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New Kids on The Block

Children as Political Subjects in *Gorilla, My Love*

Abstract

This article examines the depiction of children and adolescents in Toni Cade Bambara's Gorilla, My Love, exploring the ways in which their performance characterizes them as potential agents of change within and outside the narrative. I argue that Bambara challenges the traditional portrayal of children as victimized and unaware of the social dynamics at play in the space they inhabit, rather identifying them as proto-political subjects who convey her own militant views. My analysis will be carried out taking into account specific aspects of the children's performance, such as the use of vernacular, the figure of the 'tomboy' and creativity as a revolutionary practice. These elements will also be considered in light of Bambara's involvement in the black liberation and women's movements: the children protagonists in the stories will be investigated as heirs of Bambara's radical message.

Keywords: *African American literature, children, Butler, Signifying, tomboy*

*As a cultural worker who belongs to an oppressed people my job is to
make revolution irresistible.*

(Toni Cade Bambara, *Conversations with Toni Cade Bambara*)

In *Gorilla, My Love* (1972), her acclaimed first short story collection, Toni Cade Bambara captures, in her own words, “on-the-block, in-the-neighborhood, back glance pieces” (Tate 1983, 24): the stories in this collection thematize the complex social dynamics and the strife for empowerment of the African American communities (Harlem, the Bronx, Brooklyn, as well as rural Southern areas) depicted in them. A strong sense of belonging to a homey – yet often dilapidated – area, the need to protect it, and the urge to evolve within it are threads that run through the collection, along with the identification of the community as a site in which race, gender, and class intersect in complex ways. The intricacies of the experiences overlapping in the neighborhood are frequently conveyed by children, the main characters and narrative voices in ten out of the fifteen stories that comprise this collection (Muther 2002, 448): in *Gorilla, My*

Love and in Bambara's 'straight up fiction'¹ at large, children are in fact the medium through which the structural challenges facing the African American community are revealed and problematized. This article examines the representation of children and adolescents in *Gorilla, My Love*, exploring the ways in which their performance characterizes them as potential agents of change both within the narrative and outside it, rather than portraying them as victimized subjects who are unaware of the social dynamics at play in the space they inhabit. Therefore, I will investigate the implications that the neighborhood, as a racialized space, carries on the children's conduct, and I will examine Judith Butler's conceptualization of the performative as a potential mode of disruptive resignification of predetermined behaviors.

Bambara's use of children as a narrative device to dismantle stereotypical and/or essentializing assumptions on African Americans and women has been discussed previously (Butler-Evans 1989; Muther 2002); in my analysis, I aim to highlight how such characters epitomize Bambara's political agenda. In fact, I contend that in *Gorilla, My Love* children demythologize the conventional narrative traditionally typifying them as naïve and powerless, adopting instead behavioral and speech patterns which defy at once the other characters' and the readers' expectations about them. In order to do so, I will take into account specific aspects of the children's performance, such as the use of vernacular, the figure of the 'tomboy', and creativity as a revolutionary practice. Furthermore, this article will show how this collection – which gathers the stories Bambara wrote during the first years of her ardent political activism, years that were politically scorching *per se* – lays the groundwork for the radical trait which is distinctive of Bambara's cultural production at large, and rooted in her own experience as a child.

1. Fields, behaviors, performances: a brief exploration in social theory

"The story I wants to tell is about the block, I guess," says Violet, the girl protagonist of "Playing with Punjab" (Bambara 2011, 71): on most occasions, the story the children narrators in *Gorilla, My Love* tell is the story of their neighborhoods. Most of the tales in the collection are intense and realistic portrayals of urban areas such as Harlem, the Bronx, Brooklyn:² despite the harsh

¹ This definition is provided by Bambara in the "Sort of Preface" she writes to *Gorilla, My Love*, and later clarifies in an interview: "We've had the narrator as witness, the narrator as observer, the narrator as participant; I'm after the narrator as medium, the narrator who does not claim omniscience in that arrogant way—arrogant and immoral way that is characteristic of American, particularly Euro-American that is. But I am after the narrator as a medium; a person or a force that is simply there as a kind of magnet and through that narrator people tell their stories and lay them out" (Bonetti 2012, 33).

² Only three stories take place in the rural South, instead of in Northern urban contexts.

living conditions experienced in such social spaces, the latter are inhabited by a community that becomes an extended family to the narrator. Bambara makes sure to offer an unmitigated depiction of this bleak social space, but she also celebrates its uniqueness and its wealth of traditions, connections, and culture; the distinctive rhythm of its events and speech becomes a co-protagonist in each story. George Lipsitz famously stated that “race is produced by space, [and] that it takes places for racism to take place” (2011, 5): in his analysis of the reciprocal implication of race and place, he dwelt a great deal on urban segregation as a form of spatial and social subordination, at the same time highlighting how the racialized space of the neighborhood can “produce ways of envisioning and enacting more decent, dignified, humane, and egalitarian social relations” (2011, 6), especially in terms of African American expressive culture, which functions “both [as] a symptom and a critique of the nexus that links race and space” (2011, 20). This entanglement of systemic disadvantage and investment in the radical alternatives emerging from such devalued spaces is precisely the subject of Bambara’s poetics and, in fact, Lipsitz refers several times to Bambara in his study, which he concludes with a quotation from her novel *The Salt Eaters*.

