Black Schoolgirls in Space

STORIES OF BLACK GIRLHOODS GATHERED ON EDUCATIONAL TERRAIN

Edited by
ESTHER O. OHITO AND LUCÍA MOCK MUÑOZ DE LUNA

TRANSNATIONAL GIRLHOODS
Volume 7

Black Schoolgirls in Space

Transnational Girlhoods

EDITORS: Claudia Mitchell, *McGill University*; Bodil Formark, *Umeå University*; Ann Smith, *McGill University*; Heather Switzer, *Arizona State University*

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A portrait of three girlfriends—Karen, Lilian, and Florence, Esther Ohito's mother—standing shoulder to shoulder circa 1969 on the grounds of Mawego Girls Secondary School, an all-girls boarding school founded by the Catholic Church in the Nyanza Province of Western Kenya. Author photo.

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Ever with love,

Esther and Lucía

Introduction

Storying Black Girlhoods on Educational Terrain

Esther O. Ohito with Lucía Mock Muñoz de Luna

flesh memory (flesh mem´ e re) 1. a text, a language, a mythology, a truth, a reality, an invented as well as literal translation of everything that we've ever experienced or known, whether we know it directly or through some type of genetic memory, osmosis, or environment. 2. the body's truths and realities. 3. the multiplicity of languages and realities that the flesh holds. 4. the language activated in the body's memory.

—Akilah Oliver, *The* She Said *Dialogues: Flesh Memory*

There were no books about me, I didn't exist in all the literature I had read . . . this person, this female, this black did not exist center-self.

—Toni Morrison, quoted in Jill Matus, *Toni Morrison*

We must situate race, not only in a historical context, but also in a historical-geographical context. We must expose the skeletons of places and plant the flesh of black experiences on those bones as well.

—Bobby M. Wilson, "Critically Understanding Race-Connected Practices: A Reading of W. E. B. Du Bois and Richard Wright"

Black Schoolgirl Becoming

My Christian name is Esther (see Figure 0.1). Where I am from, I answer to other names, including Nyar Ugenya, Nyandere, and Nyamalanga. Within the walls of my childhood home, I was taught that girls are to be seen and silent. But in the privacy of my shared bedroom, gossiping with my older sister into the morning's wee hours and plotting revenge against our woes, I learned that I am naturally a storyteller and story gatherer (Kearney 2007). It was a lesson affirmed at school, where I blossomed by listening intently and purposefully to the worlds around me.

I begin with a story of how I became who I am at my core. By story, "I mean an event in which I try to hold some of the complex shimmer-

Figure 0.1. Esther O. Ohito (Nyar Ugenya), approximately age ten. Author photo.

ing strands of a constellative, epistemological space long enough to share them with you. When I say 'story,' I mean 'theory'" (Powell 2012: 384).

A long time ago, when I was eight years old, I found myself sitting beside my father during parent–teacher conferences at St. Nicholas Primary School off Ngong Road, not far from Books & Things, my favorite shop in Nairobi's Adams Arcade. My teacher, a heavy-tongued Kikuyu woman named Mrs. Mwangi, said to my father, "Your daughter's a writer." My father, a journalist with *The Standard* newspaper (if my memory does not fail me), broke into a wide, toothy smile. I stared at him adoringly. I nodded to signal understanding. I was lying. I knew neither what Mrs. Mwangi meant nor what being a writer had to do with the bliss sweeping over me. I just felt happy that I had made my father happy.

I remember being interpellated as a storyteller—a writer—by the kind of elementary and secondary school reading and writing teacher I aspired to be when I began my teaching career in Chicago, Illinois. Many years later and thousands of miles away from Kenya, I realized my why. I became a teacher because I realized the power of being visible to Mrs. Mwangi even before I was visible to myself as a self, which was long before I found language with which to articulate my knowledge. But even then, I had intuition. Even my preteen self intuitively felt called to collect, care for, and (re)tell stories. Care is cultivated by love. Even at age eight, I knew, within, that I loved words as much as I loved my father, and what greater love could there be?

I remember being a child who was most joyful, free, when playing with words. I read the dictionary for fun, which was much more fun than it sounds, sounding words out and committing meanings to memory. This meant I often penned pieces with obnoxious terms. Take *pertinacious*, for example. My absurd use of vocabulary—or use of absurd vocabulary—was fueled by the fact that at that age, I was reading both young adult literature, in the vein of Nancy Drew, the Hardy Boys, and the Sweet Valley High series, and—courtesy of my older sister—literature with what some may deem "adult themes" from writers the ilk of Danielle Steel, Sidney Sheldon, and Agatha Christie. I was being (mis)educated about whiteness as (much as) romance and mystery. Yet, I was also gearing up for battle by building an arsenal of words, toys with which to playfully imagine my way out of the misery that lurked at the corners of my world. I knew, even then, that "as a culture worker who belongs to an oppressed people my job is to make revolution irresistible" (Bambara, quoted in Bonetti 2012: 35). This made for some humorous moments. Once, I raised my hand in

class and asked my stern male teacher how to use the word *ejaculate* in a sentence. Guess who laughed?

A girl child's heart is always on the line, pressed against some margin, imperiled, sometimes destabilized, and other times brimming with joy accessible only from that lived perspective and posture. I have a vivid memory and imagination, the meld of which becomes an endless source of colorful vignettes I use to illustrate that I was a creative, curious, playful child. I navigated the landscape of my childhood driven by an exhausting insatiable desire to please an audience (in order to be liked and loved) that falsely projected my interiority as easily accessible. However, within my internal self, I harbored wonder about my place in the world in which I lived, others' worlds, and otherworldly worlds.

My story is that of a *girl* child born not far from the shores of Lake Victoria, known locally in Kenya as Nam Lolwe. This place—Luoland, home to the traditionally pastoralist and fishing community of Luo people, JoLuo—is where I came to know myself as a particular type of girl. This is where my knowledge of girlhood and Blackness is situated. This is my epistemological place of origin.

Mapping Black Girl Ontoepistemologies on the Educational Landscape

Katherine McKittrick (2011: 947) explained that Black geographies are "shaped by histories of colonialism, transatlantic slavery, contemporary practices of racism, and resistances to white supremacy." Black girls' and women's geographies are spun from our knowledges, desires, needs, and lived experiences, which are entangled with our negotiations of these processes of domination as they materialize *in place*. Black girl ontoepistemologies—interdependent ways of being and knowing—are also grounded in place. This is because "the earth is also skin and . . . a young girl can legitimately take possession of a street, or an entire city, albeit on different terms than we may be familiar with" (McKittrick 2006: ix). A girl's claim to place is inextricably enmeshed with the knowledges, needs, and lived experiences she embodies. Literature by Black women authors (e.g., H. A. Jacobs 1861; Webster 2020) published as early as the mid-1800s illustrates this assertion. Lucille Clifton's "what the mirror said" exemplifies such literature. It is a poem that says,

you got a geography
of your own. ([1980] 2012: 199)

Literature fosters a mindset of multiplicity and openness. The literature I encountered as a girl growing up in Kenya, books such as Grace Ogot's ([1966] 2000) *The Promised Land* and Margaret A. Ogola's (1994) *The River and the Source*, taught me to know myself as somebody from somewhere who was worth knowing: a Luo girl of the Ndere clan from Ugenya—Nyar Ugenya, both an individual and collective name literally meaning the daughter of a place called Ugenya. I knew who I was because in Luo culture and society, girls and women (learn to) belong to a people—a clan or community—affixed to a place based on our association to our father's and our husband's land (Ogola 1994). Blood and land—blood sucked by the soil of the land—are how my people lay claim to place.

In Dholuo, the language of Luos, my middle name, Oganda, means community. But as a displaced immigrant in the United States, a daughter who often felt isolated, set adrift in the Black diaspora, I could not find myself anywhere, least of all in the literature. Did I cease to exist? I wonder. Édouard Glissant noted,

> One of the most dramatic consequences of interdependence concerns the hazards of emigration. When identity is determined by a root, the emigrant is condemned (especially in the second generation) to being split and flattened. Usually an outcast in the place he has newly set anchor, he is forced into impossible attempts to reconcile his former and his present belonging. ([1997] 2010: 143)

Identity is tethered to and untethered by place. In other words, place does not just change people; people change in place. The self—and the sense of belonging to one's self—is shaped by "multiple and changing boundaries, constituted and maintained by social relations of power and exclusion" (McDowell 1999: 4). For a time, after immigrating to the United States, my sense of self was lost in space. The truth is, before a chance encounter with Toni Morrison's ([1970] 2000) *The Bluest Eye* as a teenager, I did not know that I could exist as myself, a *Black subject*, in the worlds found in the books most accessible to me through official school curricula, including the books that lined the shelves of the library at the public school I attended. When I finally read *The Bluest Eye*, the narrator mirrored back to me a complex self, making the textures of the self whose existence I was beginning to recognize and know anew visible to me. Thumbing through the book's pages, I was no longer simply one of those "never taken seri-

ously by anybody—all those peripheral little girls" (Morrison, quoted in Duvall 2000: 31). Using that text as a compass, I found that I was no longer a nobody to myself.

Curiosity can be formalized and fashioned into a researcher's compass (Hurston [1942] 2006). This volume presents research that takes Black girls seriously as particularly creative, curious, and desiring somebodies with particular bodies of knowledge cultivated and cultivable in the capaciousness of Black girlhood. Here, *Black*—a racial code and shorthand for Afrodiasporic subjectivities—and *girl* are fluid, sociocultural constructions with meanings that shift in place. In the United States, this dynamism is evident in the discursive practices of Black girls and women. As we spin among categories and identities, such as age and gender, we frequently acknowledge each other by saying, "Hey, girl!" To greet each other this way is to offer linguistic recognition that the other has the capacity to be and become both girl and friend (Canaan 1990; Scott 2000).

Girl, listen. *Girlhood* is a hood: an infinitely expansive universe that is home to the embodiment of galaxies, a site of knowledge generation, an ontoepistemological standpoint, and a place into which people and polarities can disappear. Girlhood is a *black* hole, a space where the complexities and contradictions of ideologies and politics, as well as (inter)personal and social relations on multiple scales, offer pathways to possibilities for liberation (Bey 2022). Indeed, what could be more educational for Black girls than a space that provides endless possibilities for genesis, again and again?

Using illustrative stories about, with, for, and on Black girls (even those who live within the self), authors included in this volume map a Black girl ontoepistemological terrain fastened to relationality (Shange 2019). On this land, creativity is queen mother to curiosity, and sibling to desire. Across the chapters in this book, Black girls are interpellated, made into not just knowers but knowers of what nobody else knows. How powerful might it be to know (you know) what no other body except your own knows? In this book, Black girls become known as keepers of epistemological secrets, creative farmers of earth fertile enough to bring forth precious knowledge.

Where My Girls @?

I remember the first time I saw a girl resembling me in a book. I was standing at the checkout desk at Roseville County Library in a suburb of

St. Paul, Minnesota. A colorful cover caught my attention from the corner of my eye. Responding to the visual stimulus, I tiptoed to the librarian's desk, magnetized by the allure of the color purple. Then, I picked up an audiocassette case (yes, I am dating myself) containing Morrison's ([1970] 2000) masterpiece, *The Bluest Eye*. Later that evening, I listened to the author reading her own words, entranced as much by the content as by the storyteller's embodied craft. Morrison created a world in which girls like me existed *and* made sense, made meaning, made knowledge, made theory.

Susmita Roye surmised that by speaking of and to girls like me, Morrison

> sheds light on a painful paradox: while they experience their girlhoods mired in physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, as well as neglect, these girls, more often than not, are robbed of their girlhoods in a struggle for survival. The disturbed girlhoods of Toni Morrison's disrupted girls most powerfully register her angry protest against a gender system that designates a woman a secondary rank and against a social system that effortlessly overlooks what befalls a poor (black) female child. (Roye 2012: 212–13)

Whereas I disagree with the interpretation of anyone's girlhood as robbed—and, instead, invite thinking about girlhood as a spacious genre containing *different* illustrative types—I appreciate Roye's invocation of Morrison as a model for the type of critical spatial analysis of Black girlhoods that the current volume attempts and invites. Morrison, then, a foundational Black girl cartographer (Butler 2018, reprinted as Chapter 1 in this volume), becomes central to this book illustrating Black girl ontoepistemologies as processual creative praxis and emplaced, embodied geographies.

This is a timely volume, curated during the global COVID-19 pandemic and amid calamity after calamity caused by climate change and various catastrophes. It is a collection of stories about all types of knowledges, desires, needs, and experiences that Black girls find in this wild world called Black girlhood. The book's pages contain stories for Black schoolgirls and school-age girls, and those who love them; girls seeking solidarity, stimulation, and God knows what else while traversing educational spaces, endeavoring to make sense of experiences that vary in relation to where intersecting lines of social difference, such as gender, sexuality, race, class, dis/ability, immigrant status, religion, and ethnicity, fall on their bodies and along the perimeters of their lives. Authors illuminate and inquire into Black girls' geographies in response to scholarly

calls for analyses of girlhoods that account for the *structures* and *strictures* of colonialism, imperialism, and racism in tandem with other -isms, such as capitalism and neocolonialism, and patriarchy (Vanner 2019). These constraints facilitate the ongoing (re)production of inequitable urban, rural, diasporic, local, and transnational educational spaces. This book foregrounds Black girls' complex negotiations of these spaces vis-à-vis the sociospatial aspects of teaching and learning that shape Black girls' being and becoming.

By (re)positioning Black girls as agents and actors in specific educational spaces, authors make visible the emplaced and embodied plurality of Black girlhood not as a singular object of research but rather as multiple sites of inquiry wherein knowledge that challenges hegemonic, whitewashed understandings of *Black* and *girl* as subjectivities can be found. Ultimately, the book invites both a recognition and a reimagining of possibilities for a world where the many somebodies Black girls can be and become (sometimes all at once) in and through education exist freely in every place, space, and body.

