

UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE – FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

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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Anglistika – amerikanistika

Praha, 4. 8. 2023

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In Prague, on August 4, 2023.

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Acknowledgements

I am immensely grateful to my supervisor, Blanka Maderová, Ph.D., for providing me with guidance, useful insights and thoughtful feedback throughout this thesis.

I would also like to thank my family and friends for their full support, patience and valuable advice.

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 analyzes 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 two contemporary novels by young African American women writers: *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 that the main characters of the two novels experience. This thesis also briefly introduces the various terms and concepts that are significant for the aims of this work. After establishing essential terminology, the focus of the discussion turns to the exploration of the contemporary African American novels mentioned above. An analysis of the main characters and themes is offered. 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 post-modern America, it examines the major themes they have in common and the character development. Furthermore,

this thesis emphasizes the need to focus on the experiences of young African American women as expressed from their own perspective while addressing social and political dilemmas in contemporary 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 dvou současných románech mladých afroamerických spisovatelek: *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. Konkrétně práce zkoumá, jak zásadní roli v životě afroamerické ženy vlastně hraje její žensství, politické názory, bezpečí a pocit jistoty. Jedním z výstupů mé práce je i krátké srovnání několika intenzivních situací, které hlavní hrdinky zmíněných dvou knih zažívají. Práce stručně představuje jednotlivé pojmy a koncepty, které jsou pro vytyčené cíle významné. Po stanovení základní terminologie se těžiště diskuse obrací ke zkoumání dvou výše zmíněných současných afroamerických románů. 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 dále zkoumá, jakým způsobem se tyto literární reprezentace pojí 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 post-moderní Americe tím, že zkoumá společná témata a vývoj postav. Dále tato práce zdůrazňuje potřebu zaměřit se na zkušenosti mladých afroamerických žen z jejich perspektivy 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

Preface

I would like to begin this revised version of my thesis by acknowledging that it is an updated and improved edition of the original work, which was not defended in its initial form.

Throughout the course of my research and subsequent revisions, I have incorporated valuable feedback and made substantial changes to enhance the overall quality and validity of the thesis. This revised version reflects the culmination of additional analysis, revised arguments, and improved clarity.

Content

- 1. Introduction.....11**

- 2. *Nightcrawling* by Leila Mottley.....21**
 - 2.1. Contemporary African American Feminine Identity According to *Nightcrawling*...25
 - 2.2. Political Identity As A Valuable Aspect of *Nightcrawling*.....32
 - 2.3.The Importance of Safe Environment and A Sense of Security in *Nightcrawling*.....35

- 3. *The Other Black Girl* by Zakiya Dalila Harris.....38**
 - 3.1. How Contemporary African American Feminine Identity Manifests Itself in *The Other Black Girl*.....41
 - 3.2.How Political Identity Influences Characters in *The Other Black Girl*.....53
 - 3.3.How Safe Environment and a Sense of Security Play A Crucial Role in *The Other Black Girl*.....56

- 4. Conclusion.....64**

- Bibliography.....69**

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 analyzed on the following pages include 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 two contemporary novels by young African American women writers: *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, the 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. All of these serious social phenomena contribute to the abstract and literal idea behind the 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 certain words or 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 two 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 post-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 respected secondary sources as well. Lastly, I will try to summarize all the meaningful information, compare the 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 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.

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 I will attempt to find the proper description of femininity in the next sections. It is, indeed, a concept hard to grasp. Femininity, according to Gonzalez and

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

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 the complexities of contemporary African American feminine identity.

In her dissertation, Davis made several great points regarding African American femininity. According to Davis, “Black women in the United States experience some of the same feminine expectations as white women.”³ This claim is certainly true, but their experiences are also shaped by their race and their culture, specifically being Black and experiencing African American culture from the insider’s perspective. Which is why Davis writes that “the Eurocentric interpretation of femininity might not be applicable to Black women given their distinct socialization experience”⁴ and that “femininity might look differently for Black women compared to white women.”⁵ The difference between white femininity and African American femininity is made visible precisely by the intersecting gender with race and culture, and it is wonderfully explored in both of the novels that this thesis covers.

Davis also includes in her dissertation the following sentence:

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” (PhD diss., University of Akron, 2018), 1.

⁴ Davis, “African American femininity: An investigation of the hegemonic and unique culturally specific norms defining womanhood,” 1.

⁵ Davis, “African American femininity: An investigation of the hegemonic and unique culturally specific norms defining womanhood,” 1.

For instance, the norms of strength, independence and perseverance are regarded as key elements of femininity among Black women 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.⁶

In my opinion, this proves just how specific the experiences of African American women are, and how much more pressure they are under in the patriarchal society that is the United States of America.

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, dependence, passivity, emotional sensitivity and submissiveness, African American women's gender roles reflect traits like independence, self-reliance, resilience, and nurturance.⁷

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 with the use of Gentry's work. Gentry presents the following statement:

The concept of a political identity can best be understood as an inner narrative of one's political self. Identity is the story that we tell ourselves and others about who we are,

⁶ Davis, "African American femininity: An investigation of the hegemonic and unique culturally specific norms defining womanhood," 1.

⁷ Davis, "African American femininity: An investigation of the hegemonic and unique culturally specific norms defining womanhood," 2.

who we were, and who we foresee ourselves to be. But how does this concept work when trying to understand identity in terms of politics?⁸

Despite it being a challenging topic to define, political identity must be discussed as it deeply influences the identity of African American women throughout their entire lives. Gentry argues:

There are two basic elements of political identity—identity development as a process and identity as a status. Identity development is the process that individuals go through to acquire their beliefs, preferences, self-identification as political people, and self-knowledge.⁹

This raises the questions of what specific role political identity plays in the environment of young African American female characters and how their environment influences their expression of femininity. In the following pages, I will analyze these aspects.