While taking into account the neighborhood as a social dimension in *Gorilla, My Love*, the aspect that is vividly thrown into light is its isolation from white upper-class American society: these spaces function as self-contained microcosms, enclaves in which characters are absorbed in their daily occupations (sometimes cooperatively, more often competitively), with an extremely limited interaction with elements external to the area they live in. This exclusion from the social fabric of white American society creates an effect of foreordained determinism, which is nonetheless downplayed in Bambara’s first collection: in fact, although her characters are acutely aware of their positionality and the implications it carries, they do not yield to passive self-pity, but rather they seem to look at their neighborhoods as self-respecting shelters, a sort of modern-day maroon communities rich in longstanding traditions, fostering independence and empowerment in their residents. This resistance to a self-perception and representation as victims is epitomized, for instance, in the story “Blues Ain’t No Mockin Bird,” in which the protagonist’s grandfather, a farmer called Mr. Cain, proudly and calmly destroys the camera of two white journalists who had come to film the disadvantaged living condition of the Black community for a food stamp campaign. Such a gesture (made by a “Cain,” and thus rife with biblical resonance) is possible and does not lead to deadly consequences because it happens in the ‘safe’ space of a rural area inhabited exclusively by African Americans: in that specific arena, Mr. Cain’s physically and symbolically violent reaction, while shocking to his granddaughter, is

not a suicidal move, since Mr. Cain has enough power (or, in Bourdieusian terms, enough ‘capital’³) within his social sphere to act in such a way.

In a Bourdieusian perspective, Mr. Cain’s behavior is fundamentally justified by the field he lives/plays in; in fact, the field shapes his *habitus* in many ways. Pierre Bourdieu elucidates, throughout his body of work, that one’s *habitus* is an embodied set of dispositions defined by the structure and the demands of the field, and it is at once discursive and physical: “[the *habitus*] is a socialized body, a structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world – a field – and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world” (1998, 81). Bourdieu resorts to the metaphor of the game to explain that the field in which one is born is organized by rules which are not negotiated by the individual subject upon that subject’s entrance into the game, and the *habitus* corresponds to a process of autonomization in mastering behavioral patterns that prove strategically profitable (1992, 66-79). However, in Bourdieu’s view such bodily and discursive operational schemes are adopted without a conscious strategic intention; this is precisely the point that Judith Butler questions in her work, as we will see shortly.

Bourdieu’s social theory and philosophical categories have frequently been referenced and engaged by feminist scholars (Adkins and Skeggs, 2004); among them, Butler specifically chooses to mobilize Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* when she addresses, in her own work, the ritual element of the subject’s performance. Butler’s idea of performativity, which she develops in relation to gender identity, can be defined as the ritualized reproduction of norms through the force of prohibition and taboo (2011, 60); from this angle, subjectivity is socially constructed and hetero-directed in ways that recall Bourdieu’s theoretical formulation. However, Butler insists on the description of social routines as arbitrarily (though not necessarily freely) chosen patterns, which construct other people’s perceptions of the subject; they can thus be extremely detrimental and should be reappropriated or reversed. Writing almost at the same time as Bourdieu, Butler draws on the transformative aspects of his thought,⁴ and combines the diagnostic aspect of his structural theory with her own explicit political agenda: her theoretical

³ The notion of ‘capital’ is one of the key concepts in Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical system; in essence, it designates one’s assets, derived from one’s status and social position, in a social space (or ‘field’). For a more detailed discussion of the operational categories in Bourdieu’s thought, see *Practical Reason* (1998).

⁴ While Bourdieu’s structural analysis has been accused of being too deterministic (Jenkins 1982), much work has been done recently to shed additional light on its progressive aspects. For instance, see Yang Yang on the disruptive role of the ‘interrupters’ of prescribed social trajectories (Yang 2014), and Mariano Croce on the ways in which Bourdieu’s semantic grid can foster social transformation, despite it being an intellectualistic tool (Croce 2019).

writings thus become performative speech acts demanding an intellectual and political (re)action.

