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ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

**Young African American Women and their Environment: Contemporary African
American Feminine Identities, Political Views and the Sense of Security**

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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In Prague, on May 1 2023.

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in exploring the unique experiences of marginalized communities and how their experiences are reflected in contemporary literature. This thesis analyses and focuses on young African American women and their environment, specifically how the environment that surrounds them becomes reflected in parts of their identities. The particular features analyzed in this bachelor thesis include the contemporary African American feminine identity, political views as an identity feature, and a sense of security, all concerning the concept of environment. These distinct elements are explored in three contemporary novels by young African American women writers: *Such a Fun Age* by Kiley Reid, *Nightcrawling* by Leila Mottley and *The Other Black Girl* by Zakiya Dalila Harris. The goal of this thesis is to show how much young African American women are affected by their surroundings and what it means to be a young black woman in contemporary American society. Most importantly, this thesis explores how vital of a role femininity, one's political views, safety and security play in one's life. One of the outputs of this work is a short comparison of several intense situations/events that the main characters of the three novels experience. This thesis also briefly introduces the various terms and concepts that play a role in this work. After establishing essential terminology, the focus of the discussion turns to the exploration of the three contemporary African American novels mentioned above. This An analysis of the main characters and themes is offered, the main characters being all young African American women living in modern-day America. Each chapter is dedicated to each novel. The terminology knowledge is used to bridge the concepts concerning the novels' characters and themes in each of the chapters. Respected secondary sources are employed as well. The work also investigates how these literary representations link with broader social, political and cultural challenges affecting African American women. In conclusion, this thesis helps us grasp young African American women's perspectives and experiences more deeply. Shedding light on the intricate

relationship between race, gender, politics and the environment in modern America, it examines the themes and character development in contemporary African American literature. Furthermore, this thesis emphasizes the need to focus on the experiences of young African American women while addressing social and political dilemmas in modern-day American society.

Key Words

contemporary African American feminine identity, identity, young African American women, safe environment, political views, security, intersubjectivity, authenticity vs. success, social classes, racism, intersectional vs. white feminism

Abstrakt

V posledních letech roste zájem o zkoumání jedinečných zkušeností marginalizovaných komunit a o to, jak se jejich zkušenosti odrážejí v současné literatuře. Tato práce se zaměřuje a analyzuje mladé Afroameričanky a jejich prostředí, konkrétně na to, jak se prostředí, kterým jsou obklopeny, odráží v částech jejich identity. Konkrétní rysy analyzované v této bakalářské práci zahrnují současnou afroamerickou ženskou identitu, politické názory jako jeden z rysů identity a pocit bezpečí, z hlediska konceptu prostředí. Tyto výrazné prvky jsou zkoumány ve třech současných románech mladých afroamerických spisovatelek: *Such a Fun Age* od Kiley Reid, *Nightcrawling* od Leily Mottley a *The Other Black Girl* od Zakiyi Dalily Harris. Cílem práce je ukázat, jak moc jsou mladé Afroameričanky ovlivněny svým okolím, co znamená být mladou černoškou v současné americké společnosti. A především práce zkoumá, jak zásadní roli v životě afroamerické ženy vlastně hraje její ženství, politické názory, bezpečí a pocit jistoty. Jedním z výstupů mé práce je i krátké srovnání několika intenzivních situací či událostí, které hlavní hrdinky zmíněných tří novel zažívají. Práce stručně představuje jednotlivé pojmy a koncepty, které v této práci hrají roli. Po stanovení základní terminologie se těžiště diskuse obrací ke zkoumání tří výše zmíněných současných afroamerických románů. Práce analyzuje hlavní postavy a témata, neboť všechny hlavní postavy jsou mladé Afroameričanky žijící v současné Americe. Každá kapitola je věnována jednotlivým románům. Znalost terminologie je využita k propojení pojmů ve vztahu k postavám a tématům románů v každé z kapitol. Využívány jsou v této práci i respektované sekundární zdroje. Bakalářská práce také zkoumá, jakým způsobem se tyto literární reprezentace propojují s širšími společenskými, politickými a kulturními problémy, které se dotýkají afroamerických žen. Závěrem lze říci, že tato práce nám pomáhá hlouběji pochopit perspektivy a zkušenosti mladých afroamerických žen. Práce osvětluje komplexní vztah mezi rasou, genderem, politikou a prostředím v moderní Americe tím, že zkoumá témata a vývoj postav v současné afroamerické literatuře. Dále tato práce

zdůrazňuje potřebu zaměřit se na zkušenosti mladých afroamerických žen a zároveň řešit sociální a politická dilemata v současné americké společnosti.

Klíčová slova

současná afroamerická ženská identita, identita, mladé afroamerické ženy, bezpečné prostředí, politické názory, bezpečnost, intersubjektivita, autenticita, úspěch, sociální třídy, rasismus, intersekcionalní vs. bílý feminismus

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1. Introduction

Just how much are young African American women affected by their surroundings? What does it mean to be a young black girl in contemporary American society? Most importantly, how significant of a role do femininity, one's political views, safety and security truly play? This thesis focuses on young African American women and their environment, particularly how is the environment they are surrounded by reflected in parts of their identities. The specific features analysed on the following pages include the contemporary African American feminine identity, political views as an identity feature and a sense of security, all concerning the concept of environment. My hypothesis is that without an environment where one feels safe and recognized, one's identity and a sense of authenticity - when tested - will suffer or even crumble down. This hypothesis and the above-mentioned distinct elements will be explored in three contemporary novels by young African American women writers; *Such a Fun Age* by Kiley Reid, *Nightcrawling* by Leila Mottley and *The Other Black Girl* by Zakiya Dalila Harris.

There are countless reasons for choosing this particular topic, some more painstakingly obvious than others. This subject matter is very intriguing to me, but more importantly, it is the essence of today's political climate in the United States, the post-Trump era, police brutality, Black Lives Matter movement, systemic racism, racial biases, hate crimes, classism, "white wokeness", sexism, interracial relationships, the importance of intersectional feminism and the dangers of toxic masculinity. Numerous serious social phenomena contribute to the abstract and literal idea behind a young African American woman's environment. Hence why this topic is worth a serious discussion.

As for methodology, I will use the method of close reading, as well as - in some chapters - analysis based on performative theory (i.e. I will look at what words/phrases "do" to the characters of the novels). Apart from the above-mentioned methods, I will also try to

define the various terms and concepts that play a role in this work. With these means, I will explore the three contemporary African American novels mentioned above. I will focus on the main characters and themes, as the main characters are all young African American women living in modern-day America. I will then use that knowledge to attempt to bridge the concepts in relation to the novels' characters and themes. I will employ the use of respected secondary sources as well. Lastly, I will try to summarize all the meaningful information, compare the three novels briefly - focusing on their most intense situations - and arrive at a - hopefully - valuable conclusion. The contents of this thesis represent my interpretations and I am fully aware that no one can fully grasp the complexity of what it truly means to be a young African American woman in today's American society, besides young African American women themselves. It is a lived experience that no dictionaries or people of different backgrounds can ever fully relate to or understand. Hence why a disclaimer of that kind needs to be stated.

I will first look at the definition of environment. The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes the environment as the following:

“The physical surroundings or conditions in which a person or other organism lives, develops, etc., or in which a thing exists; the external conditions in general affecting the life, existence, or properties of an organism or object.”¹

Environment as a set of external conditions is what I will explore in my analysis of the novels in detail. However, the internal environments of the characters, which include internalizations of external norms, stereotypes, images and ideas will be discussed as well.

¹ “environment,” OED Online. February 2023. Oxford University Press, accessed February 2, 2023, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/63089?redirectedFrom=environment>.

This thesis also inspects just how is the environment of the novels' main characters reflected in specific parts of their identities, the first one being contemporary African American feminine identity. Which is why in the next concept I will attempt to find the proper description of femininity. It is, indeed, a concept hard to grasp. Femininity, according to Gonzalez and Spencer, "encompasses dynamic sociocultural, psychological, and visible traits and characteristics that are conventionally associated with the birth sex of girls and women in a given culture and are informed by sociocultural contexts."² However, what it means to be a young African American woman in the contemporary United States is much more intricate than that. I will now attempt to explore my interpretations of the complexities of contemporary African American feminine identity.

In the United States, Black women face some of the same feminine expectations as White women. However, given their unique socialization experiences, Black women may not be able to relate to the Eurocentric interpretation of femininity. Various theories suggest that femininity may look different for Black women than for White women due to their distinct racial and gender socialization experiences (see for example Toni Morrison's work *Playing in the Dark*). In addition to more traditional norms such as familial care, investment in physical appearance and self-respect for one's body and life in general, Black women may regard the norms of strength, independence, and perseverance as key elements of femininity.³

This suggests that hegemonic femininity, the dominant culture's standard of norms ascribed to women through gender roles, might not even accurately and fully reflect African American women's feminine norms. Aside from traditional femininity traits like selflessness,

² Cesar A. Gonzalez and Katie Spencer, "Femininity," *The International Encyclopedia of Human Sexuality* (2015): 839.

³ Ashlee Wynell Davis, "African American femininity: An investigation of the hegemonic and unique culturally specific norms defining womanhood" (Diss. University of Akron, 2018), 2.

dependence, passivity, emotional sensitivity and submissiveness, African American women's gender roles reflect traits like independence, self-reliance, resilience and nurturance.⁴

In my opinion, many facets of life are influenced by identity, including our worldview and behavior, and one's political identity only proves this to be true. I will now attempt to explain the concept of political identity. Political identity is best understood, in my view, as an inner narrative of one's political self. Gentry writes that identity is the story we tell ourselves and others about who we are, who we were and who we want to be in the future.⁵ On the other hand, how does this concept work in terms of political understanding of identity? Identity development as a process and identity as a status are two fundamental components of political identity. Identity development, according to Gentry, refers to the process people go through to develop their beliefs, preferences, political self-identification and self-knowledge.⁶ How is the environment of the young African American female characters reflected in their femininity? This is what I will analyse on the following pages.

During the process of political individuation, people may fall into various categories, such as that of diffusion, explorer, fairly developed and fully developed identity, as stated by Gentry.⁷ Political ego identity is defined as knowing and caring about a set of political issues, having a set of organized beliefs about the political system and engaging in political behaviors that support specific beliefs. This definition also takes into account the importance of politics in a person's life. If politics is important to them, they are much more likely to have a well-

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Bobbi Gentry, 2017. "Political Identity: Meaning, Measures, and Evidence," *Why Youth Vote*: 26, accessed September 3, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69608-9_2 .

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

developed identity status.⁸ Younger generations of African American women are extremely important to U.S. politics and political identity plays a valuable part in their lives.

With reference to this thesis, it is essential to mention two movements - the “me too” movement and the “Black Lives Matter” movement. When Tarana Burke founded the “me too” movement in 2006, she was in her early thirties. The #metoo hashtag went viral in 2017 and alerted the world to the magnitude of the problem of sexual violence.⁹ Also, in 2013 there were three Black young women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Ayo Tometi, who launched #BlackLivesMatter, a Black-centered political will and movement-building project. It was in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer, George Zimmerman.¹⁰ A jury found George Zimmerman, a Florida neighborhood watch volunteer who was found not guilty of second-degree murder after he shot and killed the unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin, sparked a national conversation about racial profiling and civil rights. He was also cleared of the lesser charge of manslaughter.¹¹ These two movements not only completely changed the dynamics of American politics but also massively affected people worldwide.

I have mentioned racial profiling and racist incidents. It is, therefore, vital to look at the definition of racism. A range of definitions is available, so I have made the decision to use one I find the most appropriate, as I simply cannot cover all of them and the idea of racism having a singular definition is controversial itself. I have decided on a definition by Ibram X.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹“Get to Know Us | History & Inception.” n.d. Me Too. Movement, accessed October 10, 2022, <https://me-toomvmt.org/get-to-know-us/history-inception>.

¹⁰ Black Lives Matter. 2019. “Herstory – Black Lives Matter,” accessed September 19, 2022, <https://black-livesmatter.com/herstory/>.

¹¹ Lizette Alvarez, and Cara Buckley, “Zimmerman Is Acquitted in Killing of Trayvon Martin,” *The New York Times*, July 14, 2013, accessed September 10, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/15/us/george-zimmerman-verdict-trayvon-martin.html>.

Kendi as I find it to be accurate and useful for every novel in this thesis. In *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi defines racism as “a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities.”¹² Kendi then also defines racial inequity, racist policies, as well as racist ideas. “Racial inequity is when two or more racial groups are not standing on approximately equal footing.”¹³ He also claims that “a racist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups. By policy, I mean written and unwritten laws, rules, procedures, processes, regulations and guidelines that govern people.”¹⁴ He goes on to argue that “a racist idea is any idea that suggests one racial group is inferior to or superior to another racial group in any way. Racist ideas argue that the inferiorities and superiorities of racial groups explain racial inequities in society.”¹⁵ Racist ideas, in turn, influence to a certain extent the political leaning of Black women in the US.

Black women in the US are often referred to as the Democratic Party's “backbone” — dependable and loyal voters whose support can make or break a candidate.¹⁶ African American women have been among Obama's most ardent supporters at the polls. In 2008, they accounted for 60% of all black voters and supported Obama 96% of the time. In 2012, 98 percent of black women under 30, compared to 80 percent of young black men, voted for Obama.¹⁷ Exit polls

¹² Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 12.

¹³ Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 14.

¹⁶ Emily Swanson, “AP VoteCast: How Black Women Shape Democratic Politics.” AP NEWS. August 3, 2020, accessed September 1, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/barack-obama-race-and-ethnicity-politics-immigration-america-disrupted-e4081df9b4f0ccef9d4af734acf15165>.

¹⁷ Kali Nicole Gross, “Black Women Are Obama’s Most Loyal Voters — and His Most Ignored Constituency,” *The Washington Post*, October 1, 2015, accessed November 27, 2022,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/10/01/black-women-are-obamas-most-loyal-voters-and-his-most-ignored-constituency/>

from 2016 reveal that Black women, who made up 94 percent of Hillary Clinton's supporters, were by far her biggest supporters.¹⁸

According to AP VoteCast, which surveyed more than 115,000 voters nationwide, including close to 7,000 Black women, they were more likely to support Democratic House candidates in 2018 than women of any other racial or ethnic group, making it one of the most in-depth available looks at the group's political views. However, this does not imply that Black women are "typical" Democrats. According to an AP analysis of the VoteCast data, Black women's views are frequently more moderate than the rest of the party. Black women are less likely to identify as liberal, are slightly less likely to support abortion rights, are far less concerned about climate change and are slightly more likely to prioritize jobs and the economy.¹⁹ In 2020, Black women turned out in droves to support Obama's former vice president, Joe Biden, in the Democratic presidential primary, thereby saving his bid.²⁰ It is my understanding that Black women and especially those from the younger generations, help to shape the state of American politics by actively participating. Also, it is their environment that directly influences this part of their identity. When it comes to voting and being pragmatic, it is where one's surroundings play a key role.

