



Children in cuffs: Black girlhood in the wake of enslavement in North America

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Abstract

Interdisciplinary approaches to examining temporality in childhood reveal the tensions that surround Western childhood ideals. To reflect the reality of some children, childhoods must be analyzed within the spatial conditions in which childhood is experienced. Using the examples of five Black girls who faced the discrimination of adultification bias, I examine the elusive notions of protection, innocence, and being and becoming for Black children. Drawing on theoretical framing of Black geographies, to underpin the examination of Blackness and being, this article explores childhood experiences of Black girls in North America and their contemporary link to enslavement.

Keywords

Adultification, anti-Black racism, Black girls, childhoods, North America

Tensions of Black childhoods in North America

Contemporary childhood scholarship explores and critiques some of the concepts and themes in the early theorizing of childhood. Some of the initial discourses consistent within scholarship suggested a type of ideal childhood that included concepts such as “innocence,” “protection,” and “being and becoming” within a Western context (James and Prout, 1997; Mills and Mills, 2000; Qvortrup, 1994). Historically, discourses commonly reflected expectations of children and childhood that are inequitable and inaccessible for many children. Childhood theories such as Uprichard’s (2008) view of

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children as both “being”—persons in and of themselves, and “becoming”—children developmentally transitioning into adulthood, expand childhood discourses and serve to support the understanding that childhood, as theorized, is not a universal experience (Gavin, 2022). However, even in the attempt to consider childhood more broadly in scholarship, some of the perspectives still appear to be slightly out of touch as they do not relate to the specific lives and experiences of racialized children living in the West.

As contemporary scholarship continues to challenge some of the traditional childhood theories (Garlen and Ramjewan, 2024; Knight, 2019; McPherson and Perrier-Telemaque, 2024), scholars must place specific emphasis on the marginal experiences of racialized children (Knight, 2019; Spyrou et al., 2018; Tisdall et al., 2023). Childhoods, particularly of those who are descendants of formerly enslaved people, are complicated. When compared to any normalized standard for white, Western children, there is often an omission of experiences that adequately describe circumstances that shape Black children’s lives in North America. Drawing connections between colonialism, enslavement, and contemporary childhoods is therefore essential to any practical examination of temporality and the childhood experience.

Framing childhood as this time of innocence, a time when a child has the opportunity to experience both being a child and the space to grow up to become an adult, is unattainable for Black children who, throughout history, have been commonly adultified—treated as an adult—starting in early childhood. Herein lies the issue: there is limited literature that explores the day-to-day lives of Black children in North America, both pre- and post-emancipation. Details of the lived realities of Black children today could help to illustrate how they are regularly denied what is often theorized and considered as entitlements of a Western childhood experience. Advancing more inclusive representations of childhood and accounting for the lives of Black children requires an understanding of theoretical frames within Black studies that position Black life in context to the spatial (North America) and temporal (childhood) constraints that continue to shape Black lived experiences in the West (McKittrick, 2006; Sharpe, 2016).

In *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), Sharpe vividly illustrates the circumstances surrounding *Blackness and being* in North America. Capturing the severe realities of Blackness, Sharpe describes being Black as existing in “the afterlife of property” (15). Transitioned from centuries of physical bondage in North America, Black people, including children, remain permanently confined and controlled by structures and narratives of colonialism and white supremacy. *Blackness and being* represent the inherently inequitable experiences of Black people who, even centuries after emancipation, struggle to exist and live their lives free from the levels of oppression experienced by their ancestors during enslavement. As a result, *Blackness and being* in North America today means still “living in the wake” of slavery (Sharpe, 2016).

The lived realities of what Sharpe describes as *Blackness and being* in North America bring me to these critical questions on childhood and the time used to frame this period. Is there space to adequately and effectively examine Black childhood experiences in context to commonly associated expectations in childhood? If so, how can Black studies assist in illustrating the harsh circumstances of Black children, who, as an extension of their Black parents, remained trapped in “perpetual position[s] of “non-being” (Sharpe, 2016), which

exclude them from these expectations? Understanding that the circumstances that often shape childhood experiences are not neutral for most children, it is essential to emphasize how history and its racist legacies impact Black childhood in North America. Failure to acknowledge and account for the tensions experienced by Black children during their childhood propagates an incomplete and inaccurate account of temporality and its relationship to childhood.