Gentry claims that during the process of political individuation, people may fall into various categories, “such as that of diffusion, explorer, somewhat developed and fully developed.”¹⁰ He then discusses political ego identity, which is especially important in this thesis. According to Gentry, “political ego identity is knowing and caring about a set of political issues, having a set of organized beliefs about the political system, and engaging in political behaviors

⁸ Bobbi Gentry, “Political Identity: Meaning, Measures, and Evidence,” In *Why Youth Vote* (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2018): 19, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69608-9_2.

⁹ Gentry, “Political Identity: Meaning, Measures, and Evidence,” 19.

¹⁰ Gentry, “Political Identity: Meaning, Measures, and Evidence,” 19.

that support particular beliefs.”¹¹ The concept of political ego identity applies to young African American women in the sense that they develop a sense of self and engagement in the political sphere, just as any other group. But the specific issues, beliefs, and behaviors they associate with their political ego identity can be influenced by their unique experiences as African American women, as well as their potential aspirations regarding fighting for racial justice and gender equality.

Furthermore, Gentry writes that the definition of political ego “also accounts for the level of importance politics has to a person’s life. If politics is important, then these individuals are more likely to have a highly developed identity status.”¹² 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ A jury found George Zimmerman, a Florida neighborhood watch volunteer, not guilty of second-degree mur-

¹¹ Gentry, “Political Identity: Meaning, Measures, and Evidence,” 19.

¹² Gentry, “Political Identity: Meaning, Measures, and Evidence,” 19.

¹³ Tarana Burke, “Get to Know Us | History & Inception.” *Me Too Movement*, accessed October 10, 2022.

¹⁴ “Herstory - Black Lives Matter.” *Black Lives Matter*, accessed September 19, 2022, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/>.

der after he shot and killed the unarmed Black teenager Trayvon Martin, which started a national conversation about racial profiling and civil rights. He was also cleared of the lesser charge of manslaughter.¹⁵ 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 that 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. Kendi as I find it to be accurate and useful for both novels 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.”¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸ He goes on to argue that “a racist idea is any idea that suggests that one racial group is inferior to or superior to another racial group in any way. Racist ideas claim that the inferiorities and superiorities of racial groups explain racial inequities in society.”¹⁹ Racist ideas, therefore, influence to a certain extent the political leaning of Black women in the US.

¹⁵ 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>.

¹⁶ Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 12, Epub.

¹⁷ Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 13.

¹⁸ Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 13.

¹⁹ Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, 14.

In my opinion, it is crucial to include these specific quotes, as I find the entire paragraph to be a vital exploration of the definition of racism. In my view, the fact that the author has managed to acknowledge all the various definitions available demonstrates just how aware he is of the complexity surrounding the concept of racism. I find it valuable that the author has decided to select a definition that he finds the most comprehensive, since it is nearly impossible to cover every perspective. He explains racial inequity, racist policies, and racist ideas as well. This added clarification is not only beneficial in terms of further understanding of racism as a concept, but it also emphasizes the role that ideas play in perpetuating and justifying racial discrepancies within society.

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 and they were especially supportive of the first Black president Barack Obama and his policies and legacy.²⁰ Exit polls from 2016 reveal that Black women, who made up 94 percent of Hillary Clinton's supporters, were by far her biggest supporters.²¹

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

²⁰ 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>.

²¹ 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.

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.²² 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.²³ 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 author, described Black female voters as both pragmatists and visionaries, saying "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 kids and benefits like Medicare and Social Security for the elderly."²⁴ She continues: "We always vote with those things in mind."²⁵ 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 theme in this thesis.

The next theme I will analyze 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

²² Swanson, "AP VoteCast: How Black Women Shape Democratic Politics."

²³ Swanson, "AP VoteCast: How Black Women Shape Democratic Politics."

²⁴ Williams, "Black Women — Hillary Clinton's Most Reliable Voting Bloc — Look beyond Defeat."

²⁵ Williams, "Black Women — Hillary Clinton's Most Reliable Voting Bloc — Look beyond Defeat."

protected from or not exposed to danger; safety.”²⁶ 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 the safe environment, secure jobs and stable lives in *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.

²⁶ “Security, n.”. OED Online, accessed February 2023, Oxford University Press, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/174661?redirectedFrom=Security>.

2. *Nightcrawling* by Leila Mottley

An Introduction to *Nightcrawling*

Nightcrawling is a novel written by then 19-year-old Leila Mottley, published by Knopf in June 2022.²⁷ *Nightcrawling* is her debut novel.²⁸ Mottley's very first book became a *New York Times* bestseller and an *Oprah's Book Club Pick*, where she was the youngest pick ever.²⁹

Leila Mottley was also named *Oakland Youth Poet Laureate* in 2018 at age 16.³⁰ Having been born, raised, and currently living in Oakland,³¹ Mottley was inspired by a story that took place in her hometown, while she herself was still a young teenager.³²

Based on a true incident in 2015 involving institutional exploitation, brutality and corruption in the Oakland police department, *Nightcrawling* gives voice to the 17-year-old Kiara Johnson, who becomes a sex worker in order to pay for rent increases that occurred after her father's death and her mother's detention in a rehabilitation 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*.³³ According to Kit Fan:

²⁷ 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/>.

²⁸ Mottley, *Nightcrawling*, 262, Epub.

²⁹ Charles, "Oprah's Latest Book Club Pick: 'Nightcrawling,' by Leila Mottley."

³⁰ Mottley, *Nightcrawling*, 262, Epub.

³¹ Mottley, *Nightcrawling*, 262, Epub.

³² Mottley, *Nightcrawling*, 258, Epub.

³³ 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>.

What makes *Nightcrawling* scary 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.³⁴

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,"³⁵ while also looking at the factual optics of a real-life event, a scandal that took place in the author's hometown. Before I analyze the book, 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 digestible and easy to read. Yet because of the use of poetic, lyrical language and the subject matter, 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 mother is in jail and their father is dead. 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. She is only 17 and has not finished high school. Her brother refuses to work and only wants to focus on his rap career, which is going

³⁴ Fan, "*Nightcrawling* by Leila Mottley Review – a Dazzling Debut."