Brittney Cooper, a feminist scholar, described black female voters as both pragmatists and visionaries. "We have a vision for the kind of future we want to build, but we also have an acute sense of taking care of the least of these, such as protecting funding for schools for our

¹⁸ Vanessa Williams, "Black Women — Hillary Clinton's Most Reliable Voting Bloc — Look beyond Defeat," *The Washington Post*, November 12, 2016, accessed September 5, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/black-women—hillary-clintons-most-reliable-voting-bloc—look-beyond-defeat/2016/11/12/86d9182a-a845-11e6-ba59-a7d93165c6d4_story.htm

¹⁹ Emily Swanson, "AP VoteCast: How Black Women Shape Democratic Politics." AP NEWS. August 3, 2020, accessed September 1, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/barack-obama-race-and-ethnicity-politics-immigration-america-disrupted-e4081df9b4f0ccef9d4af734acf15165>.

²⁰ Ibid.

kids and benefits like Medicare and Social Security for the elderly.” “We always vote with those things in mind,” she explained.²¹ Throughout this thesis, I will ask how the environment of young African American female characters is reflected in their political identity, since I consider it a crucial role in this thesis.

The next theme I will analyse and discuss is the sense of security. The concept of environment goes, in my view, hand in hand with being reasonable and behaving the way certain situations require. The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes security as “the state or condition of being or feeling secure,” “freedom from care, anxiety or apprehension; absence of worry or anxiety; confidence in one’s safety or well-being,” or “the state or condition of being protected from or not exposed to danger; safety.”²² I presume that security is therefore not only about having a safe environment but also about not hiding one’s authentic self. Is the town one lives in safe? What about their work environment? Is it hostile or welcoming? Is one’s life stable on the outside as well as on the inside? This part of the thesis focuses on a safe environment, secure jobs and stable lives in *Such a Fun Age*, *Nightcrawling* and *The Other Black Girl*. I will examine how the surroundings of young African American women are reflected in their sense of security as an identity feature.

²¹ Williams, “Black Women — Hillary Clinton’s Most Reliable Voting Bloc — Look beyond Defeat,” *The Washington Post*, accessed September 5, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/black-women--hillary-clintons-most-reliable-voting-bloc--look-beyond-defeat/2016/11/12/86d9182a-a845-11e6-ba59-a7d93165c6d4_story.html

²² “security, n. ”. OED Online. September 2022. Oxford University Press, accessed September 07, 2022, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/174661?redirectedFrom=security>

***2. Such a Fun Age* by Kiley Reid**

An Introduction to *Such a Fun Age*

Such a Fun Age is a debut novel from Kiley Reid, published by Putnam, an imprint of Penguin Random House, on December 31, 2019.²³ Not only is Kiley Reid's debut novel a *New York Times* bestseller, it was also longlisted for The 2020 Booker Prize and a finalist for the New York Public Library's 2020 Young Lions Fiction Award, the VCU Cabell First Novelist Award, the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work by a Debut Author, as well as the Mark Twain American Voice in Literature Award.²⁴

Kiley Reid is an Arizona native who graduated from the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa and received the Truman Capote Fellowship there as well.²⁵ She began writing the novel while applying to graduate school completed it while pursuing her M.F.A. at the University of Iowa and sold it to Putnam, an imprint of Penguin Random House, in a competitive 10-house auction before graduation. Before Reid graduated, the film/TV rights were acquired by Lena Waithe and Sight Unseen Pictures.²⁶ Kiley Reid moved to Arkansas and began writing about her experiences babysitting in New York throughout her 20s after failing to get into any of the nine schools she applied to for her MFA degree. The next time she applied, Reid was accepted to the reputable Writers 'Workshop at the University of Iowa, as previously stated.²⁷

²³ Barnes and Noble. N.d. "Such a Fun Age | Hardcover." Barnes & Noble, accessed September 29, 2022, <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/such-a-fun-age-kiley-reid/1131255048?ean=9780525541905>

²⁴"Kiley Reid," Penguin Random House, accessed September 5, 2022, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse-retail.com/author/?authorid=2194829>

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ David Canfield, David. "Kiley Reid has written the most provocative page-turner of the year," Entertainment Weekly, accessed September 3, 2022, <https://ew.com/author-interviews/2019/12/17/kiley-reid-such-a-fun-age/>

²⁷Gwen Aviles, "Endorsed by Reese Witherspoon, This Debut Novel Could Be the Book of 2020," NBC News, January 4, 2020, accessed September 2, 2022, https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/books/kiley-reid-s-such-fun-age-probes-insidious-forms-racism-n1110021?cid=sm_npd_nn_fb_ma&fbclid=IwAR2Csgny-gWh7097OvCVAEZ6Nkk-IbIXKUwyrpRUqzjmeEQclaxd7iflzV0.

The attention-grabbing title of the novel may already give the reader a hint as to what one can expect from the book, who the main characters are and who the target audience is.

Masad claims that prior to the 2016 election, the “fun age” was thought by some to be miraculously post-racist and post-sexist because it was impolite to be these things in public; an age of performative white feminism; an age of social media and virality and armchair activism and online virtue-signaling that ironically requires certain people — often times those already more vulnerable — to live in specific politically correct ways while allowing others — usually those with power, influence and privilege - off the hook. *Such a Fun Age* is divided into four parts, each of the parts includes several chapters, making the book consist of twenty-eight chapters.²⁸

Although it begins with Emira's point of view, *Such a Fun Age* alternates almost evenly between Emira Tucker and Alix Chamberlain as it moves through events mainly in chronological order. Emira Tucker is a 25-year-old black girl and despite graduating from Temple University, she has no clue what she wants to do with her life, whereas Alix is in her 30s, white and has a well-established family life and career. Emira, who babysits Alix's older daughter, three-year-old Briar, is accused of kidnapping the young child in the first chapter when she takes her to a fancy grocery store called Market Depot late at night due to Alix's family emergency. Everything about Emira and Alix's relationship changes as a result of this incident. Furthermore, Kelley Copeland, the white man who films Emira's interaction with the security guard, becomes Emira's boyfriend after they run into each other on the train later that week.

Emira is still struggling financially and debating whether she should continue babysitting Briar as she grows closer to Kelley. Meanwhile, Alix begins to obsess over Emira, planning

²⁸ Ilana Masad, 'Such A Fun Age 'Is A Complex, Layered Page-Turner. National Public Radio, accessed September 2, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2019/12/28/791747689/such-a-fun-age-is-a-complex-layered-page-turner>

every detail of her life around whether or not it will make Emira like her more. Things escalate when Emira and Kelley, both of whom had cancelled flights due to snow, attend Thanksgiving at the Chamberlain house. Kelley's high school relationship with Alix becomes the focal point of a large conflict over the meal, with Alix panicking. Kelley's dislike for Alix is explained in the novel: She was wealthy and privileged in high school and she was the reason one of his closest friends, who was black, lost his scholarship after being arrested.

Following the disastrous Thanksgiving meal, Emira and Kelley have an argument that appears to mend their relationship, while Alix tries to figure out how to win Emira back. Alix secretly hacks Emira's email to obtain the video taken in the Market Depot grocery store and leaks it to the press; when Emira's friends discover this, they believe Kelley is the one who released the video. Alix makes a desperate attempt to keep Emira by offering her a full-time nannying job as well as a TV interview to clear things up over the video.

Emira is getting ready for her interview at Chamberlain's. When Zara, her best friend who is there to support her, overhears Alix discussing releasing the video, she immediately informs Emira and they quickly solve the problem. Within minutes, Emira landed a full-time position with the Green Party, where she has been working part-time as a typist. Emira goes on live TV and declines Alix's offer to be a nanny, then uses the same line that Kelley used to break up with Alix in high school. As the cameras stop rolling, Emira kisses Briar goodbye before Alix approaches her. Emira gracefully suggests that Alix be a better parent to Briar and departs the Chamberlain household for good.

The novel concludes with Emira in a better overall position: she obtains full-time employment as an administrative assistant to a supportive, kind and direct boss, and she does not speak to Kelley or Alix again, though she does wonder about Briar frequently. After this summary of the plot of the novel, I will continue with a more detailed analysis of *Such a Fun Age* and its themes.

2.1. **The Crucial Role of Contemporary African American Feminine Identity in *Such a Fun Age***

Contemporary African American feminine identity evidently plays a significant role in *Such a Fun Age*. When it comes to Emira, being a young black woman is largely reflected in her daily life, it is a core part of Emira's identity. Emira's environment is reflected in this part of her being and it is visible not only from her point of view but from other people's perspectives as well. Be it her white boss, her black friends, her white boyfriend, her parents or the white child whom she babysits. Perceptions, preconceived notions, assumptions, learned stereotypes, nature vs. nurture – all of these factors must be considered. Because of these circumstances, the reflection of Emira's identity as a young African American woman takes different forms. It is the complexity behind contemporary African American feminine identity that contributes to the genuineness of Reid's novel.

As said by Lena Waithe, "Such a Fun Age 'is such a fresh voice. It's a unique, honest portrayal of what it's like to be a black woman in America."²⁹ Emira herself struggles with several issues, just like lots of young women today. She finds adulting difficult, she genuinely wants a normal, full-time job and she also battles with her personal finances. It is her friends, her boyfriend and the child she babysits, who bring her joy. But on top of struggling as a young woman in the current world, Emira Tucker is also a Black woman. That is something her friends can relate to but unlike Emira, most of her friends have their lives together and they do not seem to be as lost as Emira is. As young Black women, they share various experiences, which can be

²⁹ Gwen Aviles, "Kiley Reid's 'Such a Fun Age' probes the insidious forms of racism," NBC New. accessed September 2, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/books/kiley-reid-s-such-fun-age-probes-insidious-forms-racism-n1110021>

seen in the book. Yet, the role of colorism is also apparent in their friendship. It can be noticed in the moment when they take a selfie where they are literally sat from the lightest to darkest, Emira being the darkest. Classism also plays a role, with Emira not being from a wealthy background and buying cheap clothing. Zara, her best friend, is the the one who is the most similar to Emira. They both love weaves and rap music, while they both also seem to be the most realistic. Additionally, Zara seems to be the most honest with Emira. Something all her friends seem to know a thing or two about is what it is like having white people in your work life or swirling – dating outside of your race. This is where Kelley, Emira's boyfriend, comes into the picture.

Although he is still young, Kelley is 7 years older than Emira, has a much nicer apartment and overall, he seems like a real grown-up to Emira. They both like black music and share a similar approach to life. However, he also only seems to date Black girls. Not only that but he only has Black friends. He also casually drops the n-word in a conversation. Kelley thinks that black culture is cool and he's proud that he's accepted by the black community, at least that's what it looks like. On the other hand, rather than respecting Blackness as a whole, he only seems to fetishize it – the women, the culture and everything that is cool about it. He only cares about the surface-level stuff, not the actual issues the Black community and young Black women deal with on a daily basis. He chooses to remain blind to those topics. Toni Morrison also writes about fetishization in her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* as she considers it to be one of the linguistic strategies used in fiction to engage the serious consequences of black people. Fetishization is especially effective at eliciting erotic fears or desires and establishing fixed and significant difference where difference does not exist or is minimal. Blood, for example, is a pervasive fetish: black blood, white blood, blood purity; the purity of white female sexuality, the pollution of African blood and sex. The categorical

absolutism of civilization and savagery is frequently asserted using the tactic of fetishization.³⁰ I believe that it is important to discuss fetishization, as it deeply affects young Black women in interracial romantic relationships. Despite it being a controversial topic in contemporary American society, adding that element to *Such a Fun Age* made Harris's novel that much more socially relevant.

The same cannot be said about Alix Chamberlain. She is a wealthy white woman who claims to be liberal and woke. She desperately tries to befriend and get close with Emira, Emira keeps a set distance between them. Despite Alix insisting on Emira calling her by her first name, Tucker still calls her Mrs Chamberlain. Although Alix wants to be friends with Emira and wants her to see Alix as a cool working woman, who's a feminist and speaks up, the opposite happens. Alix doesn't offer any proper employee benefits to Emira, she makes her wear a uniform with her slogan on it. Not only that but she makes her be available at all times and she actually doesn't want to understand her. She treats Emira like a nanny, her words may say otherwise but it's her actions that prove it. She just wants Tucker to be on her side, she uses her to be cool, once again. It can be argued that young Black women are, in my view, more than a prop, a tool, a trend. They're human beings worthy of equal rights, while they deserve to be treated with respect and kindness.

I find it is crucial to bring up the idea of whiteness, as it is oddly relates to blackness. Toni Morrison talks about whiteness in her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Morrison talks about these topics in a literary context. She claims that images of blackness can be evil and protective, rebellious while also being at the same time forgiving, fearful and desirable—all of the self-contradictory features of the self. Whiteness, alone, is

³⁰ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*., 63-64.

mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable.³¹ I find it somewhat upsetting that this is how society views whiteness and blackness. In my view, it's rather toxic, yet somehow simple to view such intricate social phenomena in such a manner.

Linda Krumholz described Morrison's work as “reread[ing] the American literary canon through an analysis of whiteness to propose the ways that black people were used to establish American identity.”³² Blackness exists because whiteness does. Whiteness is built on the idea of dominance and American individualism. Blackness needs to exist so that whiteness can and vice versa, the concepts depend on each other. I understand it to be a kind of a transactional relationship. This is something that can be seen in Emira and Alix's relationship dynamics. Alix desperately wants a connection but her employee just wants to get paid. Alix needs Emira for her selfish personal gains but Emira needs Alix for justifiable reasons. Emira is more than her hair, her skin color, her music taste, the way she talks, the way she was raised. It is to my understanding that despite trying to not let it get to her, the concept of fetishization affects her quality of life as a young African American woman in 21st century America.

2.2. The Complexity Behind Political Identity in *Such a Fun Age*

³¹ Morrison, *Whiteness*, 58-59.

³² Linda Krumholz, *Signs* 22, no. 1 (1996): 243.

Such a Fun Age takes place at a specific time and location. It's 2015 and the country is gearing up for the presidential elections in 2016. Hillary Clinton is widely anticipated to succeed President Barack Obama in office and pundits are prone to smugly proclaiming that America has moved past racism and sexism.³³

Prior to speaking about the complexity behind political identity in *Such a Fun Age*, the definition of racism and sexism has to be discussed. As I have already mentioned several times in this thesis, racism is indeed a topic one cannot escape, especially non-white people. The same can be said about sexism and how much it affects women in our society. The Cambridge Dictionary defines sexism as:

“(actions based on) the belief that the members of one sex are less intelligent, able, skillful, etc. than the members of the other sex, especially that women are less able than men”

It is to my understanding that the definition of sexism is easy to understand and is agreed on by the majority. It is, in my opinion, a good definition that I had in mind when writing this thesis. Other definitions surely exist, but, in my opinion, this one is rather broad, thus making it more applicable.