By centring the experiences of Black girls, this article outlines and describes five situations that demonstrate how the mistreatment and anti-Black racism experienced by Black girls in North America quickly disrupts or “(re)routes” (Tesar et al., 2016) their childhood. To substantiate this claim, I detail the story of a 6-year-old girl from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) who was restrained and handcuffed by police at her school; a 16-year-old girl from Surrey, British Columbia, who was restrained by police, tackled to the floor, and handcuffed on the street; a 9-year-old girl, from North New Jersey, who had the police called on her on own street; a 9-year-old girl from Rochester, New York who a police officer pepper-sprayed; and an 8-year-old girl, from San Francisco, California, who also had the police called on her in her neighbourhood. These examples draw distinct parallels to what Chinn (2020) describes as “stirring incidents,” which marked a particular occurrence in an enslaved child’s life, separating them from childhood. The contemporary, ongoing, violent circumstances that consistently impede and threaten the childhoods of Black children are not new or novel. These accounts serve to evidence of how childhood and Western ideals that are associated with the period continue to be obstructed for Black children across North America.

The goal here is to emphasize how contemporary theoretical positions on the experiences and lives of children, though moving towards more inclusive perspectives in childhood scholarship, have not sufficiently illustrated the inordinate inequities that Black children continue to endure throughout their childhood. Anti-Black racism’s social and institutional impact on children and childhood has, throughout history, resulted in the ongoing criminalization of Black girls and Black children in general, making common notions and expectations of childhood, such as innocence, protection, being and becoming, a mere illusion in the lives of many Black children.

Embodied Black girlhood in research

Once a Black girl, born and raised in a Toronto suburb by immigrant Caribbean parents, I am now a Black woman, Black feminist, scholar, and educator. In my research, I acknowledge and emphasize the diversity in Black diasporic experiences that often result in shared trauma and collective adverse impact on Black people. To date, most of my research and writing has focused on Black girlhood and, by extension, the experiences of Black children in a North American context. My physical and personal identities remain central to my lived experiences, creating the foundation for my approach to examining shared circumstances and realities of Black life in the African diasporas.

My embodied Black girl serves to underpin this research, methodology, analysis, and its drawn conclusions. In this work, my identities and lived experiences are used as tools for contextualizing the experiences of Black girls over various periods.

Black life and childhood in North America

Historically, common notions surrounding some traditional Western theorizing of childhood have informed prevalent childhood studies themes. Normalized expectations in childhood have included concepts such as childhood as a time of innocence (Robinson and Davies, 2008), with a right to protection (Collings and Davies, 2008; Wyness, 2019), and measured by specific developmental standards (Piaget, 1965). The study of children and childhood has significant historical implications that must be contextualized in its framing. To represent an aspect of Black children's diverse and complex childhood experiences, we must include the circumstances encompassing *Blackness and being* and its spatial relationship to the histories in North America.

The following literature review highlights theories and research that explore points and themes that provide the spatial and historical context required to examine the experience of Black children in North America. Then, to further connect to themes on temporality, I outlined the concept of adultification to examine the often criminal treatment of Black girls during their childhood.

Blackness and being

Blackness and being for people living in the West simultaneously presents as both a static and dynamic experience. Static in so much that Black people remain trapped in a status of enslaved "non-being" (McKittrick, 2006; Sharpe, 2016), especially in comparison to the inherent and automatic space of humanity that whiteness occupies. On the other hand, *Blackness and being* is also dynamic, shifting from the time of emancipation to civil rights movements into more contemporary claims of universal freedom to which Black people are said to have access. What remains clear is that anti-Blackness, through social and institutional discrimination in North America, continues to take on various forms. In a Canadian context, *Blackness and being* provides no permanent refuge from anti-Black racism (McKittrick, 2006; McPherson, 2021). There is no point or period of Black life where the institutional and social impediment of white domination does not present an ongoing and consistent threat to Black people's freedom and well-being, even during childhood. Essentially, Black people continue to live "in the wake" of enslavement (Sharpe, 2016).

According to Gavin (2022), "linear, universal time is the underpinning of a developmental framework for childhood" (:158). During slavery in North America, enslaved children had no childhood because "they entered the workplace early and were subjected to arbitrary authority, punishment, and separation just as enslaved adults were" (Chinn, 2020: 33). Sharpe (2016) makes the connection between Black children and the "non-status" of their mothers, stating, "Black child inherits the "non-status," the "non-being" of the mother. That inheritance of "non-status" is everywhere apparent now in the ongoing criminalization of Black women and children" (:15). This "non-status" also predetermines Black children's exclusion from concepts and protections of childhood at birth and from this position, childhood has little to do with temporality or time of life. For Black children, the idea of childhood is experienced through its limitations and exclusions that manifest

from “living in the wake” of slavery (Sharpe, 2016) and experiencing the “stirring incidents” (Chinn, 2020) that emphasize their “non-being” when compared to childhoods of white children in North America.

