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#BlackGirlMagic as Resistant Imaginary

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Abstract

This article concerns itself with the ways that Black women have taken up #BlackGirlMagic as a critical reimagining of their subject positionalities as Black women. I argue that #BlackGirlMagic is a resistant imaginary that has significantly altered the contemporary western social imaginary and suggest that the intersectional ambiguity that Black women animate builds community among Black women toward collective liberation. Bringing together Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, Simone de Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity, and María Lugones's concept of oppressed←→resisting subjects, I argue that #BlackGirlMagic's so-called "magic" is both produced by and produces what José Medina has termed a guerrilla epistemology. In outlining the contours of this epistemology, I demonstrate how #BlackGirlMagic resists through the transmission of knowledge, the creation of a critical genealogy, its visionary orientation, and the development of an insurrectionary counterdiscourse. To illustrate, I briefly discuss how #BlackGirlMagic provides white women with an opportunity for a beneficial form of epistemic friction. In the end, I suggest that #BlackGirlMagic's ability to unite Black women transnationally bodes well for its continued effects on the western social imaginary.

> The conditions within which people are able to construct subjective possibilities and new political subjectivities for themselves are not simply given in the dominant system. They are won in the practices of articulation which produce them.
>
> —Stuart Hall

One day in 2013, a Black woman from Washington, DC, named CaShawn Thompson was watching television and became fed up:

> I noticed that there were a lot of negative things being said about black women online and through other media outlets. It bothered me to no end to hear/read it said that black women were unmarriageable and that we were the least attractive of all the women on the planet. I felt like it was so deeply rooted in racism and sexism and it made me so angry. I felt like there was something that I needed to say to make myself and other women that looked like me to feel better. So I

pulled "Black Girls Are Magic" from the understandings of my childhood as to how I believed black women existed in the world. (Barker 2018)

Within weeks of its initial conception, the tweet and the hashtag therein were shared, retweeted, and tagged thousands of times on social media sites like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.[1] As the hashtag gained more traction in the popular media, hastened by a series of t-shirts bearing the now-truncated phrase "#BlackGirlMagic," increasing numbers of Black women began tagging images and posts of themselves and other Black women with the hashtag. By 2016, #BlackGirlMagic had officially entered into the social imaginary.

#BlackGirlMagic has since become a rallying phrase for Black women around the world. This article explores how Black women have taken up #BlackGirlMagic as a critical reimagining of their subject positionalities as Black women.[2] As "a discourse and a performance," #BlackGirlMagic "can be read as a political, cultural, and historical interpretation of Black femmes, girls and women's lives in relation, directly and indirectly, to Western philosophic thought" (Jordan-Zachery et al. 2019, 26). Scholarship on the importance of #BlackGirlMagic continues to grow in fields such as cultural studies, Black studies, and media studies, but scant attention has been given to the hashtag in the philosophical literature. This being so, I place #BlackGirlMagic in the context of philosophical inquiry by arguing that we should view #BlackGirlMagic as a resistant imaginary. First, I outline the dimensions of the contemporary dominant western social imaginary through a focus on digital social media and Black women as a social network. I move on to describe Black women as the intersectionally ambiguous subjects who enact #BlackGirlMagic. Using Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, Simone de Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity, and María Lugones's concept of oppressed←→resisting subjects, I argue that #BlackGirlMagic's so-called "magic" is both produced by and produces what José Medina has termed a guerrilla epistemology. After outlining the contours of this epistemology, I briefly touch on an additional consequence of #BlackGirlMagic: the possibility it affords to white women's epistemic friction through a discussion of #WhiteGirlMagic. Ultimately, I assert that #BlackGirlMagic is a resistant imaginary that has significantly altered the contemporary western social imaginary and suggest that the intersectional ambiguity that Black women animate through #BlackGirlMagic facilitates the necessary conditions for radical feminist and antiracist solidarity. My discussion focuses on the hashtag as it emerges from the context of the United States, but I argue that the resistance it achieves builds community toward Black women's collective liberation beyond borders.

Black Women in the Dominant Contemporary Western Social Imaginary

#BlackGirlMagic emerges within the context of the contemporary western social imaginary because of both its everyday colloquial use and its traction on social media, where it is often invoked in relation to personal narratives and photographs. Charles Taylor argues that the social imaginary encompasses the following characteristics: first, a focus "on the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, and legends"; second, a notion that the social imaginary "is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society"; and third, that the social imaginary "is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (Taylor 2003, 23). Taylor uses the concept of the social

imaginary to point toward how everyday members of a society organize their under-standings of one another and highlights that everyday common practices are pre-theoretical, though the task of the theorist might be to articulate them. The images and stories that make up the social imaginary are a part of the discourse implicit in the social imaginary. Hence, the social imaginary, as produced by and productive of common practices, locates common understandings.

Digital social media, therefore, become important sites for understanding the con-temporary dominant western social imaginary and the practices that shape and are shaped by it. As composed of images and stories, often to the effect of what media scholar Michele Zappavigna describes as "coupling," social media like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook are inescapable facets of the contemporary social imaginary, to varied ends (Zappavigna 2018, 134). Because social media inform our social imagi-naries, our lived experiences are also informed by the social imaginaries enacted on social media. Because our "reality cannot be disentangled from the racist and transpho-bic [in addition to patriarchal and capitalist] imaginaries that underlie it," notes Gayle Salamon, "the work of resisting such imaginaries [relies] on that same work of imagin-ing" (Salamon 2018, 22–23). In their capacity to produce possibilities for resisting the structures of domination implicit in the social imaginaries Salamon describes, digital social media appear as a fecund site of engagement because they "help activate and sus-tain latent ties that may be crucial to the mobilization of networked publics" and "may bring about disruptions to the stability of powerful hierarchies that grant a movement momentum, which may accumulate over time" (Papacharissi 2016, 4).