In her 1997 *Excitable Speech* and in her later essay “Performativity’s Social Magic,” Butler puts her theory in conversation with Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, illustrating some of what she pinpoints as its intrinsic fallacies, and proposes a way out of what she considers to be a fossilized view of performance in societal space. She identifies Bourdieu’s shortcomings as follows:

His theory fails to recognize that a certain performative force results from the rehearsal of the conventional formulae in non-conventional ways. The possibility of a resignification of that ritual is based on the prior possibility that a formula can break with its originary context, assuming meanings and functions for which it was never intended. (1997, 147)

In her work, Butler focuses on the discursive aspect of people’s performance (frequently relating it to bodily dynamics), and claims the *formative* value of the practices constituting the *habitus*: for instance, she highlights the body’s inclination to exceed the discursive interpellation as an incongruity in Bourdieu’s theorization, and a potential site of resistance to a cyclic repetition of repressive patterns (1997, 155). In essence, Butler indicates that speaking, behaving and *being* with a self-determined sense of authority is a way to break away from preordained codes and make also gendered/racial frameworks explode; in short, she posits that performing the self subversively may lead to unpredictable outcomes. I connect this theoretical stance to Toni Cade Bambara’s own political beliefs: in 1970 she edits her groundbreaking anthology *The Black Woman*, in which she authors (among others) a piece titled “On the Issue of Roles,” where she discusses the role of Black women in society and in the revolution, and writes:

Revolution begins with the self, in the self. [...] We make many false starts because we have been programmed to depend on white models or white interpretations of non-white models, so we don’t even ask the correct questions, much less begin to move in a correct direction. Perhaps we need to face the terrifying and overwhelming possibility that there are no models, that we shall have to create from scratch. (1970, 133)

Two years later, by publishing *Gorilla, My Love*, Bambara realizes her project and claims authoritative weight in two ways. First, she reinforces her role as a feminist writer and spokeswoman for Black nationalism, focusing on the depiction of Black communities with their own struggles, linguistic codes, and culture; second, she creates a narrative portrayal of children whom she entrusts with the task of conveying her own militant views, thus articulating a performative interpellation of her African American readership, advocating a self-affirming and politically radical self-perception.

2. Signifying: a child's play

In his introduction to *The Children's Culture Reader*, Henry Jenkins observes that the myth of childhood innocence is exploited to pursue precise ideological agendas: in political discourse, children are often essentialized into a pure, victimized category, deprived of any possible critical attitude, let alone agency; their needs and desires manipulated for the sake of adults' demands. On the other hand, Jenkins also warns against the risk of romanticizing children as natural-born revolutionary subjects whose rebellion against adult authority supposedly leads to rationally anticipated change (1997, 1-37).

In *Gorilla, My Love*, Bambara succeeds in the difficult task of depicting children's experience without succumbing to the temptation of turning them into revolutionary heroines/heroes: instead, she manages to describe their assertive (re)actions in a difficult social context and suggests a political trajectory for their insights. Another essentialist trap she avoids is that of representing the 'block' in her stories as a utopian place of harmony: the urban neighborhood in which most of the stories are set is rather portrayed as a battlefield, where power imbalance even among the community members is inevitable and manifest, and children are cognizant of the predefined roles they are cast in by adults and institutions and try to resist the pressure to conform to them. As Butler-Evans remarks, "*Gorilla* disrupts the apparent unity of the world it seems to represent: an idyllic inner world of the Black community in which intra-racial strife is minimal or nonexistent" (1989, 122). Within the neighborhood, the most common and direct conflicts displayed in the stories are the ones regarding gender dynamics and expectations: often the girls and women narrators are confronted with issues about their conduct, which is regarded as 'inappropriate' to their gender position and age. The tensions arising in this respect are rarely resolved in full. Bambara's objective in this collection seems rather to make them rise to the surface, become tangible and let their abrasive nature bulge intolerably: this is most evident in such stories as "Gorilla, My Love," "My Man Bovanne," "Sweet Town," "Basement," and "The Johnson Girls."

Nonetheless, when children are main characters and such conflictual dynamics occur, Bambara uses a specific narrative strategy which is all the more radical when the narrative voice is that of a young girl: Signifying. As is well known, Signifying is a linguistic and rhetorical practice which is characteristic of African American expression and entails the use of African American vernacular, pastiche, hyperboles, and parody; as Henry Louis Gates Jr. specifies in his seminal text *The Signifying Monkey*, it is predominantly a male (and phallogocentric) practice, although it can be effectively undertaken by women (1988, 54). Turning specifically to literature, Gates labels texts which "privilege the representation of the speaking black voice" as 'speakerly texts'

(1988, 112): with its widespread use of an urban vernacular, Bambara's *Gorilla, My Love* easily falls within the definition of 'speakerly text.' The role of Signifying in Bambara's short fiction has been explored by several critics: while both Katy M. Wright and Janet Ruth Heller focus on the linguistic aspects of African American Vernacular English in "The Lesson," Butler-Evans argues that the female appropriation of Signifying in Bambara implies that the feminine consciousness is asserting itself in the text (1989, 97); moreover, Comfort identifies in girls' Signifying, *Playing the Dozens*⁵ and other forms of word play a mark of "affectionate cohesion" (1998, 77). I argue that Signifying in Bambara's young female characters is a breach in the conventional portrayal of such characters, mirroring the author's own radical stance and her performance as a Black feminist intellectual: both Bambara's and her 'feisty girls' (Muther 2002) rhetorical strategy hence represents a deliberate, performative discursive choice.