Centring research on Black childhoods in North America reveals consistent patterns that call into question the disparities in childhood experiences between Black and white children before and after the period of enslavement. Webster (2020) analyzes nineteenth-century literature, which exposes the ways Black enslaved children were denied protection and deprived of their humanity. During the time of indentured servitude, which was the period of transition between enslavement and emancipation, Black children toggled the lines between bondage and imagined freedom (Webster, 2020). Enslaved childhood did not follow a predictable, structured timeline like white childhood (Chinn, 2020), and experiences of criminalization did not change for Black children after emancipation.

Living in “the afterlife of property,” as Sharpe details, impacts contemporary Black childhoods through the forms of anti-Black racism they experience, interrupting and, in many cases, permanently affecting Black children’s development (Iruka et al., 2022). With formerly enslaved ancestors, the concept of childhood (i.e. innocence, protection, being, and becoming) in a Western, white context remains unable to accommodate and account for the circumstances and lived realities that Black children continue to endure (Breslow, 2019) post-slavery. Sharpe (2016) references the current, ongoing space in which Black life remains synonymous with “non-being” in North America (and the rest of the world) as the “unfinished project of emancipation” (: 5). This status of “non-being” is in direct contradiction to many childhood theories, which advocate for the required time and space for children to be seen and treated as innocent, entitled to time for both “being” a child and time for the process of “becoming” an adult.

“Stirring incidents” of enslaved childhoods

In *Enslavement and the Temporality of Childhood*, Chinn (2020) conceptualizes how specific traumatic events fundamentally altered enslaved Black children’s understanding of their position. Unlike the childhoods of white Western children, which, as referenced above, typically followed a protected path of gradual development and preserved innocence, enslaved childhood, on the other hand, was characterized by abrupt, devastating moments that shattered any sense of security. These “stirring incidents”—whether witnessing brutal violence, experiencing physical abuse, or suffering sexual exploitation—served as transformative moments that forced Black children to confront their enslaved condition (Chinn, 2020). Such experiences functioned as pivotal moments in their life, marking the violent transition from childhood innocence to the inescapable awareness of their status as enslaved persons.

The “stirring incidents” that Chinn describes shaped the personal identities of enslaved children, and in similar form, these types of “incidents” starkly resemble current events and circumstances that often surround Black childhoods in North America. They highlight the disrupted temporality of enslaved life, where childhood is not a continuous period but a series of traumatic ruptures that fracture any association of specific time for

development in childhood. In this context, adultification, as experienced by Black children, creates familiar sequences of disruption in childhood. Stirring incidents shaped more than just isolated moments in enslaved childhood—they also defined how Black children experience time, emphasizing an unforgiving truth that stands in direct opposition to the sheltered, idealized temporality of white childhood in the West.

Temporality and Black childhoods

Tesar et al. (2016) describe temporality in context to childhood as time, “perceived as structural and measurable, as ‘duration’ and as an ‘occasion’ during which an action, process or condition exists and continues or is extinguished. Time is a series of linear instances, the flow of which can be (re)routed through human intervention and pre-determined outcomes” (:360). Many scholars use the idea of time to explore and theorize childhood with a set of normalized assumptions that appear to be standard for children during childhood (James and Prout, 1997; Tisdall and Punch, 2012). Dominant Western ideas that often surround one’s understanding of childhood and, therefore, the time of childhood development can be contested based on the children living in the same geographical region (North America) who, due to the social construction of their identities, do not experience or receive the benefits and expectations that are associated with childhood.

Any exploration of temporality in North America must be positioned in relation to the social conditions that inform lived experiences in the region. As such, to consider or explore the circumstances of Black childhoods requires situating the experience “in the wake”—represented by the lingering effects of historical trauma—of slavery (Sharpe, 2016). *Blackness and being* in North America, as described by McKittrick (2006) and Sharpe (2016), reveals the realities of Black life in times before and after emancipation. These theoretical positions outline the continued oppression and criminalization of Black people, even during childhood. The conflation of accommodations in childhood and expectations in adulthood that often shapes experiences for Black children living in North America suggests that “childhood is a culturally and historically contingent space that embodies, encloses, and lets loose different possibilities of performance” (Tesar et al., 2016: 360).