As a contouring feature of the contemporary western social imaginary, social media not only reflect everyday lived experiences, but also serve a distinctly imaginative func-tion. The ability to creatively manipulate and edit images and words on social media enables users to envision future collective possibilities. Zizi Papacharissi writes, "con-nective affordances of social media thus. . .invite forms of expression and connection that frequently help liberate the individual and collective imaginations" (4). In this way, social media have a hand in the production of the future-oriented possibilities of the subjects that they construct in and through the social imaginary. These presents and possibilities as reflected through the social imaginary have epistemological, political, and normative dimensions. As Taylor also notes, the social imaginary includes "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (Taylor 2003, 23). The social imaginary has the power to reinforce *and* rearticulate normative scripts.

The contemporary dominant western social imaginary positions Black women as an amalgam of hypervisual "controlling images" (Collins 2005; Fleetwood 2011). Despite the fact that Black women "challenge dominant depictions, used primarily by white het-eronormative power structures" (Jordan-Zachery et al. 2019, 33), they are also potential victims of what Medina terms "ego skepticism," that "internalized lack of appreciation and. . .constant self-questioning [that] can lead to a poor self-esteem, a lack of self-confidence, and even an inferiority complex" (Medina 2013, 42).[3] Black feminist scholar Moya Bailey uses the term "misogynoir" to describe "uniquely co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and inter-locking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization" (Bailey 2021, 1). Because of this, the social imaginary is a site of contestation for Black women, not only in terms of visual representation, but, most important, because of its power to increase or decrease our abilities to live dignified human lives.[4]

Black Girls are Magic: Intersectional Ambiguity

Hashtag as Social Network

It is difficult to pin down the nature of #BlackGirlMagic as a phenomenon because of the various ways it has been circulated and cited in popular media formats from news articles, magazines, blogs, and video series, in addition to social media. Importantly, #BlackGirlMagic emerges from and thrives in the digital sphere. Digital communities like so-called "Black Twitter," for example, exist online as means through which individual Black people can associate and align themselves with other individual Black people to form informal groups (McDonald 2014). In "The Power of Black Girl Magic Anthems: Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé, and 'Feeling Myself' as Political Empowerment," sociologists Aria S. Halliday and Nadia E. Brown write:

> In the 21st century, social media has become an integral site of Black women's political empowerment because of the ways Black women shape the images and discourses that emerge on various platforms. Described as the "water cooler" of social media, Twitter serves as a digital political theater where Black women contextualize their experiences and affirm the intellectual, emotional, and physical labor they exert. (Halliday and Brown 2018, 4)

After Thompson coined the phrase on Twitter, such social media became its primary mode of circulation, as Black women shared and tagged their own and others' posts with #BlackGirlMagic.[5] As #BlackGirlMagic traversed through the digital world, it became featured in other forms of media, invoked as a theme for social events, and uttered as a phrase of emphasis among Black women communicating with one another "irl" (in real life) communities.[6]

   Within social media, the hashtag is understood as a way of flagging one's desire to participate in the discourse associated with the hashtag. That is to say, the "#" comes to signal one's membership in the community of others who also hashtag one's phrase (Zappavigna 2018). "Viewed across aggregated instances," writes Zappavigna, "the hashtag can be interpreted as affording an ambient perspective. It incorporates multiple individualized perspectives as it accumulates meaning. In other words, it is simultaneously the perspective of the user and the perspective of the shared social media stream" (98). As such, #BlackGirlMagic functions relationally to connect individual Black women to others who also share in the hashtag community.

   Therefore, #BlackGirlMagic also functions as a social network of the kind Medina describes in *The Epistemology of Resistance*. He writes, "Social networks constitute a hybrid category in between that of individual actors and that of well-defined social collectivities.. . . When actions become chained, the agents who produce them automatically become members of a social network, even if they are unaware of that membership, that is, even if they are unaware that their action contributes to a particular performative chain through which they become linked to others" (Medina 2013, 226). As a social network of solidarity, then, those Black women who tag #BlackGirlMagic connect themselves and their actions to one another, relying on both personal identification and the use of digital media (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). Papacharissi terms such groups "affective publics" and notes that they "are activated and sustained by feelings of belonging and solidarity, however evanescent those feelings may be" (Papacharissi 2016, 4). Although it emerged during the same time as other hashtag-cum-political movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo,

#BlackGirlMagic has not (and, both interestingly and importantly, most likely will not) coalesce(d) into an institutional political movement, yet it bears both political impetus and impact.[7]

According to collaborative research from Instagram and Spotify that tracked the usage of the #BlackGirlMagic hashtag around the world in 2018, #BlackGirlMagic is a global phenomenon, being used in countries as varied as South Africa, Italy, Brazil, and Canada. Of the ten cities in the world where the hashtag was most frequently tagged, two (London and Toronto) are outside of the United States (Spotify Staff 2018). In Paris, the phrase was invoked in connection to the development of the controversial NYANSAPO Black Feminist festival organized by the Mwasi Collective in 2017 and is currently used to organize events sponsored by the Collective.[8] In South Africa, the phrase has been correlated with the rise of woman-centered collectives (Mahali 2017). As a woman in a BuzzFeed video on the hashtag claims, "The first time I heard #BlackGirlMagic it made me feel tied to all the brown girls around the world" (BuzzFeedVideo 2017).

