

## Book Review | *Black Girl Autopoetics: Agency in Everyday Digital Practice*, by Ashleigh Greene Wade (Duke University Press, 2024)

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Ashleigh Greene Wade's *Black Girl Autopoetics: Agency in Everyday Digital Practice* invites us to consider what it would mean to understand contemporary Black girls' social media production practices within the larger context of their sociocultural experiences and epistemologies. Throughout the book, Wade positions Black girls' creative practices, such as creating and sharing TikTok dances, vlogs, and vernacular images, as a form of self-determination used to navigate and push against everyday experiences of systemic repudiation and misogynoir. While Wade does not ignore the potential harm that may be brought to Black girls through their use of corporate-owned social media platforms, she asks the reader to expand their conceptualization of Black girls' agency within these spaces to highlight the often dynamic, intersectional, and nuanced relationship that Black girls develop with digital platforms.

*Black Girl Autopoetics* echoes previous works, such as Catherine Knight Steele's *Digital Black Feminism* (2021) and Moya Bailey's *Misogynoir Transformed* (2021), that situate Black women and femmes' digital practices as distinctly shaped by and in opposition to everyday experiences of racism and sexism. However, unlike the former, Wade's focus on Black girls shifts the central organizing theory of *Black Girl Autopoetics* away from Black feminism, which, as Wade acknowledges, is closely related to the conditions of Black girlhood but is rooted in the experiences of adult women. Here, Wade puts her work in conversation with larger discussions in Black girlhood studies that argue Black feminism can overshadow the "girl-specific" aspects of Black girls' lived experiences, and more specifically, their media

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practices, in line with other scholars working at the intersection of technology and Black girlhood, such as Andrea Adomako and Zari Taylor. Thus, Wade puts methodological approaches in media and technology studies, such as social media content analysis, in conversation with Black girlhood studies to understand “what looking at the particularities of Black girlhood can tell us broadly about digital media ecologies” (14). In this way, Wade’s work continues to highlight for STS scholars the importance of being attentive to individuals’ unique and specific lived experiences in understanding their relationship to media and technology.

In terms of her theoretical contribution, Wade offers the concept of “Black girl autopoetics” (BGA) to theorize and describe Black girls’ digital practices. To elucidate BGA, Wade draws on Sylvia Wynter’s (2003) definition of poiesis as “acts of making” that allow for the naming and reinvention of humanness as a rejection of and decoupling from “Man,” which Wynter defines in her work as the Judeo-Christian, able-bodied, heterosexual, wealthy male. Therein, autopoiesis is this act of making in relation to one’s self-identity. Building on these definitions, Wade defines BGA as a “spatiotemporal praxis of creation” (10) through which Black girls make and reflect spaces and discourse through their own subjectivities and lay claim to their distinct creative processes. Further, Wade suggests that while non-Black girls may use digital technologies to engage in self-definition and self-making, “BGA cannot be separated from the lived experiences and consequences of being a Black girl in worlds built on and sustained by white supremacy and misogynoir” (11). In this way, Wade positions Black girls’ unique lived experiences, as shaped by navigating a world built on white supremacy and misogynoir, as the defining core of a BGA digital praxis.

Subsequently, through each of the book’s four main chapters, Wade uses the concept of BGA to frame and understand how Black girls assert agency and creativity through digital media. Chapter 1 illustrates how Black girls’ digital practices act as a form of mapping in concert with the physical and conceptual conditions of the world around them. Chapter 2 examines how Black girls use social media to archive their everyday experiences of joy and achievements in opposition to societal degradation and oppression. Building on this argument, Chapter 3 illustrates how Black girls’ posts on social media engage hypervisibility to “reject the burden of externally imposed definitions of Black girlhood” (87) and present themselves through their self-defined image. Finally, Chapter 4 frames Black girls’ digital agency as a form of temporal activism, pushing against the oppressive Western, white supremacist-imposed assumptions of linear time and capability.