What seems to be clear is that temporality, commonly accepted as an exceptional period during childhood (Knight, 2019), is reversed for Black children in Canada and the United States. Many Black children cannot experience their childhood as a period of exploration or curiosity without the threat of excessive punishment and persecution, giving rise to and acceptance of adultification (Epstein et al., 2017; McPherson and Perrier-Telemaque, 2024) in the lives of Black children. Research focused on temporality in childhood signifies Black children’s continued exclusion from notions common to childhood discourses (Chinn, 2020; Knight, 2019), and theories that capture the complexities of Black life (McKittrick, 2006; Sharpe, 2016) can be used to explain these gaps. Time and temporality for Black children remain bound by the brutal circumstances that surround Black lived experiences in North America.

Anti-Black racism and adultification of Black Girls

Anti-Black racism is a term used to emphasize the specific and disproportionate impact of racism that is commonly and continually directed towards Black people in North America (McPherson, 2021). Dumas (2016) notes, “The aim of theorizing anti-Blackness is not to offer solutions to racial inequality, but to come to a deeper understanding of the Black condition within a context of utter contempt for, and acceptance of violence against the Black” (:13). It is the continued acceptance and normalization of violence enacted towards Black adults and then, by extension, their children in North America that most adequately illustrates the spatial and temporal realities of Black childhoods.

Adultification bias—a manifestation of anti-Black racism—continues to adversely affect the development and childhoods of Black children in North America. Adultification is a form of racial bias and prejudice, which disproportionately impacts Black children as members of society and institutions perceive and treat them like adults for typically justifiable, childlike or developmentally appropriate behaviour during their childhood (McPherson and Perrier-Telemaque, 2024). Focusing specifically on the experiences of Black girls, *The Georgetown Centre on Poverty and Inequality’s* study on adultification bias published a series of findings that indicate the degree to which Black girls in the United States are commonly “adultified” throughout their childhood (Epstein et al., 2017).

Adultification bias affects the lives of Black girls in a variety of ways, as it is usually enacted through institutionally sanctioned approaches, which normalize an inherited “non-status” of Black girls. In context to childhood norms and expectations, Black girls, starting as early as 5 years old, are seen as less “innocent” than their white peers (Thompson, 2020). Perceptions and reactions to Black girls behaving and seeming older than their age result in harsher treatment and adult-like expectations placed on them during their childhood. Ultimately, adultification bias leads to a failure to protect and support Black girls as children during the time of their childhood (McPherson and Perrier-Telemaque, 2024), making specific standards and rights that should be equally provided to children unreachable for them.

Adultification is implicit in the ongoing criminalization of Black girls, which can prevent them from “experiencing and living their childhood time” (Uprichard, 2008: 308). The correlation between the treatment of Black children during slavery and current manifestations of adultification bias are sharply similar in the lives of Black girls and Black children in general. As reflected in enslaved childhood literature, childhoods for enslaved children were interrupted, dangerous, and essentially did not fit into the standard frame of childhood (Chinn, 2020). Consequently, adultification takes place when Black people are, in fact, children, based on their age and stage of development; the concept also elucidates the problem with any reference or expectation of childhood as being temporal or universal.

Black childhoods as spatial and temporal

The examination of Black geographies—the spaces where Black people exist—“presents new and old patterns, which shed light on the real social conditions and identities that are

otherwise deemed irrelevant to traditional human geographies” (McKittrick, 2006: 21). Black lives are geographic; therefore, any examination of Black life must be intentionally positioned in context to the social constructions that continue to shape and impact Black experiences within the geographical region. “Black matters are spatial matters. And while we all produce, know, and negotiate space—albeit on different terms—geographies in the diaspora are accentuated by racist paradigms of the pasts and their ongoing hierarchical patterns” (: xii). Black childhoods in North America are particularly complex due to the history of slavery and the social conditions that result from centuries of Black enslavement in the United States and Canada.

Time and its relationship to associated developmental expectations during childhood are deeply embedded in the themes and discourses of childhood studies (Gavin, 2022; Jenks, 1996; Qvortrup, 1994). Thinking about childhood as temporal—marked by a specific period—forces us to consider some constraints that continue to affect development and time during Black childhoods in North America. The difficulty with notions of childhood as a period, marked by age, or being and becoming (Uprichard, 2008), for example, is that it assumes childhood experiences to be neutral and privileges children whose right to their personhood remains unchallenged. To assume childhood as a time-specific period is to privilege children whose “being” as children is not limited or marginalized by the social positions of their identities, geographic location, or inherited status. Childhood studies literature has primarily veered away from describing idealized Western childhoods to provide a critical, inclusive interpretation of the period (Farley and Garlen, 2016; Garlen and Ramjewan, 2024; Knight, 2019).