#BlackGirlMagic also functions as a social network to connect Black women across the African diaspora. Feminist solidarity across racial difference remains a point of inquiry for many feminist theorists, but intragroup solidarity is also fundamental to the achievement of these broader goals. Rashida L. Harrison, Janell Hobson, and Tammy Owens write, "By utilizing these shared principles of resistance, particularly in the realm of the cyber world, #BlackGirlMagic unifies seemingly disparate global feminist political agendas under the 'Black' banner, and constructs a formidable force of activists to combat systemic repression of women in all corners of the world" (Harrison, Hobson, and Owens 2019, 47). Insofar as #BlackGirlMagic calls our attention to the shared challenges and joys of being situated as Black women, it also creates a transnational social network of solidarity whereby Black women from many different places and spaces share their individual, yet collective lived experiences.

Intersectional

Its meaning is similarly difficult to pin down. What, exactly, is the magic of a Black girl? Julia S. Jordan-Zachery and her colleagues argue that #BlackGirlMagic articulates its tenets "in four elements: (1) community building and making, as #BlackGirlMagic serves as a form of intracommunication methodology; (2) challenging dehumanizing representations via a practice of self-definition; (3) rendering Black femmes, girls, and women visible; and (4) restoring what is sometimes violently taken" (Jordan-Zachery et al. 2019, 6). Indeed, #BlackGirlMagic describes and invokes a specifically intersectional subject positionality at the intersection of Blackness and womanness.[9] In "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," Crenshaw outlines three categories of intersectionality: the structural, the political, and the representational. She describes structural intersectionality as "the ways in which the location of women of color at the intersection of race and gender makes our actual experience[s. . .] qualitatively different than that of white women" (Crenshaw 1991, 1245). Part of the fabric of this location includes the fact that Black women "suffer from the effects of multiple subordination, coupled with institutional expectations based on inappropriate nonintersectional contexts. . ." (1251). This sense of what Frances Beale, writing before Crenshaw, terms "double jeopardy," based on structures of power that compound and co-constitute, exemplifies the unique situation of Black women (Beale 1995). In this case, intersectionality draws our

attention to the subject at the center of #BlackGirlMagic: one who is both woman and Black.[10]

Although there is specificity to this subject positionality, #BlackGirlMagic commits itself neither to any orientation toward the reality of race or gender, nor to a monolithic conception of either. Says Thompson, "When I say black girls are magic, I am talking about the black girl with disabilities, I am talking about the lesbian black woman, I am talking about the trans black woman, I am definitely talking about the poor black women and girls. Nobody gets left behind. Because who are we without all of us?" (Thande 2018). Indeed, the plurality of Black women's experiences and orientations toward being Black women is the impetus behind and the result of the phenomenon. For this reason, #BlackGirlMagic, at least in conception, does not fall prey to Crenshaw's critique of an identity politics that subsumes intragroup difference within the mantle of "Black woman."[11] Whereas dominant western social imaginaries offer only a few variations on the controlling images of Black women, #BlackGirlMagic highlights the plethora of ways black women inhabit their Black womanness.[12]

Ambiguity

Nevertheless, of this subject—a Black woman—we can say that her positionality is uniquely ambiguous. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir sets out an ontology and corresponding ethics based on the centrality of ambiguity, which she uses to describe various coterminous opposing aspects of being and lived experience, such as individual/collective, subject to past/subject to future, and so on (Beauvoir 1991, 7). Although ontologically, our ambiguity is the universal human condition, our concrete experiences of our ambiguity (much like our concrete, or situated, experiences of freedom) are contextual and often the result of our particular thrownness in the world (Bergoffen 1997; Kruks 2012). If we understand Black women as facing domination on at least two fronts, then the specific cause of the resulting harms they endure might not be one structure of domination (anti-Black racism) *or* another (patriarchy), but, rather, ambiguously, both.[13] Hence, the depictions of the referents that #BlackGirlMagic names exemplify an "intersectional ambiguity"—an ambiguity borne of the intersection of being raced Black and gendered woman.[14]

An additional level of Black women's intersectional ambiguity emerges here. In describing political intersectionality, Crenshaw writes, "The concept of political intersectionality highlights the fact that women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas. The need to split one's political energies between two sometimes opposing groups is a dimension of intersectional disempowerment that men of color and white women seldom confront" (Crenshaw 1991, 1251–52). The tension Crenshaw pinpoints here might also be understood in terms of ambiguity. In Beauvoir's account of ambiguity, our navigation of the ambiguity of our being is the crux of all of our choices, and said navigation includes within it the experience of tension between the ambiguous aspects of our situatedness. Writes Sonia Kruks, "[Ambiguity] may also denote relationships in which antithetical qualities coexist in agonistic tension. . .[Beauvoir] argues that irresolvable antinomies are constitutive of human existence and that these extend from the ontological to the ethical and the political" (Kruks 2012, 7). For Black women, one of these "irresolvable antinomies" is being positioned at the intersection of these tensions, where we are often forced to direct our political energies in one direction or the other, leaving us to choose which direction to prioritize. Because Black women are understood as having a

responsibility to each of these groups writ large, when the liberatory efforts of each group are framed as opposed, politically engaged Black women have to inhabit that tension. Under these conditions, Black women's subject positionalities are sufficiently typified by the specific tension between being situated as Black and as women, given the contours of western political society.