Textual Tracings of Black Girlhoods

Black Girlhoods in Scholarly Literature

The womanist (Walker 1983) notion that Black girls are innately creative somebodies has appeared in several Black girlhood studies texts essential to the field (e.g., Sankofa Waters, Evans-Winters, and Love 2019; Toliver 2022b). Undergirding this notion are the womanist ethoi of care and love, as ascertainable in Ruth Nicole Brown's (2013) *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*. Brown's book details an exploration undertaken collaboratively with the community-based, performance arts–oriented youth collective Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths. Framing the project, Brown wrote,

> Black girlhood is freedom, and Black girls are free. As an organizing construct, Black girlhood makes possible the affirmation of Black girls' lives and, if necessary, their liberation. *Black girlhood as a spatial intervention is useful for making our daily lives better and therefore changing the world as we currently know it* [emphasis added]. Love guides our actions and permeates our beings. For those who do not know love, we create spaces to practice Black girlhood and sense love, to name it, claim it, and share it. What we know, what we say, our process, and what we make is of value. The space is specific enough that Black girls recognize

> it as theirs. The making of the space is collective and creative; uncertainty and complexity motivate, and revolutionary action is the goal. (2013: 1)

Brown's book is considered a canonical text in Black girlhood studies, and Brown a progenitor of the field. As others have remarked,

> Black girlhood studies actualized as an important, necessary, and rich field of inquiry because Ruth Nicole Brown dared to believe not only that Black girls were worthy of our intellectual, artistic, and political labor, but also that they had something in turn to teach us—that they could, *if we listened* [emphasis added], change the world. (Owens et al. 2017: 117)

Listening to Black girls, then, is an instrumental method in the burgeoning field of Black girlhood studies, which is broadly concerned with righting the materially consequential and downright wrongful erasure of Black girls' ontoepistemologies from the knowledge canon (Halliday 2019).

Since 2013, the year Brown's (2013) *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood* was published, several studies have illuminated that in the social imaginary, Black girls exist on the periphery of hegemonic ideas of the ideal girlhood: a fiction moored to discourses that mold Black girlhood in the shape of a singular white, Western, Judeo-Christian, heterosexist, middle-class model (Nyachae and Ohito 2023; Webster 2020). The history of Black girls constitutes a relatively robust line of inquiry in Black girlhood studies. Much of that literature corpus situates Black girlhoods, real and imagined, in the historical-geographical context of the United States (Chatelain 2015; Hartman 2019; Simmons 2015; Webster 2021; Wright 2016). Some studies have brought to view the history and experience of Black girlhood in Germany (Donaldson 2019) and the knowledges, needs, and experiences of Black girls on the African continent, such as in Senegal and on the Gold Coast (Duke Bryant 2019; Hern 2021). However, to date, the United States remains the primary geographic site of Black girlhood studies.

The publication of *The Global History of Black Girlhood*, a volume edited by Corinne T. Field and LaKisha Michelle Simmons (2022), signaled a shift away from the field's narrow Western focus. The text underscores the importance of making global meaning of Black girls' place-bound histories. The book's authors also responded to calls for an interdisciplinary approach to Black girlhood studies by featuring scholars, artists, and activists theorizing and storying the storied pasts of Black girls in the diaspora, and exploring the imbrication of identity,

imagination, time, and place in the space of Black girlhood (Owens et al. 2017).

Black Girlhoods in Education Literature

Research on Black girls' educational experiences in schools and school-adjacent spaces has continued to increase (e.g., Cabral et al. 2022; Coker and González 2022; Crenshaw 2015; Farinde-Wu, Butler, and Allen-Handy 2022; Morris 2016, 2022). Thus far, much of this research has focused on the criminalization and adultification of Black girls, thereby explaining why schools and classrooms can be considered "hostile geographies" (Rogers 2022: 34)—warlike terrain—for Black girls (e.g., Burnett et al. 2022). This scholarship has brought much needed attention to damaging school policies and practices employed to police and control Black girls' bodies through exclusionary disciplinary measures such as discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions. These detrimental policies and practices push Black girls out of classrooms and schools. Black girls are cast as deserving of this mistreatment through the continuous discursive construction of an ideal (white) girlhood that always already excludes them. Researchers have surfaced the miseducation received by this group and the harms Black girls endure by being (mis)perceived as "the epitome of exactly what whiteness (as maleness) and femininity (as whiteness) is not: dark, sinister, raunchy, belligerent, burly, and licentious" (Evans-Winters and Esposito 2010: 18).

Contemporary scholarship on Black girls' educational experiences has brought visibility to the specificity of Black girls' suffering in classrooms and schools (Butler-Barnes et al. 2021; Dumas 2014). Within the published research, however, Black girlhood itself rarely has been theorized and/or articulated as contested beyond topical references to fixed notions of race and gender. Consequently, Black girlhood and Black girls have been (re)presented through frames that privilege one type of middle-class, heterosexual, and cisgender Black girl. These frames have spotlighted "only a few kinds of Blackness in Black girls, thus (re)producing the fiction that Black girls can be but one thing and that one thing must be abject" (Franklin-Phipps 2017: 385). Obscured or erased from view have been the nuanced educational needs, rich and plural knowledge, and textured lived experiences of Black girls who may, indeed, be raunchy, belligerent, burly, licentious, and wayward. Those who exist on the edges of the specific strand of Black girl deemed most worthy of educational interventions have been largely ignored and/or

forgotten in educational research. Specifically, the "good" Black girl has been configured according to middle-class norms and ideals of purity, propriety, and respectability (Nyachae and Ohito 2023). The resulting good/bad binary has marginalized the "bad" Black girl, whose possibly tenuous relationship to Black girlhood may be moored to her situatedness in a specific geographical, environmental, sociohistorical, and cultural place, and/or her expansiveness and expressiveness with regard to gender and sexuality.

In short, the narrow (re)presentations of Black girls that have abounded in educational research have contributed to a construction of Black girlhood that does little to challenge categorizations that are based in, and uphold, (neo)liberal humanist structures of what it means to be freely human. Ergo, because Black girlhood has been commonly conceptualized as monolithic rather than heterogeneous, suggested educational interventions and innovations have tended to be shaped from a one-size-fits-all mold that excludes queer Black girls marginalized in relation to their different (from the norm) geographies, genders, and sexualities.

Summarily, educational scholarship on Black girl geographies published between 2013 and 2022 has contributed to the larger field of girlhood studies along three germane lines. First, this body of research has situated the history and experiences of Black girls in specific school and community sites (e.g., Chatelain 2015; Nyachae and Ohito 2023). Second, the researchers have illuminated the conditions faced by Black girls in schools and classrooms, with an emphasis on interrupting the criminalization of Black girls as enacted through mechanisms such as the school-to-prison pipeline (e.g., Morris 2022). A third line of inquiry has interrogated Black girls' pedagogic needs, which span the academic, across a range of content areas and subjects, and the socioemotional (e.g., Apugo, Mawhinney, and Mbilishaka 2021; Cotton, Davis, and Collins 2022; Davis 2022; Delano-Oriaran et al. 2021; C. E. Jacobs 2019).

On the whole, extant research has made visible the specificity of Black girls' educational lived experiences, where education is a relational process of teaching and learning that happens everywhere all the time: at home, in communities and schools, in virtual and online spheres, and through media. Yet, revolutionary action requires more fuel than visibility; "we need to challenge the tropes of both Blackness and woman/girlhood and add to the analysis on Black girls in informal and formal educational spaces" (Rogers 2022: 36). This is where the assemblage of stories contained in the present volume enters the field.

Black Girlhoods in Theory and Method

As I wrote this introduction, I was awaiting a forthcoming volume on Black girls, love, and educational spaces, inspired by bell hooks and edited by Autumn A. Griffin and Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz (2024). I was also reading a special issue of the journal *Girlhood Studies* on African girlhoods (Jaksch, Fourshey, and Moletsane 2023). These works seek to address gaps in the literature on Black girls in educational spaces, which can be organized into three main themes.

In my review of literature, I found, first, theoretical imprecision with regard to terminology (see, e.g., D. Smith, Caruthers, and Fowler 2019). *Black girl* has been taken as a foregone conclusion, an already known entity, but really, who is a Black girl? Specific to education, how might this girl be known and be knowin' vis-à-vis place and/or space? Moreover, what are the dimensions of Black girlhood as an educational place and/or space? There, what new possibilities may be opened for who and what a Black girl could possibly be and become? What makes this particular girl's particular girlhood quintessentially (or not) Black? How might these questions be asked and answered across and with/in people, places, spaces, and times? I presume that pursuit of these queries may produce deeper knowledge of Black girls' place-based knowledge-making practices, knowledge potentially useful for creating worlds capacious enough for the complexities of Black girls—worlds in which Black girlhood is a viable, vibrant hood, within and outside of the limits of imagination.

The second aperture in the literature gestures to the need for the actualization of disciplinary and methodological border crossing. Despite calls in that vein, I found that illustrations of theoretical and methodological trans- and interdisciplinarity are limited in the literature (Griffin 2022; Owens et al. 2017). Also, there has been limited engagement with Black girl ontoepistemologies situated in educational spaces both outside of the United States (see, e.g., Stanger 2018) and beyond the Global North (see, e.g., Bhana and Mayeza 2019; Florence 2021).

The third gap in the literature corpus concerns knowledge of the interior lives of Black girls and the interiority of Black girlhoods, the inner human essence, within and across markers of social difference, as emplaced and embodied in educational spaces across time and place. S. R. Toliver (2022a) and other Black girlhood studies scholars have asked for a (re)turn to the imagination, in both theory and method. I wonder, where and how

in education literature can the transgressive knowledge suggested by such calls be located?

Location denotes area, and geography points toward spatial analysis, a lens that allows for zooming in and out while exploring different scales, from the intimate (Moss and Donovan 2017; Valentine 2008) to the intergalactic, and beyond.

> Geographical analysis necessarily includes critical social analysis: race, class, and gender are not fixed identities but ongoing social productions; the multiscalar spaces in which such social production takes place are vitally important to understanding how our societies work and, most importantly, how we might improve our social processes, especially for the most marginalized in our society. (McCreary, Basu, and Godlewska 2013: 255)

A geographical analysis brings attention to the spatiotemporal dimensions of human life. A Black feminist geographical lens allows for knowledges, desires, needs, and lived experiences to be located in "the weeping, living, hurting, body" (Bakare-Yusuf 1997: 172), recognizing this enfleshed body as essential to the intimate, complex work of *doing* human, of learning to live relationally in a place at a particular point in time.

Humans are storied into being. We become what we come to know through stories. Our stories, our theory(ies), can spark and facilitate sustaining intimate relation(ship)s across both the transatlantic and the space-time continuum, thereby producing political and potent—and perhaps potentially pleasurable—reverberations. As Black girl cartographers coediting this volume with a commitment to care and love, Lucía and I turned to the embodied art of gathering stories as a method for bringing to view the diverse landscapes of the Black girlhoods mapped in each chapter, bearing in mind that stories are cartographies of creativity, curiosity, and play, at once local and global, intimate and intergalactic, and/or everything in between.

Storytellers and story gatherers make meaning relationally. The writer of a story is in relation to the story content and characters, real or fictional. The writer is also in relation to the reader, although the reader may have a desire for the writing that the writer cannot or does not wish to fulfill. Stories can be refusals of the binary thinking characteristic of whiteness as epistemology and practice. Stories can resist dichotomization and invite plural interpretations. Stories can allow for experimentation and improvisation with voice, form, and word. Stories are also primed for revision, which Kiese Laymon posited

> as a dynamic practice of revisitation, premised on ethically reimagining the ingredients, scope, and primary audience of one's initial vision. Revision required witnessing and testifying. Witnessing and testifying required rigorous attempts at remembering and imagining. If revision was not God, revision was everything every God ever asked of believers. (2021: para. 16)

For the Black girl cartographer, possibilities abound in the words strung together to create stories. Words make people possible and make it possible for people to be. When story is approached as methodology (Mucina 2011), revision becomes the possibility of reinvention and rebirth.

True Story: Black Girls Be Knowin'

Storytelling, as a practice and process, allows for the creative "mapping of the body's inner surface, the surface of sensations, intensities, and affects, the 'subjective experience' of bodily excitations and sensations" (Grosz 1994: 37). Drawing from geographic engagement with Black feminist praxis, the stories constellating in this volume position Black girls *not* as objects of study but rather as actors, creators, composers, and interpreters of, and in, educational spaces. These stories challenge and expand understandings of Black girls and/in educational spaces by paying attention to the particular embodied and emplaced ways Black girls practice curiosity, play, desire, and/or relationality.

The attendant practices of storytelling and story gathering can be powerful, potentially leading to "the breaking of conceptual ethnic and cultural borders" (A. Smith 2019: 11). Contained in this collection are

> stories and forms of storytelling that address the ways that individuals and communities reconcile themselves with the weight of history while imagining and seizing opportunities to make themselves anew, . . . important reminders of the existence of alternative genres of the human. (Clarke and Mullings 2023: 170)

This collection of stories owes much to Tamara T. Butler's (2018) "Black Girl Cartography: Black Girlhood and Place-Making in Education Research." Originally published as a journal article in 2018, the chapter applies intersectionality as a lens of analysis to include a consideration of space—particularly in thinking through schools as geopolitical spaces—and Black girls as navigators and mappers of those spaces, creating and enacting liberatory practices rooted in Black girl ontoepistemology. Butler's interdisciplinary methodological offering to Black girlhood studies opens

the door for education research that can behold the multiplicities of Black girlhoods.

Equally important to this book is Katherine McKittrick's (2000) "'Black and 'Cause I'm Black I'm Blue': Transverse Racial Geographies in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*." McKittrick's geographical reading of *The Bluest Eye* serves as theoretical navigation for this volume, modeling a way to think about Black girls in and out of place. McKittrick writes, "It is through the instability and incoherence of place and sense of self that the characters in Morrison's novel continually 'become': they are embodied processes rather than passive recipients of cultural subjugation" (2000: 130). This sense of unbelonging serves as the point from which McKittrick positions Morrison's characters as spatial theorists and pedagogues.

McKittrick's (2000) posture toward Black girl characters in Morrison's ([1970] 2000) *The Bluest Eye* informs Chapter 2 by Katelyn M. Campbell, Lauryn DuPree, and Lucía Mock Muñoz de Luna. The trio met as graduate students in a course on girlhoods that I taught while on faculty in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. My curriculum was interdisciplinary, and the assignment from which this chapter sprouted called for letters to Morrison in response to geographical analyses of *The Bluest Eye*. I was moved to tears and (re)action by the vulnerability and introspective reflections of these three students and writers—none of whom self-identified as Black, and some of whom claimed queerness—with regard to a book of fiction that undoes and remakes realistic notions of Black girlhood. As the semester progressed, I was reminded that sometimes, as both teachers and students, we seek and establish certain types of learning spaces because we sense the potential for parts of ourselves—perhaps perceived as different or odd—to be recognized and affirmed by another (Deckman 2022). Sometimes, we enter classroom spaces desiring legibility, that is, wanting the experience of being seen and heard—of *belonging*—for who we are at the core of our beings. Understanding Morrison and the girls created in her imagination, Pecola and Claudia, as pedagogues, the letters in Campbell et al.'s chapter reach for an understanding of relationality that undoes the world as it has been taught to us, remaking it, instead, with an eye toward liberation in and through one another.