³⁵ Charles, "Oprah's Latest Book Club Pick: 'Nightcrawling,' by Leila Mottley."

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 captured the meaning behind the plot and some of its themes marvelously, is a review from *The Guardian*. As stated by Kit Fan, Mottley creates a distorted universe where reality takes on a satirical tone.³⁶ Kiara’s apartment, filled with filth and personal belongings, mirrors the dilapidated streets of Oakland, riddled with potholes.³⁷ Despite the lively atmosphere, Kiara’s friends and surroundings offer no protection and Mottley skillfully navigates the chaos surrounding Kiara, remaining calm and nonjudgmental.³⁸ However, Kiara constantly faces scrutiny from her family, friends, former police officers, and even a grand jury, demanding her time, body, money, and forgiveness. Amidst her struggles to convey the truth about her life, the American dream’s promise of opportunity and choice becomes a nightmare for those who have been abused and marginalized by those in power.³⁹

³⁶ Fan, “*Nightcrawling* by Leila Mottley Review – a Dazzling Debut.”

³⁷ Fan, “*Nightcrawling* by Leila Mottley Review – a Dazzling Debut.”

³⁸ Fan, “*Nightcrawling* by Leila Mottley Review – a Dazzling Debut.”

³⁹ Fan, “*Nightcrawling* by Leila Mottley Review – a Dazzling Debut.”

Fan adds that *Nightcrawling* stands out as a rare and gripping exploration of powerlessness, delving into Kiara’s complex psychology, youth, intelligence, and unwavering maternal drive to protect her children.⁴⁰ Mottley’s examination of Kiara’s harrowing circumstances raises ethical dilemmas, such as whether to expose corrupt cops or remain silent. As the consequences of her choices unfold, leading to a harrowing grand jury moment, *Nightcrawling* challenges Kiara’s moral compass at every turn.⁴¹ I also view *Nightcrawling* as an exploration of true powerlessness, and this paragraph demonstrates that theme wonderfully, as well as Kiara’s maternal instincts that are important aspects of the novel.

In *Nightcrawling*, Kiara’s ambitious white lawyer advises her on the impact of words, emphasizing that speaking truthfully can lead to an indictment and systemic change.⁴² *Nightcrawling* acts as an allegory, exploring the power of speech, storytelling, and fiction, while also delving into justice, guilt, and prejudice.⁴³ Mottley masterfully employs anonymity to create a chilling atmosphere in a racially charged narrative.⁴⁴ The police officers’ badge numbers—612, 190, and 601—are only disclosed at the end of the book. Mottley’s novel signals the impressive arrival of a young writer whose voice and vision leave an indelible mark.⁴⁵ Not knowing who the police officers are as identifiable persons (Kiara only knows their numbers) adds to the “detective-story-like” aspect of the novel while revealing Kiara’s disorientation.

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

⁴⁰ Fan, “*Nightcrawling* by Leila Mottley Review – a Dazzling Debut.”

⁴¹ Fan, “*Nightcrawling* by Leila Mottley Review – a Dazzling Debut.”

⁴² Fan, “*Nightcrawling* by Leila Mottley Review – a Dazzling Debut.”

⁴³ Fan, “*Nightcrawling* by Leila Mottley Review – a Dazzling Debut.”

⁴⁴ Fan, “*Nightcrawling* by Leila Mottley Review – a Dazzling Debut.”

⁴⁵ Fan, “*Nightcrawling* by Leila Mottley Review – a Dazzling Debut.”

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 novel that this thesis deals with.

2.1. Contemporary African American Feminine Identity According to *Nightcrawling*

Contemporary African American feminine identity plays a vital role in *Nightcrawling* and massively differs from the feminine identity of the main characters in *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 is very different from Nella. Not only does Mottley focus on the internal parts that make up Black womanhood, but 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—like so many of us who find ourselves in circumstances that feel impossible to survive—is still capable of joy and love.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Mottley, *Nightcrawling*, 259, Epub.

Because Kiara lives only with her brother and does not have a stable source of income and the fact that she has left high school with no qualifications, she's forced to go down a dark route in her life. She becomes a prostitute, despite being a minor. She uses her body as a kind of instrument in order 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 does not 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 dreamland.⁴⁷

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 is 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, because her job becomes more and more dangerous as 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

⁴⁷ Mottley, *Nightcrawling*, 63, Epub.

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, being fetishized, feeling unsafe, 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. The topic of fetishization, sex trafficking and child trafficking is what I will be discussing next.

In her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison identifies various linguistic techniques utilized in fiction to address the significant impacts experienced by Black people, as outlined by Snead's insightful categorization.⁴⁸ She writes the following about fetishization, the category most relevant to *Nightcrawling*:

This is especially useful in evoking erotic fears or desires and establishing fixed and major difference where difference does not exist or is minimal. Blood, for example, is a pervasive fetish: black blood, white blood, the purity of blood; the purity of white female sexuality, the pollution of African blood and sex. Fetishization is a strategy often used to assert the categorical absolutism of civilization and savagery.⁴⁹

I find it crucial to bring up the fetishization of Black women, as it deeply relates to the story of *Nightcrawling*. In the novel, Kiara, an underage Black girl, is sexually fetishized by a group of white adult police officers, and she is sexually assaulted by them. The cops fetishized, sexualized, objectified and adultified the body of a child. They did that secretly, thinking that

⁴⁸ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, 67, Epub.

⁴⁹ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination.*, 68, Epub.

this crime would go unpunished, and thankfully, that turned out not to be true, and Kiara was able to get justice. The point still stands, they committed a horrible crime on an actual child, as a part of their fetish. In this instance, Mottley wrote about the most dangerous form of fetish that can exist, in my opinion. Here, the politics of dread and desire relate to the fetishization of Black girls by white men.