#BlackGirlMagic draws our attention to yet another way that Black women live their intersectional ambiguity. In addition to the fact that Black women are at least doubly oppressed by their race and their gender, it is also *through* the experience of this double oppression that Black women come to resist their oppressions. As Jeanine Staples writes, #BlackGirlMagic:

> (re)produces, from the people who possess it, art, music, performances, literatures, languages, literacies, sciences, mathematics, technologies, landscapes, relationships, communities, and civilizations. This (re)productivity happens despite relational hardships, material poverty, physical violence, sexual abuse, social marginalization, socioeconomic oppression, academic neglect, mental accosting, and emotional pain. (Staples 2017, 32)

Against a logic of purity that would understand Black women merely as oppressed subjects, Lugones argues for the articulation of a "oppressed←→resisting" subject. She urges that we "think of people who are oppressed as not consumed or exhausted by oppression, but also as resisting or sabotaging a system aimed at molding, reducing, violating, or erasing them. . ." (Lugones 2003, 12). Additionally, Lugones cautions us that "A person may be both oppressed and resistant and act in accordance with both [the logic of oppression and the logic of resistance]" (13). The negotiation of these logics is not settled/finalized, even as they oppose one another. They exist in ambiguous tension.

Because of this, "One may intend ambiguously" (12–13). Hence, the resistance that Black women enact through #BlackGirlMagic is itself an ambiguous form of agency. Lugones points our attention to how resisting subjects can "imbue" themselves with ambiguity: Such resistant subjects are able to imaginatively respond to their (at least) doubled oppression "only when ambiguity is understood and appreciated" (74). Thompson asserts a similar view in a YouTube video on #BlackGirlMagic: "The black girl magic hashtag is about celebration and triumph over struggle, but it's not just one or the other. It's all those things because we encompass all those things. Our struggles build us up, but so do our celebrations and all the happiness and joy we experience, and all those things that come along with being, you know, multidimensional humans. Everything that comes along with being more than just one thing" (BuzzFeedVideo 2017, 2:10). As oppressed ←→resisting subjects, Black women "animate their ambiguity as a tool for resistance" (Bailey 2007, 89). #BlackGirlMagic enacts its ambiguous resistance through its rejection of stereotypes and controlling images afforded to Black women in the dominant social imaginary.[15]

Magic

But what of the magic in #BlackGirlMagic? Though the invocation of magic appears to place #BlackGirlMagic in the realm of the mystical, the magic that #BlackGirlMagic refers to is paradoxically grounded in the material conditions of Black women's lives. It is itself ambiguous. Thompson explains it thus: "I had grown up and been raised

by dynamic black women. Before I could understand anything beyond my favorite fairytales, I had decided that they were all magic" (Barker 2018). The dynamism to which Thompson refers is the intersectional ambiguity that Black women resistantly animate. The focus on the notion of "magic" calls our attention to the ways in which Black women's accomplishments in the face of oppression are "something that people don't always understand," that seem "to come out of thin air, because a lot of times, the only people supporting [black women] are other black women" (Thomas 2015). A review of the existing literature on #BlackGirlMagic reveals two associated trends on social media. Rather than Black women using incantations to assert their control over a supernatural universe, those who use the #BlackGirlMagic hashtag tend to couple it 1) to amazing/exemplary individual/group successes or 2) with everyday practices that exemplify Black women's agency. Importantly, this agency is *embodied*. That Black women face double and multiple oppressions and not only survive, but succeed and thrive, might explain why #BlackGirlMagic conjures the supernatural in a way that defies logic. Staples writes, "Black Girl Magic is *so magical* it can actually withstand and use such injustices and attempts to dehumanize and erase as fodder for its persistent existence. . . . As such, this magic is seen as unbelievably weird, undeniably alluring, incomparably inspiring, and absolutely threatening" (Staples 2017, 32).

This threat, it seems, extends not only to those who are not Black girls, but also, some argue, to Black women themselves. Because of such controlling images as the "magical negro" and the mammy, some Black women cite being wary of the association between Black women and magic.[16] As Linda Chavers argues in *Elle Magazine*, "The 'strong, black woman' archetype, which also includes the mourning black woman who suffers in silence, is the idea that we can survive it all, that we can withstand it. That we are, in fact, superhuman. Black girl magic sounds to me like just another way of saying the same thing, and it is smothering and stunting. It is, above all, constricting rather than freeing" (Chavers 2016). Here, Chavers suggests that we should not romanticize Black women's continued labor in the face of multiple oppressions. Rather, instead of focusing on the ways Black women must resist oppression in order to survive, we should set our focus on the elimination of the oppressions themselves and how they create the very conditions that necessitate our "magic" in the first place. Consequently, some Black women worry that #BlackGirlMagic may position Black women to expect their oppressions as a condition of their being in the world, a condition of their magic. Here, "magic" strips Black women of their humanity and the rights and material conditions that should be afforded thereto.

In response to this, some Black women point toward the phrase's origin.[17] Ashley Ford, responding directly to Chavers, argues, "Black Girl Magic moves way beyond the trope of impenetrable strength, and because it was created by a black woman, includes the inside joke of calling what we've always known to be real about our capabilities 'magic'" (Ford 2016). Here, magic is cast as a humorous bit of intragroup epistemology that originates from the group itself. As a result, the magic of #BlackGirlMagic is the grammatical object that gives the intersectionally ambiguous modifiers "Black" and "girl" their resistant force. #BlackGirlMagic is both produced by and produces magic. Bin Adewunme writes:

> At its best, [#BlackGirlMagic] creates a waterfall effect of good news, of black women living life on their terms, succeeding beyond every expectation. It exists for the parade-worthy achievements, but also for the little victories and innovations that move us as individuals and as a collective. . . . And on buoyant days

when I feel invincible, the idea of that magic feels like the sun on my face: pure and life-giving. (Adewunme 2017, 6)

Here, the resistant magic of #BlackGirlMagic is both in the magic that is represented and in the representation of that magic. It is a representation of resistant agency that is itself a form of resisting agency—"giving life" to (that is, animating) the continued resistant efforts of Black women.

