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## Denying Black Girlhood: Racialized Listening Practices in the Elementary Classroom

by Kennedi Alexis Johnson

In April of 2017, I was in my third month of student teaching in a general music classroom. At this point in the semester, I taught all classes—three sections each of kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade—by myself without constant supervision. Since I was providing the lesson plans and acting as “lead” teacher at this time, my supervising teacher would conduct other activities in a spacious storage closet connected to the classroom. In addition to being a Title I school (a school with a large concentration of students who come from “low-income” households), the students were predominately Black and/or Brown. As a Black woman, I recognized that my supervising teacher—a white woman of middle age who had been teaching general music for over two decades in the same elementary school—viewed the students as racialized bodies and did little to recognize her own biases. I say this for a number of reasons, but one story may illustrate aspects of how this bias affected the classroom.

One day I was continuing a lesson with a 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade class on the form of a song. Since I had not seen this class for a week, I wanted to see if they remembered the name of the form—rondo. One student—a Black girl—excitedly responded with the correct answer, “Oh, I remember, Ms. Johnson! It’s a rondo! Do you want me to teach the class how it goes?” Recognizing the joy and pride in her eyes, I began to invite her to keep speaking; however, neither of us had the opportunity to continue. Seconds after the student answered the question, my supervising teacher barged out of the storage closet demanding that the girl stop being “sassy and disrespectful.” I was shocked. After the class left the room, my supervising teacher told me that I needed to learn to have control over a classroom and not to let students speak to me rudely.

Over the last few years, I have frequently returned to this moment and asked myself what was it that made my supervising teacher register something as innocent as excitedly answering a question as an act of insubordination, of “sass.” This essay will attempt to unpack this moment through an examination of racialized listening (Stoeberl 2016). Being constantly misheard and denied the right

of voice and expression is common to the experience of Black women in the United States (Collins 1990, Brown 2013); however, I am most bothered by the mishearing of Black girls. Racialized listening practices in the classroom result in the policing of the Black body and a denial of humanity and childhood. To discuss these listening practices and their effects, I will engage ideas of controlling images, sound studies, and auto-ethnography. Lastly, I consider the ways in which educators, ethnomusicologists, and folklorists can transform the classroom into liberatory space through Black feminist thought, critical pedagogy, and intersectional active listening.

To begin, the idea of racialized sound, hearing, and listening derives from Jennifer Stoever's book *The Sonic Color Line* (2016). Stoever writes that "U.S. white supremacy has attempted to suppress, tune out, and willfully misunderstand some sounds and their makers and histories" (4). Stoever's argument is that racism as it exists within this country has depended upon the sonic as much as the visual: "Far from being vision's opposite, sound frequently appears to be visuality's doppelgänger in U.S. racial history, unacknowledged, but ever present in the construction of race and the performance of racial oppression...Sound has been entangled with vision since the conception of modern ideas of race and it has often operated at the leading edge of the visual to produce racialized identity formations" (4). To show the ways that race is not just a visual phenomenon but also a sonic one, Stoever looks the cultural and political history of the United States and how listening became a racialized practice. She begins by detailing how print media and other technologies were essential to the construction of the "Black sound": "Essentialist ideas about 'black' sounds and listening offered white elites a new method of grounding racial abjection in the body while cultivating white listening practices as critical, discerning, and delicate and, above all, as the standard of citizenship and personhood" (5). Another important argument that Stoever makes is how hearings and listenings are not only raced, but also gendered. Think about the angry Black woman stereotype versus the soft, innocent white woman. The next question, then, is to what visual stereotypes of Black women and girls are these sonic understandings of Blackness attached?

Intersectionality—a term and theoretical framework initially coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989)—has proven useful for a number of activists and scholars for thinking through the various ways that social and political identities intersect. Crenshaw specifically coined this term for us to think through how Black women may be simultaneously subjected to racism *and* sexism.