Blackness and being in North America are governed by the spatial arrangements of social, economic, institutional, and political power that remain linked to the legacies of enslavement, a time in which Black people were property (McKittrick, 2006). The lives of Black people in North America, at any age, continue to be shaped by the debilitating violence of white dominance and control. Therefore, the temporality of Black childhoods mirrors the racism, oppression, and limits to life, freedom, and well-being that are consistently experienced by Black adults in North America. In light of the interdisciplinary examination of children and childhoods across various fields, Black studies can offer a more extensive examination of childhood, which illustrates the experiences of Black children during the period that one can assume and expect them to be treated as children.

It is based on the specifics of time in childhood and the ongoing violence in Black geographies that the importance of framing the experiences of Black girls (Black children) as both spatial and temporal is underscored in this article. It is also important to emphasize and position these arguments within childhood studies as opposed to girlhood studies. Understanding that these claims can be situated across both fields, there is discursive production in the framing of childhood discourses that underpins the arguments advanced here. I am purposely invoking the notions of childhood because of what is continually refused to Black children, even though they are children. Black girls are children, and they have a long history of being denied their childhoods by virtue of the “non-status” that is inherited from their mother (parent) and continued adultification that reroutes their lives. Temporality in childhoods of Black girls is an extension of circumstances prevalent in

accounts of enslaved childhoods. These lived realities are evidence of the exclusion of Black children from the temporal assumptions of childhood that are often normalized within commonly accepted framing of childhood in the West.

Collective memory as method: Excavating Black Girlhood experiences

This article examines the experiences of Black girls in Canada and the United States who, through interference from neighbours and confrontations with police, faced the anti-Black violence of adultification, thereby limiting their access to childhood assertions during childhood.

As a Black woman who was once a Black girl, it is difficult to describe, analyze, and discuss the experiences of Black girls without reflecting on my own childhood growing up in Toronto. It is because of my own lived experience in North America that the violent incidents involving Black girls in the region are usually committed to my memory. [Keightley \(2010\)](#) suggests, “studies of social memory have demonstrated how engaging with remembering allows the excavation of relationships between individual and collective identities” (: 58). The impact of adultification and anti-Black racism continues to create shared experiences that often bind Black girls together through a common struggle. It is also through this common struggle and our “collective identities” that many of us remember and reflect on our specific experiences. In outlining the utility of memory in social science research, [Keightley \(2010\)](#) emphasizes, “In public, collective memories can be encoded in anything from feature films to political speeches. Both public and private remembering draw on and contribute to cultural representations and symbolic repositories. The nature, structure and use of these resources are central to the analysis of cultural memory” (: 58).

It is important to note that my Black lived experience as a girl and now a woman is central to my methodology of recollection and embodied analysis. The traumatic events that I hear of or witness played out in the lives of people whom I share collective identities with remain active and present in my memories throughout time. These events also serve as evidence of the ongoing normalizing of anti-Blackness in the lives of Black children. As a Black feminist scholar, the circumstances that involve and shape the experiences of Black girls are at the core of my research, and I use my memory to recall events as they arise, to seek opportunities to examine and position them within academic scholarship: The archives of news media reports are riddled with examples of Black girls who have experienced racial discrimination at the hands of the state. Often, the situations that spark the discrimination are due to shared, stereotypical, racist perceptions of Black girls ([Muhammad and McArthur, 2015](#)) that were created during periods of enslavement and continue to inform public perceptions long after emancipation.

To examine specific incidents of adultification, I used my memory of several reported events to conduct a thorough, themed content search to draw on the complete and public news reports documenting the examples of the ongoing criminalization of Black girls during childhood. According to [Anderson \(2007\)](#), thematic content analysis (TCA) is a qualitative analytic procedure that allows the researcher to gather textual data-based

themes consistent throughout the examples drawn. To complete the data collection process, I searched for specific events that took place in Canada and the United States in which authorities were contacted to address the behaviour or the mere presence of young Black girls in their communities.

The initial search, based on my memory of specific events involving Black girls, led me to uncover and review several situations that fit into the theme of this study. I then narrowed down the examples that took place within the last 8 years to emphasize the contemporary relevance of this issue and focused on incidents in which authorities were present and/or interacted with the child in the situation. From the list of the myriad of examples that could have been used in this article, I selected five accounts between 2016 and 2022, which effectively document and describe the criminalization of Black girls in Canada and the United States.