Chavers and others misinterpret something else about the magic of #BlackGirlMagic. Because Chavers's argument relies on an interpretive heuristic that conflates #BlackGirlMagic with exceptionalism, Chavers elides the ways that many Black women invoke #BlackGirlMagic in an effort to claim the humanity of their everyday being. Black women tag #BlackGirlMagic not only to moments of institutional achievement, but also to achievements of the mundane sort that exemplify that and how they have survived—as embodied resistance, staring the world in the face. In focusing on only one half of the oppressed←→ resisting intersectional ambiguity expressed in #BlackGirlMagic, Chavers's interpretation of #BlackGirlMagic erases the second half. Yes, Black women's agency is enmeshed in the oppressions they face, but not limited in scope or by time to said oppressions. Sociologists Quenette Walton and Olubunmi Basirat Oyewuwo-Gassikia assert, "#BlackGirlMagic is a strengths-based representation of Black womanhood that both examines their intersectional realities and gives Black women permission to express emotion, to struggle, and to overcome" (Walton and Oyewuwo-Gassikia 2017, 465). In this, it upholds the intersectionally ambiguous tension of oppressed←→resisting subjectivity as an important and central part of sociopolitical agency.

#Blackgirlmagic: Guerrilla Epistemology

The magic of #BlackGirlMagic also has epistemological dimensions. Professional Black Girl[18] Founder and Africana Studies scholar Yaba Blay asserts in an interview in *The Root*, "To me, us saying 'black girls are magic,' it is to say knowing what we know—about the historical, the social, the economic, the political conditions—we look at black women at the bottom of the totem pole in a lot of ways. And *still*, we find a way to do what we need to do, look good doing it, and enjoy ourselves. . .'" (Kai 2019). As such, first, #BlackGirlMagic centers the epistemological standpoints of Black women, where Black women's lived experiences of intersectional ambiguity offer them privileged access to the workings of structures of domination and to the social imaginary that attends to their condition in the world.[19] Second, #BlackGirlMagic posits that this resulting knowledge enables them to survive in hostile conditions—it provides knowledge in the form of resistance strategies and alternative means of thriving.

Furthermore, #BlackGirlMagic resists through transmitting knowledge. Ford writes, "What makes black girls magic is not an inherent access to some form of super strength. Magic is about knowing something that others don't know or refuse to see. When a black woman is successful, and the world refuses to see her blood, sweat, and tears behind the win, what does it look like? Magic. It's not for them. It's for us" (Ford 2016). Here, #BlackGirlMagic turns a politics of refusal on its head—where others deny the complexity of Black women's effort, Black women contest the dominant social imaginary to assert their agency.[20] In so doing, #BlackGirlMagic also serves the function of epistemological transmission of the fact that Black women face unique challenges

and that these challenges have been met and exceeded. This chain of knowledge becomes yet another strategy for survival. In #BlackGirlMagic, Black women summon one another: "This is how I got over. This is how you, too, might." #BlackGirlMagic enables Black women to articulate their own resistant epistemology, asserting "something that others don't see or refuse to acknowledge." In this, #BlackGirlMagic counters racist/misogynist epistemologies of ignorance that refuse to recognize both the need for the elimination of the structures of oppression that confine Black women and the dynamic methods and assertions of resistance that they have historically displayed.

#BlackGirlMagic invokes the legacy of Black women's resistance to sexism and racism, laying the groundwork for a critical genealogy. Because of its origin on digital social media, #BlackGirlMagic has developed a digital archive, which serves to correct the historical record about Black women's intellectual and cultural contributions to society. Tagging a vintage photograph of one's grandmother cooking for the family, for example, highlights the mundane ways that Black women have contributed to history. Such gestures mark other Black women as potential epistemic heroes, where the resistant knowledge is transmitted through a symbolic encounter with Black women's intersectionally ambiguous magic. This serves as a critical genealogy of Black women's labors of care and determination both for themselves and for others. As political scientist and commentator Melissa Harris Perry notes, "What I like about Black Girl Magic. . . is that it designates those moments when black girlhood or black womanhood isn't being used for surplus labor value for some other system, but just for your damn self" (Mathew 2016). In cataloging Black women's social and political agency, #BlackGirlMagic serves as a recovery of Black women's historical resistance strategies.

The social network that #BlackGirlMagic creates not only recovers the past, but also, through the transformation of collective self-knowledge, serves a visionary function. As it contests dominant imaginaries, it encourages Black girls and women to reexamine their self-perceptions. In producing a paradigm of knowledge—both about Black women's subject positionalities and about their lived experiences, #BlackGirlMagic open up new possibilities for liberation. 2014 US outdoor track and field champion Ajee' Wilson proclaims, "I display my Black Girl Magic through running, and I take a great responsibility in doing so. In America, black women have the highest rates of inactivity across all demographics, which is a leading risk factor in cardiovascular disease and dozens of other conditions. I hope when black girls of all ages see me on the track, they see some part of themselves and become motivated to get out there and get moving!" (Rocque 2016). Wilson exemplifies the way that #BlackGirlMagic can lead Black women to a different understanding of themselves through responses to particular challenges that face Black women. In this, #BlackGirlMagic alters the future landscape of the dominant social imaginary.