Toni Morrison writes about the rhetoric of dread and desire in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* in a chapter where she discusses fetishization.⁵⁰ Prior to bringing up fetishization, she wishes to do the following:

observe and trace the transformation of American Africanism from its simplistic, though menacing, purposes of establishing hierarchic difference to its surrogate properties as self-reflexive meditations on the loss of difference, to its lush and fully blossomed existence in the rhetoric of dread and desire.⁵¹

Toni Morrison, in my view, sees the rhetoric of dread and desire as the third stage of how African Americans are viewed and represented. Morrison does not suggest that the hierarchic difference between whiteness and blackness is completely overcome. She just brings our attention to the fact that the rhetoric about blackness is much more complex. Black individuals are presented as having unique features, hopes and dreams, and often contradicting qualities. Yet, this third stage may be seen, I believe, as an attempt to move away from the detrimental past of only focusing on differences and hierarchies. Hence the reason why I found this specific paragraph

⁵⁰ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination.*, 63-64, Epub.

⁵¹ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination.*, 63-64, Epub.

so helpful when writing about *Nightcrawling*. It highlights the change of representation that happened over time, and reading about fetishization and subordination in the novel truly makes the reader feel just how dangerous and backward the above-mentioned acts by the Oakland police officers are. It also reveals just how serious the crime committed by them it is. Because of their fascination with Kiara, their dread and desire are not just abstract, linguistic, or “platonically” reactions towards a Black girl but full-blown acts of violence that harm both her body, soul, and identity.

The act itself, the sexualization, represents desire to them, but the fact that it’s a crime they are committing, and they are aware of it, that represents dread. The more forbidden and disturbing something is to a pedophilic cop like those in the novel, the more appealing it sounds. The sexualization of underage Black girls by those white policemen is, apart from fetishization, a form of racism and exploitation.

I am once again going to mention the politics of dread and desire to further understand the dynamics surrounding this complex issue. The element of dread is felt also by Black individuals who are afraid of injustice, lack of security, and systemic racism in law enforcement, which is what at first protected the Oakland police officers from accountability. The element of desire reflects the dehumanization, objectification, and fetishization of young Black girls based on dangerous stereotypes, racial prejudices, and a distorted perception of them as objects of sexual desire by the police officers. Both parts reveal the vulnerability of marginalized communities and the impact of systemic racism in law enforcement.

What I am writing about in these paragraphs is what I consider to be the main idea of the novel, as it is what, I assume, Mottley and myself believe to be the most horrific aspect sadly based on a true story. The fetishization and subsequent child trafficking (here I mean Kiara’s body being distributed to other police officers) occurs to an underage Black girl who is very vulnerable and an easy target for criminals. Because she’s underage and has no high school

diploma, the only work she can find is in the same place that destroyed her loved ones, the streets. Kiara Johnson, a 17-year-old Black girl becomes a sex worker to afford rent and ends up being trafficked by the members of the Oakland police department. She doesn't have anyone to protect or save her, she doesn't have her own identity yet, she is very vulnerable and ultimately becomes taken advantage of. What happened to her was that the adult cops were sexualizing and pornificating her underage body. Not only is her case a case of sex trafficking, but child sex trafficking. After that incident came to light, she, the victim, was thrown to the wolves. Luckily, those criminals got punished and Kiara was able to find relief. The book's ending left me with a sense of deep sadness and satisfaction, knowing that Kiara's journey led to a place of resolution, despite the journey being so heartbreaking.

In the novel, Kiara begins dating her longtime friend Alé, finding consolation in the fact that Alé is a girl who has always respected and really been there for her. Kiara trusts her completely, as, in my opinion, she believes Alé would never cause her harm, unlike a violent man can. As the narrative unfolds, Kiara's connection with Alé leads her to embrace her queer feminine identity and become a member of the LGBTQ+ community, a beautiful moment that shapes the book's conclusion. Such (queer) relationships faced challenges in the past, potentially leading authors to having to defend or even sacrifice publishing books centered around the LGBTQ+ topics due to societal norms, stereotypes, and restrictions. However, our current society is more accepting than it would have been 30 years ago, and the author no longer needs to justify this relationship. Instead, I think writing about couples like Kiara and Alé is beneficial, as people who identify with the LGBTQ+ community can see themselves in the same or similar characters. Novels like these can also help break stereotypes people may associate with the LGBTQ+ community, they can start conversations, foster empathy, and educate people who simply just don't understand the community. I do believe, as someone who is not a member of

the LGBTQ+ community, that it is important for people like me to educate ourselves on such topics, if we truly want to make this world a better and a more accepting place to live.

In the end, the heartwarming part of *Nightcrawling* is the presence of love. Besides writing about Alé, Mottley is 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, it is crucial to recognize the cultural and personal significance of Black hair. Black women often view their hair as an integral part of their heritage, symbolizing their identity and personal expression. 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. In *Nightcrawling*, Kiara embraces her natural hair, which represents a crucial aspect of her identity and functions as a symbol of her blackness. The fact that she shares the same natural hair as her absentee mother, and her mom styling her hair, brings them closer together, despite the persistent emotional distrust from Kiara's side. Therefore, even though Black hair is not a central motif in the novel, it effectively showcases Kiara's authentic identity and her emotional depth.

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 to be an essential work to read when it comes to the theme of contemporary African American identity.

2.2. 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 stated 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 have 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 it happen, politically speaking? That, I think, is not so crystal clear and I presume that it 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 villains in every group and movement, and I think, which is the point Mottley was probably trying to make, that people need to see the good in other people and 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 villains 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 linked to one's political identity and its significance. Once again, Mottley captures that belief flawlessly. The way the policemen abused their power in *Nightcrawling* 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 a 2021 *BBC* report, the African American community is, by far, the most disproportionately affected community in terms of hostile behavior from law enforcement and the criminal justice system when compared to non-Black communities in the United States.⁵² *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.

⁵² 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>.

As per the 2021 *BBC* report, African Americans face a higher likelihood of experiencing fatal shootings, being subjected to traffic stops, and being incarcerated at a rate five times higher than white Americans and twice the rate of Hispanic Americans.⁵³ Considering how drastically differently African American people are treated in comparison to non-Black Americans, it is no wonder Leila Mottley made the decision to take on such a task, to write about a truly horrible and unjust crime that affected people that look like her. Unfortunately, similar incidents still take place to this day.

