiality. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the IRB, Human Research Protection Program, and other authorized representatives of Virginia Tech.

This study is not meant to gather information about specific individuals and that the information provided will be combined with that of other research participants to gather information. There is a risk that the final research paper and short video documentary for this project may include information that will make it possible for anyone who knows you to identify you based on details you provide and about your life. Your name will not be used in any part of the final paper or documentary. In agreeing to participate in this interview you are agreeing to accept possible identification as a risk. You will be given an opportunity to view the final research paper prior to publication and you can withhold your assent for some or all sections of the research paper which you believe might identify them. Your name and the names of other individual participants will not be used in the final research paper.

Only Ocqua Gerlyn Murrell will have access to pre-publication information provided and that all information provided during and upon completion of this project, will be kept in the strictest confidence and data will be kept on a password protected computer, not accessible from other computers, and kept in a locked office. You also understand that the interviews will be kept private, recording devices locked away and every attempt made to transfer all recordings immediately after interviews to the password protected computer mentioned above. At no time will the researchers release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent.
The Virginia Tech (VT) Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view the study’s data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in research.

If identifiers are removed from your private information or samples that are collected during this research, that information or those samples could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without your additional informed consent. The results of this research study may be presented in summary form at conferences, in presentations, reports to the sponsor, academic papers, and as part of a thesis/dissertation.

**What else do I need to know?**
This research is being funded by Ocqua Gerlyn Murrell. If you participate in all two parts of the research study, you will be given $50.