In "Raymond's Run," Hazel, also known as Squeaky, acts as a loving guardian to her older brother Raymond, whom she defines as "not quite right" (Bambara 2011, 23), and she states her purpose in an (indeed) feisty narrative voice: "But now, if anybody has anything to say to Raymond, anything to say about his big head, they have to come by me" (2011, 23). In her article, Mary Comfort asserts that although Hazel claims she does not have time to waste playing the dozens, she is indeed a fine player (1998, 88): she demonstrates her mastery in the game publicly, when she verbally confronts Gretchen (her strongest competitor in the annual May Day run) and her friends, and throughout the story, while the reader follows her rhythmic inner monologue first around the block, then during and after the run she eventually wins. Hazel's commentary of the events she recounts and the reality she describes is ironic, confrontational and bold, interpellating the reader as an ally and, alternatively, as a neighbor in her block – hence, as one of the people who seemingly try to force her into roles which are constricting for her. Her speech becomes most blatant and direct before the May Day run, when she blurts out a monologue in which she defends her choice to be a runner instead of a May Pole dancer, as her mother would have liked:

The biggest thing on the program is the May Pole dancing, which I can do without, thank you, even if my mother thinks it's a shame I don't take part and act like a girl for a change. [...] You'd think she'd be glad her daughter ain't out there prancing around a May Pole getting the new clothes all dirty and sweaty and trying to act like a fairy or a flower or whatever you're supposed to be when you should be trying to be yourself, whatever that is, which is, as far as I am concerned, a poor Black girl who really can't afford to buy shoes and a new dress you only wear once a lifetime cause it won't fit next year. [...] You'd think they

⁵ A playful verbal fight, common in African American communities, in which adversaries deride each other (and each other's mothers) with insults and invectives, until one of them gives up.

[my mother and father]’d know better than to encourage that kind of nonsense. I am not a strawberry. I do not dance on my toes. I run. That is what I am all about. (2011, 27-28)

In her tirade, which exemplifies her attitude throughout the entire story, Hazel disrupts several patterns at once: her parents’ expectations on her performance of gender, the righteous daughter conduct, the ‘typical’ prepubescent girl’s order of priorities. Moreover, Hazel is not just aching to disrupt a narrative scheme in which she clearly cannot fit, but she also openly points to the precise economic reasons (and thus, the class ramifications) that press her to behave in that way: running is what she does, so why would she ever force herself into an outfit she and her family cannot afford? The excessive cost of the outfit thus becomes a metaphor for the other thing Hazel cannot afford: failing to be herself (and being successful at it) on her own terms. By choosing to overtly address the patterns that she destabilizes in her monologue, and by *Signifying* her story, Hazel shows her awareness of the interruption of both the linguistic and the behavioral pattern she is carrying out: she is inhabiting her block and her community by performing her true self discursively and physically, in line with Butler’s idea that “the speech act is a bodily act, and that the ‘force’ of the performative is never fully separable from bodily force” (1997, 141). In fact, Butler sees bodily and speech acts that deviate from their routine form, forged by their prior institutional context, as insurrectionary acts which “speak the unspeakable” (1997, 142):

An utterance may gain its force precisely by virtue of the break with context that it performs. Such breaks with prior context or, indeed, with ordinary usage, are crucial to the political operation of the performative. Language takes on a non-ordinary meaning in order precisely to contest what has become sedimented in and as the ordinary. (1997, 145)

This discursive resignification taking place in “Raymond’s Run” is not isolated in Bambara’s collection. In fact, Hazel is a recurrent character in *Gorilla, My Love*: she appears in four stories under this name, whereas the same *persona* with no name or a different one also appears in the other ones. The same proud repositioning in linguistic patterns through a Signifying performance by Hazel happens in “Gorilla, My Love,” “The Hammer Man” and “The Lesson” and, especially in the last two stories, it carries profound political implications. “The Hammer Man” revolves mostly about the tension between the unnamed narrator (supposedly, a ‘Hazel’ in disguise) and Manny, a schoolmate with whom she has had a fight and who (she claims) wants to kill her, but the story eventually discloses the identity of the narrator’s true enemies: her parents’ stubborn gender normativity and two white policemen’s disciplinary intervention.