In my opinion, these statistics show the various disparities that can have several negative impacts not only on society as a whole but on the lives of the African American community as well. Losing a life has to be the most detrimental experience for the past, present, and future members of the Black community.

The disparities in the criminal justice system can contribute to a sense of injustice and unfairness, as well as a general feeling of hostility from the people that should be there to protect. From a socioeconomic standpoint, this situation can also lead to limiting opportunities for education, employment, and upward mobility, further heightening inequality and poverty in society. Consequently, it may have an impact on the U.S. economy. These statistics can also lead to a loss of trust in the U.S. criminal justice system, as it is simply not fair and just. Instead, it can create hatred and tension, which can then lead to protests, strikes, and even violence.

What I think is also worth mentioning is the slogan “Defund the Police.” According to *Time*, there are different understandings of the term “defund” and its application for promoting change. Some activists use it to illustrate their goal of a complete dissolution of police forces, while others interpret it to mean the reallocation of a police department’s budget to varying

⁵³ Reality Check Team, “Three Facts That Help Explain Anger in the US.”

degrees. Others continue to believe that the term can be used to describe both purposes or that it can just be used as a general call to accountability.⁵⁴ And this is what I believe is Mottley’s main message. She wanted to see accountability, real change and fair treatment from the police. She wanted to see changes that should have 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.

2.3. 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, in my view, need to feel safe, recognized 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 because there is a lack of these basic “requirements” during the development of Kiara’s character in Mottley’s debut novel.

In author’s note, Mottley talks about how the plot of *Nightcrawling* and Kiara’s character came to her. In 2015, as a young teenager in Oakland, Leila Mottley became aware of a scandal involving the sexual exploitation and cover-up by members of the Oakland Police Department and other police departments in the Bay Area.⁵⁵ This incident deeply affected Leila, raising concerns about the victims who didn’t receive attention but experienced the harmful

⁵⁴ 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/>.

⁵⁵ Mottley, *Nightcrawling*, 258, Epub.

effects of policing on their bodies and spirits.⁵⁶ Beyond the few cases that garnered media attention, numerous instances of violence against sex workers and young women by the police remained untold.⁵⁷ Inspired by such real and disturbing cases, Mottley wrote *Nightcrawling* to shed light on the experiences of a vulnerable young Black girl named Kiara, and amplify the narratives often overlooked, which also includes violence that black women, and queer and trans people experience.⁵⁸ The case of sexual violence is the vilest aspect of the lack of safe environment in the novel. As I've already stated, since Kiara does not 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 did not have 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, in my view, just like 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 Alé and unlike Trevor, she does not 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.

⁵⁶ Mottley, *Nightcrawling*, 258, Epub.

⁵⁷ Mottley, *Nightcrawling*, 258, Epub.

⁵⁸ Mottley, *Nightcrawling*, 259, Epub.

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 certain people's true colors and enabled to reveal just how many atrocities there are 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 darker novel out of the two I've chosen to discuss in this thesis, and it is certainly much bleaker. 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.

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

An Introduction to *The Other Black Girl*

The Other Black Girl is a debut novel from Zakiya Dalila Harris, it was published by Atria, a division of Simon & Schuster in June 2021.⁵⁹ She received her MFA in creative writing from the New School and she put that degree to use, writing her debut novel *The Other Black Girl*, where she draws on her personal experience working in the editorial section of a publishing firm for almost three years.⁶⁰ Harris's other work can be found in *Guernica* and the *Rumpus*.⁶¹

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, predominantly 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.

⁵⁹ Zakiya Dalila Harris, *The Other Black Girl* (New York: Atria Books, 2021), 330, 332, Epub.

⁶⁰ Harris, *The Other Black Girl*, 330, Epub.

⁶¹ Harris, *The Other Black Girl*, 330, Epub.

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 and Needles*. Nella begins to receive threatening notes forcing her to quit her job at 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 neg-

atively 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 1980s 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.

3.1 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 novel 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 the 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*. According to Raveén Green, "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."⁶² 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.

⁶² Raveén Green, "The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature" (Senior Thesis, Haverford College, 2022), 1.

The fact that the book is based on personal experience is what makes the story so much more substantial, just like the fact that it employs the use of the distinct experiences and qualities that are specific to Black girls. As a white person myself, this paragraph is one of the instances showing why *The Other Black Girl* is important not only to Black readers but to white readers as well. It explores the unique experiences of Black girls, fostering empathy and understanding. By creating a safe space for Black girls to be seen and heard, the novel promotes inclusivity and recognition of their voices. It encourages white readers to become better allies and to advocate for equality. Ultimately, carefully reading a book by and about a Black person, such as *The Other Black Girl*, can help to contribute to a more equal and empathetic society.

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.⁶³

⁶³ Harris, *The Other Black Girl*, 319, Epub.

There is an old African American aphorism that, I believe, perfectly illustrates the complex struggles that Nella is going through and that she also mentions in the book: “Well, we know how it goes: We gotta work twice as hard to get what we want.”⁶⁴ She, a young Black woman in (mainly) white America, working in a predominantly white industry, has to try to be multiple things at once. She has to go above and beyond and - in *The Other Black Girl* - it is still not enough.

In my opinion, societal pressure very much affects young Black girls in the United States and they have to be juggling different identities, activities, roles, all at once. They must check so many boxes and aim to 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 the complexities and problems many young Black girls in various industries can relate to. And this relates to women’s looks, too.