Black childhoods in cuffs

The following outlines the details of five cases that were pulled from a series of reported incidents, documented, and published by online news outlets between 2016 and 2022. I've summarized the details of each of the selected incidents to indicate the adultification bias and inherent criminalization of Black girls during their time of childhood.

Case #1

In September 2016, an unarmed 6-year-old Black girl attending a Mississauga (a suburb within the Greater Toronto Area) elementary school was reportedly having difficulty in class when she allegedly began throwing an “uncontrollable” and “violent” tantrum ([Cheung and Sienkiewicz, 2017](#)). The teacher assistant, unable to control the little girl, contacted the office for assistance, and the vice principal tried to intervene. The vice principal reported being unable to control the child, and after attempts to contain the situation failed, the school administration proceeded to call the authorities. When the Halton police arrived at the school, the two officers dispatched decided to handcuff the arms and feet of the 6-year-old Black girl to restrain her. She remained forcibly confined to handcuffs for 28 mins until the paramedics arrived ([Cheung and Sienkiewicz, 2017](#)). The parent of the child noted the ongoing terror the child feels and filed a lawsuit against the police department, which was settled by the Human Rights Tribunal in Ontario as the officers were deemed at fault for using “overly excessive force” to restrain the child “Race was a factor” ([2020](#)).

Case #2

In April 2017, an unarmed 16-year-old Black girl was waiting for the bus in Surrey, British Columbia, when she was approached by police who asked if her name was LaToya. The 16-year-old responded, “No,” and the police officers continued to question and “harass” the child as she stepped back to avoid the officers. At this point, the officers grabbed the child, threw her to the ground, and proceeded to handcuff her ([Lovgreen, 2017](#)). The young Black

girl told the officers repeatedly that they had the wrong person. She was on her way to look for her first summer job. The police, who, after realizing they had the wrong person, uncuffed the child but failed to help her up or to confirm if she had been harmed during the altercation. They left her there, on the ground by the bus stop, to fend for herself (Lovgreen, 2017). The parents of the child used the media to demand an apology from the Surrey police department, and they noted that their daughter remains traumatized from the experience.

Case #3

In June 2018, an unarmed 8-year-old Black girl was confronted by a white woman who threatened and proceeded to call the police on the child for selling water without a permit outside of the ATandT Centre in San Francisco, California, on a very hot day (Campisi et al., 2018). The woman who approached the 8-year-old selling \$2 bottles of water was concerned that the child was selling water without a permit and creating a disturbance in the neighbourhood. The woman was recorded calling and speaking to the police about the young girl and requesting police assistance for the matter. After going viral on social media, the woman faced a stream of backlash and then claimed not to have called the police on anyone in particular as she only inquired if the actions of the young girl were legal (Campisi et al., 2018).

Case #4

In January 2021, an unarmed 9-year-old Black girl was handcuffed and pepper-sprayed by a Rochester, New York, police officer who was called to the child's home due to a family disturbance. The little girl was forced to the ground in the snow as she was handcuffed while she yelled frantically for her father (Hong, 2021). At a point during the altercation, it is reported that the child said, "Officer, please don't do this to me," and the officer responded, "You did this to yourself," before yelling at the young girl, "You're acting like a child." When she responded, "I am a child." (Griffith, 2021). The officer proceeds to pepper-spray the child as she is restrained (Hong, 2021). The child was transported to the hospital, where she was treated and released later on the same day. The incident was captured on the officer's body cam footage and reviewed by the Rochester police chief. The incident received media attention and led the then-governor, Andrew Cuomo, to call for a full investigation into the procedures taken in the altercation (Hong, 2021).

Case #5

In October 2022, an unarmed 9-year-old Black girl who had taken a keen interest in trying to prevent the infestation and damage to trees in her neighbourhood. A neighbour called the police on her as he witnessed the child using a spray to kill the lanternflies on trees. On the call to 911, the neighbour stated, "There's a little Black woman walking, spraying stuff on the sidewalks and trees on Elizabeth and Florence [area in North New Jersey]. I don't know what the hell she's doing. Scares me though" (Brown and Moges-Gerbi, 2022). The

description the neighbour gave to the 911 dispatch of the 9-year-old girls was a “real tiny woman” wearing a “hood.” When the police arrived, however, they quickly realized that the 9-year-old girl was a child, and the police were reported to have handled the situation “well.” The parent of the little girl, in a media interview, remarked on the child’s ongoing fear of police after the incident (Brown and Moges-Gerbi, 2022).