The term misogynoir was coined by queer Black feminist scholar Moya Bailey in a 2010 *Crunk Feminist Collective* blog post (as quoted in Bailey and Trudy, 2018). As one may deduce, the word combines misogyny and noir. Misogyny can be defined as contempt or prejudice directed toward women, while noir is French for "black"; however, it also has connotative roots in "film noir"—typically dark, sexualized crime films. Misogynoir "describes the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience" (Bailey and Trudy 2018, 762). They conceptualize the term around the portrayal of Black women and "racial visual violence" frequently seen in popular culture throughout history, and Bailey notes: "For me, naming misogynoir was about noting both an historical anti-Black misogyny and a problematic intraracial gender dynamic that had wider implications in popular culture. Misogynoir can come from Black men, white men and women, and even other Black women" (Bailey and Trudy 2018, 762). Bailey's writing clarifies that misogynoir is not to be appropriated by other women of color or white women—it is a term specific to Black women's experiences of misogyny and anti-Blackness.

### **Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images**

Patricia Hill Collins shows how Black women have been stereotyped into specific categories or images as a means of control, writing that “intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality could not continue without powerful ideological justifications for their existence” (2000, 69). According to Collins, these controlling images essentially exist on a scale from “mammy” to “jezebel.” The “mammy” can be generally characterized as the faithful, obedient domestic servant who “knows her place” and is content with her subordination. On the other hand, the matriarch is considered a mother figure who is unfeminine, overly aggressive or assertive, and emasculating. Last, the jezebel is a stereotype that characterizes the Black woman as hypersexual and naturally so.

As Patricia Hill Collins reminds us, controlling images of Black women are typically defined by oppositional terms. In other words, Black women are either seen as a matriarch or mammy, as a jezebel or as asexual. There is little room for a Black woman to be an individual and exist outside these stereotypical boxes. This understanding of difference in terms of dichotomous categorization is also important in thinking about the ways in which Black women and girls are read as either being good or bad, sassy or ladylike, quiet or loud, and/or assertive or aggressive. Pulling from themes of intersectionality, Collins is clear that these controlling images differ between Black and white women: “Unlike the controlling images developed for middle-class White women, the controlling images applied to Black women are so uniformly negative that they almost necessitate resistance” (2000, 100). However, as Collins writes, schools should be considered institutions in which these dominant ideologies

or controlling images are both resisted and reproduced (2000, 85). By using Collins’ and Stoeber’s arguments, we might see how racism is injected into the listening practices of educators and administrators. How might these racialized listening practices operate in the classroom and how do these practices disrupt students’ learning?

The use of controlling images in the schools can be seen in Edward Morris’ essay “‘Ladies’ or ‘Loudies’?: Perceptions and Experiences of Black Girls in Classrooms” (2007). Morris seeks to understand the “unique educational perceptions and obstacles” Black girls face in schools. Morris, a white “middle-classed” man, conducts this two-year ethnographic study in a predominately Black, “working-class” middle school. He was clear about his position, or rather positionality, and that he did not have the ability to connect with the Black girls as much as he might have if he were of the same race, gender, and “age position.” Morris discovered that a number of teachers encouraged students to exemplify a “docile form of femininity, emblemized in the prescription to act like ‘ladies.’ At the same time, however, most teachers viewed the existing femininity of these girls as coarse and overly assertive, leading one teacher to describe them as ‘loudies’” (2007, 491). This form of femininity was most certainly predicated on white supremacist, patriarchal interpretations—interpretations that leave little to no room for other understandings of the feminine. In *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, Collins writes that we exist within a society that finds the “middle-class, heterosexual, White femininity as normative” whereas Black femininity is considered a “subordinated gender identity [that] becomes constructed not just in relation to White women, but also in relation to multiple others, namely, all men, sexual outlaws (prostitutes and lesbians), unmarried women, and girls” (Collins 2004, 193). Therefore, when a girl, particularly a Black girl, steps outside these desired

performances, Morris found that they were often punished for being too loud, unladylike, or behaving (and dressing) like a “hoochie-mama.”