The meaning behind racism is not easy to explain. Many factors play a part and one cannot simplify the concept of racism. I have, therefore, tried to use a definition that I presume to be a fitting one. I am aware that there is a large variety of definitions in the academic world, some of them are even problematic and because of that, I can't possibly cover and explain all

³³ Constance Grady, “The smart political argument behind the satire *Such a Fun Age*,” *Vox*, Nov 19, 2021, accessed September 5, 2022. <https://www.vox.com/culture/22790112/such-a-fun-age-kiley-reid>

of them in a B.A. thesis. This definition is, therefore, the one I am working with in this thesis. In *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi defines racism as “a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities.”³⁴ Kendi then also defines racial inequality, racist policies, as well as racist ideas. “Racial inequity is when two or more racial groups are not standing on approximately equal footing.”³⁵ Kendi adds: “A racist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups. By policy, I mean written and unwritten laws, rules, procedures, processes, regulations and guidelines that govern people.”³⁶ He explains: “A racist idea is any idea that suggests one racial group is inferior to or superior to another racial group in any way. Racist ideas argue that the inferiorities and superiorities of racial groups explain racial inequities in society.”³⁷ I believe Kendi defines these concepts and ideas tied to race in such an understandable and accessible way in order to truly break down the concept of racism, working with definitions that are accurate and explicit, which is crucial. His writing goes hand in hand with Harris’s novel because, in my view, both works come across as very critical and valid.

Emira experiences racial profiling in Philadelphia, where the novel is mainly set. I believe that it is therefore important to explore the city and the political side of Philadelphia. Philadelphia is the largest city of Pennsylvania. Some events happen in New York City but the majority of the book is set in the city of Philadelphia. Thus, it is worth looking at the exact results of the 2012 and 2016 presidential election in Philadelphia County. Those elections influence the plot and the characters of the novel.

³⁴ Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 17-18.

³⁵ Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 18.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 20.

Pennsylvania is a competitive state that leans Democratic and has 20 electoral votes. In 2016, Hillary Clinton was favored to win. Barack Obama won Pennsylvania in 2012 by 5.4 percentage points. According to the *New York Times*, the Democrat Hillary Clinton far outperformed Republican Donald Trump, winning 82.3% of the vote to his 15.3%.³⁸

Tannen writes that Philadelphia was strongly Democratic in 2016 but not as strongly as it was in 2012, when Barack Obama received 85.2% of the vote to Mitt Romney's 14.0%. Simply stating that Philadelphia is Democratic ignores the city's significant diversity, which mirrors the nation's politics. Much of the city, primarily West and North Philadelphia, backed Clinton, mirroring her strong support among Black and Latino voters nationwide. The Center City also supported Clinton, though not to the same extent as the surrounding neighborhoods. Deep South Philadelphia and the Far Northeast were Trump country — or Philadelphia's version of it.³⁹ The diversity of political views and how one is shaped by their political identity are heavily visible in Reid's novel. Alix's political identity differs from Emira's, as well as Kelley, Peter and Emira's friends. Despite them having relatively small character development, the reader can see that even Emira's friends are different from Alix's social circle.

The idea of the United States being some sort of post-racial, post sexist-paradise - that was, as *Such a Fun Age* demonstrates, never the case. This novel is a satire of polite liberal prejudices and how they thrive underneath the illusion of colorblind civility.⁴⁰ Every character in the novel has their own political views, some feel stronger about their opinions than others,

³⁸ *The New York Times*, "Pennsylvania Presidential Race Results: Donald J. Trump Wins," August 1, 2017, sec. U.S., accessed September 19, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/elections/2016/results/pennsylvania-president-clinton-trump>.

³⁹ Jonathan Tannen, "How Philadelphia Neighborhoods Voted." Econsult Solutions, Inc. November 14, 2016, accessed September 5, 2022. <https://econsultsolutions.com/how-philadelphia-neighborhoods-voted-2016/>.

⁴⁰ Grady, "The smart political argument behind the satire *Such a Fun Age*," *Vox*, Nov 19, 2021, accessed September 5, 2022. <https://www.vox.com/culture/22790112/such-a-fun-age-kiley-reid>

while some express their views more freely than others. One's political views are influenced by various factors and these different factors can be found in Reid's novel. The main adult characters have particular sets of political views due to them playing a certain role in modern American society.

When it comes to Emira's political identity, she does not have it easy. Emira Tucker, the novel's protagonist, is a 25-year-old Black girl. Despite being a recent Temple University graduate, she doesn't have a proper full-time job, is struggling with adulting and is constantly broke. She does have two part-time jobs, she works as a transcriptionist for the Philadelphia Green Party and as a babysitter for a white 3-year-old toddler named Briar Chamberlain.

However, all Emira wants to do is hang out with Briar. In an effort to secure her own health insurance before her 26th birthday, Emira has tried to picture herself working as a permanent nanny for another family. However, Briar, who is intelligent, funny and insatiably curious, is the child she really enjoys caring for.⁴¹ It's in the first chapter where Emira has to leave her friend Josefa's 26th birthday party to babysit Briar due to a Chamberlain family emergency. Alix's husband Peter, who is a newbie at a local station makes a racist and sexist joke and because of that, eggs get thrown at the Chamberlain house. Although it's a Saturday night and Emira is not dressed appropriately for babysitting, she decides to accept the offer as she desperately needs the money and her boss is paying her double. Here, the reader can already see the inequality between the two women. Alix is a white, upper-class, rich, Millennial who moved from Manhattan and who can certainly afford to have a nanny and ask her to work whenever

⁴¹ Ibid.

she pleases, without Emira having the actual status of an employee. Emira is not fond of her and continues to call her by her surname, not her first name, like Alix wants.

Emira Tucker was born in a small town in Maryland to a family of craftspeople and was the first to attend college. It was Temple University where she purchased her first weave, got drunk for the first time and where she met her best friend Zara.⁴² Zara accompanied Emira to Market Depot, a fancy grocery store Briar likes that Alix suggested for them to visit on that Saturday night. Her race, her age and her socioeconomic background are the reasons she was not able to turn that offer down. Her being a black girl, dancing to music in a high-class grocery store, with a young white child was also the reason for racial profiling by the shop's security guard. American Civil Liberties Union claims that racial profiling is “the discriminatory practice by law enforcement officials of targeting individuals for suspicion of crime based on the individual's race, ethnicity, religion or national origin.”⁴³

In *Such a Fun Age*, Emira is accused of kidnapping Briar, as she is a young Black woman wearing a tight dress late at night in a luxury grocery store, with a white toddler. Emira is then forced to call Mr. Chamberlain. Only after his arrival is the entire situation resolved. It is Peter Chamberlain, a white man who saves the situation and another white man of a younger age, that records the entire incident, Kelley Cooper.

Despite making Kelley delete the video, the threat of that tape leaking looms over everything in *Such a Fun Age*. Everything the tape represents does as well. It's not just potentially humiliating for Emira; it's also exciting for those around her — the nice white guy who made the tape, Emira's nice white employers — because it allows them to posture defensively about

⁴² Reid, *Such a Fun Age*, 38, epub.

⁴³ American Civil Liberties Union, “Racial Profiling: Definition.” American Civil Liberties Union,” 2019, accessed September 2, 2022, <https://www.aclu.org/other/racial-profiling-definition>.

how non-racist they are by becoming enraged at this racist white security guard. It also allows them to fetishize and gleefully consume Emira's youth, blackness and perceived coolness. Additionally, it allows them to exploit Emira without ever requiring them to interact with her as a human being with agency who has wants and needs of her own.⁴⁴ In her job as a nanny, Emira is not fully respected. Because of the way she is perceived, she struggles and her white surroundings only seem to use her for their benefit to make themselves feel good.

Emira finds herself in a love triangle after the incident at the grocery store. This is where, in my opinion, the idea of fetishization comes into play again - this time from a political perspective influencing Emira's love life. She begins dating Kelley, the white guy who made the tape and is surprised to discover that all of his friends are black and that the majority of his ex-girlfriends are women of color; when he nonchalantly drops the n-word in front of her, she is at a loss for words. Emira can tell Kelley thinks being around black people makes him cool but he's so thoughtful, smart and well-meaning that she wants to believe he is interested in her specifically, rather than just her blackness.⁴⁵ Kelley was not Emira's first white boyfriend. She was already aware of certain dynamics that happen in interracial relationships. He was not with her for the right reasons. At the end of the novel when they break up, Emira sees Kelley with his new girlfriend, who is another black woman. Kelley presents himself as a liberal who is focused on social issues but those conversations are what shows his true colors. Does he really care about Black people or is he a Conservative with a fetish?

Despite being a wealthy white mom in her 30s, Alix wants Emira to affirm Alix's own youth and liberalism. Alix wants Emira to know she has black friends, enjoys Toni Morrison

⁴⁴ Constance Grady, "In *Such a Fun Age*, everyone wants the black girl's attention, but she just wants a real job", *Vox*, Jan 8, 2020, accessed September 2, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2020/1/8/21055681/such-a-fun-age-kiley-reid-review>

⁴⁵ Ibid.

and gets her favorite shoes from Payless. She believes that if Emira sees all of this in Alix, she will like her and if Emira likes her, it will demonstrate that Alix is a good and virtuous white person who is also hip, young and fun. Emira sees Alix primarily as a goofy white lady and mom. She puts up with Alix because she loves Briar but she finds it odd that Alix wants to spend so much time with her.⁴⁶

Alix built her brand as a WordPress-era proto-influencer, sending handwritten letters to companies and asking them to send her free stuff, then posting both the letters and a review of the stuff on her blog. She now runs a small business teaching women lessons about the importance of making their voices heard through letters.⁴⁷ She even has her own hashtag, #LetHerSpeak. This particular slogan is also found on Emira's uniform, a polo shirt she wears. From my point of view, this item only further highlights the racial and class differences between them.

She lies awake the night before Thanksgiving, proudly counting the number of black guests she will have at her dinner (five) and she is looking forward to working with Hillary Clinton's campaign.⁴⁸ While Alix is eager to work with Clinton, when it comes to young Black voters a lot of them did not support Hillary Clinton. They cited her husband's support for harsh anti-crime legislation in the 1990s, as well as her use of the term "super predator" to describe some young offenders.⁴⁹ This part of the book, in my opinion, helps to demonstrate Alix's inner world and all the "good" she is supposedly doing. She might have good intentions but because of her naivety and oblivion to Clinton as an older white female politician, Alix ultimately and unknowingly reveals her true colors. Mrs. Chamberlain is a simple white liberal feminist, not

⁴⁶ Grady, "In Such a Fun Age, everyone wants the black girl's attention, but she just wants a real job," Vox.com.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Williams, "Black Women — Hillary Clinton's Most Reliable Voting Bloc — Look beyond Defeat," *The Washington Post*.

an intersectional feminist. She cares about how she is perceived, I think, not how she can help make a real change.

As *Such a Fun Age* progresses, it becomes clear that Kelley and Alix have a deeply connected past, one that has each convinced the other is the real racist. Also, their relationships with Emira become the arena in which they hope to demonstrate their racial virtue.⁵⁰ It was because of Alix that Kelley's high school black friend had his life destroyed and Ms. Chamberlain had to change her name from Alex to Alix to live her life as peacefully as possible. After their relationship ended, Kelley began to prefer girls of color.

However, Emira who has no idea she has sparked such a feud, is simply trying to figure out her own life. She has just turned 26 and will be kicked off her parents' health insurance. She wants a job with benefits, a real adult job that her friends will respect — but all she really wants to do is babysit little Briar. She has no desire to make a group of wealthy older white people feel better about themselves by bestowing her social capital on them, no matter how badly they want her to.⁵¹ At the end of the novel, with the help of her best friend Zara, Emira figures out that it was Ms. Chamberlain who leaked the tape. Instead of continuing to work for the Chamberlain family, she decides to quit and start working full-time for the Green Party. She sees herself becoming a responsible young woman with a proper job, at a place where she feels worthy and appreciated.

As their official website claims, the Green Party stands with #BlackLivesMatter and for women's equality, among other things.⁵² The Party has also come up with a special division called the Black Caucus of the Green Party of the United States. Their main goal is to increase

⁵⁰ Grady, "In *Such a Fun Age*, everyone wants the black girl's attention, but she just wants a real job," Vox.com

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² "We stand," *The Green Party*, accessed September 10, 2022, https://www.gp.org/we_stand

the participation of men and women of African and African American descent in the Green Party's political and policy-making processes.⁵³ The Green Party is a lot more welcoming to Emira and treats her like a grown educated woman of class worthy of proper employment and not like a nanny or maid. I presume that it is a group that Emira is glad to be a part of.

Emira Tucker is, however, not a Separationist, nor a member of a black nationalist or supremacist group advocating for violent extremism and anti-white attacks. She doesn't believe in violence, yet racial profiling, which proved to be almost violent in the grocery store, still affects her in her everyday life. The "nice" white people in her life stand up for her and she does not end up in jail, it is thanks to them that nothing serious happens to her. Had it not been for the "nice" white people being in the right place at the right time, she could have easily been arrested. Although Emira is not a member of any radical groups promoting black nationalism and this ideology does not play a role in her life, it does play a significant role in black America.

According to counter-terrorism experts and scholars, black Nationalism arose as a reaction to the white supremacism that pervaded America's political system from its founding until the passage of voting and civil rights reforms in the mid-1960s. This distinguishes black nationalism from white nationalism in that black extremism is a reaction to real and brutal oppression. Regardless, the groups and individuals involved in this movement explicitly promote racist and bigoted ideas. In general, Black Nationalist hate groups advocate hatred of whites, LGBT people and Jewish people. Black nationalists have also advocated for a separate territory within the country for African Americans (similar to white nationalists who argue for a white homeland in the Pacific Northwest). Black Nationalists, according to their propaganda, want a portion of the Southeast United States set aside for a black nation. They are also known for their

⁵³ *National Black Caucus*, accessed September 4, 2022, <https://www.blackcaucusgreens.org/>

anti-government and anti-police sentiments, which stem from their long-held beliefs about government corruption and police brutality. Given the history of black people in the United States, from lynchings to modern-day mass incarceration, this concern is not totally unwarranted.⁵⁴ Although radical extremists should not exist in American society, it is important, in my view, to be aware of them and their views, in order to understand opinions from those radical movements.

Despite not always being violent, organizations like the Nation of Islam, the New Black Panthers, the New Black Liberation Militia, the New Black Panther Nation and the Five Percenters are breeding grounds for radical fanaticism. They attract violent individuals and indoctrinate them, encouraging criminal and violent behavior.⁵⁵ The search for black empowerment and pride has a rich history, so even though violent groups are active, so are those that practise peaceful behavior. Those groups and individuals are present to this day, as their main goal is to fight racial injustice and claim what belongs to them.