Hence, we can view #BlackGirlMagic as the development of an alternative epistemology that creates an insurrectionary counterdiscourse. Since internalization of stereotypes can affect agency and understanding of potential for agency, this kind of counterdiscourse also provides individual and collective motivation. The fact that Black women are naming their magic for *themselves* is important. As this counterdiscourse is not aimed at convincing others outside the group, but others *within* the group, it constructs an alternative epistemology from the inside out. As a phrase that is "for us, by us," the primary normative force of #BlackGirlMagic is intragroup. I contend that #BlackGirlMagic is also an example of a guerrilla pluralism that tries to "provoke and re-energize" struggles, implicitly focusing on "the gaps, discontinuities, tensions, and clashes among perspectives and discursive practices" (Medina 2013,

284). Medina argues that guerrilla pluralism "is necessary in the face of radical exclusions" "because when available discourses leave no room for certain voices to be heard or to sound intelligible, these excluded standpoints have to develop voices and acquire agency in opposition to the available discursive practices, that is, in counterdiscourses" (290). Because #BlackGirlMagic depicts Black women and girls *as* agents, by highlighting the various things that Black women *do*, it broadens access to the lived experiences of Black women.

#Whitegirlsaremagic Tears: Epistemic Friction[21]

Although intragroup solidarity and the collective liberation of Black women are the most important impetuses behind #BlackGirlMagic, an additional consequence of the epistemology produced by #BlackGirlMagic can be found in white women's responses of epistemic friction. Epistemic friction involves the "contestation of differently normatively structured knowledges" and interrogation of "epistemic exclusions, disqualification, and hegemonies," and hence provides those who have historically perpetuated exclusions to reflect about their own positionalities. (Medina 2013, 281) Much like the #AllLivesMatter/#BlueLivesMatter responses to #BlackLivesMatter, the hashtags #WhiteGirlsAreMagic and #WhiteGirlMagic inevitably emerged on social media in response to #BlackGirlMagic (Blay 2015). Those who saw #WhiteGirlMagic as a critique of #BlackGirlMagic cited the hashtag's needless emphasis on race. Some suggested that if the tables were turned, and the phrase "white girls are magic" was used instead, they would be susceptible to being labeled racist (BBC 2016). In November, 2018, a Black woman named Jacqueline Washington shared on Facebook a note she received from her daughter's school, reporting that her daughter Mariah was "walking around the classroom yelling 'I have black girl magic!' to her white female classmates." The teacher went on: "While we want Mariah to feel empowered this made some of the other girls cry. I hope that you would be willing to speak with her about this" (Harris 2018).

These instances illustrate the types of possible resistance leveled against the counterdiscourse of #BlackGirlMagic. For some, #BlackGirlMagic is a discourse that produces epistemic frictions of the sort aforementioned. Racial and gendered ignorance of one's own subject positionality forecloses the possibilities for the types of epistemic lucidity for which Medina advocates. When one is confronted with a challenge to one's dominant epistemology, friction occurs. Medina describes two types of epistemic friction, one of which includes beneficial epistemic friction: "a friction that enables us to acknowledge and engage alternative viewpoints and to reach epistemic equilibrium among alternative perspectives on a problem or phenomenon. Through this friction, epistemic counterpoints can also enable subjects and communities to detect and sensitize themselves to their blind spots and shared self-ignorance" (Medina 2013, 176). In this case, we might say that, for white women, hearing or being confronted with #BlackGirlMagic could produce epistemic friction for at least two simultaneous reasons: first, Black women are naming an alternate articulation of themselves that does not jibe with the dominant imaginary and, second, this idea sheds light on the relationships that many non-Black women and men have had with Black women. The naming of this hitherto unstated epistemology is then perceived as threatening.

Specifically, the emphasis on magic is unsettling to power dynamics of domination that place white women above Black women in the race–gender hierarchy. Michael Harriot asserts, with a twist of irony, "White girls are magic. Maybe not to you or

me [as Black people], but to America. If you think Whiteness is sacred in this country, there is nothing more exquisitely protected, hailed and celebrated in the entire universe as White femininity" (Harriot 2016). When Black women assert their own magic for themselves, they resist/disrupt the need for white validation that is at the center of the dominant social imaginary concerning white women. Nicole R. Fleetwood writes:

> Within classic visual narratives and historical discourse, whether rendered asexual in the figure of the mammy, ambivalent or sexually submerged as in the trope of the passing woman, or bestial as in representations of the jezebel, black women are produced through visual signs as in excess of idealized white femininity. Through various renderings in visual culture the black female body and the sexual imaginary associated with that body not only set the boundaries around which idealized white femininity is understood and visualized, but as art critic Lorraine O'Grady argues, both the black female and the black male function in dominant representational codes "to cast the difference of white men and white women into sharper relief." In other words, the black woman as excess establishes the boundaries for normative codes of the white female body and femininity. (Fleetwood 2011, 110–11)

Because white women's superiority is in part based on the power they are afforded via their racial dominance and codes of femininity, #BlackGirlMagic signals a loss of power for white women, which might cause them either to reevaluate their part in the conditions that produce Black girl magic or to desire that white girls, too, be deemed magic.