Desire runs wild in "Queer Like Me: Black Girlhood Sexuality on the Playground, Under the Covers, and in the Halls of Academia" by Adilia E. E. James's (2011, reprinted as Chapter 3 in this volume). Revisited here over ten years after it was written and similar in womanist spirit to

Trimiko Melancon and Joanne M. Braxton's (2015) *Black Female Sexualities* and Debra Curtis's (2009) *Pleasures and Perils: Girls' Sexuality in a Caribbean Consumer Culture*, James's work remains a prescient, critical intervention in Black girlhood studies, insisting on desire and inserting pleasure into the study of, with, and for Black girls. Reflecting on her own wants throughout her childhood and early adulthood, James offers readers and researchers an opening to consider pleasure and desire as a way of thinking through and with issues of race, class, gender, and age, suggesting that this consideration might lead to more expansive understandings of identity development.

Although in conversation with themes raised in Morrison's ([1970] 2000) critical spatial analysis of Black girlhood in *The Bluest Eye* and James's (2011) call to counter silences in sex education, Nadine M. Finigan-Carr's chapter speaks primarily to school disciplinary practices that criminalize those girls most in need of care. The author attends to arguably the most vulnerable type of Black girls: those who have been sexually abused and are then subjected to prolonged exploitation. The chapter extends and endarkens research on the long-term material and psychological effects of sexual violence (Carlton 2022). Finigan-Carr shows how policies and practices in school spaces can either exacerbate that vulnerability—as is often the case, with disastrous results—or intervene. Propelled by a personal investment and desire for justice, the author provides a spatial intervention that crystallizes why and suggests how the pipeline from sexual abuse to sexual exploitation to prison, a "triple-stop" space of entrapment for Black girls experiencing a particular type of precarity, must be ruptured.

Black girls who mother in their youth are brought to focus in Taryrn T. C. Brown's chapter, which amplifies Black teen mothers' epistemologies. In Brown's writing, Black mothers at the intersections of various social positionings theorize, no longer simply the object of inquiry or the subject of abstract theory. Drawing from observations, photos, and conversations with Black teen mothers in one high school's Teen Parent Success Program, Brown illustrates that it is within this particular educational space that the mothers are free to deconstruct deficit courses that render them other, while in the process learning to desire, (re)construct, and reclaim themselves as more than (m)other.

In "'You Know, Let Me Put My Two Cents In': Using Photovoice to Locate the Educational Experiences of Black Girls," Lateasha Meyers visually maps what Black girls knew and learned while being and becoming

girls and using photography to (re)claim their voices by visually making space for themselves in the silencing and marginalizing context of a Midwestern US high school. Set in an intergenerational mentoring program, Meyers's inquiry is guided by a reflective practice of what it means to truly listen to Black girls using visual methods to creatively engage with and communicate their ontoepistemologies.

Relationality is the connective tissue among the women in Renée Wilmot's lyrically written ode to Black women in Richmond, Virginia. Wilmot traces Black girlhood becoming through space and time in one place, centering an intergenerational dialogue on identity, belonging, and education. The author uses the geopolitical and historical stories of Richmond to contextualize portraits of three generations of Black women interconnected by familial bonds. The resulting picture shows how Black girl navigational practices evolve through time and in the relationships women have with one another, rooted in spaces they claim and create.

For Black girls, belonging is a place of embodiment and freedom, argues Susan Wilcox in her interdisciplinary exploration of the Dipo tradition, a gendered rite of passage among the Krobo people in Ghana. This chapter explores how Krobo girls transition to womanhood in that context, a place where their sense of belonging to people and place is affirmed and confirmed. Wilcox brings to view these girls' particular negotiations of the push and pull of modernity and tradition. Positioning these Black girls as pedagogues (Hice-Fromille 2022), the author pulls out lessons that these young women teach through their always ongoing process of becoming, learnings such as the artificiality of the "distinction between past and future, before and after, childhood and adulthood, control and chaos, and competence and inability, which shifts ideas about time, space, identity, power, and potential."

In the chapter "A Luo Girl's Inheritance" (my adaptation of Ohito 2022), I pose what I consider to be pertinent questions for anyone, any people, pushed up against a margin. I ask what we must understand about our geohistories in order to envision individual liberation and collective freedom, and how we might use knowledge of our past to shape our present and mold our future. Narratively tracing the associative trail of memories across space, time, culture, community, and kin, I try a task similar to that which defeated Humpy Dumpty: putting together the pieces of a broken heart, documenting and remembering some ways a girl child's body and heart can be shattered, and what it means for a grown-up girl

to commit to and carefully undertake the difficult work of reparative revision. The chapter explores the idea of stories that shape our negotiations of our multiple selves, and our relationships, in relation. The chapter also asks, "What if our politics are shaped by the texture of wounds rather than the identity of selves? What possible future will have been opened up by posing that very question?" (van der Zaag 2022: 37). If wounds remind us that we are animals, a fact long known and embraced by Indigenous peoples the world over, then what theoretical and methodological approaches to researching Black girlhoods in relation to the shape of Black girls' injuries are imaginable and actionable?

Black girlhoods as sites of queer promise, potential, and futurity in both social sciences–based and humanities-based research are the focus of the volume finale, "As Queer as a Black Girl: Navigating Toward a Transnational Black Girlhood Studies." In this Conclusion, Lucía and I theorize a queer/transnational framework for the study of Black girlhoods. We propose this as an approach to inquiry about the knowledges, needs, and experiences of Black girls in various spaces and places, one that draws attention to the reading and writing of their layered stories, and places an emphasis on the epistemological vitality of their individual and collective creativity, curiosities, desires, and modes of play.

Lessons From the Abundant Land of Black Girlhoods

Play has been theorized as "the gateway to the unconscious" (Winnicott, as cited in Abram 2007: 252). Play, which occurs in space, is "exciting because it deals with the existence of a precarious borderline between the subjective and that which can be objectively perceived" (Winnicott, as cited in Abram 2007: 252). Furthermore, play, "like dreams, serves the function of self-revelation" (Winnicott, as cited Abram 2007: 252–53). Our hope, then, is that the chapters in this volume reveal play—and, concomitantly, creativity, curiosity, and desire—as the relational tissue connecting multiplicitous stories that illuminate the complexities in Black girls' social and material worlds, thereby irradiating the textured intersecting interiorities and exteriorities in Black girlhoods.

There are many places Lucía and I hope this book encourages scholars of Black girlhoods and practitioners with investments in lovin' on Black girls to go, such as deeper into the imagination and the recesses of the

unconscious and all around the subterranean worlds that open there and then. We hope this volume pushes Black girlhood scholars beyond disciplinary borders and the geographic borders of the Global North, where many of the chapters are located. We also hope this book brings to view the fact that perhaps matters that (dis)connect us are, after all, matters of injuries, wounds, and difference.

Recently, while rereading Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, I was reminded that we never just shape the world; "the world shapes us" (2008: 2). The world—and the worlds contained therein—is not just our home. Our relationships with our homes—even those embodied in other human beings with whom we share space at any given time—are layered and complicated. But in the end, home—our first school, our original place of teaching and learning—is the place to which we return to lose or find ourselves, again and again.

In the end, in a world hostile to their beings, how do Black girls—particularly those perceived as flawed, raunchy, belligerent, burly, licentious, or wayward, yet also wholly beautiful and imperfectly human—survive under siege? My hope is that this book illustrates that refuge and refusal, however partial, can be found through and with/in stories: real, fictional, coauthored, and (re)constructed across time, space, and place. I also hope that this volume kindles in you, dear reader, a sense of wonder and curiosity about the abundance of stories of Black girls and Black girlhoods lived in and out of place.

To love Black girls, in theory and practice, is to cultivate and create spaces for *different* stories. Remember, each of us began once upon a time, when sperm met egg, perhaps after a human agent's (un)hurried ejaculation or a helpful hand from a more-than-human and/or otherworldly actor. Stories weave together relationships, providing a lens that magnifies, inviting us to better see our textured selves and to see our better selves, and perhaps inspiring us to be our better selves when (re)searching for value and purpose in our lives and the lives of others.

I dream of education spaces where each particular Black girl, including the one still living within me, the one who refuses to die, can access knowledge that brings her to life and brings her aliveness into the world. I dream of creating a world worthy of the gift of precious Black girl knowledge, a home where space abounds for teaching and learning about the possibilities creatively embodied by Black girls being and becoming, on multiple scales, across place and space, for all time. Amen.

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Chapter 1

Black Girl Cartography

Black Girlhood and Place-Making in Education Research

Tamara T. Butler

Black Girl Cartographies

"Intersectional Black feminism," or intersectionality rooted in Black feminist practices and theories (Blige 2010, 2013; Carastathis 2014; Collins 2000), names the multiple axes of difference and makes clear how equitable and ethical interventions should be conceived. In other words, since Black women experience oppressions along the lines of space, place, race, gender, sexuality, and class, liberation should be imagined along those same lines. For example, in 1990, eight teenagers raped and murdered Kimberly Rae Harbour, a twenty-six-year-old Black woman who was also a mother in Dorchester, Massachusetts (Crenshaw 1991). Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) discusses the ways that Harbour's story did not draw as much media attention as White women who were assaulted or reported missing that year. Yet there was little discussion about the interplay of patriarchy, misogyny, and the structural inequities that shaped Dorchester into a dangerous location for young women of color. How might the impending

Notes for this section can be found on page 44.

gentrification of the historically poor neighborhood transform it into a place of violence against Black female bodies, and the erasure of said violence? Similar questions can be asked of Baltimore, Maryland (Alphonza Watson); New Orleans, Louisiana (Chyna Gibson and Ciara McElveen); Cleveland, Ohio (Tonia Carmichael, Crystal Dozier, Tishanna Culver, Le'Shanda Long, Michelle Mason, Kim Yvette Smith, Nancy Cobbs, Amelda Hunter, Telacia Forston, Janice Webb, and Diane Turner); St. Petersburg, Florida (Dominique Battle, Ashaunti Butler, and Laniya Miller); Seattle, Washington (Charleena Lyles and her unborn child); and Detroit, Michigan (Aiyana Jones and Shelly Hilliard). The same holds true for Black girls, whose oppressions, in addition to those listed, are also linked to the liminality of age (Winn 2010).

In Kinloch's work with youth in Harlem, three Black female participants bring attention to what it means to be a Black female attending school in and living in an urban community. Kinloch's (2010: 116) former research assistant, Rebekkah Hogan (research participant) asserts, "I occupy an interesting location in the matrix of gentrification." Although she is older than the high school student participants, she still lives in Harlem, and her assertion speaks to the ways Black girlhood is tied to geospatial location. She continues by reflecting on how Harlem is a place of belonging for her, as she is able to move through spaces (e.g., a Dominican bakery, a Senegalese grocery store) without question due to the color of her skin. However, her class status simultaneously dislocates her from working-class community members, as she is "educated" with a "middle-class job" that allows her to afford the increasing rent in the disappearing neighborhoods (Kinloch 2010: 116). Another poignant moment for Black girls in the text emerges during an interview at Harlem High School (pseudonym). During the interview, Samantha (a seventeen-year-old Black female student) asserts that "they'd rather for us to struggle" (Kinloch 2010: 52) in reference to developers and government officials who are not making life easier for current Harlem residents, especially those who are working-class or living in fixed-income households. Through the space of the interview, the girls "were sharing stories about gentrification, place, and race that they did not share during the course of their schooling, but that had an impact on their out-of-school lived experiences" (52). Through Samantha's assertion and Kinloch's observation, we come to see that Black girls—and the researchers who work with them—are attentive to the ways race, class, gender, and additional interlocking identities tied to place funnel into urban classrooms.

As a result, I am working toward a praxis-oriented framework that I am calling "Black Girl Cartography," or the study of how and where Black girls are physically and sociopolitically mapped in education. For this chapter, I focus on the types of knowledge Black women education researchers connect to Black girls' geopolitical and social locations (e.g., race, gender, age, sexuality, ability, and class). Specifically, I consider how Black Girl cartographers—scholars and researchers responsible for most of the education research featured here—push intersectionality in education to be more critical of the connections between oppressions and geopolitical and sociocultural locations, by opening with a discussion of location as addressed in intersectional Black feminism. The second section, "Black Girl Cartography: Mapping our Stories," offers an overview of what is required of scholars who use (and seek to use) the framework to consider how Black Girlhood is informed, reformed, or stifled by the geopolitical space of school. The piece continues with a discussion of how I came to this framework and set of publications about Black girls. Through a selective review of education research during a decade of Black Girlhood Celebration (Kwakye, Hill, and Callier 2017), I focus on two emergent themes: "Black Girl navigational practices" and "Black Girl charting." The chapter closes with a series of theoretical and methodological possibilities, returning to the notion of Black girls' (and women's) knowledge as pathways to social transformation and liberation.

Intersectional Black Feminisms[1]: Charting Resistance

> From Anna Julia Cooper's "train station" (1891–1892) to the Combahee River Collective's idea of "interlocking" (1977/1995) to Deborah King's revision of "jeopardy" (Beale 1969) with her conception of "multiple jeopardy" (1988) to Hortense Spillers' "interstices" (1984) to Kimberlé Crenshaw's "intersection" (1989) and beyond, there have been attempts to create metaphors capable of capturing experiences of oppression that seem to twist and turn so as to resist being tracked. (Dotson 2013: 3)

Black girls and women's liberatory practices have been, and will continue to be, rooted in the spaces that we demand, seek, create, and cultivate. In 1977, a collective of Black feminists, lesbians, and Black feminist lesbians issued "A Black Feminist Statement" calling attention to the interlocking oppressions stemming from racism, sexism, heteropatriarchy, and classism that Black women experience. The Combahee River Collective's

Statement highlighted the sociopolitical intersections of these oppressions and articulated the ways Black feminism should be considered "the logical political movement" to liberate "all women of color." For the Collective, the Black feminist practices toward liberation are rooted in the epistemologies of Sojourner Truth, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, Mary Church Terrell, and Harriet Tubman. The group's name, Combahee River Collective, intentionally alludes to a site of Tubman's liberatory practices. Tubman's guidance of 150 Black Union soldiers along South Carolina's Combahee River resulted in the freedom of approximately 750 enslaved peoples (Guy-Sheftall 1995). The campaign's success relied heavily on Tubman's sociopolitical locations as a Black enslaved woman, which deeply informed her knowledge of the land and the people. To me, a major component of "intersectional Black feminism" (B. Cooper 2015: 15) that emerges from the rhetorical work of the Statement is sociopolitical locations—race, class, gender, and geopolitical location—of resistance.