In recent years, Patrisse Cullors, a co-founder of the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, has advocated for racial reparations in the form of “financial restitution, land redistribution, political self-determination, culturally relevant education programs, language recuperation and the right to return (or repatriation),” citing Frantz Fanon's work for “understanding the current global context for Black individuals on the African continent and in our multiple diasporas.”⁵⁶ Frantz Omar Fanon was one of the most important writers in black Atlantic theory

⁵⁴ Daryl Johnson, “Return of the Violent Black Nationalist.” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, August 8, 2017, accessed November 4, 2022, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2017/return-violent-black-nationalist>.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Patrisse Cullors, “Abolition And Reparations: Histories of Resistance, Transformative Justice, And Accountability,” *Harvard Law Review*. April 10, 2019. accessed October 9, 2022, <https://harvardlawreview.org/2019/04/abolition-and-reparations-histories-of-resistance-transformative-justice-and-accountability/>

in an age of anti-colonial liberation struggle. The title of his first significant piece is *Black Skin, White Masks*. In the social environment and the most hidden corners of awareness, anti-Black racism has its roots and this study aims to comprehend them. The book is the primary treatise on blackness by Fanon. In fact, his attention turns away from blackness as a problem of the modern world and toward a broader theory of the oppressed, colonialism and revolutionary resistance to coloniality as a system. This transition occurs in the years after the publication of *Black Skin, White Masks*. But without Fanon's early reflections on anti-Black racism, that transition would not be possible. There is evidence of Fanon's impact in the Black Panther Party.⁵⁷

Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale created the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) in Oakland, California in October 1966 after meeting at Merritt College. It was a revolutionary group that promoted Black nationalism, socialism and the use of weapons for self-defense, particularly in the face of police brutality. It was a component of the Black Power movement, which diverged from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference's integrationist objectives and nonviolent protest strategies. The black panther, a recent symbol of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, an independent Black political party in Alabama, served as the inspiration for the name of the BPP.⁵⁸

Every single party or group in history that emphasized or still to this day emphasizes that black empowerment truly managed to influence the political state of modern-day America and its citizens. Although Black Panthers are not discussed in the novel, Black Lives Matter is and this movement would not exist without its predecessors. I found it, therefore, important to

⁵⁷ John Drabinski. "Frantz Fanon." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2019, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019, accessed October 9, 2022. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/frantz-fanon/>.

⁵⁸ The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. "The Black Panther Party." *National Archives*. August 25, 2016, accessed September 9, 2022, <https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/black-power/black-panthers>.

mention those movements, as there is a relation between them and *Such a Fun Age*, though not an obvious one. Emira, Alix and Kelley are most affected by their public political persona, pointing to the fact that wokeness and performative activism won't truly make a change and only deepen the divide between classes in America. It is only Emira, who stays honest throughout the entire novel and enjoys a sort of happy ending. Although, she truly misses young Briar. However, given the baby's environment, it is predictable that Briar will behave the same way as Alix in her future.

In my opinion, the main conclusion which can be drawn here is that Emira cannot escape anti-Black racism and sexism as a young Black woman in modern-day America. She lives in a liberal, Democratic part of the United States, yet she cannot avoid certain negative incidents with racist and sexist subtexts. Concerning the white people in her life, like her boyfriend or her employer, she finds herself in kind of a gray area – some white people support her and understand her, yet some white people make her feel unsafe. Not everything in life is black and white and this statement applies to Emira's political life. She is rooting for Black people and is proud of her blackness but she is not a radical thinker. Instead, as she continues to grow confident within herself, she learns to trust herself and stand up for herself.

2.3. Safe Environment and a Sense of Security in *Such a Fun Age*

The unsettling grocery store incident becomes the catalyst for every important change in Emira's life. It is the lack of a safe environment and safety that truly drives the plot of the

book. What is, however, important is that the idea of safety and a safe environment does not concern only the levels of crime, it also deals with non-hostile work and family/friend environment, job security and stability in life in general.

Emira has led a happy, relatively calm life so far. She has grown up in a family with two parents in a small town and she was the first person in her family to go to college. She has found a great group of girl friends, young women that are there for her and that she can relate to and confide in, the latter being especially Zara, her best friend. However, because of her inability to find a proper job she likes, she does only part-time jobs. Unlike her friends, Emira's life lacks stability. That is, of course, rather understandable, as all one needs to do is to look at the social end economic state of the country and know that she is certainly not the only recent college graduate in that state of mind. On the other hand, the fact is that her life is not stable and she does not feel like a real grown-up. Her family and friends help create a safe environment for her but it is her work environment that does not feel safe and trustworthy. This lack of trust in Emira's life, in my opinion, feels very similar to that of Trayvon Martin's, although Martin's was much more drastic. Munro states that Martin was a 17-year-old African American teenager. He was being observed by Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer with German and Peruvian ancestry, as Martin was leaving a convenience store. When Zimmerman called the Sanford Police Department's non-emergency line, he indicated that there had been burglaries in the area and said that he had seen "a real suspicious guy" "going around, looking about. Zimmerman further labeled Martin as someone who was "up to no good or he's on drugs or something."⁵⁹ There was a clear distrust in that situation, a crime based on preconceived notions. Zimmerman was in a position similar to that of the grocery store's security guard and Emira felt

⁵⁹ André Munro, "Shooting of Trayvon Martin | United States History," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, accessed September 4, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/event/shooting-of-Trayvon-Martin>.

a sense of fear, just like Trayvon. Luckily for Emira, she survived the situation but in real life, Trayvon did not. I presume that had there been more clarity and trust, more authentic compassion and empathy, there would be significantly less racial assaults and less racial profiling as well.

Although Alix looks like she means well, Emira can tell that Alix is not really being herself and tries hard to make Emira like her. Which is why Emira continues to keep a distance between them for the sake of her peace of mind. She insists on calling Alix Ms. Chamberlain and tries to keep their relationship on a professional level, unlike Alix who is desperate for a friendship with Emira.

As stated previously, it was the racial profiling in the luxury grocery store by a white security guard late at night that was the catalyst for everything. In my view, a racist incident like that is something so dangerous and given the location and time, it is something that could have easily ended up way worse than it did. Despite genuinely enjoying spending time with Briar and truly caring for her, it is the circumstances that help create a hostile work environment for Emira. Her being a young Black nanny for a rich white family, her not having a proper contract with actual employee status and benefits, her knowing how vile white people can be and her knowing even those white people that pride themselves in having black friends can become dangerous to deal with.

Although he stands up for her during the racial profiling, Kelley doesn't make Emira feel safe. It is apparent that he is older, taller and has more money than her but his fetish for Black girls and off-putting remarks only make Emira worry that he is with her only for what she represents in society, not for who she really is as a human being. I assume that both Kelley and Alix seem to suffer from the white-savior complex. According to the Black Equality Resource Guide,

“the white-savior complex is defined as an idea in which a white person, or more broadly a white culture, 'rescues' people of color from their own situation.”⁶⁰

This is apparent in the novel, as both Alix and Kelley try to protect Emira but for the wrong reasons. Be it Kelley in Market Depot or Alix after the Market Depot incident or in the news interview.

In my view, Zara is Emira’s anchor. As her best friend, she is always there for her and provides a sense of security and a stable support for Emira. From my standpoint there are other possibilities of friendship in *Such a Fun Age*. Emira could certainly be friends with Alix but the circumstances won’t allow it. Not one person in this novel is perfect, everyone is at fault to some extent. I believe that some people in Emira Tucker’s life are more successful, some less when it comes to creating a safe environment for her. Emira is finding herself, as she is not sure of herself and feels insecure within herself, as well as with her friends and other adults. The fact that despite it being possible, Emira still refuses to be friends with Alix. I believe that amplifies that building a healthy environment is a collaborative process where every single party is involved. It is therefore not only her employer or other people, Emira is also at fault. To my understanding, imperfection is ever-present in life and it is especially evident in the different perspectives in *Such a Fun Age*.

Alix and Kelley are both oblivious to the racially motivated manipulation they are enacting on Emira, as well as the motivations behind it. On the surface, the two “saviors” are more concerned with being progressive and politically correct than with meeting Emira's needs. In a deeper sense, Alix hiring a young Black woman to watch her children is directly related to her

⁶⁰“White Savior Complex”, *Black Equality Resources*, accessed September 4, 2022, <https://blackequalityresources.com/white-savior-complex/>

own upbringing, during which she had a Black caregiver because of her parents' unexpected wealth. Due to their narrow interpretation of what an ally is, Alix and Kelley are unable to see the harm they are doing to Emira.⁶¹ Desperately trying to provide safe environment for Emira Tucker, the complete opposite is what is truly achieved.

When one feels safe, one feels protected from any form of harm that exists in the world. Emira doesn't feel safe and at ease with any of the white adults in her life. Briar, the 3-year-old girl Emira babysits is an exception. Because of her young age, she is not aware of racism, power imbalances in society or the patriarchal society. Emira genuinely likes spending time with Briar and she has nothing but love and care for her. There is a true love and connection between the two of them. Tucker feels at home with Briar, the person that is not yet affected by the standards of society where your race, gender and social class determine the condition of one's life.

The real shift in Emira Tucker's life begins when she quits her job and tries to find herself, when she leaves Alix and Kelley behind, that is when she starts to understand and to embrace a sense of true safety and a secure environment. When Emira Tucker takes full control of her life, she creates a safe environment within herself and in her actual surroundings. Regarding Emira's inner world, the readers can see she went through a rather significant change. She learned how to set personal and emotional boundaries, something that almost every young person can relate. Emira managed to build boundaries that she's comfortable with. She learned what her hierarchy of values looks like. On the other hand, she wouldn't have learned any of that had she not gone through a complicated and toxic work relationship.

People need security and a safe environment to live freely, pursue their dreams, to live their lives the way they want to, I believe. It is one of the most crucial aspects of living in the

⁶¹ Savanna Ramsey, "Scrutinized, but Never Seen," *The Women's Review of Books* 37 (5): 24.

21st century. As I stated in this chapter, it is the lack of a safe environment that drives the plot of the book. It's the danger behind it that makes this book a page-turner. Emira knows what it's like to have a secure and safe environment in your life as she's lived a happy life at home and she has female friends she can count on, especially Zara, her best friend who is like an anchor to her, Zara keeps Emira grounded. However, as an adult she lacks that safety in her life. It is by setting clear and healthy boundaries that she learns to live as a young confident woman. She knows that as a Black woman in America, she is always going to face racism and sexism. Nonetheless, by setting those boundaries in her personal and professional life, she learns how to feel safe within herself and with her employers. She learns to discover the true importance of living in a safe environment by experiencing what it is like to live in a rather unsafe environment.

3. *Nighcrawling* by Leila Mottley

An Introduction to *Nighcrawling*

Nightcrawling is a debut novel from Leila Mottley⁶² published by Knopf in June 2022.⁶³ Mottley has received plenty of accolades for her book but what is perhaps most impressive is the fact that she was just 19 years old when *Nightcrawling* was published.⁶⁴ Even so, the acclaims she has earned have to be mentioned as well. Mottley's debut became a *New York Times* bestseller and an *Oprah's Book Club Pick*, where she was the youngest pick ever.⁶⁵ Her novel was also longlisted for *The Booker Prize* and it received the title of "best book of the year" from *The New Yorker*, *The Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Time* and *Goodreads*.⁶⁶

Nightcrawling was written by Leila Mottley, as stated above. She was also named *Oakland Youth Poet Laureate* in 2018 at age 16. She was born and raised in Oakland, where she currently resides.⁶⁷ She had written the first draft of "Nightcrawling" in the summer of 2019, just after graduating from high school and working as a substitute preschool teacher. Her agents were introduced to her by novelist Ruth Ozeki, who taught her advanced fiction writing course at Smith College. The team made the correct decision to sell *Nightcrawling* to Knopf at auction

⁶²"Nightcrawling by Leila Mottley| PenguinRandomHouse.com: Books." n.d. PenguinRandomhouse.com, accessed December 7, 2022, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/669672/nightcrawling-by-leila-mottley/>.

⁶³ Ron Charles, Ron, 2022. "Oprah's Latest Book Club Pick: 'Nightcrawling,' by Leila Mottley." *The Washington Post*, June 14, 2022, accessed December 7, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/books/2022/06/14/nightcrawling-leila-mottley/>.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Nightcrawling by Leila Mottley| PenguinRandomHouse.com: Books." N.d. PenguinRandomhouse.com. accessed December 7, 2022, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/669672/nightcrawling-by-leila-mottley/>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

in April 2020 instead of waiting out the pandemic. She was in the middle of her second semester at Smith College at the time.⁶⁸

Based on a true incident in 2015 involving institutional exploitation, brutality and corruption in the Oakland police department, *Nightcrawling* gives voice to 17-year-old Kiara Johnson, who becomes a sex worker to pay for rent increases after her father's death and her mother's detention in a rehab facility. She also has to take care of Trevor, a nine-year-old left behind by a neighbor and her disillusioned older brother Marcus, who spends his time making music. Drugs, sex and power battles are common themes in television dramas like *The Wire*.⁶⁹ According to Kit Fan,

What makes *Nightcrawling* scarring and unforgettable as a novel is Mottley's ability to change our language about and perception of the repressed and confined. She does this by entering the mind, body and soul of Kiara, one of the toughest and kindest young heroines of our time.⁷⁰

It is precisely the use of language that makes it a standout novel. With the combination of such a difficult subject and truly multidimensional characters, it is a remarkable read, I believe. Mottley can express "an extraordinary degree of sympathy with people who have none,"⁷¹ while also looking at the factual optics of a real-life event., a scandal that took place in the author's

⁶⁸ Elisabeth Egan, "Leila Mottley Graduated from High School and Wrote a Novel." *The New York Times*, June 30, 2022, sec. Books, accessed November 9, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/30/books/review/night-crawling-leila-mottley.html>.

⁶⁹ Kit Fan, "Nightcrawling by Leila Mottley Review – a Dazzling Debut." *The Guardian*, June 2, 2022, accessed December 9, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/jun/02/nightcrawling-by-leila-mottley-review-a-dazzling-debut>.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ron Charles, "Oprah's Latest Book Club Pick: 'Nightcrawling,' by Leila Mottley." *The Washington Post*, June 14, 2022, accessed December 7, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/books/2022/06/14/nightcrawling-leila-mottley/>.

hometown. Before I analyze the book as a whole, I presume that to understand the novel, it is important to first look at its plot and its vital moments.

Overall, the novel has 250 pages and is divided into 26 chapters, making each section seemingly digestible and easy to read. Yet because of the use of poetic, lyrical language and the subject topic, this book is the opposite of a lighthearted read.

The main protagonist is named Kiara and she's a 17-year-old high school dropout. She has an older brother, Marcus. They live alone in a run-down flat in East Oakland. Their father is dead and their mother is in jail. When Kiara finds out their rent is doubled, she does not know what to do. Unable to figure out how to properly provide for her family when their rent is doubled, Kiara is at a loss, as no one wants to hire her as she is only 17 and a high school dropout. Her brother refuses to work and only wants to focus on his rap career, which is going nowhere. Therefore, when Kiara gets drunk and a man mistakes her for a sex worker, she decides to start “walking the streets” that night - becoming a prostitute. She thinks she does that to protect her brother and herself, as well as a young boy who lives in her apartment complex. His name is Trevor and he has a mother that does not care for him. Kiara truly believes she needs to do sex work for her family — but she changes her mind when the police find out what she is doing. She is then forced to work for them, for which she does not always get paid. The police angle is based on true events and it was this news report that inspired Mottley to write *Nightcrawling*. In the end, everyone finds out what happened and Kiara is free of her unfortunate destiny. She is reunited with her mother and finds love in her best friend. Still, the book doesn't feel like it has a true happy ending.

