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Everyday Resistance, Self-Definition, and Hope on the Black Internet: A Review

Raven Maragh-Lloyd, **Black Networked Resistance: Strategic Rearticulations in the Digital Age**, Oakland: University of California Press, 2024, 184 pp., $29.95 (paperback).

Ashleigh Greene Wade, **Black Girl Autopoetics: Agency in Everyday Digital Practice**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024, 176 pp., $24.95 (paperback).

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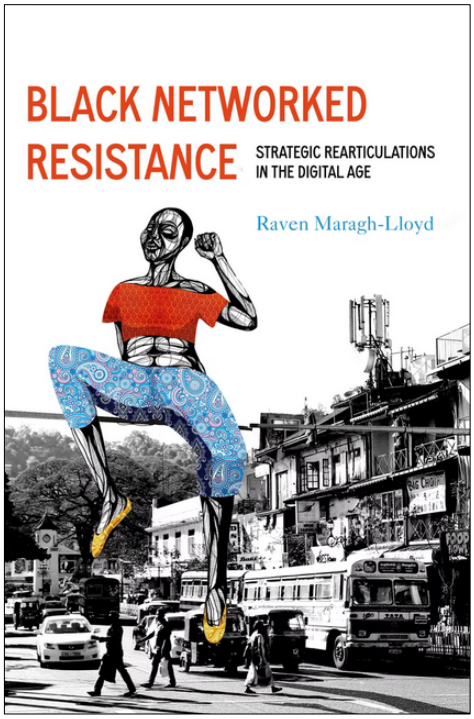
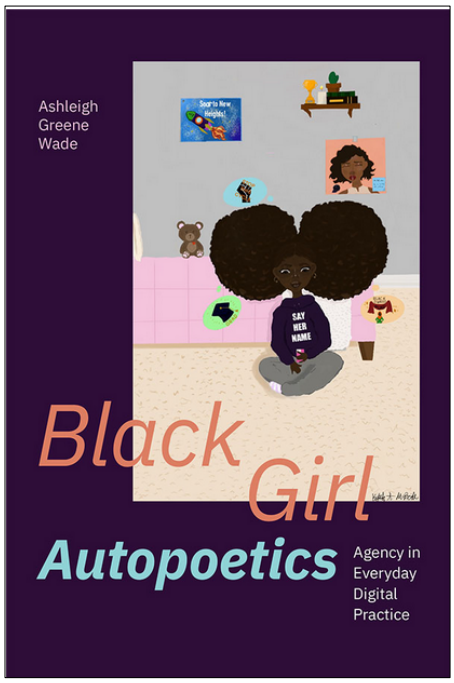


Raven Maragh-Lloyd's ***Black Networked Publics: Strategic Rearticulations in the Digital Age*** and Ashleigh Greene Wade's ***Black Girl Autopoetics: Agency in Everyday Digital Practice*** are two books by Black women scholars written in 2024 that use mixed methodologies to explore the everyday online practices of Black people. Both books anchor themselves in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement. While neither centers the movement specifically, both reference events of the 2020 protests and the role Black people played in documenting the murders of unarmed Black people and calling for justice. It is perhaps unsurprising that multiple authors would be affected by that moment or that it would help shape their work, especially work on the ways Black people use social media platforms.

Raven Maragh-Lloyd takes up the object of resistance; she positions Black social media users as part of networked publics and defines networked publics, citing danah boyd (2011), as both the spaces created by networked technologies such as social media sites and the imagined collectives that emerge when the technology, people, and practices come together. Following boyd (2011), Maragh-Lloyd argues that the interactions of Black social media users and the practices they use to resist racist oppression are structured by the affordances of the platforms they congregate on. She describes these practices of resistance and connects them to historical antecedents that Black publics have used to fight against subjugation.

Every chapter of the book focuses on a different "resistance strategy" that together paint a picture of "Black networked resistance as a historically enriched, connective, and iterative digital practice that intervenes in- and outside of online culture" (p. 3). These strategies are: using humor to fight against surveillance and threats by White women; the work of digital historians; Black women building online networks of care for each other; public debates on celebrities and cancel culture, which demonstrate the

nonmonolithic nature of Black communities; and "evergreen" networks of resistance that change and take on new forms as social media platforms change.



Ashleigh Greene Wade focuses on autopoetics, which she takes from Sylvia Wynter, specifically citing Wynter's 1976 speech "Ethno or Socio Poetics." In it, Wynter (1976) argues that techniques of self-making—autopoetics—tend in the Western world to reproduce a Western bourgeois subject and the ideals of being in the world that come alongside him. However, autopoetics can also produce other modes of being, including counterhegemonic ones (Wynter, 1976). Wade wants to explore how Black girls participate in these processes of self-making; because Black girls are removed from the hegemonic norm (what Wynter calls Man, the White bourgeois Christian male subject of the state), they may feel a greater impetus than other populations to think of and define themselves in creative and different ways. Wade's argument is that their online content and what they have to say about it are instances of their autopoetic practices.