In fact, the narrator's mother bribes her to join a community center where her tomboyish manners may be rectified, and there she finds a folder in which she learns

That I was from a deviant family in a deviant neighborhood. I showed my mother the word in the dictionary, but she didn't pay me no mind. It was my favorite word after that. I ran it in the ground till one day my father got the strap just to show how deviant he could get. So I gave up trying to improve my vocabulary. And I almost gave up my dungarees. (2011, 38-39)

The word 'deviant' is, in this context, not only painfully emblematic of her cultural positioning, but symbolically charged with her parents' preoccupations regarding the narrator's sexual orientation: despite the negative connotations attached to it, she tries to embrace the new term and claim it as a distinctive personality trait, but is disciplined against it by her parents. However, her in-your-face talk is not defeated by this incident, as the final episode in the story shows. One night, after being expelled from the community center for playing pool instead of sewing (her performance once more nonconformant to the expected gender criteria and therefore sanctioned), the narrator finds Manny at the park, intent in perfecting his lay-ups; two policemen stop them and, in a threatening tone, urge them to leave the playground for no apparent reason. As they approach Manny more violently, the narrator steps up to defend him, and when called "sister" by one of the police officers, she replies: "I damn sure can't be your sister seeing how I'm a black girl. Boy, I sure will be glad when you run me in so I can tell everybody about that. You must think you're in the South, mister" (2011, 40-41). The young narrator is not afraid to verbally antagonize (in her own distinctive linguistic style) an agent of law enforcement whom she immediately perceives as dangerous, and she literally snaps at him when, shortly after, he mockingly defines Manny as "her boyfriend": this once again gendered, heteronormative interpellation is unbearable to her, and is followed by an intense Signifying monologue which is a direct reaction to it. The narrator is eventually reduced to (at least behavioral) discipline: at the end of the story, she goes back to the community center and starts wearing matching clothes and shoes. But the retrospective and proud freestyle emphasis with which her voice narrates Manny's story seems to suggest that her ultimate performance of girlhood is possibly staged and, although temporarily quiescent, her discursive and behavioral resistance is still active.

Similarly, "The Lesson," a widely anthologized story, foregrounds a strong duality between good and evil in the form of socioeconomic inequalities: the narrative voice sounds ready to embrace rebellion, but the reader is left to wonder whether she has yet the tools to enact it. Nonetheless, Sylvia (another alias for Hazel) seems rather sure about the fact that regardless of how valuable

the lesson alluded to in the title of the story may be, she will narrate it with her unique tone and style. Miss Moore is a college educated woman who moves to Sylvia's neighborhood and seems on a mission to provide the kids on her block with instruments to improve their education. Sylvia immediately singles her out as an outsider whose behavior and style are different and unprecedented in their neighborhood: among the elements she highlights to indicate such difference are her "proper speech," the fact that she is "the only woman on the block with no first name" and the books and free classes she gives to her and her friends (2011, 87-88). Throughout the story, Sylvia antagonizes Miss Moore and her good practices seemingly for the sake of it, although she ambiguously joins all the educational activities she plans for the neighborhood's kids; while a quite predictable preadolescent defiance dynamic is in place, at a deeper linguistic level something subtler happens in the story.

One day Miss Moore takes all the children to the lavish FAO Schwarz Toy Store on the Fifth Avenue, with the clear objective of eliciting from them a genuine outrage at the class/racial disparities they are involuntarily subject to. The fact that the lesson takes place outside of their usual neighborhood is highly significant: in his work, Lipsitz discusses in depth how, within urban contexts, the segregation of certain districts from other, more privileged areas magnifies social hierarchies and "imposes the equivalent of a racial tax on people of color" (2011, 7), not only in terms of wealth, but also in terms of health and education. When faced with the disparity between the Fifth Avenue store and her ordinary bleak landscape, Sylvia's fury becomes palpable, but although she barely controls it, she states that she has no intention to satisfy Miss Moore's interpellation to react in a class-conscious way, and intensifies her Signifying style to stress her firmness:

Miss Moore lines us up in front of the mailbox where we started from, seems like years ago, and I got a headache for thinkin so hard. And we lean all over each other so we can hold up under the draggy-ass lecture she always finishes us off with at the end before we thank her for boring us to tears. (2011, 95)

Despite her acumen, the young girl resists Miss Moore's performative call to class and racial awareness, in that although she shares her vantage point, she sees it as an intellectualistic betrayal of her roots – and she underscores her unshakeable unruliness through her speech, which performs at once her uneasy feelings after Miss Moore's lesson and her need to express them on her own terms. The reader is left thinking that Miss Moore's lesson is not lost, and the emphatic way in which the story is told is one of the signs that this is the case, since it is in line with Bambara's political use of the African American vernacular. Comfort writes that "in 'A Sort

of a Preface,' Bambara confesses – and boasts – of her ability to Signify” (1998, 95), which is unanimously regarded by the critics as an essential part of her poetics from a political standpoint: “she understood that the intellectual also needed to speak the language of her community. She had total confidence in the capacity of that language to convey political complexities and moral values” (Holmes and Wall 2008, 5). Through this lens, Sylvia’s last line in the story is resignified as a powerful statement of self-affirmation and, possibly, a proto-political project: “But ain’t nobody gonna beat me at nuthin” (2011, 96).