The Combahee River Collective's work to connect to a genealogy of Black women's resistance is echoed in the work of contemporary scholars thinking about Black women's knowledge and location. In *Demonic Grounds*, McKittrick (2006: xiv) focuses on how Black women navigated the Americas, a place she describes as "a geographic landscape that is upheld by a legacy of exploitation, exploration, and conquest." I argue that the Americas are a geopolitical landscape, created by legal documents rooted in patriarchy, capitalism, and Eurocentric concepts of empire.[2] Therefore, we come to see how Black women engage in fugitivity—acts of resistance, escape, and survival—throughout the transatlantic slave trade in other geopolitical spaces: the hulls of slave ships, the tops of auction blocks, and hidden spaces of homes. Black women recognized that their bodies were vulnerable to violence and exploitation, and in that held deep visions of liberation and survival. As McKittrick (2006: xiv) asserts, "Black matters are spatial matters." In other words, conceptions of Blackness are tied to reclaiming a sense of belonging, weaving one's self into genealogies of resilience, and conjuring new imaginings of existing. The Combahee River Collective's name and Statement signal to the ways in which Black women have been fighting for, making, and demanding epistemological and physical spaces.

For this chapter, I am defining space as formally uncharted locations that are still inhabited, used, and created. Physical space can occur within a recognized place (e.g., building, ship, home, city, state, body of water), while epistemological space refers to locations in a field of study or dis-

cipline. In analyzing these spaces, we begin to develop a more nuanced understanding of how "Black women and girls, trans* people and queer people become victims of anti-Black state violence" (Lindsey 2015: 233) and epistemic violence (Dotson 2011; Spivak 1988). Black feminist philosopher Kristie Dotson (2013) demands that analyses of Black women's oppressions require naming spaces where Black women are excluded or included and by whom. For her, an analysis of Black women's oppressions requires "politics of social spatiality" (Dotson 2013: 17). In her reading of Anna Julia Cooper, "Black women simply did not have a 'field' of space," Dotson (2013: 19) asserts "that lent to interpreting Black women's place in American social landscapes." A. J. Cooper's (1891) encounter with two rooms—one for "ladies" and one for "colored people"—reinforces Fannie Barrier Williams's (1905) description of Black women existing "beneath, beyond, and outside of US social imaginaries." Therefore, the rhetorical work of Black feminists who penned the Combahee River Collective Statement were grounded in a politics of spatiality, one that reasserted Black women's presence in American physical and social landscapes.

Black feminist legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) builds on Black feminism's interest in mapping and analyzing Black women's sociopolitical locations. Denouncing "single-axis framework" for the analysis of Black women's experiences, she calls attention to "intersections." In 1991, she critiqued how media, women's shelters, and the judicial system (e.g., police officers, jurors, judges) neglected, underserved, and dismissed sexual violence perpetrated against women of color victims/survivors. Her three-part discussion illuminates how the intersecting axes of race, gender, and class often displace women of color victims, as they are unable to find solace, shelter, and assistance. I am particularly drawn to what intersectionality reveals about location. Through Dotson's (2011, 2013) and Crenshaw's lenses, we see that intersectionality is not just about interlocking identities, but it is also about how those identities interlock with geopolitical locations. Geopolitical locations undergird the notion that places are created through laws, ordinances, and zoning codes. Rezoning laws, unemployment, as well as racial and class discrimination in the housing industry gentrified places like Dorchester, Massachusetts, in the 1990s. Once we factor in misogyny, patriarchy, and dehumanizing ideas around Black women's bodies into this economically disenfranchised neighborhood, young Black poor or working-class women living in such a neighborhood, like Kimberly Rae Harbour, become vulnerable to violence. Therefore, intersectional Black feminists are concerned with under-

standing how geopolitical locations compound the social inequities that Black women experience.

Black Girl Cartography: Mapping Our Stories

To engage in the work of Black Girl Cartography, we are required to be in explicit conversations about place, race, and gender. Such conversations can begin with research methods that explore mapping as a method to reveal inequities and interlocking oppressions (Annamma 2017). Mapping as a method generates questions such as: What is the narrative behind why the researcher selected this town, city, or neighborhood? What are the girls saying about the town or city? Where is the research "site" in relation to the spaces/places where the girls avoid or spend time? How are girls making use of a place? In answering these questions, we can begin to see how Black girl research relies on the social geography—frequency of movement, entering and exiting, spaces of inclusion and exclusion—of Black girls. This also begins to reveal how a place may or may not welcome Black girls, and how that informs the girls' practices. For example, if girls do not frequent the local library, but are more likely to be found at a community center, how will the researcher account for the girls' place-making practices in the research? By exploring such narratives, we are moving away from sterile and exploitative research practices and instead begin to call into question our research motives and how they may or may not align with the girls' practices, ways of knowing, and being.

Mapping is also applicable to theoretical mapping of Black girls. Gholson's (2016) study of how Black girls are relegated to the research gaps in mathematics education echoes a larger issue of regarding where and how Black girls are situated in social imaginations.[3] In her critical analysis of policy reports published by the College Board Advocacy and Policy Center, she notes how the data reporting process erases Black girls. While one report disaggregates by race and ethnicity, the other only disaggregates by gender. As a result, Black girls are hidden in statistics for "Black" students or "female" students, but neither report makes room for both a holistic analysis of how Black girls are performing in mathematics. Therefore, she is putting forth a call for radical creative research that cultivates knowledge about Black girls. Without such research, Black girls are pushed to the "proverbial shadows of inquiry in mathematics education" (Gholson 2016: 298) and studied in passing. For example, Black girls

may become visible when research focuses on "endangered" Black male students or to discuss the Black-White achievement gap. Black girls are rendered "ungeographic" in the field and, as she notes, are left to "engage in the domestic housekeeping of theoretical spaces so that others' identities can be salient and knowable within mathematics education" (Gholson 2016: 298). Therefore, her work brings attention to the ways that race, class, gender, location, and knowledge production are intricately linked. When mathematics education research cannot recognize "Black girl" as an identity, interventions for and pedagogy stemming from such an identity are unimaginable. As a result, Black girls are scripted as incapable of learning mathematics and incapable of providing substantial contributions to the field.

In addition to exploring one's stories of entry and "rationale," Black Girl Cartography requires self-reflection. When Black Girl cartographers dig into the stories behind our research questions, sites, and implications, we find that we are face-to-face with our younger selves. I am defining Black Girl cartographers as researchers, scholars, advocates, and individuals who self-identify as a "Black Girl" and who have a deep concern for Black girls' health, lives, well-being and ways of being. Our commitments to Black girls extend beyond the page and the walls of the academy; instead, we express an interest in sustaining, imagining, and mapping (or protecting) sites of "learning, self-love, and critical discourse where women and girls can come together to share" (Phelps-Ward and Laura 2016: 818). Black Girl cartographers' writings emerge as testaments, letters, and entries to younger selves and future selves, to women and girls that we have grown with and some of whom we may never meet. To one another, we offer new ways of using Black feminism and womanism to explore our own stories (Baker-Bell 2017; Cutts 2012; Lindsay-Dennis 2015; K. T. Edwards, Baszile, and Guillory 2016). Through this work, we begin to see how our own educational experiences have guided us back into classroom spaces so that we may be more intentional about our practices. As a result, we find ourselves centering the stories of Black women (Butler 2017), being attentive to the lived experiences of Black girls (Love 2017), and thinking about what it means to become a Black woman learner and teacher (Bailey and Miller 2015; E. Edwards, McArthur, and Russell-Owens 2016; Ford 2016). We also teach others to do the same. Therefore, Black Girl Cartography requires a commitment of engaging in an ongoing dialogue with past, present, and future Black girls and women, especially one's self.

Methods for Locating Black Girl Cartographers in Education Research

The Combahee River Collective reminds us that to be an intersectional Black feminist is to be engaged in an ongoing practice of reflexivity—where we call into question our everyday politics, beliefs, and behaviors. As a Black Girl cartographer, my work of charting the creative practices of Black girls is grounded in the notion that I am not first and I am not alone. I am consistently thinking about my connection to other scholars who are doing the work with and on behalf of Black girls in the present and in the future. Becoming a Black Girl cartographer requires drawing on lessons that we learned from our experiences as Black girls and/or working with Black girls (Dillard 2000; Lindsay-Dennis 2015). Unfortunately, for some education researchers, "there is so much about Black identity"—and Blackgirl identity[4]—"that doesn't get called into practice" (Smith and Smith 1981: 119). Therefore, I intentionally called my Blackgirlness into practice to craft this chapter. When I present, I often begin with the assertion that I am a Geechee Girl whose research is focused on documenting the stories of Black women who are willing to share them with me so that I may share with others. I use the term *Geechee Girl* to evoke identities and knowledges informed by race, gender, and place; therefore, I am a Black girl from the Southeastern United States, specifically from the South Carolina Sea Island community of Johns Island. The lenses through which I see the world rely heavily upon relationships grounded in trust, reciprocity, responsibility, and respect (Torrez 2018) for self and others. This is key because these lenses inform the research methods, citational practice, and structure associated with this and other projects.

Through the radical citation practice (Tuck 2017) of citing Black women scholars who work with/for Black girls, this chapter attempts to make visible how educators and education researchers are engaging in this intergenerational moment around Black Girlhood. Although advocates, scholars, relatives, and more have been doing the work of honoring, documenting, and nurturing Black Girlhood, 2006 ushered in an era of Black Girlhood Celebration (Kwakye et al. 2017) on a larger platform. To highlight the contributions and achievements of Black women and girls, Beverly Bond launched "Black Girls Rock!" as an organization and Black Entertainment Television awards show. In 2009, Toni Carey and Ashley-Hicks-Rocha began the campaign #BlackGirlsRun to challenge health disparities among Black women and girls. In 2013, CaShawn

Thompson started a movement with "Black Girls Are Magic" (#BlackGirlMagic) and Renina Jarmon revealed that it is because "Black Girls are From the Future." In their 2014 report on policing and schooling, the African American Policy Forum declared that Black Girls Matter. These dates, declarations, and movements are important because they are milestones along Black Girlhood's journey into the mainstream. They are also encapsulated in the year parameters I used for my search: research published between 2007 and 2017. To construct this chapter, I relied on #BlackGirl networks on social media (Facebook and Twitter) to crowdsource citations and publications from scholars who focus on Black girls in education. In addition to receiving five publications through the social media announcement, I connected with scholars whose research focuses on Black girls in other areas of study (e.g., public health, disability studies, sociology, law, and art education). I also searched electronic databases such as ProQuest, JSTOR, and Google Scholar for empirical studies and theoretical discussions about Black girls. ProQuest and EBSCO Host searches of "Black girls," "Black female adolescents," and "education" generated education research that focuses on Black girls in urban schools, communities, and afterschool programs. The search yielded twenty-four publications, including three books and twenty-one peer-reviewed articles, which I analyzed using the following questions:

1. Are the authors using Black feminist or womanist frameworks? (If yes, proceed to Question 2. If no, do not use here. Save for later.)
2. How are the authors conceptualizing the practices and knowledges of Black girls?
3. Did the authors create the site (i.e., program or class) or was the site in place (i.e., a school)?
4. Do the authors discuss the research site? If so, how?

Two major themes that emerged from the research are "Black Girl navigational practices" and "Black Girl charting" (see Table 1.1). In these studies, the scholars—Black Girl cartographers—often documented how schools functioned as geopolitical sites or spaces where adults and peers attempted to (and sometimes successfully) stop Black girl collective practices, punish Black girl movements, and fragment Black girl identities. Therefore, Black Girl navigational practices are connected to the ways that girls work together in the face of individual meritocracy, choose movement over stagnation, and choose to bring their whole selves when schools

Table 1.1. Themes and focal studies on Black girls in education. Created by the author.

Overarching Theme	Emergent Themes	Studies
Black Girl cartographer research methodologies: Black feminist and womanist methods	Reflexive storytelling	Baker-Bell (2017) Bailey and Miller (2015) Butler (2017) Cutts (2012) E. Edwards et al. (2016) Ford (2016) Lindsay-Dennis (2015) Love (2017)
Black Girl Cartography: schools are hostile geopolitical spaces for Black girls	Black Girl navigational practices	Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews (2017) Brown (2013) Hill (2011, 2016) Johnson (2017) Kinloch (2010, 2012) Lane (2017) Watson (2016)
	Black Girl charting: curricula and digital spaces	Greene (2016) Muhammad and Haddix (2016) Nyachae (2016) Ohito (2016) Phelps-Ward and Laura (2016) Price-Dennis (2016)

demand fragmentation. "Black Girl charting" focuses on the tools—curricula and digital space—students and facilitators use to carve out spaces for Black girls to thrive.

Black Girls Navigating Practices

Figured Worlds: Schools as Geopolitical Spaces

Black Girl cartographers interrogate how Black girls unpack their relationships between race, gender, class, and geospatial location. Such work speaks to Dotson's (2013: 17) notion of Black feminists' move toward a "politics of spatiality," or calling attention to the theoretical and physical spaces that Black women create, require, and sustain. Emerging from the

theoretical work and lived experiences of self-identified Black girls and women, inquiries in the field of Black Girlhood studies (Brown 2013; Hill 2011, 2016; Lindsey 2013) are attentive to the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality, especially in schools.

While Black Girlhood studies point specifically to Black girl spaces, girlhood cartography studies interrogate the intersections of race, gender, dis/ability, sexuality, *and* location. Scholars mapping and charting Black girl practices reveal how said girls are epistemically and physically excluded from notions of girlhood. In their work on dis/abled girls and Girl Power, Erevelles and Mutua (2005: 127) assert that elements of Girl Power that are grounded in ableism and heteronormativity, "independence, assertiveness, and strength laced with patriarchal notions of beauty and attractiveness" move dis/abled girls to the periphery of girlhood (Schalk 2013). Research emerging from dis/ability critical race theory, or DisCrit (Annamma 2017; Annamma, Connor, and Ferri 2013) and Black disability studies (Schalk 2017) explores the intersections of race and dis/ability, but not the intersections race, dis/ability, gender, and sexuality. For education, the conversations about race and dis/ability move toward interventions for students of color and special education (Blanchett 2014; Tefera, Thorius, and Artiles 2014) and move the field closer to seeing Black dis/abled girls. By placing cartographies of girlhood in conversation with Black Girlhood studies, we can craft a framework to understand how schools function as geopolitical spaces and how Black girls navigate said spaces. In doing so, we develop a heightened sense of urgency about what Black girls' presence (or absence) in research means for the state of the field, and more important, for the lives of Black girls.