Another review that I think captioned the meaning behind the plot and some of its themes marvelously, is a review from *The Guardian*. As stated by Kit Fan, Mottley crafts a damaged universe in which reality reads like an enthusiastic parody, from the filthy but personal home interiors of Kiara's apartment to the dirty Oakland streets littered with potholes. Kiara's

streets are filled with life, skateboards, graffiti, spicy food and excellent friends who cannot protect her. Order and chaos are required in fiction. Mottley handles the pandemonium both outside and inside Kiara with a calm, unjudgmental demeanor. This is a challenging task, especially since all eyes are on Kiara - those of family, friends, police officers turned customers and finally, a grand jury - are on her at all times, demanding her time, body, money and capacity for forgiveness. Meanwhile, she struggles to tell her account of her life's sad truth. If opportunity and choice are the basis of the American dream, they are nightmares for those who have been used and smeared by those in power, I think, leaving them with the impression that life is hopeless and unsurvivable. Nonetheless, it is *Nightcrawling*'s dedication to the art and ethics of survival that distinguishes it as a rare and riveting meditation on the powerless. Kiara's complicated psychology, youth and edgy intelligence are unpacked in Motley's work, as is her unwavering maternal drive to protect Marcus and Trevor at all costs. Mottley's extensive examination of Kiara's horrible condition raises ethical questions as well: whether to expose the cops or keep her quiet. *Nightcrawling* justifies every impossible decision she must make, probing her moral compass as the consequences unfold around her and crescendo to a terrifying grand jury moment. Kiara is cautioned by her ambitious white lawyer about the power of the spoken word: "The only thing you have control over is what you say ... If you tell the truth, then we have a chance at an indictment and changing the way this kind of thing works." *Nightcrawling* is an allegory of the potential power of speech, narrative and fiction, as well as a daring study of justice, guilt and prejudice. Mottley employs anonymity to chilling effect in a book where racism is pervasive. The badge numbers of the police officers are 612, 190 and 601. Their identities are not revealed until the very end. The novel heralds the brilliant advent of a young writer with

a voice and vision you won't be able to shake.”⁷² After this summary of the plot of the book, I will continue with a more detailed analysis of *Nightcrawling* and some of its themes. However, because the book was released recently and the number of resources to use is rather limited, I have decided to incorporate my own thoughts and opinions on the novel, as opposed to the other two novels that this thesis deals with.

3. 1. Contemporary African American Feminine Identity According to *Nightcrawling*

Just like the other books that are analyzed in this thesis, contemporary African American feminine identity plays a vital role and massively differs from the feminine identity of the main characters in *Such a Fun Age* and *The Other Black Girl*. It is the variety of these characters that shows that Black femininity is not a monolith and that is precisely what makes it so interesting and valuable. Kiara’s is different from that of Emira or Nella. Not only does Mottley focus on the internal parts that make up Black womanhood, she also manages to explore the external parts, as they are intertwined.

Kiara is a 17-year-old (almost 18-year-old) Black girl from East Oakland and because she is still a teenager, her feminine identity is different from that of adult women. She is still a child but because of her unfortunate situation, she’s forced to grow up fast and leave her childhood behind. In the novel’s author’s note, Mottley writes:

I wanted to write a story that would reflect the fear and danger that comes with black womanhood and the adultification of black girls, while also recognizing that Kiara—

⁷² Kit Fan, “Nightcrawling by Leila Mottley Review – a Dazzling Debut.” *The Guardian*, June 2, 2022, accessed December 9, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/jun/02/nightcrawling-by-leila-mottley-review-a-dazzling-debut>.

like so many of us who find ourselves in circumstances that feel impossible to survive—
is still capable of joy and love.⁷³

Because of the fact that Kiara lives only with her brother and doesn't have a stable source of income and the fact that she is a high school dropout with no qualifications, she's forced to go down a dark route in her life. She becomes a prostitute, despite being a minor. She is using her body as a kind of instrument, to make ends meet and to survive in a cruel world. She's aware that what she's doing is illegal and dangerous but she doesn't see a way out. The people that bring her joy are Trevor, a young boy from her building who treats Kiara like a big sister or a mom, as well as Alé, Kiara's longtime friend and later on, girlfriend. Internally, these people give her the strength she needs. Mottley perfectly captures these feelings in the following lines.

“Trevor and I sweltering, jumping, always close to the sky. Alé and her weed, that smile quick, Sunday Shoes, funeral day. For these moments, I forget my body is a currency and none of the things I did last night make any sense at all. Trevor's body, the way it fills up with air and releases, reminds me how sacred it is to be young. These moments when all I want is to have my mama hum me a lullaby I will only remember in dream-land.”

The idea of Kiara's body being a currency is a painful and accurate statement. Throughout the novel Kiara talks about her body like she is not in it, like she's sort of floating above her physical body and looking down at herself, watching herself experience all the ugly things, desperately trying to get away. This is not surprising, as her job is becoming more and more dangerous as

⁷³ Mottley, *Nightcrawling*, 259, epub.

the novel progresses. She becomes entangled with a ring of police officers who sexually abuse her. Kiara is a minor, a young Black girl who should feel protected. Instead, the group that should be there for her commits a crime against her. Mottley can painfully describe what it feels like to be a woman and although her novel deals with sex trafficking, the idea of being taken advantage of, not feeling safe, not knowing who to trust or trusting the wrong people is a universal experience, an experience that is harsher for women of color and young women of color even more so.

Yet Mottley is also able to show how much Trevor means to Kiara and how much sisterly or motherly love she exudes. There are also recollections throughout *Nightcrawling* of times when Kiara felt a strong bond with her older brother Marcus. She wants to help and use her feminine energy in this manner. The concept of nurture is beautiful and is rooted in empathy and femininity, in my opinion. Mottley manages to write marvelously about it.

When talking about Black femininity, one must always include Black hair. Black woman's hair represents her heritage, it is her crown, her identity and how she sees herself. When Kiara visits her mother in jail, she begins to reminisce about old times, when she was a little girl and her mom would do her hair. Now, several years later, during a jail visit, Kiara has her hair done by her mom again. Mottley describes the act of doing one's hair as an intimate experience that brings Black women together.

Leila Mottley's *Nightcrawling* is a compelling examination of Black womanhood as a whole. The reader can learn more about Black femininity and all of its complexities by following Kiara on her journey. What makes *Nightcrawling* unique is the fact that Mottley writes about Black femininity from the perspective of a Black female sex worker in the 21st century and the reader can see just what exactly has changed in the world and what has stayed the same, especially when it comes to the experiences young African American women go through. I

consider this book an essential to read when it comes to the theme of contemporary African American identity.

3.2. Political Identity As A Valuable Aspect of *Nightcrawling*

In my view, the idea of political identity is a rather tricky, hidden aspect of *Nightcrawling*. It's an aspect of *Nightcrawling* that is hidden between the lines, it's more about what's unsaid than what is explicitly stated. Firstly, it is never clearly said in the novel what each of the character's political views are or who they support politically. However, the novel itself takes place in a historically liberal state, California and an even more liberal, diverse and unorthodox city, Oakland. The author of the novel is apparently a liberal Democrat, according to sources and statements she made but I truly think that is not the case with the novel's protagonist.

Throughout almost the entire novel, it does not seem like either side supports Kiara. The left or the right wing, the Democrats or the Republicans. Both parties have failed her. Those who should've been there for her were not. Only in the end, justice is served and those who wronged her got what they deserved, at least the majority of those people in her life. thanks to whom did that happen, politically speaking? That, I think, is not actually crystal clear and I presume that was done on purpose.

What I think Mottley demonstrates wonderfully with her novel is the human experience and how flawed humans are. Just because someone says they support people of color, Black women or sex workers, does not automatically mean they will do so in real life. Just because someone says they are there for you, does not mean you can trust them. Just because someone looks like you does not mean they have your back and see the world the same way you do. Just

because someone shares the same values as you does not automatically mean that they are your friend. There are bad people in every group and movement, and I think, which is the point Mottley was probably trying to make as people need to see the good in other people and to be willing to accept help, no matter where it comes from. Regardless of one's race, gender, profession, background, religion or sexual orientation and identity, there will be kind people who want to support others and there will be bad people whose only intention is to hurt others.

What I also believe relates to the idea of politics and political identity is corruption and the abuse of power in *Nightcrawling*. Had the Oakland policemen not been corrupt and been good, honest police officers, had they not sexually abused a minor, had they not run a sex trafficking operation, Kiara would not have had to go through what she had to go through. This is why, in my view, having certain moral values and knowing what is right and what is wrong is essentially what also links to one's political identity and its significance. Once again, Mottley captures that belief flawlessly.

The way the policemen abused their power is related to how various politicians around the world manipulate via their power and why many powerful people abuse their power as well. According to various sources, the Black community is the community that is the most affected by hostile behavior from the police and the criminal justice system. *Nightcrawling* deals with sex trafficking, a horrible crime that happened in Oakland but the police as a whole have caused many horrible injustices to Black Americans, while many of those crimes made headlines with a goal to make the policing system across the U.S. fair and safe.

According to a 2021 report by the BBC, African Americans are more likely to get fatally shot, they are more likely to be pulled over and are imprisoned at five times the rate of white

Americans and twice the rate of Hispanic-Americans.⁷⁴ Dr. Michael Lindsey, who directs the McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research at New York University and has studied the effects of racism on mental health in black youth, has stated that “Black communities are often over-policed and over-profiled, which can even lead to fatality, as recent cases have shown us.”⁷⁵ He also asks whether “an interaction with the police result in an outcome characterized by physical harm or unequal treatment by the court system”⁷⁶ as it is “a real concern for Black Americans.”⁷⁷ It is no wonder Leila Mottley made the decision to take on such a task, to write about a truly horrible crime that affected people that look like her and similar incidents still take place to this day.

What I think is also worth mentioning is the slogan “Defund the Police.” According to Time Magazine, there are various interpretations of what the term "defund" actually means — and how it should be used to promote change. Some activists use it to describe their goal of completely disbanding police forces, while others interpret it to mean the reallocation of a police department's budget to varying degrees. Others continue to believe that the term can be used to describe both goals or that it can simply be used as a broader call to accountability.⁷⁸ And this is what I believe is Mottley’s main message. She wanted to see accountability, real

⁷⁴ Reality Check Team, “Three Facts That Help Explain Anger in the US.” *BBC News*, April 21, 2021, sec. US & Canada, accessed September 5, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52877678>.

⁷⁵ Laura Santhanam, “Two-Thirds of Black Americans Don’t Trust the Police to Treat Them Equally. Most White Americans Do,” *PBS NewsHour*, June 5, 2020, accessed September 5, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/news-hour/politics/two-thirds-of-black-americans-dont-trust-the-police-to-treat-them-equally-most-white-americans-do>.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Josiah Bates, “How Are Activists Managing Dissension within the ‘Defund the Police’ Movement?” *Time*, February 23, 2021, accessed October 9, 2022. <https://time.com/5936408/defund-the-police-definition-movement/>.

change and fair treatment from the police. She wanted to see changes that should've happened a long time ago. The way I see it, political identity is not the most important part of the book but it is still a meaningful aspect that has a massive impact on every single young Black woman in America.

3.3. The Importance of Safe Environment and A Sense of Security in *Nightcrawling*

Safety is perhaps the most vital part of *Nightcrawling*. Instead of, once again, being explicitly written about, everything about this topic is stated indirectly. Young women need to feel safe and protected in order to thrive and to fully develop into healthy adults. They need to feel like someone has their back, like they have a home or a safe space. The reason why I'm bringing these themes up is due to the lack of these themes being prevalent in Mottley's debut novel.

During an interview with the NPR, Mottley talks about how Kiara's character came to her mind, as she was reading about the true event that inspired her novel. "In 2017, a court ordered that the police department pay a Black woman almost a million dollars in damages after she claimed that multiple police officers sexually abused her,"⁷⁹ states the interviewer. Mottley then talks about what was going through her mind, how she processed the events that happened in her hometown when she was 17 years old, just like her protagonist Kiara.

"... looking at the way the media spoke about this case because there was this disproportionate focus on what does it mean for the relationship between the police department

⁷⁹ Ayesha Rascoe, "'Nightcrawling' Follows a Woman Who Turns to Sex Work to Support Her Family," *NPR*. June 5, 2022, accessed September 5, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/05/1103145068/nightcrawling-follows-a-woman-who-turns-to-sex-work-to-support-her-family>.

and the community; what does it mean for the police officers; and not a lot of focus at all on what does it mean for this young girl; what does it mean for the harm to her and the thousands of other girls and women who experience this kind of thing regularly? And, you know, their stories never make it to the media or to a courtroom. And so I started thinking about it and researching other cases of police sexual violence. And then Kiara kind of came to me. ”

The case of sexual violence is the vilest aspect of the lack of a safe environment in the novel. As I've already stated before, since Kiara doesn't have the resources she needs, she becomes a sex worker to make ends meet, as she cannot do any other job that would make her enough money. This is the most important aspect as to her safety. The police department does not help her when it should be the department she can count on.

Kiara hasn't had a happy childhood. Her dad passed away when she was a child, her mother left her as well as her older brother. Her mother then ended up in jail. Therefore, Kiara never really had a proper safe environment at home. Since she had not grown up surrounded by healthy, loving parental relationships, she was more likely going to end up in a bad place, just as she did.

Alé is, in my opinion, the only person in the book that provides a safe space for her and the reader can see that, especially at the end of the novel. Kiara and Alé are at first, long-time friends, Kiara trusts in Alé and unlike Trevor, she doesn't have to look after her. They are equal, as it is Alé who provides Kiara with warm meals from her family's restaurant and is also there for her physically and emotionally. The way I see it, despite not having a safe environment at home or on the streets, she finds a recluse when with Alé.

It's essential to realize that even when you are surrounded by danger and crime at all times, you need good people to be there for you. As it's not just your literal environment that can create a safe space for you, it's the people as well. And with her poetic and beautiful language, the author demonstrates that safety perfectly.

In my view, Mottley needed to write about this specific case, not only because it took place in her hometown and deeply affected young Black girls but it also showed people's true colors and enabled to reveal just how much evil there is in the world. In order to know how important one's safe environment is, one must know what it's like to not have it. I believe the author did a marvelous job when talking about this segment.

It's rather clear that *Nightcrawling* is not a lighthearted novel. In my opinion, it is the darkest and the most heartbreaking novel out of the three I've chosen to discuss in this thesis. However, it explores large issues that need to be talked about, serious hardships that affect young Black women daily. Not only do Black girls have to deal with racism, sexism and misogyny but they can also come in contact with dangerous criminals, have toxic relationships with their families and have no one to turn to. This novel proved just that and it also managed to show the reader that justice was served and Kiara got a kind of happy ending, although not a typical one.