3. Tomboys as game changers? Toni Cade Bambara’s ‘lesson’

What is one to make of ‘the Hazels’ in *Gorilla, My Love*, then? Are these girls mindful of their own rebellious performances or do they just revolt against adult authority because of the ‘deviant’ field they are born in? To what extent are disturbances in the continuity of their expected conduct able to bring about the conscious counter-hegemonic insurrections theorized by Butler? Elizabeth Muther does not seem to have many doubts about that: “Bambara’s girl narrator/protagonists – drawn not so obliquely from her own childhood – represent the prophetic childhood and adolescence of black feminism. With self-possession and militancy, they defend themselves against the pathologizing liberalism of the 1960s” (2002, 448). It is indisputable that Bambara’s non-conforming portrayals of the girls narrators in her stories are framed in a clear feminist perspective, as it is unquestionable that this first collection is imbued with the 1960s values that inform her activism and undergird her further literary production even more substantially, from the end of the 1970s. Nonetheless, as previously argued in this article, Bambara resists the temptation to provide paradigms rather than characters, and offers portrayals which, despite their looming large in the narrative, turn out to be nuanced and honest: sometimes Hazel’s youthful inexperience in the face of complex circumstances is at the core of the narrative, notwithstanding her straightforward and cocky attitude. In this section, I look more closely at Bambara’s “Hazels” and their performances as tomboys, in order to assess to what extent strategically performing oneself as such and developing creative reactions can make room for actual subversion in the stories.

While a certain liminality gender-wise is predictable in prepuberal years and in fact corresponds to a healthy exploration of one’s own gender identity and of other ‘fields’, the “Hazels” we have met so far all embrace their ‘tomboyism’ to pursue a greater freedom and mobility, and their ‘tomboyism’ can be read “as a sign of independence and self-motivation” (Halberstam 1998, 6). Nonetheless, Judith Halberstam illustrates how these playful explorations can only be tolerable until puberty occurs: after that moment, girls’ adolescence translates into a restraint in personal

freedom, with gender conformity being exerted by taming all behaviors which deviate from the dominant codes of heteronormativity. “The Hammer Man” epitomizes this process, foregrounding the typical life-threatening injury used in childhood literature as a narrative device to have the tomboy capitulate to a more traditional notion of femininity (which is, in this story, also racially charged): when the two policemen in the park become seriously aggressive, the narrator imagines herself and Manny being shot by them, linguistically staging a symbolic killing of both her tomboy self and Manny’s proclivity to a behavior unanimously perceived as peculiar. Subsequently to his arrest, Manny is institutionalized, and the narrator reconducted to more proper ‘girly’ activities – a role which, as previously noted, may be only temporarily performed, her tomboy self ready to resurface.

In other stories, instead, by resisting the pressure to be restrained in a more conventional and acceptable conduct, Hazel takes the reins of her own ‘tomboyism’ performing it in an overtly self-aware fashion that paves the way to potentially radical outcomes, redefining the norms not only of the individual’s field, but of the community itself. Bambara uses this narrative strategy with a precise political agenda, putting forward the issues and the claims of the community she belongs to; “Gorilla, My Love” is probably the story in the collection in which Hazel seems most immoderate and performs her assertiveness in the most vehement way. In the story, she is disappointed by the movie she has just seen, *Gorilla, My Love*, claiming to have been fooled by its misleading title; therefore, she furiously confronts the theater director and demands a refund, performing her most confident and aggressive self in a field in which she knows her act will be perceived as shocking, inasmuch as it diverges from the expected behavior of a regular (white?) movie goer. This is her proud manifesto of tomboyish self-affirmation:

And now I’m really furious cause I get so tired grownups messin over kids just cause they little and can’t take em to court. What is it, he say to me like I lost my mittens or wet on myself or am somebody’s retarded child. When in reality I am the smartest kid P.S. 186 ever had in its whole lifetime and you can ax anybody. (2011, 17)

Eventually, her ambush is not successful; as a response to this, out of frustration and in retaliation Hazel sets fire to a candy stand nearby, causing the movie theater’s closure for a week. With this episode, Bambara portrays the serious consequences that can be ignited by adults’ lies, implying that when facing inequalities, the ‘feisty girls’ in her stories are not afraid to take their rage out of their usual field. This dynamic is also presented, although underscoring its problematic aspects, in “The Lesson”, the other story in the collection which brings Hazel out of her neighborhood and frames the theme of ‘adult lies’ in more explicit class terms, hence

demanding a more specifically political reaction. During their ‘field trip’ to the Fifth Avenue, Sylvia and her friends are invited by Miss Moore to cross the threshold and enter the toy store, where they will be able to see first-hand the toys and their price tags, but their usual bravado seems halted:

[...] when we get there I kinda hang back. Not that I’m scared, what’s there to be afraid of, just a toy store. But I feel funny, shame. But I got to be shamed about? Got as much right to go in as anybody. But somehow I can’t seem to get hold of the door, so I step away for Sugar to lead. But she hangs back too. And I look at her and she looks at me and this is ridiculous. I mean, damn, I have never been shy about doing nothing or going nowhere. (2011, 93)

When they finally manage to go in, Sylvia compares their entrance to a “glued-together jigsaw done all wrong” (2011, 93), and has a flashback of a time in which her best friend Sugar and she entered a Catholic church “on a dare” (2011, 93) and she was not able to desacralize the place with the mocking gesture Sugar had dared her to perform. Similarly, in exploring the store, Sylvia and her friends silently walk on tiptoes, hardly touching anything and simply staring at the prices: the spell that the store atmosphere casts over them angers Sylvia, who stubbornly blames Miss Moore for her distress, but is instead perfectly mindful of its origin, as her subsequent interior monologue on the subway underlines. This episode stands in sharp contrast with Hazel’s boisterous performance in “Gorilla, My Love”: in “The Lesson,” Sylvia and her friend spontaneously adapt to the new field – they recognize the store as a social space in which the norms in force are incommensurable with the ones regulating their own neighborhood, hence they perform their selves abiding by the conventional social norms exerted “through prohibition and taboo” (Butler 2011, 60). However, this naturally compliant maneuver is insulting to Sylvia’s sense of self, and she is in fact reluctant to perform it: this event has created a rift which is impossible to ignore, and it demands attention and a response. Miss Moore’s lesson, a full-fledged shock therapy aimed at awakening both class and racial awareness in the children of her block, works on Sugar and Sylvia in different ways. Sugar discursively articulates her resentment and her realizations following precisely the dialectic path down which Miss Moore leads her; Sylvia, instead, feels betrayed by Sugar’s mature but somewhat orchestrated reaction, therefore she treats her roughly and retreats to a quiet place where she can calmly recollect the day’s events, get in touch with her emotions and resources, and elaborate *her own* strategy to respond to them. Her irked reaction is almost psychosomatic, and possibly signals the incipient elaboration of a more conscious and creative performative act to come, as suggested by Butler’s psychoanalytical way of framing the question. In fact, Butler suggests that a spontaneous refusal or failure to abide by the behavioral norm may be the result of an innate resistance to

incorporate it (1999, 118): reformulating one's performance in ways that diverge from the expected and accepted ones, therefore, becomes a self-authorizing statement and a performative act, opening a pathway for future redefinitions of the subject:

The performative is not only a ritual practice: it is one of the influential rituals by which subjects are formed and reformulated. This point seems to me to be a crucial one, and raises again the possibility of a speech act as an insurrectionary act. Within the political sphere, performativity can work in precisely such counter-hegemonic ways. That moment in which a speech act without prior authorization nevertheless assumes authorization in the course of its performance may anticipate and instate altered contexts for its future reception. (1997, 160)

Sylvia proves eventually to be the real outsider, potentially the game changer in the field: while acknowledging the truth of Miss Moore's lesson, her tomboy performance at the end of the story is a way to stress that she, too, intends to question the status quo, but at her own pace and in her own style – without Miss Moore's institutional authorization, her reaction will indeed be a performative one.

Although this sense of purpose is palpable in several stories in the collection, "Raymond's Run" is the one in which all the elements hitherto discussed converge in the most accomplished form: moreover, the ending of the story discloses a more defined horizon of change and exemplifies the hopeful traits in Bambara's radical poetics. Since their first meeting in the story, Hazel's rivalry with Gretchen is described in unfriendly terms: in fact, Gretchen is portrayed as her nemesis, her ontological Other. She is new to the neighborhood and has 'stolen' Hazel's friend Mary Louise right after her arrival; she is white and freckled-faced; she is as cold-blooded and silent throughout the story, as Hazel is a hot-tempered, articulate Signifier. What Hazel and Gretchen have in common is their burning ambition to win the race (hence, implicitly, they also share a nonconforming gender performance) and a difficulty to relate to each other which is older than them, as Hazel points out: "Gretchen smiles, but it's not a smile, and I'm thinking that girls never really smiles at each other because they don't know how and don't want to know how and there's probably no one to teach us how, cause grown-up girls don't know either" (2011, 26-27). Yet, in Hazel's comment there is a wistful longing for recognition, in that not only is Gretchen the one person who has the means to understand how fundamental running is to her identity, but Hazel also seems to imply that, after all, not being able to smile at each other is pointless, misguided and perhaps entails major drawbacks.