For Black Girl cartographers, disciplinary actions construct schools as hostile geopolitical spaces that often threaten Black girls' learning and their livelihood. Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews (2017) examine how Black girls are policed in learning spaces. They position schools where zero tolerance policies are implemented as figured worlds built on notions of whiteness and femininity. Such positioning echoes the work of Black Girl cartographers (Bailey and Miller 2015; Evans-Winters and Esposito 2010; Halliday 2017; Hill 2016; Johnson 2017; Lane 2017) who examine schools as heteronormative, patriarchal, racist, sexist, and ableist geopolitical practices that limit Blackgirl ways of being. As a result, these spaces force Black girls "to accept, reject, or negotiate identities of criminalization and misplaced femininity" (Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews 2017: 14) to not be pushed out of classrooms. However, Black girls creatively

navigate these misplaced identities and work together to reclaim classrooms as sites of belonging.

Navigational Practices

Black Girl cartographers also highlight how Black girls carve out spaces in urban schools to engage in sustainable practices of teaching and caring for one another. In *Crossing Boundaries* (Kinloch 2012), Damya and Christina reimagined the classroom as a site for edification and guidance. Throughout the course of the year, graduating seniors Damya (seventeen-year-old African American female student) and Christina (nineteen-year-old Afro-Jamaican female student) had an "antagonistic relationship" where the two often engaged in heated verbal exchanges (Kinloch 2012: 99). However, during a peer writing exchange, Christina asked Damya to partner with her, read her paper, and provide feedback. Kinloch notes that because "Christina respected Damya," she chose Damya in hopes that she would engage in "a very special kind of listening" with her that requires "open hearts and minds" (Delpit 1995: 46, quoted in Kinloch 2012: 99). Through their peer review, Damya expressed a deep concern for Christina, who although she was a high school senior, had "not mastered academic codes and conventions in ways that would allow her to assert a stronger academic voice" (Kinloch 2012: 98). Kinloch highlights how Christina and Damya reclaimed the contentious classroom space as one to build constructive relationships. By working through each other's stories and leaning on each other's strengths, we come to see how Black girls "author themselves in new agentive ways" (Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews 2017: 14). As a result, Black girls' efforts to work together pushes back against educational spaces that are rooted in individualism and meritocracy.

Black Girl cartographers map classrooms as sites where girls still grapple with connections between identities and place. Watson (2016: 242) speaks with six girls attending City High School (pseudonym), located in a "large urban city in the northeastern United States." While the girls expressed that they felt safe at City High School, the girls also expressed concerns about the school's inability to counter pervasive narratives of Black girls. For example, Christine shares insights about stigmas that limit Black girls' movement through the school, stigmas "that Black girls are supposed to be loud and ratchet and ghetto" (245). While some girls negotiate or reject "loud and ratchet and ghetto," Christine's observation raises questions about how community members and educators have mapped certain

ways of being onto place. How are notions of urban, ghetto, and defiant unpacked productively among scholars, girls, teachers, and researchers? In the case of Kim and Samantha, Kinloch (2010) pushes back on concepts that link urban spaces to negative behaviors. For her, Black girls emerge as "street survivors," whom she describes as individuals with "a sophisticated awareness about the community, its history, and street codes (e.g., language; dispositions; appearance; popular venues/spots like the Apollo)" (Kinloch 2010: 49). Therefore, urban spaces for Black girls are sites of complex relationships and sophisticated practices rather than sites of one-dimensional ways of being and knowing.

Through their work, Black girl practices emerge as temporal and spatial acts of intentional resistances, innovative productions, and creative engagements. The same can be said for Black trans*girls, Black queer girls, Black gender nonconforming girls, and more iterations of being for Black girls that theoretically and physically disrupt space, or "bring wreck" (Pough 2004). Their presence and practices force the field to interrogate how spaces, such as schools and communities, are constructed and maintained by heteronormative, racist, sexist, and ableist ideologies. Two examples of bringing "wreck" that transforms school spaces can be found in the embodied practices of writing (Johnson 2017) and moving (Hill 2011, 2016). In her work with queer youth of color, Johnson (2017: 27) highlights the writing of Anika, a seventeen-year-old Black queer female who uses the pen for truth telling and to raise questions about visibility and "heteronormative hegemony." "Why can't you see me?" she writes, "Is it because I love your sister?/Because I dress like your brother?" (27). To disrupt notions of how gender is curated, constructed, and (mis)read, Anika challenges those reading both her writing and her body. As a result, she urges readers to consider how she wants to be read as she navigates spaces. Hill (2016: 6) explores a research participant's (Unique, "sixteen-year-old raised in a Cameroonian American household") assertion that, "*Not all of us are idiots and start twerkin' in the middle of the hallway for no good reason! I actually read books*" (emphasis in original). "The act of twerkin' in the middle of the [school] hallway," Hill offers (2016: 6), could be read as "an act of resistance where foregrounding the Blackgirl body transforms the school hallway into a place of comfort and/or where Blackgirls claim authority." Though she does not use the word "map" or "cartography" in her work, Hill's (2016) discussion of Blackgirl body movements map schools, more specifically the liminal spaces of hallways, as spaces where Black girls begin to challenge oppressive structures that seek to po-

lice their bodies. Such work not only points to the resistant and generative cartographies of Black girls, it also points to what we should be considering in research that centers the lived experiences of Black girls—their whole selves moving through and transforming spaces.

Black Girl Charting: Curricula and Digital Spaces

Black Girl cartographers explore the interstitial space of curricula in search of how Black girls are represented in, working with, or critiquing texts. In their review of Black Girl literacies, Muhammad and Haddix (2016) include a section on research connected to Black girls, children's and young adult literature and urban fiction. They conclude that children's and young literature focused on Black girl bodies, specifically "body image, skin color" and "representations of Black girls' hair" (2016: 318), while urban fiction usually focused on young Black female (sixteen to twenty-three years of age) protagonists who face and overcome difficulties. In their study of Rita Williams-Garcia's *One Crazy Summer*, Howard and Ryan (2017) focus on how Black Girl Power manifests in the twelve-year-old character Delphine Gaither. "Black girls on the cusp of adolescence can draw on their lived experiences" of Black tween characters like Delphine "and become agents of change" (Howard and Ryan 2017: 178). While it is important to think about the themes that are explored in literature, especially when they positively impact girls' perceptions of self, it is equally important to consider how children's, young adult, and urban literature map Black girl geographies as well. For example, of the five young adult books that are mentioned in the review, two books are set in inner-city/urban communities (*Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes and *The Skin I'm In* by Sharon Flake); one book is set in an all-white school in Connecticut (Jacqueline Woodson's *Maizon at Blue Hill*); one book is set in Georgia/change of setting to Georgia (Rita Williams-Garcia's *Like Sisters on the Homefront*); and one book is set in a high school, though the geopolitical location is unclear (Sharon Draper's *November Blues*). Collectively, these texts signal as to where Black girls are most prevalent or at least can thrive in the literary imaginations of writers and readers. Similarly, urban fiction, "street literature, hip-hop literature, Black pulp fiction, ghetto lit, and gangsta lit" (Muhammad and Haddix 2016: 319), signals to readers that certain types of Black girls have deep ties to urban geographies. As a result, notions of resilience in the face of more contemporary issues are reserved for Black girls "with some sort of social injury" (319). Some spaces are unknown (and shall remain unknown), but should be used in classrooms. Through

a Black feminist reading of Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl," Ohito (2016: 450) brings attention to Black girl texts that can be incorporated into ELA classrooms. She asserts that Kincaid's short story decenters the Western world and "confirms that other worlds beyond that which is governed by Man are not only present but also possible." As a result, texts like "Girl" open up conversations about Black Girl spaces of belonging and knowing. The ongoing challenge to Black Girl cartographers is making known (or marking) the additional geopolitical spaces where Black Girls thrive, make meaning, care for one another, and negotiate. Such texts can be incorporated not only into K–12 classrooms but also into teacher education programs in an effort to help preservice teachers envision, consider, and imagine multiple locations for Black Girlhood.

Similarly, Black Girl curricula can also prove to be rich ground to help Black girls develop strong senses of self and community, as well as a vision for future possibilities. As cocreator of the *Sisters of Promise* curriculum, Nyachae (2016) and her partners place the stories and lived experiences of Black girls at the center of their teaching practices. The program curriculum, which was created by "Black women teachers for Black girls within the margins of school" (Nyachae 2016: 787), intentionally takes into account the girls' sociocultural and geopolitical location—Black girls from the northeast region of the United States who qualified for free or reduced lunch. Through their work, Nyachae and her cofacilitators implemented a program that "empowers Black girls, exposes the oppression of Black women in contemporary American society, and critically examines the world as it relates to each Black girl's intersectionality" (2016: 794). The program engages in a "politics of spatiality" (Dotson 2013) by considering each girl's experience through the lenses of place, race, gender, and age. By "intentionally creating the afterschool space with and for Black girls to discuss theory, reflect upon experiences, and address societal issues" (Butler 2016: 316), Nyachae and her cofacilitators reconstructed urban girls as cocreators of knowledge with ways of knowing, being, and critiquing arising from their experiences as Black girls from the northern United States.

Black Girl cartographers also highlight how Black girls engage in the interstitial spaces of multimodal curricula. By producing and disseminating more complex conceptions of Black Girlhood, girls often used digital tools to expand their sociogeopolitical boundaries and "functioned as conduits for circulating counternarratives to a global audience" (Price-Dennis 2016: 358). For six girls participating in the summer "Facebook online street literature book club" (Greene 2016: 279), the digital platform and

its disconnection from school spaces offered them a "platform to focus on agency, identity construction, or meaning-making" (285). Greene encourages educators to rethink how they ask Black girls to engage digital spaces. Instead of constructing assignments that are narrow in scope, function, and audience, educators are urged to "mirror the level of freedom of expression and linguistic autonomy often present in Black girls' digital practices" (285). Through such efforts, digital spaces emerge as good ground for the cultivation of Black Girls' "radical creativity and incisive knowledge" (Dotson 2014: 13; see also Phelps-Ward and Laura 2016; Price-Dennis 2016). By sifting through curricula created and facilitated by Black Girl cartographers, we learn about the interstitial spaces where we can seek, find, listen to, work alongside, and learn from Black girls across the field of education.

Futures of Black Girl Cartography in Education

Black Girl cartographers are committed to learning by walking alongside Black girls. In Belo Horizonte, Brazil, Henery (2011) learns how Black women's physical labor and geopolitical knowledge shaped the community. As wives, mothers, and domestic laborers, the women's footsteps carved out new pathways in the favelas in the form of "a geographic pattern, rhythm, and ethic of black women's work that . . . gave shape to the neighborhood" (Henery 2011: 92). By walking with the women, Henery recounts how "Black women's social dynamics" (92) shaped the Brazilian terrain. Similarly, Black Girl cartographers are "walking" with Black girls who are charting and shaping various terrains of learning. When education research works through the framework of Black Girl Cartography, we see where Black girls cultivate care that is rooted in justice, respect, reciprocity, and futurity. Seeing Black girls is the first required action in activism for and with Black girls, as it then pushes toward hearing girls, believing girls, understanding Black Girl matters, and articulating why Black girls matter. I return to McKittrick to think about implications for Black Girl matters, cartography, and the field of education.

> If black women's geographies illustrate that our ideological models and the three-dimensional physical world can, indeed, be alterable and reimagined, *where* do their sense of place, and their conceptual interventions take us? Can black women's geographies also open up the possibility to rethink, and therefore respatialize, our present sociogeographic organization? (McKittrick 2006: 122)

To answer McKittrick's questions is to consider how education researchers can become ethical and responsible Black Girl cartographers. Part of ethical engagement is recognizing limits and learning to seek answers in new ways. With all the possibilities of Black Girl Cartography, I do recognize that cartography can be a limiting framework in that it may make static people who are in motion and occupying multiple spaces simultaneously, as well as try to make legible practices that are embodied, ever changing, and indescribable (as we do not yet have the language to effectively translate practices). Writing about the terrains through which Black girls travel and/or make is limited in that it is incapable of fully depicting the multidimensional practices, knowledges, and spaces of Black girlhood (Price-Dennis et al. 2017). I acknowledge that there are several Black girls who are not "mapped" in this chapter, girls who are important to the framing of Black Girl Cartography. Therefore, the framework is in-flux and in-progress as it is being shaped by the cartographic knowledges of trans* Black girls, Black dis/abled girls, Black girls living outside of the United States, Black girls of various spiritual and religious beliefs, multilingual Black girls, and more. Charting their critical cartographic knowledges requires more conversations with scholars, researchers, and advocates who are walking alongside those who have not been mapped here.

Muhammad and Haddix (2016: 329) assert, in their call for the centering of Black Girl literacies, that "if we reimagine English education where Black girls matter, all children would benefit from a curricular and pedagogical infrastructure that values humanity." Echoing the Combahee River Collective's assertion that everyone else's freedom would be a result of Black women's freedom, Muhammad and Haddix remind us that each child's education and liberation are connected to the education and liberation of Black girls. For example, Black Girl cartographers (Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews 2017; Morris 2015; Wun 2016) who examine the ways zero tolerance policies result in the overpolicing of Black girls in schools highlight how disciplinary responses push Black girlhood out of schooling landscapes. Their work calls into question why Black girls do not seem to matter in schools. Cartographers who focus on Black girls' digital practices bring attention to how Black girls reclaim space and forge communities, especially if they have been physically or socially ostracized (Phelps-Ward and Laura 2016; Greene 2016). Collectively, Black Girl cartographers remind us that education research rooted in responsibility and critical reflexivity can contribute to the long-standing activism of Black women. Such work names the structures and institutions that are respon-

sible for inequities, articulates how Black girls' experiences are shaped by said structures, and considers how Black girls are working within/against the structures. Therefore, Black Girl cartographers are documenting the ways that Black girls are leading to more sustaining, holistic, and liberatory practices. In carrying the legacy of Harriet and unnamed liberators, Black Girl cartographers remember (and remind us) that everyone's liberation is, and possibilities for liberatory education are, intricately linked to Black Girl knowledge.