4. *The Other Black Girl* by Zakiya Dalila Harris

An Introduction to *The Other Black Girl*

The Other Black Girl is a debut novel, as well as a *New York Times* bestseller, from Zakiya Dalila Harris. It was published by Atria, a division of Simon & Schuster on June 1, 2021.⁸⁰ A TV adaptation of the novel is in production and should be released in 2023 on Hulu.⁸¹ Harris's other work can be found in *Esquire*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Guernica*, the *Rumpus* and the *New York Times*.⁸²

Harris obtained her BA from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and her MFA in creative nonfiction writing from the New School. She was born and raised in Connecticut, now she resides in Brooklyn.⁸³ She worked in book publishing before becoming a full-time writer - she draws on this experience in her debut book, *The Other Black Girl*, which blends social satire and a mystery to tell the tale of Nella, the only black employee at a fictional publishing house, up until Hazel-May McCall joins the company. The book, which was the object of a 15-way auction prior to release in the US, addresses the difficulties of surviving in a structurally discriminatory workplace and traces how the two come to be rivals.⁸⁴ The fact that the book was already being looked at with anticipation before the actual release only makes the novel and what it represents much more exciting. But, in my opinion, it is also kind of ironic

⁸⁰ THE OTHER BLACK GIRL | *Kirkus Reviews*. N.d. www.kirkusreviews.com, accessed November 26, 2022. <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/zakiya-dalila-harris/the-other-black-girl/>.

⁸¹ Zakiya Dalila Harris, N.d. "About Me," Zakiya Dalila Harris, accessed November 3, 2022. <http://zakiyadalilaharris.com/about>.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Anita Sethi, "Zakiya Dalila Harris: 'Publishing Is Such a Spoofable World,'" *The Guardian*, June 5, 2021, accessed September 5, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jun/05/zakiya-dalila-harris-publishing-is-such-a-spoofable-world>.

and almost contradictory, when one realizes that the book - which is about racial inequality and the significant danger that surrounds a young Black woman - was subjected to a prominent auction.

The Other Black Girl by Zakiya Dalila Harris is a novel with psychological, thriller and horror aspects that are essential to the reading experience, as well as the evolution of the Black Horror and Black Thriller genre. The book takes place in Manhattan's cutthroat, predominately white publishing world. Office politics generate anxiety in Harris's story, which was written while she was an editorial assistant at the Alfred A. Knopf publishing house in Manhattan. Harris also incorporates aspects of science fiction horror and literary realism. *The Other Black Girl* explores systemic and internalized racism, Black female experiences, professional advantages and the role of media in racial portrayals by following the careers of five Black women at Wagner Books from 1983 to 2018.

I have decided to include a summary of the plot of the novel, as I need to discuss various themes and the meaning behind this literary work. The novel is divided into four parts and it includes a prologue and an epilogue.

In the prologue, it is December 1983 and an unknown narrator who is later revealed as Kendra Rae Phillips is fleeing NYC in horror. Kendra Rae is Wagner Books' only Black female editor and she did an interview where she criticized the publishing industry's racial structures. Therefore, she's received a lot of hate as a result. However, regardless of what the media says, she is more concerned about the people that are after her, not the media. What is also a vital part of the prologue is that her scalp itches and she cannot stop scratching her head.

Part 1 foreshadows a similar fate for the main character, Nella Rogers, an editing assistant and the sole Black woman working at Wagner in 2018. Despite her efforts to launch talks about racial bias in Diversity Town Halls, Nella is skeptical that any substantial change will

occur. Wagner hires Hazel-May McCall, another Black lady, surprising Nella. The two ladies become friends and Nella complains about the racist depiction of a Black woman in the book *Pins and Needles*, which she is editing. Hazel advises Nella to discuss her concerns with her supervisor, Vera Parini, and the author, Colin Franklin. Nella follows Hazel's suggestion, which has a dramatic negative outcome. Is Nella's career at Wagner, like Kendra Rae's, now over? Part 1 ends on a cliffhanger.

A throwback to the novel *Burning Heart*'s release party in October 1983 opens Part 2. Kendra Rae prepares her interview responses in advance, visibly upset by her white coworkers' offensive small talk. After a month has passed, Diana gets a distressed call from someone who wants to "do something" about Kendra Rae's bad press. In 2018, Nella's life starts to fall apart as Hazel becomes the popular one. Hazel is urged by Vera to take over Nella's responsibilities. Additionally, Hazel undermines Nella's credibility by defending *Pins & Needles*. Nella begins to receive threatening notes forcing her to leave Wagner, which just makes her more paranoid and scared. Part 2 includes Shani's story, a woman who joins the Resistance, an organization that is keeping an eye on Hazel and "Other Black Girls." Shani's life has been negatively impacted by Hazel as well. "The Other Black Girls" are competitive women who infiltrate business environments and "convert" regular Black women into obedient versions of themselves. In my opinion, Part 2 of the book is one of the most important ones as it tries to show the difference between Black women, how there is no "one type" of Black woman.

Part 3 deals with the power struggle between "The Other Black Girls" and the Resistance, from the 80s 'till 2018. Nella comes to an event planned by Hazel at a natural hair cafe where Nella and Richard, the owner of Wagner Books, launch a joint project to improve recruiting procedures in the publishing industry. Shocked Nella confronts Hazel but Hazel surprisingly gives her a jar of Smooth'd Out hair grease and invites her to a natural hair party. The

next day, Shani informs the Resistance of her findings. Kendra Rae is hiding out at the Resistance headquarters and requests Shani to describe what is in the jar. Kendra Rae makes a comparison between Smooth'd Out that burned her scalp and the process by which “The Other Black Girls” are “converting” Black women. Shani contacts Nella but the Resistance detains Shani before their meeting. I consider Part 3 to be the most crucial section of the novel because it clearly shows what is happening and the plot gradually becomes more thrilling.

In Part 4, after Kendra Rae's interview, Diana teams up with Richard and Imani to create a pharmaceutical blend that will numb the prefrontal cortex, making Black women more compliant. Nella joins Hazel's gathering for natural hair unaware of this, hoping to find out more about Hazel's dubious actions. She manages to go but the next day at a crucial meeting, Nella discovers that Hazel has changed their honored guest, a prominent Black activist. Sadly, Nella is defeated as she agrees to conversion. In the epilogue, she changes her name and goes to Oregon to fix Shani the same way she was “fixed” by Hazel.

The novel ends with a wicked, thrilling scene that adds extra tension and uneasiness to the reading experience. Altogether, the text provides valuable commentary on racial and social complexities while also being truly entertaining. The thrilling, horror-like aspect is greatly evident in the final chapter. All of the elements and motifs mentioned above will be discussed in the following lines of this chapter.

4.1 How Contemporary African American Feminine Identity Manifests Itself in *The Other Black Girl*

I believe that there are similarities between the way contemporary African American feminine identity manifests itself in *The Other Black Girl* and the other two novels discussed in this thesis but there are also differences. That distinctness is apparent in Harris's novel, as she not only explores the themes of Black womanhood, sisterhood and female stereotypes in relation to whiteness but also Black female jealousy. Envy and jealousy are often discussed in literary works that deal with female friendship and all its forms. However, Black female jealousy that is present in friendships and work relationships between female colleagues in predominantly white spaces is not written about as often in comparison to the experience of white women. *The Other Black Girl* is one of a few books exploring the ins and outs of the publishing industry from the perspective of a young Black woman. Contemporary African American feminine identity is not a monolith and that is especially glaring in the horror novel *The Other Black Girl*.

Raveén Green writes that Black women “constantly see their femininity, womanhood and body through the eyes of the white gaze; this includes being fed stereotypes of hypermasculinization, hypersexualization, etc.”⁸⁵ What they don't often see is those experiences through their own lens. It's precisely the element of authenticity in Harris's novel that makes it so captivating.

As Naomi Jackson writes in her review in *The Washington Post*, the unabashed appeal of *The Other Black Girl* to Black female readers is one of the book's joys. From references to '90s Black culture (Janet Jackson's braids in “Poetic Justice,” “A Different World” reruns) to

⁸⁵Raveén Green, “The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature,” 1.

sufficient doses of hair-related anxiety, dialogues and plot lines, Black girls will love how this novel centers on their experiences, opinions and eccentricities. Nella's conviction that the odds are stacked against Black women, which is supported by both personal experience and statistical evidence, is at the core of the book.⁸⁶ The fact that the book is based on personal experience is what makes the story so much more substantial. It is not rare that a novel is fully fictional with no real-life events included in the story, so although it is fictional from the horror genre perspective, it shows the toxic environment of a predominately white publishing world, the complexities of friendship, envy and conformity from the perspective of a young Black woman.

Nella remembers “. . . the day she'd first learned that it would not be enough for her to simply go to college, get good grades, and get the interview. That it wouldn't be enough to simply show up to work; to simply wear the right clothes. You had to wear the right mentality. You had to live the mentality. Be everyone's best friend. Be sassy. Be confident, but also be deferential. Be spiritual, but also be down-to-earth. Be woke, but still keep some of that sleep in your eyes, too.”⁸⁷ There's a saying that as a Black person in the U.S., especially young Black women in various work fields, have to work twice as hard as non-Black individuals. In my opinion, societal pressure very much affects young Black girls in the United States and they have to be, to put it simply, multiple things at once. They must check so many boxes and be everything others want them to be. They can also feel lonely and alone. I presume that reading about Nella's life can feel painfully accurate, as Harris truly explores all of the complexities and problems many young Black girls in various industries can relate to.

⁸⁶ Naomi Jackson, “The Other Black Girl ‘Should Be at the Top of Your Summer Reading List,” *The Washington Post*, June 9, 2021, accessed October 4, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/other-black-girl-zakiya-dalila-harris-book-review/2021/06/09/bb7919f0-c923-11eb-a11b-6c6191ccd599_story.html.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

Regina Porter writes in her book review in *The Guardian* that the following passage from *The Other Black Girl* is important, she also writes why.

“The girl had a wide, symmetrical face, and two almond-colored eyes perfectly spaced between a Lena Horne nose and a generous forehead. Her skin was a shade or two darker than Nella’s maple complexion, falling somewhere between hickory and pecan. And her locs – each one as thick as a bubble tea straw and longer than her arms – started out as a deep brown, then turned blonde as they continued past her ears. She’d gathered a bunch and piled them on top of her head in a bun; the locs that hadn’t made it hung loosely around the nape of her neck.”⁸⁸

In my judgment, hair is always going to be important to Black women and in the Black community in general. Hair can be one’s crown and pride but it can also cause unwanted attention and remarks, the latter from non-Black people particularly. How light or how dark a person is is a complex issue that is always going to be discussed in the Black community. That is why I agree with Porter’s take on Nella’s hair.

I agree with Porter that this quotation is noteworthy for a variety of reasons. Be it the meaning of skin color and hair in African American culture or the legacy of slavery and colonization. Nella had permed hair growing up but she tried going natural with some degree of success. As Porter notes, Nella lacks the confidence and understanding necessary to manage her natural do in a conservative work environment, in contrast to Hazel. Nevertheless, Nella is pleased to have another black woman in the workplace and rapidly gains Hazel's trust by teaching her how to deal with their capricious superiors. Nella begins to get anonymous threats ordering her to quit Wagner Books immediately after Hazel arrives. Hazel first appears to be the

⁸⁸ Harris, *The Other Black Girl*, 17-18, epub.

epitome of perfection, with a charming, well-connected artist boyfriend and a winning personality that enables her to code-switch effortlessly.⁸⁹ I will describe the term code-switching in more detail in a different part of this chapter regarding safe environment. Now I am going to include a simple definition by John Joseph Gumperz. He defined conversational code-switching as “the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems.”⁹⁰

What is essentially meant by that is the idea of changing the way one speaks depending on the social context, in this case to appeal to a white environment. Another useful definition was provided by George B. Ray in his work titled *Language and Interracial Communication in the United States: Speaking in Black and White*. He describes African American code-switching as “a skill that holds benefits in relation to the way success is often measured in institutional and professional settings.”⁹¹ In other words, code-switching allows African Americans to truly be able to exist peacefully in predominantly white spaces. They can code-switch to their normal, authentic voice when they are surrounded by other African Americans.

In *The Other Black Girl*, Hazel does this by speaking in a way that reduces white anxiety around people of color and by playing up her genuine, Harlem-born black activist credentials in a way that makes the white employees feel at ease and “woke.” When Nella offers constructive criticism on a book published by one of Wagner's best-selling white male authors that includes a misconceived pregnant black opioid addict named Shartricia Daniels, her chances of getting promoted vanish. When asked for her thoughts on the novel, Hazel does not object to

⁸⁹Regina Porter, “The Other Black Girl by Zakiya Dalila Harris Review – an Audacious Debut,” *The Guardian*. June 16, 2021, accessed September 22, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jun/16/the-other-black-girl-by-zakiya-dalila-harris-review-an-audacious-debut>.

⁹⁰ John Joseph Gumperz, “Discourse Strategies,” 59.

⁹¹ George B. Ray, *Language and Interracial Communication in the United States: Speaking in Black and White*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2019), 72, epub.

the stereotypes.⁹² In her review for *NPR*, Bethanne Patrick explains this perfectly. Patrick writes that Nella “longs for another Black woman as colleague, someone with whom she can share the pressures Black people face overall in corporate America,”⁹³ especially something like the publishing industry, a place that has “functioned as de facto country clubs, rife with class privilege, nepotism and deeply ingrained bigotry.”⁹⁴

Patrick also explains that the paths taken by Nella and Hazel may equally well be plainly labeled “Success” and “Authenticity,” though not necessarily in that order. As a young Black woman, if you choose the first option, you risk hiding your genuine identity — not just your sense of style and taste but also the basic values that guide your life. - as a young Black woman, if you take the second route, you'll own your identity but you'll never hold the corner office because you'll cause too much conflict along the way.⁹⁵ A vital question arises, it is a question Patrick asks as well: “What's a young Black woman to do?”⁹⁶ Which path to choose, should she follow her gut instincts, what her family wants her to do, what her ancestors want her to do or should she listen to those that she aspires to be like? What about her moral compass?

Unlike many novels about modern African American life that laud the long-standing African American upper classes, Harris's book is not afraid to speak out the patriarchal disparities on which those upper classes also rely. Nella understands that her comfortable but mundane

⁹² Porter, “The Other Black Girl by Zakiya Dalila Harris Review – an Audacious Debut,” *The Guardian*, June 16, 2021, accessed September 22, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jun/16/the-other-black-girl-by-zakiya-dalila-harris-review-an-audacious-debut>.

⁹³ Bethanne Patrick, “An Office Rivalry Turns Strange — and Maybe Dangerous — in ‘the Other Black Girl.’” *NPR*, June 4, 2021, sec. Book Reviews, accessed September 15, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/04/1002959204/an-office-rivalry-turns-strange-and-maybe-dangerous-in-the-other-black-girl>

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

middle-class upbringing does not provide her with the same benefits as Hazel's more privileged upbringing. And just because these two women are both Black doesn't mean they're alike in any other way, a point Harris and her fellow Black writers should not have to make but must in a world where either may still be referred to as "the other Black female" in the office.⁹⁷ In my opinion, it is precisely this perspective that is needed in the literary world and in the world of Millennials and Gen Zers. One must not shy away from issues and problems that communities of either a specific race, ethnicity or gender are faced with and this book does an excellent job at highlighting that. Which is why the Black Female gaze is so important.