According to Morris’s findings, teachers subjected Black girls to a form of discipline that was not interested in their students’ academic growth, but a discipline that was largely directed at curbing their students’ demeanor. This discipline stemmed from teachers’ perceptions of the girls as challenging authority or being loud and not “ladylike” (Morris 2007, 501). This complements Ann Arnett Ferguson’s articulation of adultification in *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity* (2000). In this book, Ferguson focuses on the socialization and punishment of Black boys in the public school system. She writes that as Black boys are denied the ability to be children in the eyes of society and their educators and administrators: “as black children, they are not seen as childlike but adultified; as black males, they are denied the masculine dispensation constituting white males as being ‘naturally naughty’ and are discerned as willfully bad” (Ferguson 2000, 80). Because of this denial of childhood to Black boys and society’s belief that they are already adult-like and therefore worthy of adult-like punishments, Black boys are more likely to be viewed as deserving of punishment. Perhaps Black girls are also subject to a form of adultification that differs from that of Black boys.

To connect ideas of adultification to his findings, Morris does the work of linking Collins’ description of controlling images to perceptions of femininity related to Black womanhood and girlhood. He focuses on the stereotype of the matriarch:

This adultification may pertain to Black girls as well, whom many view as overly sexual and controlling at a young age. [Patricia Hill] Collins discusses the stereotypical “controlling image” of the Black female matriarch. The matriarch portrays a negative view of African American femininity as overly aggressive and dominant. Similar to Black boys, whose adultification leads to a perception of them as aggressively masculine and justifies strict punishments, the adultification of Black girls can lead to a perception of them as aggressively feminine, which can justify restriction of their inquisitiveness and assertiveness in classrooms (503-04).

Another controlling image in Morris’s “Ladies” or “Loudies” is the “hoochie-mama.” Collins frames this stereotype and the related images of the whore and jezebel as central to the various controlling images of Black women. She argues that these images are central because “efforts to control Black women’s sexuality lie at the heart of Black women’s oppression” (Collins 2000, 81). The image of the jezebel has its roots in American slavery. The term was used to cast Black women as sexually aggressive and thus deserving of sexual assault(s) at the hands of white men. Attached to the stereotype of the jezebel was also an assumption of heightened fertility. On the other hand, the term “hoochie” is much more contemporary. While the term can still be defined as a “sexually aggressive” woman, its popularization has been made possible through popular culture—such as images produced through hip-hop videos. Apparently, there are a variety of hoochies—the “plain” hoochie, the “club” hoochie, the “gold-digging” hoochie, and, finally, the “hoochie mama.” Hoochie mama, a term popularized by the hip-hop group 2 Live Crew, marries meanings of the hoochie to ideas of Black American poverty. Collins writes that the “‘hoochie mama’ is a ‘hoodrat,’ a ‘ghetto hoochie’ whose main purpose is to provide them sexual favors” (Collins 2000, 81). We also should understand why the hoochie is a “mama” in this iteration. Collins explains

that because she is also a mama it “speaks to the numbers of Black women in poverty who are single parents whose exchange of sexual favors for money is motivated by their children’s economic needs” (Collins 2000, 81)—a notion less rooted in reality and more so in misogyny.

In his time at the middle school, Morris found that educators attached the hoochie-mama label to students who had “perceived over-active and overly mature sexuality stands in contrast to dominant proscriptions of ladylike restriction of sexuality” (Morris 2007, 508). Since the educators were primarily interested in molding Black girls into “ladies,” many of their efforts were aimed at curtailing behavior deemed “provocative.” These were the educators’ attempts to police girls’ behaviors seen as a “mark of inappropriate, overly sexual femininity” (508). In one exchange, a teacher’s aide deems it acceptable to interrupt a Black girl’s education to call out “hoochie-mama” clothing:

The school usually requires uniforms, but it’s a free dress day today. I’m sitting in an Art class. A Black woman who is an aide for the class asks a Black girl, ‘Why you wearin’ that hoochie mama skirt? I can almost see your butt in that!’ The girl ignores what the aide said and continues working on her project (503).

What stands out to me is that the education in art is less important than correcting her choice in clothing that is too “grown” or overly sexual. We see that it is more important for educators to mold Black girls into “young ladies,” in addition to “subtly (and [sometimes] unwittingly) molding them into less active” (511) and enthusiastic learners.