The theme of hair is prominently featured throughout the novel, with the use of hair grease and its chemical contents playing a significant role, in my opinion. However, one aspect that is not discussed in the same depth but could potentially be explored is the idea of a woman’s body shape or weight, which is a topic of discussion for many women, both in real life and fiction. Nonetheless, hair serves as a driving force and is intricately woven into the experiences of the Black female characters in *The Other Black Girl*. The following paragraph captures the importance of the first impression that Hazel made:

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

⁶⁴ Harris, *The Other Black Girl*, 116, Epub.

than Nella's chestnut complexion, falling somewhere between hickory and umber. And her locs—every one as thick as a bubble-tea straw and longer than her arms—started out as a deep brown, then turned honey-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. And then there was the girl's pantsuit: a smart-looking ensemble composed of a single-button marigold jacket and a matching pair of oversized slacks that hit a couple of inches above the ankle. Below that, a pair of red patent leather high-heeled ankle boots that Nella would have broken her neck just trying to get into.⁶⁵

In my understanding, hair can hold tremendous significance within the Black community. This can be observed in the paragraph above and in my following comment. Black hair is often regarded as a symbol of cultural pride and personal identity, which is described in this thesis. However, it is important to realize that hair can also attract unwanted attention and lead to insensitive comments, especially from non-Black people who are not educated on the topic of Black hair. It is crucial to cultivate an environment where diversity is respected, and all forms of discrimination are condemned. Furthermore, the issue of skin tone, how much melanin does a Black individual have and how light or dark they are, is a multifaceted subject that continues to be a topic of discussion within the Black community. What is also important is the use of clothing and work appearance, how much effort one puts in and how mature they seem in the workplace, especially as women of color. In my view, it is crucial to approach these conversations with sensitivity, acknowledging the historical and ongoing impact of colorism.

⁶⁵ Harris, *The Other Black Girl*, 17-18, Epub.

The description of Hazel’s appearance adds a visual layer to the exploration of skin color and hair in African American culture, emphasizing the diversity and beauty of Black hair and the significance placed on physical features within the Black community. That is how I understand it. But that paragraph also highlights Nella’s own insecurities and her different features. Nella’s clumsiness, her journey with her natural hair, even just from that single paragraph alone, Hazel, to me, comes across as a much more confident and put together person than Nella is. Still, Nella is very happy to discover that her new colleague is a young Black girl, especially because it’s much better to have an accomplice that looks like you in professional settings where Eurocentric beauty standards often prevail.

I will now introduce another important aspect of Black identity – code-switching. I will also 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.”⁶⁶

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.”⁶⁷ In other words, code-switching allows African Americans to truly

⁶⁶ J. Gumperz, “Conversational Code Switching,” In *Discourse Strategies. Studies in Interactional Sociolinguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 59, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511611834>.

⁶⁷ George B. Ray, *Language and Interracial Communication in the United States: Speaking in Black and White* (New York: Peter Lang, 2019), 72, Epub.

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 the stereotypes.

In her review for *NPR*, Bethanne Patrick explains this perfectly. She 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,”⁶⁸ 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.”⁶⁹ Overall, this passage displays the pressure to conform, downplay racial issues, and maintain a facade of acceptance in order to navigate and flourish in such environments. This can be emotionally exhausting, and it perpetuates a cycle where Black employees are constantly required to educate their white colleagues on racial issues. The longing for solidarity and understanding among Black co-workers reflects the need for mutual support and shared knowledge of the systemic racism faced by people of color in the corporate world. Harris manages to brilliantly capture the inner workings of a toxic workplace and toxic

⁶⁸ 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>.

⁶⁹ Patrick, “Office Rivalry Turns Strange — and Maybe Dangerous — in ‘The Other Black Girl.’”

friendships, how emotionally taxing they can be and how serious of an issue systemic racism in the workplace is.

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.⁷⁰ If you choose the second path, you will embrace your identity fully as a young Black woman, but you will probably face obstacles in reaching the highest position within the company due to the disputes you might encounter along the way.⁷¹ This dilemma poses an important question that Patrick also ponders: “What’s a young Black woman to do?”⁷² 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 post-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.⁷³ Nella understands that her comfortable but mundane middle-class upbringing does not provide her with the same benefits as Hazel’s more privileged upbringing.⁷⁴ Despite both being Black women, it is important to recognize that these two individuals are not automatically similar in other aspects.⁷⁵ Harris and her fellow Black writers should not have to emphasize this point, but sadly, in a world where they may still be

⁷⁰ Patrick, “An Office Rivalry Turns Strange — and Maybe Dangerous — in ‘The Other Black Girl.’”

⁷¹ Patrick, “An Office Rivalry Turns Strange — and Maybe Dangerous — in ‘The Other Black Girl.’”

⁷² Patrick, “An Office Rivalry Turns Strange — and Maybe Dangerous — in ‘The Other Black Girl.’”

⁷³ Patrick, “An Office Rivalry Turns Strange — and Maybe Dangerous — in ‘The Other Black Girl.’”

⁷⁴ Patrick, “An Office Rivalry Turns Strange — and Maybe Dangerous — in ‘The Other Black Girl.’”

⁷⁵ Patrick, “An Office Rivalry Turns Strange — and Maybe Dangerous — in ‘The Other Black Girl.’”

labeled as “the other Black female” in the workplace, it becomes a must.⁷⁶ 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 daily; by using this gaze, both society and Black women can remake the media.⁷⁷ 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.⁷⁸ 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.”⁷⁹ 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.

Green summarizes this by stating that without the Black female gaze, recognizing Black women often results in a projection of stereotypes based on racism, fetishism, dehumanization

⁷⁶ Patrick, “An Office Rivalry Turns Strange — and Maybe Dangerous — in ‘The Other Black Girl.’”

⁷⁷ Green, “The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature,” 2.

⁷⁸ Green, “The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature,” 2.

⁷⁹ bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” In *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (South End Press, 1992):131. Epub.

and so on. Thus, the media must be formed by the Black female gaze since what is seen is inextricably linked to how Black womanhood is defined.⁸⁰ Black girls require an outlet provided by and for them.⁸¹ 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.⁸² Nella, as a young Black female character, defies stereotypes and offers a refreshing viewpoint that challenges common perceptions. She provides a representation that goes beyond preconceived notions, accentuating the intricacy and diversity within Black feminine identity.