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Notes

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1. Britney Cooper discusses how and why scholars should take up Black feminist scholarship as relevant theoretical frameworks of analysis that can and should be interrogated, expanded, and critiqued. In her critique of the ways non-Black feminists dismiss the critical epistemological work of Black feminists, B. Cooper (2015: 15) writes, "It is almost as if intersectional Black feminism is treated like those annoying emergency broadcast announcements on radio and television."
2. Critical geographer Mona Domosh (2017) documents how federal agricultural programs were responsible for maintaining a poor Black working class in Alabama. Through, what she is calling "critical historical geography of race," we can begin to consider how race/racism, gender/gender discrimination, *and* location informed the "making and unmaking of US culture, politics, and power" (Domosh 2017: 766). In other words, such work considers how people's geopolitical location informs where they work, where they live, how much they are paid, and how they are viewed in legislation.

3. In her review of S. B. Edwards and Harris's (2017) *Hidden Human Computers*, Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2016) discusses the connections between Black women's knowledge of space and time and the need for the book, which is by and about Black women in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields.
4. To underscore the holistic realities Black girls (and women) experience as racialized, gendered, aged, and sexualized individuals, scholars use identifiers such as "Blackgirl" (Hill 2016) and "Blackgirlwoman" (Hill 2016; Womack 2013) to describe themselves and research participants. The rhetorical intentionality of removing the space(s) between the identities also emphasizes the inability to analyze the positions, conditions, and contributions of Black girls from one axis (e.g., race, gender, class, age, sexuality, dis/ability, etc.), as well as the incompleteness of such analyses. "Blackgirl" and "Blackgirlwoman" recognizes that Black girls enter informal and formal classroom spaces with their interlocking identities, which schools attempt to fragment through punishment and policing (Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews 2017).

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Chapter 2

Dear Toni Morrison

On Black Girls as Makers of Theories and Worlds

Katelyn M. Campbell, Lauryn DuPree,
and Lucía Mock Muñoz de Luna

Lucille Clifton's poem "what the mirror said" begins with this invocation:

> listen,
> you a wonder, ([1980] 2012: 199)

We read this poem in a graduate class on girlhoods in the spring of 2021, amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the relentless precarity that it brought into our lives. In this course, we also read Toni Morrison's ([1970] 2007) debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*. We returned to Clifton's poem throughout the semester, forming the contours of the course and rooting our analysis in the body/ies that girls inhabit. To be brought back to our bodies as a source of wonder and strength in a moment when all we wanted was to protect our bodies was a stark reminder of the multitudes and complexities of all that our girlhoods contain. Morrison's book, too, was a reckoning: challenging us to think about girls, girlhoods, space, relationality, knowledge, and so much more in different and urgently needed ways. Morrison begins her story with the marigolds that did not bloom in the fall of 1941—not just their (Claudia and her family's) marigolds, "no-

Notes for this section can be found on page 75.

body's did" ([1970] 2007: xix). Introducing Claudia and Pecola's world this way to the reader helped us understand their girlhood as intimately connected to the making of the world. As former girls, it also urged us to think of our own stories in relation to Claudia, Pecola, and the making of their, and our, world.

Together, Clifton's ([1980] 2012) poem and Morrison's ([1970] 2007) book helped shape our understanding of (our own) girlhoods as complex, relational, spatial, and deeply important to understanding the current spaces and world we are trying to (survive and) live in. One of the assignments for this course was to write a letter addressed to Toni Morrison as a response to *The Bluest Eye*; collected here are our individual letters. Writing these letters was an unexpected gift during a time of isolation and loneliness; as a method, it invited us to engage with the text with a vulnerability mostly ridiculed in academic spaces, while reaching for the relationality that Morrison's work demands. These are our stories, each offering our memories and moments of suffering, resistance, love, and joy. By way of connection, this assignment illuminated the distance created—or perhaps made more visible—by the pandemic and reminded us of the ways we struggle to build relations and even make community across the time and space between us. Our virtual class sessions each week were a refuge from loneliness and became a space of collaboration. These letters reflect that space, and we share them here as a way to think about how our stories might help us all find openings for solidarity and mutuality through and across differences and across space and time. We all might not always see our own selves or experiences in Pecola and/or Claudia (although some of us do), but we are always, *always*, in relation to these girls, to their knowledge and world-making. We should not shy away from that relation.

Each of our letters offers a different perspective on themes of reclaiming, repairing, (re)imagining, and hoping for new fertile soils, of life, death, and memory. The foci of these letters include undoing/remaking/(re)claiming the world in relation to Black girls' place-based ontoepistemologies; a politics against white epistemologies of ignorance; and affective solidarities, reflexivity, and voice. Read together, it is our hope that these letters demonstrate what might be possible through a careful (Sharpe 2016) study of Black girlhood that pays attention to spatiotemporality, sociality, relationality, reflexivity, and knowledge production, while understanding Morrison ([1970] 2007) and the girls in her book as spatial theorists and makers of knowledge (and worlds). From this perspective, in these letters, we seek to address three questions:

1. What kind of knowledge is harvested in those soils?
2. What and how does that knowledge matter?
3. What possibilities open up for all of us when we take girls seriously as theorists and creative writers of the world?

McKittrick (2000: 130) wrote, "It is through the instability and incoherence of place and sense of self that the characters in Morrison's novel [*The Bluest Eye*] continually 'become': they are embodied processes rather than passive recipients of cultural subjugation." This incoherence comes partly in the characters' relationships to Blackness and whiteness: "To be an acceptable part of the nation—to belong—is to be white" (133); how Pecola and Claudia negotiate their *un*belonging, their construction of space outside of whiteness (the United States), is a damnation of our current world. Pecola does not have a happy ending; there is no resolution, no good feeling in her story. Claudia, in the closing lines of the novel, understands that sometimes, and particularly in the case of her friend Pecola, the land and soil that should nurture Black girlhood instead "kills of its own volition" and that when this happens, "we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live" (Morrison [1970] 2007: 206). This is a particularly difficult reality to bear now, in this moment, as we all witness the utter disposability of children in the United States: the ways in which we (i.e., adults, society, this land that should nourish) have abandoned our responsibility to care and to nourish—or rather, how our society was only ever meant to nourish certain children, certain lives, at the devastating expense of others. The knowledge generated in these soils is unrelenting in its demands for upheaval, in its urgent calls for an otherwise. In these letters, the three of us attempt to reckon with this urgency while also holding Clifton's ([1980] 2012) wonder at the center of our analysis.

Understanding Me without Seeing Me: A Reflexive Letter to Toni Morrison after Reading *The Bluest Eye*

By Lauryn DuPree

Dear Ms. Morrison,

Unfortunately, you'll never read this, but as you well know, writing is not always about the audience or recipient. Writing offers a space for reflection, understanding, expression, protest, apologizing, and healing, among a host of other functions. Similarly, reading offers many of those

outlets, too. For me, reading was my safe place, my escape. As you were as a child, I too was a voracious reader, devouring books as fast as I possibly could, befriending main characters whose relationships with me were always cut too short, and mourning as I felt the pages under my fingertips begin to dwindle as I neared the book endings (Als 2003). As a young girl, I frequented libraries and bookstores, which greeted me with the smell of words on pages and the possibilities for new places and friends.

Books took me to places that my physical body did not allow. You see, I spent most of my life living with crippling hidden anxiety and existing in a body that did not feel like it belonged to me. For a number of medical reasons, I was morbidly obese for the majority of my adolescent and young adult years. Looking at me, you would have seen a brown-haired, hazel-eyed, chubby-cheeked, taller-than-average, fat white girl. In earnest, I was all of those things. What I was *not*, though, were the societal judgments that each of those descriptors carry/ied. So, although you in no way wrote *The Bluest Eye* (Morrison [1970] 2007) for me, a white girl-still-turning-woman, I could not help but see parts of me embodied in both Claudia and Pecola. Not wanting blue-eyed dolls and not totally fangirling over Shirley Temple–like white-girl icons connected me to Claudia. Struggling with what it is like to live a life in which you do not feel seen for who you are, but seen for your circumstances, the story of Pecola resonated with parts of my coming-of-age story. However, I need to say that *The Bluest Eye* is not mine to claim. I do not get to colonize the stories of Claudia and Pecola, to assert them as my own.

Usually in reading a book, I start with thinking of myself and then read to see how the characters fit *me*, as is common in Western (read: white) thought. With *The Bluest Eye*, Blackness is central, and whiteness is left on the outskirts. Upon reading your novel, I did not automatically connect with any character, and reflecting on that realization, I think that was your purpose. As a white (developing) woman, it would be nearly impossible and, dare I say, inappropriate for me to assert that I could fully, wholeheartedly, and immediately latch on to your characters as myself. Instead, you had me feverishly flipping pages, looking for where *I* fit in *your* story. That was when I realized how I used to frame the way I viewed the world, as problematic as that methodology seems when written out.

As a girl, where did *I* fit?

I suppose I could do a quick search on the internet for some cliché, vapid quotes, but it's not that easy. It's not that cut-and-dried. If the solution could be found in a Hallmark card or on a refrigerator magnet, then your

writing would not be held as salient and canonical as it is, half a century after you first penned the work.

My story of not fitting in started early in my life, and I mean *fitting* in every sense of the word. Early in life, it was fitting in with how I played, fitting into friend groups, fitting in to what I should or should not do. Later in life, it transformed into fitting in to "cool" clothes and even physically fitting into spaces.

> It had begun with Christmas and the gift of dolls. The big, the special, the loving gift was always a big, blue-eyed Baby Doll. From the clucking sounds of adults I knew that the doll represented what they thought was my fondest wish. I was bemused with the thing itself, and the way it looked. What I was I supposed to do with it? . . .
>
> . . . Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl treasured. "Here," they said "*this* is beautiful, and if you are on this day 'worthy' you may have it." (Morrison [1970] 2007: 19–21)

My very first doll (and the only doll I ever played with or connected myself to) was a Cabbage Patch doll. Obviously, as a late-1980s baby, I was apparently born into the time of the Cabbage Patch phenomenon, but I was oblivious. Did that stop my parents from stalking stores until shipments arrived? Of course not. In the small town where I lived at the time, *all* of the young girls were getting Cabbage Patch dolls, and in my parents' eyes, if any kid in town deserved a Cabbage Patch doll, it was me. That fateful day, the day these dolls were available in the only toy store in our town that carried them, my parents packed me up and let me choose exactly which Cabbage Patch doll I wanted.

There were plenty of "blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll[s]" (Morrison [1970] 2007: 21) from which I could have picked from the cabbage patch, so to speak. I chose a little boy with mocha-colored skin and short, brown, twisted hair made of yarn, dressed in a gray and yellow athletic-looking outfit. From my mother's recollection, he came with a birth certificate and the name "Michael Jack," which I determined was too cumbersome. He soon became affectionately known as Mick Jack, and he was my companion, as I was an only child at the time, not yet having the experience of a sibling. Looking back, I'm not sure if I didn't *want* a doll that looked like me, didn't *see* a doll that looked like me, or just didn't care, but I chose the doll that I truly wanted.

In any case, for a period of time, Mick Jack went with me wherever I went, including friends' houses in my neighborhood. The two girls I

played with most often were petite, blond-haired, blue-eyed girls who *always* made the better dance teams than I did. They let me play when it was not something that I would hold them back in, so doll play fit that bill. At our first play session with Mick Jack, I proudly sat him down as part of our group, and their eyes grew as big as the pretend saucers on which our plastic teacups sat.

"Why would you get *that* doll?"

"You got a boy? With dark skin? Why not a girl like you?"

"Was he on sale?"

Like Claudia, in that moment, I was infuriated. I saw these two girls with their dolls who had shiny, synthetic blond hairs on their heads and painted blue eyes, with three little dots to mimic the glossiness of eyes, sitting in front of me with faces glued in disdain. I had the urge to grab their dolls and throw them across the room. I was so proud of Mick Jack. At the time, I internalized what they said and let them know that I had, in fact, chosen him and that I needed a "break" from "girl" things. They looked at each other and giggled, still in disbelief that I would've chosen him. But then again, I wasn't like them. I didn't have the blond hair that I could find on a doll or the blue eyes that people commented on. My hazel eyes, at the time, garnered much less attention than cerulean blue eyes did. My body was awkward and chubby and soft, surely not intended for the invitation-only acrobatics team on which they both starred.

Like Claudia, in that moment, I was not just mad at their dolls; I was mad at *them*.

> "Oh," said Frieda, "somebody has to love you."
>
> "Oh."
>
> There was a long pause in which Pecola and I thought this over. It would involve, I supposed, "my man," who, before leaving me, would love me. . . .
>
> Then Pecola asked a question that had never entered my mind. "How do you do that? I mean, *how do you get somebody to love you* [emphasis added]?" But Frieda was asleep. And I didn't know. (Morrison [1970] 2007: 32)

> Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time. Thrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty. She would only see what there was to see: *the eyes of other people* [emphasis added]. (46–47)

The little girl in me who proudly brought Mick Jack to her friends' house, only to find that both me and my brown-faced doll were not good

enough, grew up looking to others for validation, approval, and affirmation. In school, it manifested differently than how it did in Pecola: I was the teacher's pet who could do no wrong. With friends, also different from Pecola's experience, I decided to go a different route. I was *everyone's* friend, allowing others to (ab)use me in ways that I thought would earn their friendship and trust. I bounced from friend group to friend group, dabbling in extracurricular activities, like Yearbook, that let me be looked up to, as you were (Als 2003). I let a boy use me for companionship, advice, pleasure, and (secretly) math answers.

Through high school and college, because of a medical condition, I rapidly gained weight despite not eating as society would deem an obese person should eat and not being "lazy" as society quickly labeled an obese person. In fact, doctors told me that because of this condition, I could eat a salad, and for whatever reason, my body would hold onto every calorie I ate as if I were starving. Friends would share meals with me and say, "Lauryn, you don't eat like a fat person." How does one respond to this? I usually internalized their use of the word *fat* and committed to never again eat in front of whomever had brought that up.

In 2009, I stepped on the scale and saw that I weighed 455 pounds. I was a first-year teacher. Like Pecola, I did not exist at all on my own; I existed only in comparison with and through the eyes of others. I had relinquished thoughts of romantic relationships because of the way I looked: "Look at you! No one could love you." I was crippled by anxiety stemming from my body: "That person died from a heart attack, and they were way skinnier than you! You're bound to die soon if they did." I did *any* and *every*thing someone asked me to do, even to my own detriment: "If you don't help them, they'll leave you."