This is not discussed within the Morris essay: however, as we have seen in this single episode, perceived aggressive femininity and unladylike behavior can also be classified as “sassy” behavior. In her second book, *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*, hip-hop/Black feminist scholar Ruth Nicole Brown spends considerable time analyzing sassiness. She writes that “[t]eachers, parents, and community workers are quick to offer anecdotes about Black girls are in need of management, because of what they say and *how* they say it” (200). As we see with my classroom incident, the *how* is often perceived as sassy. Brown uses a definition for sassy put forth by Joyce Stevens as a “willful forthrightness in demeanor that expresses a spirited behavioral expressive style of boldness, independence, and courage, which Black adolescent girls learn early to deal with everyday hassles” (200). Unfortunately, Black girls are acknowledged for a brand of sassiness that is somehow an affront to those in positions of power and authority.

In the previous findings and my own experience in the classroom, Black girls occupy a unique intersection of race, gender, and often class where they become rendered invisible. This invisibility can be best defined as an “absence of, or erroneous representations of, oppressed groups and/or individuals” (Macías 2015, 261). In other words, while “Black women are not literally invisible to others, persistent stereotypical labels allow for others to fail to identify them as individuals and to ignore their voices” (261). What happens when a Black girl’s individuality is erased and the person in authority is allowed to see or hear them not as themselves, but as a girl with sass, a “loudie,” hoochie-mama, or disrespectful? How do these beliefs in control justify the “miseducation” of a Black girl? Further, how do controlling images police and, in turn, criminalize the Black girl in these spaces of education? Lastly, how might Black girls be responding to this brand of policing?

We might have an idea of how these images actually influence the learning and policing of Black girls through Monique Morris's *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* (2016). In *Pushout*, Morris interrogates how gender and racial inequalities in public schools have continued to persist in the nation's educational system and how Black girls bear a large brunt of the effects. The central argument of the book is that Black girls are being "criminalized (and physically and mentally harmed) by beliefs, policies, and actions that degrade and marginalize both their learning and their humanity, leading to conditions that push them out of schools and render them vulnerable to even more harm" (Morris 2016, 29). Morris raises the fact that Black girls are pushed out from the school system through the school-to-prison pipeline—the practice of criminalizing Black and Brown children in schools, which leads to a higher probability of imprisonment. While Morris acknowledges the reality of the pipeline, she finds that current analyses of the pipeline and criminalization in school are too masculinized. Similar to what we have seen with Morris, Collins, and Brown, Black girls are largely punished when they "engage in acts that are deemed 'ghetto'—often a euphemism for actions that deviate from social norms tied to a narrow, White middle-class definition of femininity" (30). This view of Black girls as deviants from the norm has resulted in their restriction not to only jails but also other forms of policed confinement such as house arrest, digital monitoring, and detention centers. In addition to their literal criminalization, how else are Black girls affected by this objectification and criminalization?

If we return to Brown's *Hear Our Truths*, we see that this criminalized, deviant view of Black girls can police them into silence. She writes: "Taught to be unseen and unheard, their silence may be self-imposed or sanctioned. Silent Black girls have a lot to say; however, without time, good relationships, and patience, their voices remain a backdrop to conversations about them" (Brown, 184). Unfortunately, when Black girls choose the route of silence, it counts against them in class for some teachers as being shy or apathetic. Brown warns against these assumptions by asking people to consider the possibilities that Black girls may be silent because they find safety in silence or that they are "willfully lost in fearful power struggles that position them as mute" (184). This rendering of silence fits with Black feminist Pauli Murray's discussion of how systems of oppression operate: "A system of oppression draws much of its strength from the acquiescence of its victims, who have accepted the dominant image of themselves and are paralyzed by a sense of helplessness" (Collins 2000, 99). Adding on to Murray, Collins adds that "the notion that Black women's objectification as the Other is so complete that we become willing participants in our own oppression" (99).