This tension is defused at the end of the story, thanks to the incredible performance (in both sport and Butlerian sense) of Raymond, who runs and possibly wins the race, although

informally. While on the starting line, Hazel glances first at Gretchen, who is “kicking her legs out like a pro” (2011, 30), and then sees her brother Raymond “on line on the other side of the fence, bending down with his fingers on the ground *just like he knew what he was doing*” (2011, 30, italics mine); during the run, Hazel realizes that, side by side with her and Gretchen, Raymond is running “with his arms down on the side and the palms tucked up behind him, running in his very own style” (2011, 30). Comfort observes that “Raymond pantomimes his admiration for Hazel, whose example he follows” (1998, 89), yet he does so mindfully, delivering a dazzling performance of ‘himself as a runner’ which deconstructs all of his sister’s (and everyone else’s) assumptions on what he, as a disabled boy, is or should be capable of doing. Moreover, he wins the race *on the other side of the fence*: his physical position mirrors his metaphorical exclusion from the hegemonic categories in a Butlerian sense – consequently, his unauthorized gesture becomes all the more insurrectionist. It may also be argued that Raymond is a successful version of Manny, who is a perfect basketball player but is stripped of any chances of pursuing his career: “The Hammer Man” was first published in 1966, whereas “Raymond’s Run” first appeared in *Tales and Short Stories for Black Folks* (edited by Bambara and published by Doubleday) in 1971 – these two stories are connected by similar settings and dynamics, but “Raymond’s Run” introduces a sense of *future possibility* which is alien to Bambara’s earlier works.

Raymond’s performance also offers a possible resolution to the ontological conflict between Hazel and Gretchen. Hazel is enthusiastic in discovering Raymond’s ability and imagines that, should she fail at winning the race and becoming a professional runner, she would be thrilled to coach her talented brother; when she learns that, instead, she is the official winner of the race, she looks at Gretchen

And I smile. Cause she’s good, no doubt about it. Maybe she’d like to help me coach Raymond; she obviously is serious about running, as any fool can see. And she nods to congratulate and then she smiles. And I smile. We stand there with this big smile of respect between us. It’s about as real a smile as girls can do for each other, considering we don’t practice real smiling every day, you know, cause maybe we too busy being flowers or fairies or strawberries instead of something honest and worthy of respect...you know...like being people. (2011, 32)

Butler-Evans remarks that the end of this story “marks the emergence of a consciousness grounded in feminine and proto-feminist experiences” (1989, 99) since the text introduces an incipient female bonding; I would argue that it is also hopeful regarding racial relationships in a way which is unprecedented and perhaps unequalled in Bambara’s literary *oeuvre*. Raymond’s conscious performance of mastery ignites a process of counter-hegemonic rethinking which

literally starts in the field/track where Hazel is a player/competitor and has the potential to transform and transcend such field; moreover, Gretchen is the only white character in the stories collected in *Gorilla, My Love* who is considered a player in the same field as Hazel and, in addition, is included in the field's potential reform.

In *How Race Takes Place*, Lipsitz addresses the notion of black spatial imaginary as a strategy to countering dynamics of racial subordination by using the very context that generates them in innovative ways. He argues that “Black neighborhoods generate a spatial imaginary that favors public cooperation in solving public problems. [...] The radical solidarity at the heart of the Black spatial imaginary stems not so much from an abstract idealism as from necessity.” (2011, 56). From this angle, Hazel's and Gretchen's smiles, as well as their hypothesized coaching of Raymond, can be interpreted as a disinterested attempt to cooperate in social microcosms – sport, and their neighborhood at large – that create necessities but also foster ways to address such necessities originally. Lipsitz also maintains that

People who do not control physical places often construct discursive spaces as sites of agency, affiliation, and imagination. [...] Works of expressive culture function as repositories of collective memory, sources of moral instruction, and mechanisms for transforming places and calling communities into being through display, dialogue, and decoration. Like activists, artists committed to Black freedom proceed by promoting new understandings of the scale, scope, and stakes of place and space, by burrowing in, branching out, and building up. (2011, 60)

Therefore, in this perspective, Bambara's radical poetics is connected to her engagement in favor of the education of young African Americans (for instance, her commitment to the Search for Education, Elevation, Knowledge – SEEK – Program at the City College of New York), as well as to her community activism in Harlem, Philadelphia and Atlanta, and her involvement in the Women's Movement. All these can be read as transformative acts, which are carried out for the sake of the social field itself, rather than to pursue an immediate personal gain, and carry profound implications also in Bambara's cultural and literary production. In fact, Bambara may not be as hopeful throughout her entire narrative fiction as “Raymond's Run” seems to suggest; but she indeed proves to be a disinterested and proactive player in the literary field, with her political belief imbuing the stories in *Gorilla, My Love* and standing as a beacon to guide her subsequent short stories and novels.

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