Raveén Green writes that the oppositional Black female gaze recognizes the violence in invisibility that Black women experience on a daily basis; by using this gaze, both society and Black women are able to remake the media. The erasure of Black women is a result of this invisibility, indicating that society does not want to perceive Black women in the light that they represent themselves and how they view society.⁹⁸ Green also includes a quote by bell hooks, a prolific Black female author. In "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," bell hooks defines the Black Female gaze as: "Looking and looking back, black women involve ourselves in a process whereby we see our history as counter-memory, using it as a way to know the present and invent the future."⁹⁹ In my understanding, this relates to Nella in a particular way. She considers herself to be an outsider and she does not feel seen by others in a way that truly represents her. Just when she thinks she found someone who is going to see her for who she truly is, the opposite happens. She then tries to resist and fight for what she believes to be the truth but unfortunately ends up failing.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Green, "The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature," 2.

⁹⁹ bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," 131, epub.

Green summarizes this by stating that without the Black female gaze, recognizing Black women becomes a preoccupation of stereotypes based on racism, fetishism, dehumanization and so on. As a result, the media must be formed by the Black female gaze since what is seen is inextricably linked to how Black womanhood is defined. Black girls require an outlet provided by and for them. Our personal lens draws attention to how society perceives Black women, how they are taught to perceive themselves, how they can modify that perception and how they can further strengthen their Black feminine identity.¹⁰⁰ This is why Nella as a young Black female character is so important. She is not a stereotype, if anything, she is the opposite of what a typical Black woman is like according to non-Black people, in my opinion. To overcome stereotypes, one must realize Black feminine identity is not cookie-cutter.

What must be mentioned is the idea of ordinariness. Not every young Black woman is rich, poor, simple, gifted, shy, fierce. Representation of young Black women is essential because it highlights the variety among contemporary Black women. Green writes that Harris is making the point that Nella is an ordinary Black woman. She isn't from a wealthy or poor family, she attended college and she primarily works at her dream career but she isn't able to accomplish all of her objectives and she doesn't appear to stand out for her work or even her ethnicity at her job. When Harris crafts this gaze and attitude for our main heroine, we see that Black women face more than simply the obstacles of their upbringing. They dread being forgotten by their white coworkers and the guilt of not doing enough for anyone except themselves. She is constantly wary of how she represents herself and her community. These concerns are brought on by how predominantly white her daily existence is. Nella is an ordinary Black girl, one whose melanin cannot be removed since she actively embraces her culture. In opposition to Hazel's

¹⁰⁰ Green, "The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature," 4.

depiction, her discussion with Nella and other co-workers demonstrates how she is able to become obedient and set aside her ideals in order to be financially successful. Hazel's concern is living a life that is not sustainable enough. She is introduced as the new Black girl from Brooklyn who can interact with both white and Black people. I agree with Green that she is the ideal illustration of how to code-switch without considering the effects on her coworkers or her own mental health.¹⁰¹ The effects of Hazel's code-switching on Nella are destructive of her identity. Hazel doesn't fully realize what she's doing and how it is weighing down on Nella emotionally and how it is complicating Nella's life. Hazel was supposed to be an ally of hers and is instead her destroyer. This is where the use of speech acts and performative sentences in particular, comes into play. According to John Langshaw Austin's work titled *How to do things with words*, performative sentences, derived from the word 'perform', indicate that "the issuing of utterance is the performing of an action – it is not normally thought of as just saying something."¹⁰² Therefore, performative sentences aren't just plain sentences, they do something. We utter performative sentences when we want to make changes, for example, our marital status with the "I do" formula. Performative sentences are very powerful and Hazel uses them to her advantage. Just because Hazel is a young Black woman, it does not mean Hazel and Nella will automatically get along. Instead of helping Nella constructing her black feminine identity, she is slowly making it fall apart by means of her words and hidden messages.

One of the many manifestations of the Black female gaze is represented by Hazel's viewpoint. The idea is that Black women should have it easier and find comfort in themselves by not worrying about being a sell-out and changing from one "personality" to another. Instead, Black women should strive to live happily and be well-paid even if it means compromising to

¹⁰¹ Green, "The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature," 9-10.

¹⁰² John Langshaw Austin, *How to do things with words*, 6-7, epub.

succeed and survive. While Nella worries that she isn't black enough, Hazel uses her blackness as a recruiting tool to get other Black women to support Richard and Diana's cause. As a reader, one can sympathize with both women and their situations. In this work, Black women are not villainized; rather, they are two victims who contribute to their own subjugation.¹⁰³

Diana is in my view, an example of the Black female gaze in another form and demonstrates how Black women may contribute to their own oppression. Harris illustrates the pervasive internalized racism that still affects Black women through Diana's chapters. Diana's gaze conveys disinterest and almost a disdain for one's own hair, highlighting her willingness to ignore her race in order to succeed, she is also not afraid to sacrifice others in order to achieve what she wants.¹⁰⁴ By using the motif of Natural Black hair, Harris demonstrates how Black women are always under the pressure of being presentable and constantly stress about being under the gaze of objectification.¹⁰⁵ All of these factors contribute to the idea of contemporary Black feminine identity in modern-day America, all of these factors show how many difficulties young Black women in the workplace face every day. The idea that there are given paths that a young Black girl must choose between is what sets their experience apart from non-Black girls.

But before I move on to another matter, I've decided to mention another secondary source that actually compares the book to a very famous film. According to *The Multiverse of Office Fiction*, there's a similarity between the 2007 film *The Devil Wears Prada* and *The Other Black Girl*, particularly the film's main character named Andrea Sachs and the novel's protagonist Nella Rogers.¹⁰⁶ The author makes a few interesting points about Nella and *The Other*

¹⁰³ Green, "The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature," 12.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Green, "The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature," 14—15.

¹⁰⁶ Kobayashi Masaomi, "At Work, at Home, at Life: Bartleby and His Kinwomen," *In The Multiverse of Office Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan. 76.

Black Girls as a literary work. By incorporating “the specific experience of the Black employee” and “putting some readers in positions they might never have imagined,” the novel breaks free from the confines of “the genre.” Nella, on the other hand, is connected to her symbolic sisters, whether directly or indirectly. The twenty-first-century office worker women highlighted in this chapter can be seen to defy office literature narrative conventions. They never get caught up in the either/or dilemma of work versus life.¹⁰⁷ Although it is obvious that there is a striking difference between the life of a young white woman in the publishing industry and that of a young Black woman, there are still things that are relatable for both women, despite their differences.

Andrea and Nella both prefer to be free of the confines of the office. Nella is currently employed at a different company on a different coast, thus she has become the other black girl in her relationship to another black woman, Shani. Andrea and Nella are two out of a thousand women who find an alternative life after an oppressive experience in a corporate, often masculine environment. They are all part of the growing universe of women's possibilities.¹⁰⁸ Although *The Other Black Girl* does not have a positive ending, it still shows the reader how Nella can grow careerwise, even though she does unfortunately lose herself. Without considering the horror aspect of the book, Harris technically shows the reader what kind of possibilities there are for women in the workplace. She also demonstrates what is essentially needed for career growth, especially for young women in the modern workplace.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 99-100.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 100.

4.2. How Political Identity Influences in *The Other Black Girl*

In my opinion, politics and political identity aren't explicitly discussed in *The Other Black Girl*. Instead, seemingly minor details are explored. The readers cannot say with certainty who voted for who, who identifies as a Republican or a Democrat, or who has conservative or liberal views. The readers can, however, see what kinds of opinions regarding one's political identity the main characters have. According to *The Washington Post*, the novel is "conversant on the social and political issues that Black women face in the world and the workplace"¹⁰⁹ As the host of *NPR's* radio show says in his interview with Harris, "this book is a commentary on race and performance but it is also a very specific sendup of the publishing industry and the enduring tone-deaf liberal whiteness of the publishing industry."¹¹⁰

This tone-deaf liberalism not only from the perspective of white people but also of Black people that have been quite literally brainwashed can be seen in the parts of the book that discuss the character of Shartricia. Patricia's character is ultimately omnipresent in the entire novel, it is the ultimate catalyst of *The Other Black Girl* and everything that happens to Nella in the story.

Shartricia Daniels is a fictional character from an upcoming novel by the white writer Colin Franklin. Shartricia represents a problematic, racist, stereotypical depiction of a Black female opioid addict. And Nella takes a massive offense to that character and tries to stop the book from being published in that state. She is, however, unable to do that. She is thrilled when she finds out another Black girl has joined the Manhattan office, and she is even happier when

¹⁰⁹ Naomi Jackson, "'The Other Black Girl' Should Be at the Top of Your Summer Reading List," *The Washington Post*, accessed September 10, 2022. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/other-black-girl-zakiya-dalila-harris-book-review/2021/06/09/bb7919f0-c923-11eb-a11b-6c6191ccd599_story.html

¹¹⁰ Sam Sanders, "Zakiya Dalila Harris and 'the Other Black Girl,' It's Been a Minute," *NPR*, accessed September 10, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/24/999933219/zakiya-dalila-harris-and-the-other-black-girl>

she finds out Hazel agrees with her opinion on Shartricia. But when Nella expects Hazel to help her and stand up for her, the opposite happens and from that point, everything begins to go downhill for Nella. It is when Nella expresses her honest opinion in front of her liberal white colleagues that she begins to feel disliked and like an outcast.

Hazel-May McCall, on the other hand, only pretends to be there for Nella, when in fact, she is in it only for herself and she is not afraid of betraying her own people. She does not seem to care about having a political identity that benefits young Black women, she only looks out for herself. In my opinion, politics play a huge role in our life. We as people vote for the people we feel have our best interests. We support politicians as public figures that preach what we want to hear. However, Hazel wants what benefits her and it is different in each situation. When something different resonates with her, she will follow it. She does not have an intelligible agenda. Politically, she is indistinctive. We could see her as a female incarnation of the archetype of American “confidence man.” The confidence man is a shape-shifter, a trickster who plays with people around him following a secret goal that benefits him. Those around him cannot pin him down, catch him or even chase him away. Similarly, Hazel wants Nella to confide in her but then she abuses Nella’s trust.

Another way in which the importance of having a political identity is explored is in those minor details in the book that talk about societal incidents that happened in the past few years and that caused waves on social media, and that directly play a role in one’s political identity. A perfect example of that is the paragraph below, a paragraph that truly shows how much seemingly minor events that maybe don’t affect us directly, play a significant role in our lives, maybe larger than we would like to admit.

“Nella wasn’t the one doing the calling out, but she closely monitored social media so she could support whoever did. She read think pieces by day and retweeted that the Oscars were indeed too white by night, and following the infamous Black-boy-in-a-monkey-hoodie incident, she took a six month-long break from shopping at H&M—a big deal for someone who loved buying cheap basics in the summertime. She could see the common thread of perceived subhumanity that ran between the cultural faux pas of major corporations and the continuous police killings of Black people.”¹¹¹

In my opinion, these seemingly minor incidents could even be considered to be a lot more important to Nella than, for example, large demonstrations or voting. This, I believe, can also apply to many young Black women in 21st-century America. It's not the small details in their daily life that make up one's life and how one sees the world, not the occasional and larger occurrences and this is perfectly demonstrated in *The Other Black Girl*. What I mean by that is that the novel doesn't describe painstakingly obvious racial crimes and injustices that don't happen every single minute of the day, it's the little incidents that are present in one's daily life. Those are, in my opinion, much more impactful on one's mentality.

Harris also mentions Obama, Malcolm X and Fritz Fanon, personalities who are massively important to the Black community. In my view, oftentimes politics and the idea of supporting one political party or a politician can seem intimidating but as one can tell from the paragraph above, possessing a political identity is not necessarily always about big, abstract ideas, but about those supposedly unimportant incidents that happen on social media and in one's community of any sorts, in the case of *The Other Black Girl* especially.

¹¹¹ Harris, *The Other Black Girl*, 18. epub.

4.3. How Safe Environment and a Sense of Security Play A Crucial Role in *The Other Black Girl*

Safety or the lack thereof plays a vital role in *The Other Black Girl*, particularly the safety of one's work environment. And according to a study titled "Black Women Talk about Workplace Stress and How They Cope." Black women face the same struggles as white women; however, they have to face issues of diversity on top of inequality. The major issues Black women deal with in the workplace include being hired or promoted in the workplace, defending one's race and lack of mentorship, shifting or code-switching to overcome barriers to employment, coping with racism and discrimination, as well as being isolated and/or excluded.¹¹²

This is very applicable to Nella's situation in the entire book. At the beginning of the novel, she's the only young Black woman in the office. When Hazel becomes an employee and also Nella's colleague who sits next to her, Nella hopes that she will feel safer, understood and less lonely. But the opposite happens and Nella begins to truly feel like an outcast. On the one hand, Nella should feel safe around Hazel, her Black female co-worker but she doesn't. On the other hand, there are white people that she feels safe around but there are also white people she doesn't trust, nor does she act like herself around them. At first, she wishes she was as good at code-switching as Hazel is but later she finds out that is not what she wants. It is at the end of the novel because of the hair grease, Nella completely "switches" but that action is forced.

Because of this action, decided to include a part of the text included in Green's work by Ver-shawn Ashanti Young titled ' "Nah, We Straight': An Argument Against Code-Switching, "

¹¹² J. Camille Hall, et al. "Black Women Talk about Workplace Stress and How They Cope." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 43, no. 2, 29 June 2011, p. 213, accessed September 4, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934711413272>.

where the author talks about the act of code-switching as a survival method. Young also quotes Toni Cook, “a legend in the education landscape of Oakland from the cradle to college.”¹¹³ He writes: “In Cook’s view, blacks should develop a dual personality, acting and speaking one way with whites, another with blacks in recognition of ‘the twoness of the world [they’re] involved in.’”¹¹⁴ Green also included a notable work by Fritz Fanon. In “Black Skin, White Masks,” Fanon argues this phenomenon has “two dimensions. One [being] with [the black man’s] fellows, the other with the white man. A Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro.”¹¹⁵ In his chapter, “The Negro and Language,” he precisely conveys the concept of code-switching by employing language. The manifestation of fitting oneself into a box acceptable to whiteness or the ‘dominant’ in society is code-switching. It is utilizing this shift in speech and body expression to advance and achieve goals beyond merely surviving in society. As Fanon notes, it stems from the desire that “requires a white approval.”¹¹⁶ This is where Hazel comes in, specifically with what code-switching means for her and how she differs from Nella.

According to Green, Hazel thought that switching codes would help her advance more quickly in society. She believed she needed to go past her radical thinking in order to put other Black women in the same position she was in. Hazel was nevertheless able to turn around and comply with the author of “Pins and Needles” to demonstrate that she was willing to put up with racism in order to win the support of her white co-workers, even while she was referring

¹¹³ Jumoke Hinton-Hodge, “The Legendary Toni Cook Opines on Housing for All.” Great School Voices, accessed November 4, 2022, <https://greatschoolvoices.org/2020/11/the-legendary-toni-cook-opines-on-housing-for-all/>.