Wade’s commitment to uplifting and protecting Black girls’ digital practices and agency is made visible through her careful and explicit attention to digital research ethics. In the “interlude” between the book’s introduction and four main chapters, Wade makes apparent her awareness that, as a group, Black girls’ race, gender, and age make them particularly vulnerable to potential harms that may

arise through the research process. In turn, she is intentional in outlining the practices she put in place to protect participants' privacy. Most notably and creatively, Wade's decision to include illustrations of Black girls' digital content, commissioned from Boricua, nonbinary artist and scholar Al Valentín, PhD, instead of reproducing the original digital images, highlights her commitment to respecting the digital autonomy of the Black girls considered in her research and ensuring the "ethical visualization" (26) and recirculation of their digital content. In this way, methodologically, *Black Girl Autopoetics* offers science and technology scholars a new tool to engage in ethical technology research, particularly when focusing on the practices of historically marginalized and vulnerable populations.

Central to the narrative and arguments that drive *Black Girl Autopoetics* are Wade's own experiences, both professionally and as a Black woman who was once, herself, a young Black girl. As Wade herself states in the introduction, "My reading of Black girls' digital content, while rooted in established analytical methodologies, is informed by my own acquired, embodied, and lived knowledge" (7). This aspect of *Black Girl Autopoetics* is most salient in its first chapter, which Wade foregrounds through her journey to working with Black girls and studying their digital practices. Throughout the chapter, Wade draws on her own experiences as an educator observing the rules and assumptions K–12 institutions cast on Black girls to situate their digital engagement. Wade argues that these digital practices can be situated as a process of mapping, drawing on the work of fellow Black girlhood scholar LaKisha Simmons, whereby Black girls respond to and operate in parallel with the varying levels of policing and surveillance they experience in the physical and conceptual world around them. Wade's reading of these material, conceptual, and digital intersections are heavily filtered through her own emotional and embodied reading of students' interactions. Still, *Black Girl Autopoetics* compellingly illustrates the complex entanglement between how Black girls navigate offline and online spaces, particularly through its comparative examination of two socioeconomically distinct educational environments.

Chapters 2 and 3 shift the book's object focus from Black girls' experiences to the public social media content they create. Wade suggests Black girls' social media posts operate as an everyday digital archive that, in line with historical Black archival practices, allows for self-representation and definition that can push against misogynoir-based stereotypes and erasure. Wade's suggestion in Chapter 3 that Black girls' images online, particularly those that transgress the norms of respectability politics, make them hypervisible and invisible (when refracted through misogynoir-based stereotypes) echoes similar arguments by scholar Safiya Noble (2013) in her interrogation of the images of Black girls populated through Google search results. However, through the lens of BGA, Wade argues that within what she terms the "paradox of hyper(in)visibility," Black girls on

social media make themselves hypervisible as an expression of self-definition and agency in which they “refuse to take responsibility for how misogynoir corrupts our gaze” (104). Thus, building on these previous arguments about the circulation of Black girls’ images online, Wade’s focus on how the way these images are produced invites us to interrogate how our preconceived notions of respectability undermine Black girls’ ability to define the stakes of their representation. At the same time, the book’s shift away from Black girls’ direct practices and actions in these sections still leaves the question open: How might Black girls conceptualize these practices, and to what degree are their practices of archiving and hypervisibility intentional?

Rounding out Wade’s examination of BGA in Chapter 4, she focuses on the temporal aspects of BGA. Wade draws on Black studies to argue that the nonlinearity and agency of Black temporalities (compared to white supremacist and colonial understandings of time) is reflected in how Black girls use social media to engage in activism, particularly in how they undermine broader expectations of what Black girls can accomplish. As Wade writes, “Instead of waiting for a specific moment in the linear progression from childhood to adulthood, Black girl activists do not rely on age as a primary indicator of their readiness to fight for social justice” (110). Thus, Wade invites us to consider how our relationship to technology is dictated not only by physical space but also by time and, further, how Black girls’ use of technology may shift what happens in our present moment and future. Collectively, then, *Black Girl Autopoetics* offers STS scholars a compelling and thoughtful example of how we might ethically and with care examine how systems of power shape the culturally specific way communities develop practices around and with technology.

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## Author Bio

**Chelsea Peterson-Salahuddin** (she/her) is an assistant professor at the University of Michigan School of Information. Her research focuses on the culturally specific ways marginalized communities, most often Black women, femmes, and queer folks, engage with mass and digital communications technologies to seek information, produce knowledge, and build community, and how the infrastructure of these technologies helps these communities to overcome or continue to replicate systemic barriers to equity.