Discussion

These examples further illustrate the issue of the temporality of childhood as a time-based experience. They highlight the urgency with which people who encounter Black children demonstrate their willingness to call the authorities to report situations and behaviours that do not require violent interventions. These circumstances remove any opportunity for these Black girls to explore their childhood as merely “being” a child and any protection that childhood in the West is said to secure for children. The examples also point to the unmistakable reality that contemporary Black childhoods remain stuck in the past, and “becoming,” as a process during childhood before entering adulthood, is rarely extended to include Black children as they are already treated as if they are adults. Chinn (2020) illustrates the paradox of Black childhoods, where enslaved children were simultaneously never children (adultification) and yet always children (non-adult) under slavery’s legal and ideological framework. What is clear from these contemporary accounts of Black girls’ experiences is that Black children continue to exist as non-beings, living in “the afterlife of property” (Sharpe, 2016) and, therefore, rarely have an opportunity to be fully considered and treated as the children they are.

Based on most of the police responses in these situations, these cases indicate how quickly authorities will use excessive force to restrain and criminalize Black children during average, everyday activities. When we consider the age of these Black girls at the time of these altercations, the violent and traumatic interactions with police challenge any suggestion that during childhood, Black girls are automatically treated as innocent children. The circumstances of and resolution to these events demonstrate how adultification continues to be the normalized response to Black children. These events also contradicted the temporal understanding of childhood as a period of “innocence,” where children’s behaviour is described and treated as being childlike. Adultification removes any expectation that Black girls are entitled to simply “being” a child during their childhood. Each of the situations, and the people involved in escalating the circumstances, are complicit in denying these children a time of childhood free from normalized adultification and other forms of violence.

In each case, none of the girls were presumed to be children in need of protection (Collings and Davies, 2008) or allowed to explore as curious children in a period of “being” by those who initiated the call to the police. These were similar presumptions that were made of Black children during enslavement. Chinn (2020) highlights “stirring incidents” that describe life altering experiences of Black children during slavery. Contemporarily, these “incidents” that take place during childhood continue to punctuate the realities of Black children who are living in the afterlife of “being” property in the wake of enslavement.

In cases 1, 2, and 4, the Black girls were not treated like children by the police, who have a duty to protect them. Similar to the period in which Black children were enslaved, there was no effort to accommodate and respond to these girls as children; instead, in each of the cases, the girls were directly or indirectly referred to as adults. A consequential issue in all of these situations is the lack of concern about the impact that physical confinement and interactions with the police (the stirring incidents) might have on the development and experience of the child moving forward (Iruka et al., 2022). At birth and throughout the early stages of their lives, Black girls are regularly seen and treated as grown adults, which underscores how Tesar et al. (2016) refer to time as “(re)routing” childhood “through human intervention” (: 360). In these situations, the time these girls have to experience their childhood is disproportionately short-lived, if experienced at all.

In case #2, the 16-year-old child was left on the ground to fend for herself. One must hold deep loathing for a child to harm them “accidentally” and, upon realizing the error, offer no apology, support, or assistance to that child. The child was deemed to be the “problem” in this situation merely based on the colour of her skin, and this confirms the racist logic that justifies her instant demotion to “non-being” during her childhood. This, in part, echoes Knight’s (2019) suggestion that “Black children... are less legible as children, less able to access associated constructions such as innocence” (: 81). The treatment this 16-year-old received by police was inhumane by any standards but should be particularly concerning when directed towards a child. These actions demonstrate the ongoing contempt for Black people within Black geographies, sustaining perceptions of Black people as unworthy of humanity. “Fitting the description” (of a person of interest) is a common experience for Black people, which allows police officers to use their positions of authority to exercise any racist contempt that might be held towards Black people in general. “You fit the description” of the nonbeing, being out of place, and the noncitizen always available to and for death.” (Sharpe, 2016: 86). In this situation and the other cases outlined, it is hard to deny the anti-Black racism that maintains and supports the criminalization of Black adults, which is so callously extended to Black children.