What must be mentioned is the idea of ordinariness. Not every young Black woman is rich, poor, simple, gifted, shy, fierce. Higher, larger and more varied 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 depiction, her discussion with Nella and other coworkers demonstrates how she can become obedient and set aside her ideals to be financially

⁸⁰ Green, "The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature," 4.

⁸¹ Green, "The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature," 4.

⁸² Green, "The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature," 4.

successful. Hazel's concern is living a life where she does make an adequate amount of money. 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.⁸³ 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 other performatives 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."⁸⁴ Therefore, performative sentences aren't just plain sentences, they do something. We utter performative sentences when we want to make changes, for example, of 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 a hidden messaging telling her to "leave Wagner."⁸⁵

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,

⁸³ Green, "The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature," 9-10.

⁸⁴ John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 6-7, Epub.

⁸⁵ Harris, *The Other Black Girl*, 93, Epub.

Black women should strive to live happily and be well-paid even if it means compromising to succeed and survive.⁸⁶ 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.⁸⁷ Readers can empathize with both women and their circumstances in this work; Black women are not portrayed as villains but rather as two victims who play a role in their own subjugation.⁸⁸

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.⁸⁹ Through the motif of natural Black hair, Harris illustrates the perpetual pressure faced by Black women to maintain a presentable appearance, leading to constant anxiety under the objectifying gaze.⁹⁰ All of these factors contribute to the idea of contemporary Black feminine identity in post-modern-day America, all 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*

⁸⁶ Green, "The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature," 12.

⁸⁷ Green, "The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature," 12.

⁸⁸ Green, "The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature," 12.

⁸⁹ Green, "The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature," 12.

⁹⁰ Green, "The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature," 14-15.

Black Girl, particularly the film's main character named Andrea Sachs and the novel's protagonist Nella Rogers.⁹¹ The author makes a few interesting points about Nella and *The Other Black Girl* 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."⁹² Nella, on the other hand, is connected to her symbolic sisters, whether directly or indirectly.⁹³ 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.⁹⁴ 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.⁹⁵ 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, making them all a part of the growing universe of women's possibilities.⁹⁶ Although *The Other Black Girl* does not have a happy ending, it still shows the reader how Nella can grow careerwise, even though she does unfortunately lose herself. Without con-

⁹¹ Masaomi Kobayashi, "At Work, at Home, at Life: Bartleby and His Kinswomen," In *The Multiverse of Office Fiction*. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022): 76.

⁹² Kobayashi, "At Work, at Home, at Life: Bartleby and His Kinswomen," 99-100.

⁹³ Kobayashi, "At Work, at Home, at Life: Bartleby and His Kinswomen," 99-100.

⁹⁴ Kobayashi, "At Work, at Home, at Life: Bartleby and His Kinswomen," 99-100.

⁹⁵ Kobayashi, "At Work, at Home, at Life: Bartleby and His Kinswomen," 100.

⁹⁶ Kobayashi, "At Work, at Home, at Life: Bartleby and His Kinswomen," 100.

sidering 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 post-modern workplace.

3.2. How Political Identity Influences Characters 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. 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."⁹⁷

This tone-deaf liberalism not only from the perspective of white people but also of Black people who have been quite literally brainwashed can be seen in the parts of the book that discuss the character of Shartricia. Shartricia'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

⁹⁷ 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>.

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 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 shapeshifter, 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. The following paragraph manages to prove this specific point:

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.⁹⁸

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 the small details in their daily life that make up their lives and how they see the world, not the occasional and larger occurrences. 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, 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 Frantz 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

⁹⁸ Harris, *The Other Black Girl*, 18. Epub.

ideas, but about those supposedly unimportant incidents that happen on social media and in one's community of any sort, in the case of *The Other Black Girl* especially.

3.3. 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.⁹⁹ 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.¹⁰⁰

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 does not. On the other hand, there are white people that she feels safe around but there are also white people she does not 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

⁹⁹ J. Camille Hall, Joyce E. Everett, and Johnnie Hamilton-Mason, "Black Women Talk about Workplace Stress and How They Cope," *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 43, no. 2 (March 2012): 213, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934711413272>.

¹⁰⁰ Hall, Everett and Hamilton-Mason, "Black Women Talk about Workplace Stress and How They Cope," 213.

end of the novel where - because of the hair grease - Nella completely “switches.” Yet, that action is enforced.

Because of this action, I decided to include the author Frantz Fanon, who is included in Green’s work. In “Black Skin, White Masks,” Fanon argues that 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.”¹⁰¹ In his chapter, “The Negro and Language,” he explains the concept of code-switching as employing language and the manifestation of fitting oneself into a box acceptable to whiteness or the ‘dominant’ in society.¹⁰² It is utilizing this shift in speech and body expression to advance and achieve goals beyond merely surviving in society.¹⁰³ As Fanon notes, it stems from the desire that “requires a white approval.”¹⁰⁴ This is where Hazel comes in, specifically with what code-switching means for her and how she differs from Nella.

According to Green, Hazel believed that adopting different behaviors and ideologies would help her succeed in society and uplift other Black women.¹⁰⁵ Despite her own radical thinking, she demonstrated a willingness to tolerate racism and gain the approval of her white colleagues by aligning with the author of *Pins and Needles*.¹⁰⁶ However, privately, she referred

¹⁰¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Paladin, 1970), 17. Epub.

¹⁰² Green, “The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature,” 10 - 11.

¹⁰³ Green, “The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature,” 10 - 11.

¹⁰⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 51, Epub.

¹⁰⁵ Green, “The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature,” 11.

¹⁰⁶ Green, “The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature,” 11.

to Nella as “sis.”¹⁰⁷ While appearing friendly to Nella’s boss, Hazel instructed Nella to resist publishing the book, demonstrating contradictory behavior.¹⁰⁸

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,”¹⁰⁹ 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 girl to

¹⁰⁷ Green, “The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature,” 11.

¹⁰⁸ Green, “The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature,” 11.