  Those white women who see in #BlackGirlMagic a separatist rhetoric designed to diminish white women's confidence display an ignorance of the relative privileges afforded to white women and girls. Thompson responds, "'I don't think [#WhiteGirlsAreMagic is] necessary because white women haven't had all the problems that black women have'" (BBC 2016). Indeed, there would be something unsettling about the idea that the intersection of whiteness and womanness produces some kind of magic, at least insofar as it has been shored up by #BlackGirlMagic. White women's primary social identities are at least partially premised upon white women's domination of Black people at large and Black women in particular (especially in situations supposedly premised upon solidarity) (Browne 2018). Additionally, because #BlackGirlMagic "comes from within the community, [Black women] are setting that standard [themselves]," comments Jenn M. Jackson. "[Black women] are choosing to see something magical in black womanhood, and we're not comparing it to anything else" (BBC 2016). The intersectionally ambiguous subject positionality of Black women that includes the ambiguity of their double oppression and the tensions experienced because of their specific oppressions both produces and is produced by the magic necessary to survive as a Black girl or woman, outside of Black women's conscious acknowledgment of white women.

  In addition to its central ability to create community among Black women, #BlackGirlMagic provides the opportunity for white women to examine their own epistemologies. Imagine, for instance, that instead of sending home a note to the magical black girl's mother, the teacher had, instead opened up a space for dialogue. Mightn't she have said, "Let's talk about the kinds of obstacles to self-esteem that black girls like your classmate have to deal with"? This may sound simplistic, and perhaps inappropriate for an elementary school classroom discussion, but white feminist

women who see antiracist work as a part of a comprehensive feminist outlook can take on the challenge of viewing #BlackGirlMagic in the counterdiscursive way for which I have argued. If we define radical feminist solidarity as "the cultivation of an ever-expanding accountability and responsiveness to indefinitely many others," then the beneficial friction produced by #BlackGirlMagic provides the conditions for a necessary first step for those who are not named by the phrase (Medina 2013, 302). The self-reflection that it engenders is necessary if white women's claims to desire solidarity with Black women are sincere.

Mantras, Prayers, and Promises of our Survival[22]

#BlackGirlMagic results in an alteration of the epistemological field and social imaginary with regard to Black women. Through this epistemic achievement, #BlackGirlMagic serves as a counterdiscursive, resistant imaginary that could be termed both guerrilla (deconstructive) and melioristic (constructive).[23] As what Lugones terms a *curdled* discourse, #BlackGirlMagic "reveals the devaluation of ambiguity as *threatening*" and serves as "a meta comment" to hegemonic assumptions about Black women's lived experiences (Lugones 2003, 117). Yet it also serves a meliorative, constructive purpose insofar as it brings to the fore the kinds of epistemic frictions that, through their popularity and widespread usage, can give way to the epistemic equilibriums necessary to achieving epistemic justice.

As a resistant imaginary, #BlackGirlMagic has fundamentally altered the landscape of the social imaginary about Black women. It should be noted that results of such shifts are yet to be seen. As cultural theorist Stuart Hall reminds us again and again, shifts in the social imaginary happen slowly over time and take up the logics of the historical moment to enact resistance. And further, "every such formation, every struggle for change, has contradictory effects as well as limits. One cannot ignore the negative side in defending the positive contributions it advances, but one cannot ignore the gains that are made while condemning its defeats" (Hall 2016, 188–89). #BlackGirlMagic needn't be understood as the teleological end of Black women's liberation nor as the only work needed to secure this liberation. Epistemic agency cannot be the only type of agency that Black women enact. Yaba Blay, when reflecting on #BlackGirlMagic, sounds hesitant:

> I'm watching trends, that's all I'm seeing. I even think "black girl magic" is a trend. I don't even think black people using "black girl magic" actually believe that black girls are magic . . . I don't think we believe it . . . not even black women. I think that we are going with the flow, and now, Google has given us all permission to use it, because we're still following mainstream and white leads. So now, Google says "black girl magic," and now it's okay? I just don't trust us, and I don't believe us. (Kai 2019)

In addition to being monetized by corporations, #BlackGirlMagic has also been embraced by pandering politicians like Hillary Clinton, who exclaimed to the audience at the Black Women's Agenda in 2016, "While your stories are often missing from the history books, make no mistake, you are the changemakers, the path breakers and the ground shakers. And you are proof that yes indeed, black girl magic is real" (Levine 2016; Kai 2019). Such concepts as the "double self" suggest that the self constructed in our digital lives might not be a reflection of our actions in the real world.[24]

Proclaiming "Black is Beautiful," though empowering to a generation of Black Americans, did not necessarily make it the case.

The instruments of counterdiscursive shifts and melioration are never pure nor intended to dominate the social imaginary indefinitely. But because "[p]ossibilities flourish when we dwell in ambiguity" (Bailey 2007, 91), processes of deconstructing and meliorating are also ambiguous, especially insofar as they are tied to the resisting←→oppressed subjects of #BlackGirlMagic. If #BlackGirlMagic, as ambiguous, is viewed as threatening, it is so "because it is creative, changing, defiant of norms meant to subdue it." But, as Lugones also reminds us, "we find our people as we make the threat good, day to day, attentive to our company in our groups, across groups" (Lugones 2003, 116). As we commit ourselves to widening the field of possibility for ourselves and others, we must recognize the cultural work and the conditions that have produced and continue to produce resistant imaginaries, which in turn produce new possibilities for our liberation. Taylor asks, "What exactly is involved when a theory penetrates and transforms the social imaginary?" And answers:

> For the most part, people take up, improvise, or are inducted into new practices. These are made sense of by the new outlook, the one first articulated in theory; this outlook is the context that gives sense to the practices. Hence the new understanding comes to be accessible to the participants in a way it wasn't before. It begins to define the contours of their world and can eventually come to count as the taken-for-granted shape of things, too obvious to mention. (Taylor 2003, 29)