Wade develops this through a mixed-method approach that combines ethnographic study of a group of girls at a high school in Richmond, Virginia, with focus group interviews, content analyses, and interviews of specific online creators. Of these, the ethnography does the most to establish the importance of this argument, and it makes up the first chapter. To conduct participant observation, Wade taught a class on a volunteer basis at a charter school in Richmond that serves a low-income population. Wade documents how (primarily White) school administrators attempt to control the (majority Black) student body's expression to conform to standards of respectability and appropriate behavior. In one instance, Wade recounts a meeting she had with an administrator about a student who had been suspended and threatened with expulsion. In the meeting, the administrator said she wanted to humble the student, who she saw as too prideful; if the student kept this attitude, she would be kept in poverty, the administrator claimed. Outside the classroom, the girls at the school live in an overpoliced neighborhood where regular childhood expression is often too dangerous to engage in. Thus, when Wade shares about how her students find freedom to express themselves online, it is clear why this is important: The students' offline lives are structured in very limiting ways that are intimately linked to their racialization and gendering as Black girls. The rest of the book builds by looking at how Black girls create their own definitions of selfhood through their digital practices; later chapters explore the quotidian everyday content that Black girls post online as an archive of childhood, the politics of hypervisibility, and the reordering of hegemonic temporal structures.

These focal points highlight the texts' similarities and differences. In general, both authors are optimistic, foregrounding the agency of Black people and celebrating it. At the same time, they recognize the inherent ambivalence of their objects, along with the ways that Black publics are not invested in the

same issues and do not agree even when they are. The degree to which their discussions of ambivalence and nonmonolithic Blackness are satisfying can be debated, though.

Still, the overlaps between the two books are many, which speaks to the prevalence of the digital practices they identify, despite the differences in theoretical framing. What follows is a brief exploration of three overlapping areas.

Hyper(in)visibility

Hyper(in)visibility refers to the seeming paradox by which people in vulnerable subject positions are hypervisible and hyperinvisible at the same time. Wade raises the example of Darnella Frazier, the girl who filmed George Floyd's murder in 2020 and was subjected to waves of online harassment and scrutiny before being just as quickly forgotten by the public. Many online commenters criticized Frazier for not intervening in the murder, making invisible the fact that she was a teenager witnessing and recording a traumatic event.

Offline, Black people are often subjected to similar dynamics, where their actions may be hypervisible but their subjectivity hyperinvisible. The first chapter of *Black Networked Resistance* is titled after the 2018 #PermitPatty incident, which saw a White woman call the police on a young Black girl selling water without a permit. The girl's aunt filmed the woman, who had gone to hide in the bushes, saying, "The whole world is gonna see you, boo" (p. 24). The words were practically prophetic: social media sites were soon flooded with memes and commentary about #PermitPatty. These, Maragh-Lloyd argues, call to attention the long history of White women weaponizing the police against Black people; long, too, is the tradition of Black people using humor to point out the absurdity of the ways they are surveilled in everyday life.

Wade also recounts how the students at the high school where she conducted participant observation face pressure from teachers who closely regulate their self-presentation. The teachers assume a connection between "unrespectable" presentation and bad behavior. Their outward expressions are made hypervisible while their agency is made hyperinvisible. In response, some girls choose visibility online, refusing White hegemonic standards of beauty and behavior. Genres of posting Wade calls "ratchet performativity, sexualization, and flexin'" (p. 87) defy the dehumanization that Black girls are subjected to when surveilled in real life by asserting different value systems and creating other norms for girls to live up to.

Archiving

Maragh-Lloyd dedicates her second chapter to the archival practices of Black communities. Drawing on Stuart Hall, she calls archiving a discursive formation that interrupts a field "by allowing for a collection of the past to be read through multiple lenses in the present and future. This kind of interruption is precisely how Black archives function as resistance: by rewriting traditional ontologies of the past" (p. 48). Wade echoes this, exploring archiving as one dimension of rearticulating temporality and reclaiming the past from "hegemonic, linear time" (p. 123). Black communities have a long history of creating their own archives that challenge historical narratives of progress and domination, and Maragh-Lloyd connects

this legacy of Black newspapers, memoirs, and art movements to online creators who share historical facts, challenge common understandings of the past, and critique how progress has been made in years since.

Because of its affordances, Instagram becomes a site of study for both authors. The platform's capabilities make it an attractive site for amateur (or, perhaps we should say "unlicensed") archivists to share their content. Wade looks at @ArtHoeCollective on Instagram, an account created by Black queer people that makes its archival intervention in the realm of art: who makes it, who is depicted in it, and who gets to curate and exhibit it. Art history, too, has acted as a site of Black erasure, and online creators reclaim space within it. Additionally, she argues that the content of regular Black girls serves as an archive of everyday Black childhood, a corrective against "adultification," the process by which Black children are seen by the broader society as adults earlier than their non-Black peers. Other benefits to archiving the everyday are shifts in beauty standards, such as those brought about by the natural hair movement. In this sense, archives are also rewriting the present.