Pecola had China, Poland, and Miss Marie. I had my mom, dad, and brother. I did not let anyone *truly* see who I was except for them. In turn, as Pecola did, I put my trust in them alone at this time in my life. Just as Pecola did, when it came to my family, I "loved them, visited them, and ran their errands" (Morrison [1970] 2007: 50–51). I lived with my family, out of insecurity, until I was twenty-six years old. I was too scared to go out into the world on my own; I thought the world would fail me because I had never learned to trust it.

In 2015, I reached my breaking point. My anxiety was worse than it had ever been, triggered by my weight. I decided to have weight-loss surgery. At first, I wanted the surgery to make me *look* like I thought I was supposed to look, or rather, how society thought I should look. The deci-

sion to have this surgery was not an easy way out; in fact, like Pecola, I was faced with a situation that threatened my life. I signed off for the surgery by saying, in essence, that I was willing to die (during surgery) in order to save myself. The difference here, though, is that whereas I had decided what the world thought about *me*, an albeit very egotistical view, Pecola did not get the chance to do so: the world made its own decisions for her.

> All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us—all who know her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. (Morrison [1970] 2007: 205)

During the first year and a half after surgery, I dropped 150 pounds very quickly. I began running and working out; I liked the way it made me feel. I liked the feeling of being in control of my body and proving my body was capable of things it had never imagined before. Those who had not given me the time of day in my "previous" body suddenly reached out to rekindle friendships. Ecstatic to finally meet the standards of others, I found myself filled in a way I had not been previously.

On the contrary, though, I had a group of friends, three girls, who I would've considered family. We did it all together: college, study abroad, trips, relationships, yo-yo diets. We had lost and gained together, or so I thought. When I began losing weight and my body began rapidly changing, they began to distance themselves from me. I had been with them through *everything* they had gone through. I had poured into them when I had nothing from which to pour. They ended up telling me that they didn't know "where they fit" in my "new life" and that my new body had created problems for them. It hit me: I was the designated fat friend. No matter how big or small they were, I would always be there, bigger than them, to make them feel better about themselves. "We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness" (Morrison [1970] 2007: 205).

I began getting attention from men. I got close to a male colleague. We had great times, and we enjoyed our time together. We would laugh and dance and listen to music. We would cook and toast drinks and dream of futures that were more expensive than our teacher incomes could afford. We would spend nights and weekends together. I decided to take him to my childhood vacation spot, a nearby beach, for a weekend trip. It was right there, in the same hotel I had stayed in many times with my family, where I learned that my voice and my no were not loud enough—or maybe they were but were ignored. It was right then, in that moment,

when I experienced a feeling of guilt and embarrassment that I had never experienced before, much less at the hands of someone else. "All of us—all who know her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her" (Morrison [1970] 2007: 205).

> Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love. (206)

> But singular as Pecola's life was, I believed some aspects of her woundability were lodged in all young girls. In exploring the social and domestic aggression that could cause a child to literally fall apart, I mounted a series of rejections, some routine, some exceptional, some monstrous. (xii)

Like Claudia takes up in this passage, I too have found that the journey to love is only as beautiful or healthy as the lover. As a damaged girl, I could only love myself through ways that were damaging. As a hurting girl, I could only hurt myself. Claudia's words about love provide a glimmer of hope, not because she writes from a place of hope but because she writes from a place of despair and one that we hope to avoid.

Pecola was never loved well. One may argue that she was *loved*, but the circumstances of that "love" are veritably damaging and leave readers wondering if she is damned to an eternity of never being loved.

If love is contingent upon beauty and one never feels beautiful, is love, by definition, attainable? Can love grow from harm? For Pecola's sake, for Claudia's sake, and for my sake, I hope so.

When I first sat down to write this letter after reading *The Bluest Eye*, I started blindly, not knowing what it was I felt like I needed to say. By just beginning to write, I found my way. I found my words. Although you did not write this novel with a girl like me in mind, your words impacted me in a way that I was in no way prepared to experience. You kept me in my comfort zone, you pushed me out of my comfort zone, and you took me to zones in which I had no experience to ground myself.

You didn't write *The Bluest Eye* for me. Your words were not crafted for me. Yet, your words still helped illuminate the dark parts of my own past in my journey to finding love. I wrote words in this letter that I have only spoken to two other people and have never written down.

Although I know I wasn't who you had in mind while writing, your words grabbed my mind. I'm not one to claim the pain and stories of others as my own or to swap pain-for-pain stories, but I can tell you this:

the soil in the world in which we live does not let every flower bloom. Yet, your words have been the fertilizer for so many flowers to have a chance at growing that would not have normally had a chance at survival, much less blooming. Single flowers are pretty to look at, but beauty comes in numbers.

Your work here is done; it's up to us now to help the seedlings thrive into flowers. Thank you.

Love,

Lauryn

"How Much Is a Little Girl Worth?": Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and a Politics against White Epistemologies of Ignorance

By Katelyn M. Campbell

Dear Toni Morrison,

A few weeks ago, I sat in front of my computer screen listening to the harrowing testimony of four former USA Gymnastics athletes before the US Senate Judiciary Committee about the FBI's gross mishandling of team doctor Larry Nassar's extensive and serial sexual abuse of women and girls. The four former gymnasts, now women, each testified about the extent to which the FBI had failed them. One by one, they shared their stories of being ignored, gaslit, and abandoned.

Perhaps the most heartbreaking testimony came from Simone Biles (Barrett 2021), the lone Black gymnast on the stand, who is widely regarded as the greatest gymnast of all time. She began her testimony by expressing her discomfort with why she had come and what she had to share before reciting her accomplishments, which include winning twenty-five world championship medals and seven Olympic medals while competing for Team USA. Through tears, Biles shared that she was also a victim of child sexual abuse and that she offered her testimony with the hope that no other child would have to experience the abuse that Nassar had perpetrated and that the governing bodies of her sport and federal law enforcement had enabled. She detailed the extent to which those with power over her situation had failed to address the abuse that she and hundreds of other gymnasts had endured. Biles also pointed out that she didn't become aware that USA Gymnastics had known about her abuse until long after

she reported it, and that they had allowed her to compete in the 2016 Olympic Games with this knowledge without anyone having contacted her or her parents. She specified, "It truly feels like the FBI turned a blind eye to us." Biles then invoked fellow gymnast and survivor of Nassar's abuse Rachael Denhollander's question in her address to the committee: "How much is a little girl worth?"

I open my letter to you with this story from Biles because as she and her three fellow survivors—Aly Raisman, McKayla Maroney, and Maggie Nichols—spoke, I was reminded of the story of young Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*. As the panel of gymnasts noted, if their abuse as highly visible public figures was not taken seriously, how could anyone trust the FBI to handle other cases with the care and diligence those circumstances necessitate? Although Pecola might not be famous in the style of Biles and her fellow athletes, she is a known entity within her community, marked physically by the abuse she endures and the pregnancy she is forced to bear after being raped by her father, Cholly. The ways young Pecola is visible are used as sources of blame rather than to spotlight the systems and individuals that fail her. When she becomes pregnant, those in her world seem to refashion her into adulthood despite her young age, regarding her as a pariah rather than a victim, a fallen woman rather than an abused child. Yet, we know from the visions you provide of Pecola's interiority that she is indeed still a Black *girl*, navigating girlhood experiences of struggling to belong that are further inflected by racism.

The Bluest Eye is a story not only about Pecola's abuse but also about a girlhood in motion. As McKittrick (2000) noted, Pecola's entrance into the novel comes through her family's physical movement from the South northward to Lorain, Ohio, along the path followed by many Black Southerners during the Great Migration. Pecola is further moved by her desperate desire to be loved, a goal which she will go to impossible lengths to reach. Even as she is marked by her abuse and confined within a space of social exteriority by racism and being branded as a fallen girl, Pecola continues to seek that which eludes her, represented by the metaphor of a pair of blue eyes.

When I first read *The Bluest Eye*, I reacted with horror. I saw in Pecola my own childhood experiences with sexual violence and the failure of those around me to take the knowledge of my abuse seriously. At times, I wondered if I could make it to the end of the novel. The manner in which you address Pecola's abuse is matter of fact. Your account is not told through insinuation or metaphor but rather in a direct manner—a

way that narratives of sexual abuse tend to elide. At the time, I wondered why you gave a chapter-length space for Cholly's backstory. His journey is marked by his own history of abuse and neglect and his reckoning with having grown up with what was likely the label "bastard," doomed from the beginning.[1] His story inspires sympathy until you later connect it with what he becomes. After reading that chapter, I felt conflicted about how I felt bad for what happened to Cholly as a child while still holding him responsible for the rape he commits as an adult. A generous reading would allow for the idea that perhaps this move of yours is to allow readers to see how structural forces produce a moment when parents can transgress their own place in a normative orientation to girlhood by transforming a subject whom they are supposed to protect into an object of their sexual desire and predation.

In the months that have passed since my initial reading of *The Bluest Eye*, I have continued to think back to Pecola's story and what you were trying to tell us through it. For me, among many things, it sparks the methodological question of what would happen if people in power regarded childhood sexual abuse as what it unfortunately is—ordinary—and how that informs the way one considers ideas of girlhood. In acknowledging the violent and quotidian nature of childhood sexual abuse, particularly as it is inflicted upon Black girls, it becomes possible to challenge hegemonic constructions of girlhood that regard any sexual experience as a marker of transgression violating a certain social contract that makes some girls worthy candidates for protection. This practice also holds space for the ways hegemonic norms for girlhood seek to construct a false utopia that girls strive for but most often can never reach. My thinking is ever influenced by the theorist José Esteban Muñoz (2009), whose work in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* set out a queer mode for thinking about utopia as always being situated on the horizon that "queer" as a category strives to reach. How might we consider hegemonic notions of girlhood as a social location that, while residing on the horizon, is in fact a dystopian mirage rather than a safe haven? Such a consideration requires an appraisal of the extrapolations and omissions required to construct the white heteropatriarchal ideal girl.

I am a white settler former-girl who was born in a small town near Charleston, West Virginia, in 1995. I grew up living with both of my biological parents. Both of them had steady work throughout my childhood, and my younger sister and I rarely wanted for much. Almost all of my biological family lived within a few hours of us, with the notable

exception of one of my aunts, who moved to Georgia in the mid-1980s to work in the carpet factories in Dalton and never returned. I remember learning about my aunt through stories that largely regarded her as aberrant and not someone I should aspire to be like. She had struggled in school, whereas her three sisters excelled; she started drinking early and became an alcoholic in high school after her boyfriend died in a car accident, in which she was also involved; she experienced what her sisters called "delusions of grandeur," in which she would obsess over how their family was too poor to allow her to live in the kind of environment that would appease her anxiety. In every story about my aunt when she was only elementary-school age, she was presented as almost an adult, with full cognition and control over her actions. To some extent, she became the Pecola of our family, the person on whom blame is placed whether or not they were at fault for what happened to them.

I formulated a lot of my ideas around what it meant to be a "good" girl through this framework and in the context of a locally conservative political environment. Although my family was not religious and had fairly progressive views about the place of women and girls in society, I picked up many normative and limiting ideas about how I should be from my classmates, their parents, and my teachers in my rural and conservative public school district. School was the site where I became oriented to the image of a hegemonic version of girlhood that structured normative assessments of my and my peers' characters and played out in decisions about our lives.[2] A "good" girl at our school was generally white, able-bodied, thin, conventionally attractive but uninterested in sex, a good student but quiet in class, and from a middle-class family, among a number of other qualities. Our varying abilities to embody this vision of an ideal girl played out in our educational lives; for instance, girls I knew who became pregnant while we were in middle and high school were often hidden away by the school or their parents. I still do not know what happened to several of my classmates who became pregnant when we were only twelve years old. This was amid the "crisis" around teen pregnancy that dominated headlines in the 2000s and early 2010s, when shows like MTV's *Teen Mom* churned out new images of "failed" girls each week.

Despite the near impossibility of the hegemonic utopian girlhood that white supremacy and patriarchy imagine, girls nonetheless try to embody it. These efforts manifest through acts of omission and prayer; they show up as compartmentalization of harassment so as not to be seen as a "problem," as depicted by young Pecola going to the home of Soap-

head Church, despite being afraid of him, to ask for the blue eyes she seeks so she can earn the love she so desperately wants. Aspirations toward normative girlhood can furthermore be read as aspirations toward protection: it is painful to deviate from normative structures of power, and conformity offers a particular kind of embrace. To paraphrase and expand Simone Biles's question from earlier in my letter, "How much is a little girl worth?" (Barrett 2021): what would it take for a little girl to be worth enough to be protected from harm? The desire to be safe from harm—in Pecola's case, harm that is perpetrated within one's own family through both abuse and unloving relationships—motivates girls to pursue even the most impossible attempts at assimilation.

I admit as I write to you that there were parts of *The Bluest Eye* that I struggled to read and that I struggle even harder to write about now. Like in Pecola's family, there was a predator in our lives when I was growing up: he was not a blood relative but the son of a woman who cared for children out of her home while our parents were at work. For a long time, those of us who were victimized by him did not speak about what happened to us ("Quiet as it's kept"; Morrison [1970] 2007: xix), and when we finally spoke about it years later, we were either not believed or told to go back out and play without any further discussion. As I consider the disappointment of our attempt to get help, I am reminded that despite the failure of adults in our lives to step in, as white girls, we were more likely to have been believed in the first place, or at least to have been believed to not be at fault or somehow fatally flawed even if we still were not understood as victims.

The silences each of us kept were part of a coping strategy that relied on a logic of omission: if we did not acknowledge or even could eventually forget what happened, then maybe it would be as if the violation had never occurred, and we could move on with our lives with the trappings of the privileges otherwise afforded to us by our race and station. Yet, attempts to forget did not, in fact, make the story go away. Learning to sit with the knowledge of what happened in order to find paths forward has been critical for building our adult lives.

Scholars within feminist philosophy and critical ethnic studies have pointed to the ways the kinds of ignorance that we were expected to produce and embody are tied to white, Western epistemologies. Mills (2007) argued that white ignorance is a handicap of white supremacy and that it is not simply white people just not knowing something but rather a not-knowing that comes from racism. In my case, the production of igno-

rance or not-knowing through acts of narrative omission yields the possibility that I and others could perhaps someday still reach the utopian standard of white girlhood that is often understood as correlating with living a good life. Thinking more broadly with Mills with regard to the broader milieu of childhood sexual abuse and the broader cultural refusal to know that one in nine girls under eighteen years of age experience sexual abuse seems again to serve the purpose of maintaining the impossible utopian/dystopian subject of girlhood as a tool for social regulation in service of white heteropatriarchy.[3] Rejecting a white epistemology of ignorance requires a fulsome engagement with the intersectional nature of sexual violence, particularly as it relates to the experiences of girls who are marginalized by racism.