As a resistant imaginary built upon an intersectionally ambiguous resistant epistemology, #BlackGirlMagic reminds us that "Loving blackness [and womanness] as political resistance transforms our ways of looking and being, and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life" (hooks 2001, 65). This work requires critical reflection on the ways we collectively reimagine our worlds. As #BlackGirlMagic becomes more a part of the transnational Black feminist landscape, it "often challenges and redefines what it means to be Black and a woman in oppressive spaces" and "by challenging existing notions of Blackness and womanhood particularly within Western capitalist systems, Black women discover the power to define that which more accurately reflects the realities of their lives" (Harrison, Hobson, and Owens 2019, 44). Those of us who commit to Black women's liberation and to articulating the ambiguous intersections of new political subjectivities do the work of reclaiming Black life for ourselves and for our future magical subjects.

Notes

1 For more on the history of the hashtag, of which the origin and propriety are a source of controversy, see Jones 2019.

2 I appreciate and empathize with Black feminist scholar Moya Bailey's reservations about the category 'woman' that is referred to throughout this article. For a useful discussion of those who are often elided or assumed when the phrase 'Black women' is used, see: Bailey 18–22. While I partially address this in the article, I want to name Black queer and trans women as members of the network of Black women included herein.

3 Black women have a long history of contending with and resisting the dominant western social imaginary. For more about the history and genealogy of Black women in the dominant western social imaginary through popular media and visual culture, see hooks 1995a; Keyes 2000; Collins 2005; Bradley 2015; Cobb 2015; Fleetwood 2015; Slatton 2016; Bradley 2021.

4 For more about how this plays out in the internet dating world, see Rudder 2015; Buggs 2017; Henderson 2020.

5 For more on Black women's engagement with social media, see Macias 2015.

6 See the sketch "Courtroom Kiki" from the HBO sketch comedy series, *Black Lady Sketch Show*, for a humorous example of Black women using the phrase "Black Girl Magic" (*Black Lady Sketch Show* 2019).

7 It is also important to note that—no matter whom one credits with coining the term—it shares the time period of its genesis with the entrance of Black Lives Matter into the US collective consciousness at the end of 2012. Misty Copeland, the first Black principal dancer with the American Ballet Theatre, and former United States President Barack Obama discuss the connection between these movements in Scott 2016.

8 For more on the festival, see Daldorph 2017.

9 Because I am focused on the framework of ambiguity described by Beauvoir and Lugones, my discussion focuses on the double oppression of Black women, while simultaneously acknowledging that many Black women are oppressed conterminously by multiple—not just two—structures of domination. Recall Crenshaw's infamous traffic analogy in Crenshaw 1989.

10 For more on the genealogy and history of what sometimes becomes subsumed into the concept "intersectionality," see May 2015; Collins and Bilge 2020.

11 For more on how this functions and its relation to political Blackness in an international context, see Swaby 2014.

12 Importantly, the English-language origins of the phrase might delimit its usage for and by non-English speaking women of the African diaspora. The Anglo-linguistic nature of the phrase calls our attention to Afrofeminist criticisms of American Black women's centeredness in theory about Black women. For more about this, see Emejulu and Sobande 2019. For an interesting perspective from a non-Black-identifying Latinx woman of color about how she relates to #BlackGirlMagic, see Cruz 2016. I look forward to reading more such perspectives and want to acknowledge their importance to these discussions.

13 The ways that Black women are positioned to experience various ambiguities is a fecund area of research. Ralina Joseph offers an additional and critically important way that Black women in the media animate ambiguity through postracial resistance, see Joseph 2018.

14 For more on the concept of intersectional ambiguity, see Mason 2018.

15 For more on "controlling images" and other stereotypical representations of Black women in the popular media and visual culture, see hooks 1995b; Keyes 2000; Collins 2005; Fleetwood 2011; Bradley 2015; Slatton 2016.

16 For more on the "magical negro," see Glenn and Cunningham 2009.

17 Some also make note of the ableism implied in Chavers's account. See, Jordan-Zachery et al. 2019, x.

18 According to the website, Professional Black Girl is a "multi-platform digital community that celebrates the everyday magic of Black women and girls! By announcing ourselves 'Professional Black Girls,' we assert an unapologetic identity in a world that too often tries to tell us how we 'ought to' act. We know that 'acting' like anything other than ourselves robs us of our freedom, so instead, we choose, embrace, and celebrate who we are. We are professional code-switchers. We hold Ph.Ds and listen to trap music. We twerk and we work" (Professional Black Girl n.d.).

19 Although I am not arguing here that #BlackGirlMagic is either inherently feminist or antiracist, I do think further analysis toward this claim might be found in the framework of Black feminist standpoint

theory. On Black feminist standpoint, see Collins 1991. For a helpful framing of Collins's black feminist epistemology, see Dotson 2015.

20 For more on the politics of refusal and the genesis of the concept in Afro-pessimism, see Wilderson et al. 2017.

21 I have described Black women's subject positionality as typified by the tension described by "All the women are white, all the men are black, but some of us are brave," but it should be noted that Black men responded to #BlackGirlMagic not by attempting to appropriate the phrase, but rather by pointing toward a unique area of resistance afforded by their own intersectional ambiguity: #BlackBoyJoy. For more about this, see Santanta 2017.

22 For more on the history of this, see Jones-Rogers 2019.

23 For more on Medina's conception of guerrilla and melioristic pluralisms, see Medina 2013, 297.

24 For more about this, see Turkle 2015.

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