Placemaking and Community

The girls in Wade's study create spaces online where they can present themselves in ways that defy the restrictions put on them at school. At school, they have no control over the ways adults approach and interact with them, but online, they can use social media affordances to structure their audiences. Curating what Wade calls "digital garrets"—after Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Katherine McKittrick's reflections on it (pp. 55–59)—is a strategy Black girls use to take care of themselves. Maragh-Lloyd calls this "filtering" in her discussion of Black women's practices of care. Both articulations refer to being selective online; this selectiveness can range from choosing to only follow Black women/girls/people to reserving certain types of posts for platforms that afford more privacy, like Snapchat.

But privacy does not mean solitude. Maragh-Lloyd's focus group participants recount stories of hyping other Black women up on social media. This is healing for them, too; seeing other Black women succeed provides motivation, and others in the community can cheer on their own successes. Wade sees the digital activities of Black girls as creating maps that, like the Green Book, are not legible to outsiders, creating paths through the digital space that keep other girls safe. While this is no remedy for the spatial dispossession Black communities face in an age of gentrification, she asserts that these spaces Black girls carve out for themselves and each other can help further understandings of placemaking.

Conclusion

Black Networked Resistance and *Black Girl Autopoetics* are accessible entries into the literature of Black Internet cultures. Many frequent users of the Internet will be able to remember specific events cited by the authors and may be able to connect their own memories to their discussions. I laughed out loud, reminisced fondly, and questioned my own participation in some of the examples they reference. Though there is much that is generative in these books, it is important to recognize how billionaire platform owners are contributing to the rise of right-wing rhetoric and policies all over the globe. In the U.S.

context specifically, it can be hard to be optimistic about the potentials of Black digital practices in the face of Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter and Meta's recent end of any pretentions at fact checking. Readers might find the authors' optimism misplaced in the current political landscape or their focus on the quotidian banal. While both authors do effectively argue that the practices they identify are widespread and useful for the people who participate in them, these complications are important and worth discussing.

Maragh-Lloyd frames her project as Afro-optimist as opposed to Afro-pessimist, the latter of which she identifies with a political economy-centric critique of anti-Black racism. Maragh-Lloyd makes the active choice to decenter political economic critiques in favor of looking at the reparative work that Black people conduct online. However, political economy plays an important role in guiding the decisions that determine how social media sites work—they're businesses, and the changes that they make in search of maximizing the time users spend on a particular app, growing advertising revenue, and moderating content that may make them less advertiser-friendly are direct results of their business models. A choice to deliberately focus on the more optimistic side of Black cybercultures is not a bad one, per se. I would argue, though, that it is possible to explore both political economy and the practices that Black users engage in at the same time, especially in a search for the way practices change over time. The rearticulations Maragh-Lloyd writes about are responses to changes in platform architecture, but those are also changes deeply embedded in political economy. The resistance undertaken by Black communities is felt on the political economic level as well. The sites of struggle are inherently interwoven, and looking at both of them together might provide exciting insights that could help further the argument of the book.

The connection between political economy and online practices is most evident when the profit motive of a platform and the well-being of Black people conflict. An instance of this is Wade's discussion of Black girls needing a safe space to develop sexual identity. Wade argues that because Black girls are adultified and seen as grown before their time, their explorations of sexuality are not understood by the broader culture as innocent in the way that those of other children might be. She writes,

> Suggesting Black girls modify their digital content to account for how others sexualize their images (1) assumes Black girls derive no pleasure from being sexual or sexually desirable, (2) absolves the adults who sexualize and prey on Black girls of accountability, and (3) strips Black girls of their sexual agency by denying it exists in the first place. (pp. 99–100)

All of this is true and poignant. However, it is important not to understate the role of the social media platforms in creating and structuring the risks Black girls face online and the ways they profit from these dangers. Black girls should not have to take responsibility for the way bad actors react to their self-presentation; in an ideal world, they would also have avenues for sharing images of themselves that do not profit from their images and the subsequent virality and/or harassment that may ensue as current platforms do. It is a problem that one of the main avenues that Black girls have to express themselves outside of offline repressive structures, the Internet, is able to profit from their harm. This raises the question of what it would take for Black girls to be able to fully own their images and the means to sharing them with each other. The possibilities that Black girls would then have for self-definition and self-making would go far beyond what is currently available to them.

The Internet, if anything, is always changing, and there is always more that could be said. Despite what these books do not say, they can inspire with their focus on simple, everyday actions that have the potential to create change. The lines Maragh-Lloyd draws between current digital practices and earlier means of resistance give us places to look for strategies and victories to spur on the fight. And Wade's insistence that Black girls make ways out of no way every day could be a helpful reminder in the face of an increasingly bleak political landscape. To close, I will leave the reader with Maragh-Lloyd's insistence that Black resistance outruns platforms, strategically reorganizing to rise to the political circumstances of our times, time and time again.

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