I have also seen Black girls choose the route of willful silence in the face of their objectification. I momentarily return to the 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade girl whose education or moment of learning was interrupted by my supervising teacher's inability to register her response as anything but "sassy and disrespectful." Immediately after the supervising teacher cut the girl off, the girl remained silent for the rest of class. I was toward the end of my lesson; however, I still had a few minutes left of instruction. The girl was completely disengaged even though I tried to recreate the inviting atmosphere that I hoped was present before the moment of interruption. Regrettably, this disengagement and silence did not stop after this day—the girl did not willingly speak in that classroom for the remainder of the semester. Yes, we would chat in the cafeteria or hallway or before class actually began, however, the classroom was now a space where she did not feel safe to be herself or even speak without being accused of some perceived sass.

How can we provide a classroom space where Black girls are not silenced? A space where Black girls can speak freely without fear of being sonically policed, misunderstood, or punished? How can we create a space where Black girls feel safe and able to use the totality of their voice, their expression, and their range of emotions, their self? What will this classroom space even look like and can it exist in today's society—a society that has not dealt with its racist past and present? A concept that may guide us in that direction is intersectional active listening.

Before defining what I understand to be intersectional active listening, I would like to explore “intersectional listening” as coined by the ethnomusicologist Allie Martin. While active listening is typically used to describe a form of listening that requires a person to engage fully with a person's body language and speech to respond properly to the content and intent of what has been said, intersectional listening asks us to perform a quite different task. I first heard of this idea during a presentation by Martin at the 2019 Society for Ethnomusicology annual meeting titled “Listening Intersectionally to Gentrification in Washington, DC.” She put forth the concept of “intersectional listening” as an “intentionally speculative mode of listening that challenges us to hear multiple axes of analysis” (Martin 2019). She continued by saying that this type of listening “refutes the consideration of only race, class, or gender, instead encouraging a listening practice that refuses the language of either/or and instead lives within the both/and” (Martin). While her study focuses on hearing gentrification in Washington, DC, she argues that intersectional listening can transform the way we “hear black life” (Martin). As I understand it, intersectional active listening requires us to understand the totality of a person. We must actively empathize with one's gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, and all other aspects of their identity if we are to hear them truly. Additionally, we must actively and consistently be reflexive in our understanding of how our own positionalities or identities impact how we hear others. What, then, would it mean to apply this concept to the ways we hear Black girls in the classroom? This kind of listening would not only require us to listen actively, but also require us to suspend our biases and to listen/hear the totality of the Black girl's being without casting judgment or stereotyping them into confinement. Furthermore, how might this intersectional active listening also be useful in hearing and responding to queerness, foreignness, and so on? How can this form of listening build the inclusive, loving spaces that Morris and Brown are striving to create for Black girls?

If we return to my student teaching experience, what would it have been like for the student if my supervising teacher had the tools to practice an intersectional active listening? Would the supervising teacher have felt the need to disrupt the moment of learning to chastise the girl for being “sassy?” Or would she have heard the excitement that I was able to hear (and see)? In this situation, I was able to recognize the girl's response as excitement not only because of my own positionality as a Black woman, but also because I had taken the time to figure out who this student was and, in turn, how she sounded. I knew what she sounded like when she was sad, upset, happy, or excited—my supervising teacher did not. Instead, my supervising teacher was operating on biases she internalized about Black girlhood—that Black girls are inherently sassy and they must be taught to behave and respond in a way that is more “acceptable” for a white society. If my supervising teacher were able to account for the girl's entirety of being, through the practice of intersectional active listening, the student would not have been misheard. This kind of listening requires us to unpack and address the assumptions we make surrounding matters of identity. Using and practicing intersectional active listening—a listening that values the Black girl's voice and

self—is a first step we may take to address racialized listening practices and affirm the humanity and girlhood of Black girls in the classroom.

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*Kennedi Alexis Johnson is a 4<sup>th</sup>-year PhD student in Ethnomusicology with a minor in African American and African Diaspora Studies at Indiana University. Her interests include Black feminism, critical pedagogy, and sound studies. Her research centers on the ways in which race and gender are perceived sonically in the U.S. More specifically, she looks at how the (mis)hearings of Black girls as sassy, angry, or disrespectful impede their learning in the nation's school system.*

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