¹¹⁴ Vershawn Ashanti Young, “‘Nah, We Straight’: An Argument Against Code Switching”. JAC 29, no. 1/2 (2009): 56, accessed November 4, 2022, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20866886>

¹¹⁵ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 17.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* 51.

to Nella in private as “sis.” While she plays the part of the friendly Black girl to Nella's boss, she advises Nella to fight against having the book published. She exercises both sides of the coin.¹¹⁷

White people, Hazel says, have the luxury of not having to always be mindful of their presence and behavior. “There's this social phenomenon. It's called code-switching”¹¹⁸, she says sarcastically of the entire department meeting. Changing her vocabulary and playing along was not an issue for Hazel. Her opposition was not something she wanted to present because she was working on a project with the company's CEO, Richard Wagner, to increase the number of Black women in the office. In this exchange, Hazel is being sarcastic, demonstrating that she does not see an issue with how her actions have damaged Nella and her emotional condition. However, Nella never blames Hazel for it.

Though she does grow more wary of Hazel and her ideas to gain the upper hand, she doesn't oppose code-switching as such openly. She still tries to play along but it becomes difficult at times. Like when her colleague Sophie mistakes her for Hazel.

“Yes, she knew all about code-switching and being flexible and easygoing and not taking anything too personally, but as Sophie continued to tap-dance around her faux pas, waxing poetic about an article she'd read about how the eye saw hues, Nella felt too tired to play along. She didn't bother to nod or laugh at Sophie's half jokes. She simply stood there, stone-faced, picking jasmine out of her mug piece by piece, waiting for the

¹¹⁷ Green, “The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature,” 11.

¹¹⁸ Harris, *The Other Black Girl*, 243, epub.

girl to stop speaking—or, at least, to finally stop tripping over herself long enough to realize that she wasn't going to undo what she'd done.”¹¹⁹

In my opinion, she nonetheless believes in the idea of code-switching and what it does for the Black community but at that moment, she chooses to put herself first. At a certain point, code-switching is not necessary and Nella recognizes that, yet she's still aware that she is always going to need code-switching in her life, just like other people of color.

Hair becomes a symbol of the hardships Black women encounter when competing in the publishing industry as Nella begins to be apprehensive of Hazel and sees her as a threat to her profession rather than a confidante. The plot's build-up is based on the fact that Nella is getting notes asking her to leave Wagner right now.¹²⁰ Without knowing who is sending these notes, Nella is left to hypothesize about who is attempting to force her to leave and whether or not it is Hazel.

Green writes that it's easy to see how Nella was taken in by the safety and comfort of natural hair, as well as the opportunity to connect with other Black women. Harris uses the scene of Black women getting their hair done together to demonstrate how, in the Black female gaze, natural hair provides a sense of security for all Black women. Black women can always relate to each other because it is a common experience.¹²¹

Hazel claims that, however, using hair grease can alter one's brain chemistry and functioning to the point that complying with whiteness is no longer a source of anxiety or tension and it never again enters one's thoughts when competing with another Black woman for a job.

¹¹⁹ Harris, *The Other Black Girl*, 224-225, epub.

¹²⁰ Ibid. 97.

¹²¹ Green, “The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature,” 17.

This is one of the tragedies that Black women confront today: conforming and adapting to whiteness by silence and passively complying with what their white co-workers require of them, even when they are micro-aggressed in the process.¹²²

“Of course there’s code switching, right? But it’s not just that. We really change ourselves,”¹²³ Harris said in an interview with *The New York Times*. I assume that the fact the novel is a horror is not a coincidence, as the idea of fully changing yourself for others is a terrifying action. It was only natural for the author to include code-switching, as it’s something very relatable, yet the existence of it is quite disturbing.

Code switching creates uncertainty and chaos. Hazel does not linguistically create a safe space, she is not consistent in her speech, she deconstructs identity by the way she 'switches.' When words become “performative,” they do something. They can, for example, change the course of events or one’s identity (like when the president says: “I declare war on Ukraine” or when one says “I do” during a marriage ceremony). So this is where J.L. Austin’s work about performatives, which was mentioned previously in the text, can be mentioned again, as it relates to Nella’s situation very much. However, in the case of Nella, the words coming from Hazel do not create any positive change or new positive possibilities for Nella's identity. Hazel only pretends to be working for the good of Black people. Instead, she is linguistically negative, creating total chaos in Nella. There are many ways to create a safe space and language is one of the tools that can be used. Yet, Nella rarely experiences such moments of safety or security in her workplace.

¹²² Green, “The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature,” 18.

¹²³ Elizabeth A. Harris, “Her Book Doesn’t Go Easy on Publishing. Publishers Ate It Up,” *The New York Times*, accessed September 4, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/23/books/zakiya-dalila-harris-other-black-girl.html>

In her interview with Sam Sanders, Harris stated that when writing her novel, she was inspired by Jordan Peele's 2017 social thriller "Get Out." "Talking about white liberals in this way seemed so new to me at the time, and I really wanted to do something similar with the book," she said. "Having this conversation about the way we commodify blackness and the way we commodify diversity, for the way it looks versus what it actually should be: how to meaningfully retain people in these spaces."¹²⁴ The meaning behind safe spaces is so nuanced and complex, it can truly mean multiple things, depending on one's personal situation and how one views safety and a safe environment. For young Black women in today's America, in my view nothing is more sacred than safety and Harris demonstrated that perfectly in her book.

In this chapter, I have tried to highlight three aspects, contemporary Black feminine identity, political identity and a safe environment concerning the life of the main character named Nella in *The Other Black Girl*. These three aspects are interconnected, they cannot be separated and everything is related and mutually confirming. Following the dynamics within the book, we can see that there is no feminine identity without political identity, political identity cannot exist without security and these elements can't be put in separate categories, one can see it in Nella and Hazel. Just because the characters are seemingly similar, they are both Black, women, young and liberal, it doesn't mean they are alike. The "similarity" shows that they could not be more different. It is Hazel's greed and lack of authenticity, and both Hazel's and Nella's code-switching that complicates things between them. I've concluded that just because someone looks like you, and acts like you and even to others seems similar to you, it doesn't mean that you will automatically get along with them and they will be your ally. They may come from a different class, social status, different region, etc. Also, some people come from different

¹²⁴ Sanders, "Zakiya Dalila Harris and "the Other Black Girl," It's Been a Minute," *NPR*, accessed September 10, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2021/05/24/999933219/zakiya-dalila-harris-and-the-other-black-girl>

backgrounds and have different life experiences. Those kinds of people can often be friendlier and more honest. Ultimately, those things that can seemingly connect people can also divide them and things are often not what they seem to be.

5. Conclusion

This thesis focused on contemporary African American women and their environment, particularly how their environment is reflected in parts of their identities. The specific features analyzed in this thesis' pages included the contemporary African American feminine identity, political views as an identity feature and a sense of security. These distinct elements were explored in three modern novels by young African American women writers; *Such a Fun Age* by Kiley Reid, *Nightcrawling* by Leila Mottley and *The Other Black Girl* by Zakiya Dalila Harris.

The environment has a significant impact on the lives of young African American women. This study explored the ways in which the environment shapes the experiences and perspectives of these women and how these themes are reflected in African American literature. Through a comprehensive analysis of literary works by young African American female writers, it is evident that the environment plays a crucial role in shaping the identity, values and worldview of these women. The authors wonderfully demonstrate how exactly the environments of the three heroines differ and what kind of an impact this has on their safety, identity and political views. Let us compare the three authors briefly, focusing on the most intense incidents in the story.

In *Such a Fun Age*, Emira is a young Black woman who works as a babysitter for a white family, the Chamberlains, in a wealthy Philadelphia suburb. The novel explores themes of race, class, privilege and power dynamics that affect Kiara's experiences and perceptions. The racial dynamics in Emira's environment also play a crucial role in shaping her experiences. Emira is deeply aware of the racial and cultural differences between her and the Chamberlains. She often feels like an outsider in their world, which is dominated by white norms and expectations. The impact of Emira's environment on her safety is profound. As a young African American woman, Emira faces many risks and dangers that her white counterparts simply do not.

She is racially profiled and discriminated against in various settings. This is exemplified in a very intense scene where she is wrongly accused of kidnapping Briar, the small child she is babysitting, while they are at a fancy supermarket. The incident leaves her traumatized and highlights the systemic racism and bias that African Americans face in their daily lives. Kiara's environment also shapes her political views. She becomes increasingly aware of the structural inequalities that perpetuate racial and economic disparities. She is critical of the Chamberlains' superficial attempts at activism, Alix's white feminism and the entire family's failure to address the root causes of inequality.

In *The Other Black Girl*, Nella is an editorial assistant at Wagner Books, a predominantly white publishing company in Manhattan, New York City. As the only Black employee in the company, Nella faces constant microaggressions and isolation, which affect her mental health and sense of belonging. The publishing industry is known for its lack of diversity and Nella's experience reflects this exact reality. She is often the only Black person in meetings and feels pressured to represent her entire race. Nella's colleagues frequently make insensitive comments and she is expected to tolerate them without complaint. The toxic environment at work leads Nella to seek comfort in the company of Hazel, a new Black hire who seems to understand her experiences. However, as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Hazel's intentions are not as pure as they seem. One of the most intense incidents that occur in Nella's life during this period is when she starts receiving a secret anonymous note "Leave Wagner now," which - as we find out later - came from Hazel. Such a statement - when repeated - becomes performative for Nella. It does something to her, it makes her feel unsafe, unstable and later also betrayed. The code-switching that Hazel employs very often contributes to these feelings. Together with the unsafe environment that Nella faces at work, all of these "threats" spill over into her personal life as well. She lives in a predominantly white neighborhood in Brooklyn with her white boyfriend and their relationship begins to suffer as she becomes more and more distressed at

work. Nella's identity as a Black woman is constantly questioned, as she is often told that she doesn't fit the stereotype of what a Black woman should look or act like. As a result of these experiences, Nella's political views begin to shift and she becomes more aware of the systemic racism and discrimination that Black people face. Although the novel doesn't have a happy ending for Nella, the main takeaway of this book would be the fact that there should be no specific behavioral patterns or a way of living that young Black women should follow, no specific hairstyle to wear or a certain political view to possess. As *The Other Black Girl* is also infused with elements of horror, which add a layer of suspense and tension to the story, it helps to bring the notion to a life of what would happen if all Black people would succumb to the pressure of white supremacy and acted like puppets to prosper in a predominantly white society and what would happen to those who would fight back.

Kiara, the main character in *Nightcrawling*, lives in a hostile and treacherous environment. Kiara, a 17-year-old sex worker, must navigate a world where she is frequently in danger of suffering both physical and emotional harm. Her surroundings are rife with drugs, violence and abuse, while she is forced to rely solely on her instincts to survive. The turning point in the story is when Kiara begins to work as an illegal sex worker and is abused by the policemen who know that she has no other choice than to obey them. This new status has a significant impact on her safety, feminine identity and political views. She is constantly aware of the threat she is in and to keep herself safe, Kiara must actively monitor her surroundings and the individuals she comes into contact with. She is commonly left with no choice but to rely on her instincts and survival skills due to her inability to trust those around her. Kiara struggles with her identity as a person and with the roles she is forced to play. She is keenly aware of the stigma her profession carries and she has trouble finding a sense of self-worth and purpose outside of her work. Trevor and Alé seem to be the only kind-hearted people who help her find comfort within herself and the only people that bring her joy. Kiara's struggle is made worse by the fact that

her job is illegal and potentially lethal, further marginalizing her and reinforcing her sense of being an outcast. Kiara's experiences as an illegal sex worker have undoubtedly impacted her political beliefs. She is acutely aware of the power relationships that exist in society and she holds low regard for those in positions of authority as well as for institutions that she believes to be responsible for preserving injustice and inequality. She has strong opinions against the criminal justice system as well because in her view, she believes it serves to oppress people rather than to uphold the law. She only finds an ally in the criminal justice system near the end of the novel.

Thus, the incidents of accusation of kidnapping (Emira's case), the anonymous letters and racism at work (Nela's case) and the sexual abuse by policemen (Kiara's case) all manifest that there are double standards, systemic racism, code-switching, difficult economic issues and hardships whose effects the "mainstream" predominantly white society may not realize at all. The heroines of the novels represent different possibilities for black identities, they occupy different subject positions in the social matrix. However, it seems nearly impossible to create new identities for themselves and escape the predetermined positions and stereotypes projected on them. My hypothesis - that without an environment where one feels safe and recognized, one's identity and a sense of authenticity - when tested - will suffer or even crumble down - was therefore confirmed in all three novels. The worst case, i.e. the loss of one's authenticity, was the case of Nella (in *Such a Fun Age*). Emira and Kiara's identities definitely suffered due to the lack of safe environment and other aspects, but did not crumble down completely. Even though there are no bright happy endings for Emira and Kiara, they do develop their identities and the reader gets a sense of their authenticity and strength face to face their various environments.

An effort was made to define each of the terms used in this thesis before trying to explain how they relate to the overall topic of environment. It was also attempted to inspect three modern African American novels. Due to the fact that the main characters are all young African American women who live in contemporary America, this thesis tried to draw attention to their themes and main characters. An attempt was also made to connect the concepts in relation to the characters and themes of the novels. Reliable secondary sources were also used.

The first chapter of this thesis focused on the novel *Such a Fun Age* by Kiley Reid and the crucial role of contemporary African American feminine identity, the complexity behind political identity in *Such a Fun Age* and having a safe environment and a sense of security in *Such a Fun Age*. The second chapter of this thesis centered on contemporary African American feminine identity, political identity as a valuable aspect in *Nightcrawling*, the importance of a safe environment and a sense of security in *Nightcrawling*. The third and final chapter centered on *The Other Black Girl* by Zakiya Dalila Harris and how contemporary African American feminine identity manifests itself *The Other Black Girl*, how political identity influences *The Other Black Girl*, how safe environment and a sense of security play a crucial role in *The Other Black Girl*.

In conclusion, the thesis shows that one's environment could not possibly be more influential. In this paper, we can see just how difficult life is for a young Black nanny working in a predominately white and wealthy environment, what it means to be the other Black girl in an industry that is cutthroat and very white, as well as how dangerous sex trafficking is for girls in present-day America. Overall, this thesis showed the hardships young Black women face daily in contemporary America and the various obstacles they must overcome. However, it also showed and valorized their grace, perseverance and strength. This thesis highlighted the importance of representation in literature and the challenges that are being reflected in writing. African American female writers give African American women a platform to share their stories

and viewpoints by examining the experiences of African American women. This representation is essential for empowering young African American women and dispelling the prejudices and negative stereotypes that they encounter in society. This work sheds light on how the environment affects the lives of young African American women and how this is addressed in African American literature. It emphasizes the importance of fostering a more inclusive society in which African American women's contributions and experiences are greatly recognized. Due to the scope of a BA thesis, only certain aspects can be dealt with in the above-mentioned novels. Therefore, more detailed research would be needed for a more profound exploration and discussion.

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