¹⁰⁹ Harris, *The Other Black Girl*, 203, Epub.

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.¹¹⁰

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.

The idea of race and code-switching is also something that can be related to the idea of performativity as discussed by Judith Butler. She argues “that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results.”¹¹¹ I interpret this as her saying that identities are not fixed selves, or essences, that would exist “before” we act. Rather, they are socially constructed through repetitive acts - be it behavioral or speech acts. Although her work *Gender Trouble* focuses primarily on gender and sex, in this case, code-switching involves the intentional and repeated switching between different dialects, speech patterns or even languages based on the social context and the people involved. For Black people, code-switching can be, and often is, an act adapting their speech and mannerisms to navigate various social spaces and uphold multiple cultural identities. This practice is, as can be seen in *The Other Black Girl*, often dominated by different power structures.

Which is why, in this context, the link between performativity and code-switching becomes apparent. Both concepts acknowledge the performative character of identity and behavior. Code-switching allows (Black) people to negotiate their identities within different cultural

¹¹⁰ Harris, *The Other Black Girl*, 225-226, Epub.

¹¹¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 10th anniversary edition (New York: Routledge, 1999), 33. Epub.

contexts. It is an action that has a long history, it was repeated thousands of times, and therefore it has a lot of power. Being involved in this practice, as both Nella and Hazel are, does something to the identity of the person, making it more adaptable, flexible but also perhaps more prone to instability and the danger of collapse. As Judith Butler expressed above, identity is not static but instead shaped through repeated acts. Which, in my view, shows that it important to always realize what it is that we repeat, whether we want to repeat it, and how it shapes who we are.

Speaking of the meaning of one's identity, in *The Other Black Girl*, hair becomes also an identity 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 immediately. 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.¹¹² 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.¹¹³ The act of "doing one's hair" together and in a specific way was repeated many times in the past. It is therefore also performative, it does something to the Black woman's identity, it has a lot of power. Black women can always relate to each other because "doing one's hair" is a common experience.¹¹⁴ Hazel claims that, however, using hair grease can alter one's brain chemistry and functioning

¹¹² Green, "The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature," 17.

¹¹³ Green, "The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature," 17.

¹¹⁴ Green, "The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature," 17.

to the point that one can complying with whiteness easily. It 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.

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.¹¹⁵ In my opinion, this passage emphasizes the woeful aspect of the challenges faced by Black women today, while accentuating - in an indirect way - the demand for workplaces to promote inclusion, equality, and respect for diverse identities, rather than forcing people to compromise their authenticity for professional advancement.

This is where the discussion of change comes in. In the novel, Nella goes through a truly gruesome transformation. I assume that the fact that the novel is based on a horror story is not a coincidence, as the idea of fully changing yourself for others is a terrifying action. Because to change yourself to the point where you only exist for others, sacrificing your authentic self, is the exact opposite of what a true experience of life should be and what the US constitution promotes. It was only natural for the author to include code-switching, as it is something very relatable, while the existence of it is quite disturbing. I do believe that the use of code-switching in combination with horror was also intentional in the sense that the author wanted to highlight the extent to which certain situations can become extreme, exposing the potential dangers of our society.

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.'

¹¹⁵ Green, "The Black Female Gaze of Horror Literature," 18.

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, new possibilities, or a new subject position for Nella’s identity. Hazel only pretends to be working for the good of Black people. Instead, she is linguistically destructive, creating total chaos in Nella with her code-switching, and the note (or letter) that tells her to leave Wagner immediately. The performative character of this note will be explored later. 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.

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*.¹¹⁶ “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,”¹¹⁷ 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.”¹¹⁸ 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.

¹¹⁶ Sanders, “Zakiya Dalila Harris and ‘The Other Black Girl,’ It’s Been a Minute.”

¹¹⁷ Sanders, “Zakiya Dalila Harris and ‘The Other Black Girl,’ It’s Been a Minute.”

¹¹⁸ Sanders, “Zakiya Dalila Harris and ‘The Other Black Girl,’ It’s Been a Minute.”

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 backgrounds and have different life experiences. It is also important which (racializing, or gendering, etc.) acts one decides to repeat and which stereotypes one combats openly in one's life. Then, certain people can 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 on the surface.

4. 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 two novels by young African American women writers: *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 two heroines differ and what kind of an impact this has on their safety, identity and political views. Let us, finally, compare the two authors briefly, focusing on the most intense incidents in the story.

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 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. Even though Nella does not know if the letter comes from someone of higher authority than her, it still has some power, causing anxiety and feelings of insecurity in Nella. Plus, the code-switching that Hazel employs very often also contributes to these feelings. Together with the unsafe environment that Nella faces at work, 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 could 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.

To compare Nella to Kiara, Kiara, the main character in *Nightcrawling*, lives in a hostile and treacherous environment. She is a 17-year-old sex worker who 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 use her 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, stability, 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 the anonymous letters and racism at work (Nella'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 the two novels. The worst case, i.e. the complete loss of one's authenticity, was the case of Nella (in *The Other Black Girl*). Kiara's identity definitely suffered due to the lack of safe environment and other aspects but did not crumble down completely like Nella's did. Even though there is no bright happy ending for Kiara, she manages to develop her identity and the reader gets a sense of her authenticity and the strength she possesses to face 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 explore two post-modern African American novels. Since the main characters are both young African American women who live in contemporary America, this thesis tried to draw attention to their themes and main characteristics. 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, an introduction, provided a comprehensive overview of the literary works analyzed. Additionally, the chapter outlined its specific focus and it set the foundation for the subsequent analysis. The second chapter of this thesis centered on contemporary African American feminine identity, political identity as a valuable aspect of *Nightcrawling*, the importance of a safe environment, and a sense of security in *Nightcrawling*. The third and final chapter concerned *The Other Black Girl* by Zakiya Dalila Harris. It revealed how contemporary African American feminine identity manifests itself in *The Other Black Girl*, how political identity influences characters in *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 work we can see 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 (Black) 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 could 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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