In case # 1, the 6-year-old girl in Canada who, like other 6-year-old children at one time or another, appeared to be in distress on that day, causing her to physically act out. Considering the age and the size of the child, the intervention of the school officials was excessive. The officers justified the shackling of a 6-year-old child, similar to approaches levied on enslaved children, as the only means to contain and de-escalate the situation. Sharpe (2016) compares modern-day policing strategies regularly used to enforce unjust policies on Black people in North America to those imposed during enslavement. Stating, “The reality and provenance of policing...follow a direct line from the overseer and the slave master/slave owner’s and any white person’s charge of impudence” (: 86). Herein lies the problem for those with no interest in or desire to advance Black freedom post-emancipation: the policing, surveillance, and criminalization of Black bodies, both adults and children, has been taken up by all members of white society (McPherson, 2021). What seems most frightening, particularly for Black children living in North America, is the ease and frequency with which these situations arise.

Cases # 3 and # 5 clearly account for two young Black girls curiously and ambitiously exploring the world around them. Thinking on the temporal assertion of “being” in

Uprichard's account of childhood, the children in these cases were exercising the "being" children through their explorations. The male neighbour in case # 5 openly described the young girl as a "little woman"; it seemed as if witnessing a Black body doing something that he could not recognize automatically defaulted the young girl to be an adult. Was he really that frightened by a "little Black woman," or are all little Black girls merely "women" who should be criminalized? Chinn (2020) reminds us that "the temporal slippage among enslaved childhood, girlhood, and womanhood is the result of the power of white men—and women—to sexually exploit her and other enslaved young women" (: 49). There is limited possibility for Black girls to be afforded the benefit of "being" a child in the context of "being and becoming" as they are so easily treated like adults. Chinn continues, "That is, enslaved girlhood is not a period of time as much as it is a space of potential female subjection" (:49).

There are a number of circumstances in each of these reported incidents that would lead one to believe that the authorities deemed the situations severe enough to require adult-level interventions to be used on children. This highlights the reality that childhood is not marked by time or age for many Black children. There is no guarantee of childhood expectation or accommodation at any point or period in Black life. The 6-year-old girl, who had her hands and feet cuffed in the school office for 28 mins, the 9-year-old girl who was pepper-sprayed in the police car, and the 16-year-old girl who was tackled to the ground and handcuffed, characterize the normalized, cruel, excessive use of force used on Black adults become the justifiable force used on children. *Blackness and being* in North America means that "Black children are not seen as children and the corral of "urban youth" holds them outside of the category of the child; they are offered more trauma by the state and state actors" (Sharpe, 2016: 89). These traumatic experiences do not simply vanish from the human psyche because the situations appear to be resolved. As indicated by the parents of the children affected, these events have long-term implications on the child's notion of safety, their perceptions of police, and their physical well-being, mimicking the "stirring incidents" that mark time in the lives of Black people in North America.

Conclusion

I would like to end this examination of the experiences of Black girls during childhood in North America by attempting to contribute a response to the question I pose at the beginning of this article. *Is there space to adequately and effectively examine Black childhood experiences in context of commonly associated expectations in childhood?* My answer is yes. Consistent efforts to make childhood studies more accessible and inclusive of all childhood experiences is an active project that many scholars continue to engage in interdisciplinarily at various intersections across the field. However, what we do know, through detailing the circumstances of Black children's lives, is that temporality in childhood must be deconstructed in this context. One approach, as explored here, is to draw on Black studies scholarship to position the experiences of Black children within their spatial existence. Considering childhood as a period of time that is associated with

age remains problematic for Black children. Perpetual states of non-status and living in the wake of slavery complicate any suggestion of a linear, universal childhood experience.

If, during childhood, children are expected to be treated with more care and consideration based on their age, more research that centres on and explores how identities and their intersections impact lived experiences during childhood is required. Situating the spatial patterns of Black geographies should compel researchers and scholars to continue to consider the lives of people in the West who remain subjugated by its brutal histories. As times change, childhood considerations and expectations do not automatically benefit, or shape childhoods lived and experienced. The cases used here only scratch the surface to reveal how regularly Black children are denied any accommodations or protection in childhood across Canada and the United States.

As researchers, we must be willing to name and describe, with detail, the circumstances that contribute to and maintain adultification bias as experienced by Black children. It should also be clear that although there are evident shifts in the discourses and framing of childhood in scholarship, Black children in North America continue to experience a disproportionate level of violence and criminalization. The impact of adultification bias is significant to childhood experiences because it makes any expectation of protection or presumed innocence elusive. When theorizing general notions of childhood, we must intentionally elaborate on the ongoing effect that manifestations of anti-Black racism have on the childhoods of Black children. Childhood is not, and has never been, a neutral experience. Living in the wake of enslavement only extends Black children's inherited status as non-being, and this continues due to North America's inability to fully and completely emancipate Black people from the legacies of enslavement and colonialism.

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