In keeping with this charge against ignorance, I admire the way your writing from the beginning requires us to inhabit both the bitter and the sweet. In reply to a friend who asked me about what I was reading when your novel was assigned for a class on Black girlhoods, I remarked that your prose never allows us to sit with a moment of joy long before you introduce a moment of pain or sorrow. From your opening lines—"Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow" (Morrison [1970] 2007: xix)—one learns that the seed, so often seen as a symbol of hope or potential, is not always the blessing that it might seem. The potential utopian world imagined by Pecola's cousins once the marigolds bloom is foreclosed by both their failure to emerge and the presumption that, in the absence of some other explanation, the fallen Pecola is to blame. Through the act of keeping it quiet, of either refusing or being unable to acknowledge or process the violation of Pecola that has occurred, she is rendered as the aberration that soils the plan for perfection. That rendering registers as trauma for Pecola—a trauma that I imagine carries forward in the lives of other Black girls whether they are survivors of the sexual violence Pecola experiences or the quotidian practices of estrangement that structure her daily existence of marginalization and unbelonging.

All the while, Pecola navigates the geographies of her everyday life: the house her father burns down, her new temporary home with her cousins, and the school she attends with them. Pecola often sits alone at school, wondering aloud and in private about what it would take to get someone to love her. Despite its horror and her desire to exist otherwise, Pecola seems to accept her fate, trying to find ways to improve her day-to-day

life while recognizing that although she may never be perfect, she may one day be loved. Through Pecola's isolation, you give us glimpses into her inner world: a geography of its own that holds the knowledge that those around her might keep quiet. This inner world represents a space of both confinement and possibility; it is not only the space where Pecola must go when she has nowhere else left to turn but also a space of potentiality where she can imagine a future otherwise.

Although we get mostly hints of Pecola's interiority through your narrative, the pieces of her we actually see remind me of Jacobs's (1861) writings in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* describing the seven years she hid in a garret, where she could see out to look upon her enslaver and children but could not be seen herself. McKittrick (2006) wrote about this site of Jacobs's fugitivity as a particular form of Black women's geographies, a kind of invisibility that both causes pain and renders a particular vantage point from which Black female subjects can observe the world and develop situated knowledges about it while remaining undetected. These knowledges can be used for acts of subversion and also self-protection.

Your theorizing of Pecola's experience presents an important addendum of specificity to McKittrick's (2006) and Jacobs's (1861) arguments and experiences, suggesting that although Black girls may share some experiences with Black women with regard to experiences of fugitivity, Black girls also live out that positionality while operating developmentally as children who may not have the tools necessary to make sense of it. For instance, whereas Pecola knows the feeling of her isolation, her environment does not seem to enable her to understand the ways that isolation is not her fault but rather the result of a confluence of forces that label her as errant or excessive. This inability to perceive seems to be what fuels her goal of making herself desirable by pursuing whiteness vis-à-vis her pair of blue eyes; it is likely also the cause of what her cousin Claudia describes as Pecola's insanity. It is indeed maddening to live as one's embodied self while aspiring toward a different embodiment and subjectivity, attempting to perform the latter in the hope of escaping the former.

What might a politic against white ignorance in support of Black girls that understands school as a site where norms about girlhood subjectivity are made, shaped, and taught look like? Ahmed (2006) pointed toward an interpretation of socialization and belonging that understands subjectivity as occurring through an orientation to objects that is affected by the locations from which one views the world. With school as a site where subjects with varying social locations intersect, it is first important to ac-

knowledge and understand the positionalities from which students enter the classroom—a task that requires the eschewal of epistemic practices of ignorance I discussed earlier in favor of listening to and *hearing* girls.

As part of that listening and hearing, Ann Cvetkovich's work on trauma, most clearly articulated in her 2003 monograph, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, proves instructive for understanding the archive from which girls draw to narrate their experiences. As she approached the past, Cvetkovich aimed to find where trauma leaves traces when it resists consciousness (its own form of not-knowing), sourcing evidence from a wide archive of objects and experiences that are embedded in performances and the everyday. In thinking with Cvetkovich, I wonder how a project that takes the trauma of girlhood seriously, while also not centering trauma so emphatically that it elides the possibility that girlhood might be a space of pleasure, could help one understand better paths forward for nurturing girls whose trauma marks them as outside of hegemonic norms. If one were to treat trauma as evidence of oppressive systems of power at work rather than an individual failing or experience, how could that open up the possibility for breaking down discursive and interpersonal practices that marginalize Black girls? Perhaps a more useful conception of girlhood within this framework would not rely on attempts to produce a universalized girl subject, but rather would rely on understanding how girls have the ability to be their own agents and theorists of their lives while also needing specialized care and attention to support them as they grow into the adults they will one day become in a world where abuse and trauma are unfortunately all too ordinary.

Thank you again for your generative work.

Sincerely,

Katelyn M. Campbell

Pecola Breedlove and the Undoing of the World

By Lucía Mock Muñoz de Luna

Dear Professor Morrison,

Happy belated birthday! I hope your day was a joyous one, spent with loved ones and good food, wherever it is that you are these days.

Thank you for your reply to our last letter to you; when my colleagues and I wrote to you in November of last year to ask you about

your thoughts on the field of critical whiteness studies, I certainly did not expect a response. But with what seems like your usual clarity of mind, you sent one of your books in response. It reminds me of your rejoinder to Rose's (1998) inane question to you so many years ago: you said that white people had a serious problem with racism and that we needed to get to the business of doing something about it. He asked you for some free advice (it's never free, though, especially when a white man like him is demanding it from you), and you simply responded, "It's all in my books."

So, I am very grateful for your response, particularly because your gentle nudge for me to return to *The Bluest Eye* has reminded me of the importance of simplicity when looking at (and reading) the world. I use *simplicity* with purpose here, without meaning to conflate it with a *lack* of complexity or importance but because I'm starting to realize that many times in the academy long, complicated words and sentences and thoughts are assumed to have some deeper meaning, whereas most of the time, that complication is just subterfuge for bad ideas, for a lack of imagination and courage. Perhaps more importantly, you've reminded me to appreciate that simplicity is never really all that simple, is it? Also, the narrative of simplicity—and innocence, too—in/of childhood often is subterfuge for the harm that the world, and we adults, carry out upon children. That is, who gets to have a simple childhood? Who, in this world, is seen and treated like a child? What does that say about us? In some ways, this letter is my attempt to sit with your response to Rose ("It's all in my books"), to take Black girls' ways of knowing and being in the world as theory, and to meditate on what Black girls' theorizing in *The Bluest Eye* can teach white people about racism. I focus here in many ways on Pecola as a theory builder, in the small moments when she observes the world for what it is, with simple but devastating acuity.

This is an aside, but this realization about simplicity has been one of the most important of my life, as a girl and now as a woman. My uncle (my dad's brother), a Harvard-educated theologian and polyglot, has called my mom "dull" and laughed at her lack of education and globalism; it's some form of hatred that I don't quite have a name for but have felt deeply. (Is it sexism or exotification of Spaniards? My dad's family has always had a sort of Hemingwayesque relationship with Spain: they see the country as their playground, a place for pleasure and not much else. I see this dismissiveness in their treatment of my mom as well.) Looking back now, I can see that as a girl, I was taught that I should laugh at my mom, too: at the simplicity of her ideas, at her feelings, *at her*. Unlearning

that type of (self-)hatred, and finding my way back to my mom, has been a long and needed journey. Along the way, as I mentioned, I've come to see simplicity for the joys and challenges it can bring: clarity, incisiveness, an unflinching commitment to and questioning of truth, and an opening to think carefully about love—like Pecola noting, in a passing moment, her inability to understand why people do not like dandelions ("Why, she wonders, do people call them weeds? She thought they were pretty"; Morrison [1970] 2007: 47). Pecola sees beauty in what others deem ugly, a pest. There is nothing dull about simplicity; its sharpness can cut. Pecola's observation of dandelions, to me, cuts to the heart of the book: the wonder and questioning of how the world has come to the decision of what, and who, is deemed worthy and lovable. In her own response ("She thought they were pretty"), she refuses the world, insisting instead on the beauty she sees and feels. The tragedy of her story, of course, is that she cannot see this same beauty in herself; the damnation of our society comes in how a child like Pecola is destroyed because we refuse to see her beauty or allow her to see it in herself. But I'm getting ahead of myself. What I mean to say is that childhood and simplicity are often connected in my mind, and I want to think through why and how these ideas are in conversation and why you chose to write your first book through the story of a young Black girl and her friends.

If I'm being honest, though, one of the difficulties of living through a pandemic is how much time we've had to think, what it means to take stock of the moment and the world we live in, and what our lives mean in a world like this one. The truth is that as much as I'd like to imagine myself as someone who at least recognizes the injustices of the world and is no longer shocked at its cruelty, I still find myself at a loss when seeing how this year has exposed "the calculus of living and dying" (Brand 2020: para. 6) that forms the contours of our world, and the gleefulness we seem to have in killing one another (particularly the most vulnerable among us), in putting one another at risk for the sake of a return to normal, a return to the steady march toward mutual destruction. So, I am grateful for your words, but I admit that they come at a time when it is hard to feel faith in the world, to not see it for anything but the disaster it is. Pecola's story reminds me of the all-consuming despair that the (white) world puts on the shoulders of some people, especially those who are not white, not male, not straight, not able-bodied, not rich, not a citizen, and so on. Pecola's story also makes me think of how this despair has been written as almost inevitable and all-consuming. And maybe because, in addition to

everything else, we've spent this winter with what feels like constant rain and cold, this moment reminds me of Lorde's ([1988] 2017: 53) question to herself as she battled liver cancer: "How do I hold faith with sun in a sunless place?"

I read your words again while also reading Dumas's (2018) writing on the necessity of meditating on Black suffering, and the dangerous limits of racial justice work in education. He asked those of us in education to consider deeply how schools harm Black students *as a function* of schooling, as a necessary part of education as we know it today. He described Black suffering as the "the ontological position of the Black as having no Human place in the world" (2018: 33), and as a necessary condition of schooling as we know it now. Dumas claimed that unless we all commit ourselves to the death of whiteness, that is, the end of the current world order, any and all attempts at justice will fall short because they only reform a system that necessitates Black death and suffering. Albeit difficult to read, he also described several instances of Black children being brutalized by the structures of schooling and the people who uphold those structures. We assigned Dumas's chapter last month (as we have done for the past two years) in the social justice course that I co-teach with my advisor, who is also a white woman. Intentionally, we read his piece after we read the first few chapters of your book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Morrison 1992), as a way to think through how white people come to know themselves through a relation of dominance to Blackness and how this relation manifests itself in education, which presents itself as an unquestionable social good. But each time we read Dumas's and your chapters together, I'm uneasy with what it means for two white women in a predominantly white field, with mostly white (women) students in class, to meditate on Black suffering when we are often the ones who facilitate that suffering in schools. I'm also uneasy because we don't *actually* meditate on Black suffering: we spend less than one class session on it and then move on. We intellectualize Black suffering, playact at solidarity and understanding, and then continue on as if we've crossed off another item on a checklist that absolves us of our participation in and upholding of a world that delights in anti-Black violence.

I'm starting to think that this thin engagement with Black thought is the standard in white anti-racist work. We list off authors and thinkers we've read as some sort of conquest, claiming them as foundational to our work without actually deeply engaging with the theory put forth (yes, that's shade at critical whiteness scholars again; I won't let that go), and

then our work remains suspiciously safe for and legible to those in power. At this point, I'm not sure which is worse: a disingenuous, or failed, attempt to think with/alongside Black studies, or ignoring it altogether and willfully remaining beholden to white thought. All of this, of course, still holds us non-Black people always in relationship to Blackness, and it is a difficult truth to reconcile with the fact that my sense of being has been rooted in domination and hierarchy—and hatred. I see it now when looking back on my girlhood and the abuse of my mom, and I see it in my identity and work as an educator, where anti-Blackness is cloaked in language of caring, progress, and justice.

I'm also uneasy because I'm not sure that we (i.e., educators, white people, those invested in whiteness) understand what it would mean to behold Black life outside of the violence of whiteness, and I don't know if reading Dumas's (2018) work (and even your work, Ms. Morrison) under the current conditions of a (university) classroom allow for anything beyond a false momentary empathy that ultimately does little to affect Black liberation—which, I am coming to think, will also mean liberation from the Human, as Wynter (2003) noted, which would mean liberation for us all. Gray (2021) recently posted a short piece online in which he wrote, "*Description is not liberation*" (para. 11), questioning how and why images and descriptions of violence against Black people are used to "fuel its [the anti-Black world of white progressives] rage and its 'progress'" (para. 18), making the violence necessary in order to provoke empathy in the white conscience. Ultimately, though, that empathy has done little to make material changes that support Black life or liberation in this country, so what does it mean to evoke Black suffering to justify our work? Does it only serve to reify the (self-)importance of our work? Can white people (and those who maintain whiteness) ever position ourselves to understand Black life outside of suffering, outside of *use*, outside and beyond domination?

I find myself wondering if *The Bluest Eye* is a meditation on Black suffering—the *particular* suffering of a Black girl, who stands at the nexus of so much vitriol and violence (you describe Black girls as being the most vulnerable and delicate members of our world)—and what it means to behold Black suffering and meditate on it through the eyes and experiences of a girl, a child. What does it mean to spend time with a girl whom the world cannot seem to know, or love, without violence ("Love is never any better than the lover"; Morrison [1970] 2007: 206)? What does it mean to expose the violence of the world through the eyes of childhood,

whose simplicity makes its analysis so direct, so damning? You wrote in the foreword of *The Bluest Eye* that ultimately you failed in your intention with the book: "many readers remain touched but not moved" (Morrison [1970] 2007: xii). This reflection has stuck with me because of its honesty and because I wonder what that being "moved" did/would have/will look like. You said you wanted readers not to pity Pecola for her being smashed by the world but rather to interrogate themselves for the smashing. Yet, what good is this interrogation if it doesn't lead to the destruction of the self, of the world?

All of this is to say that perhaps when you told Rose (1998) that your advice to us white people could be found in your books, I take it to mean that you wanted us to spend time in a world that is not our own, a world where we are not the center (or that does away with the notions of centers, and domination, altogether). This spending time with is akin not only to meditating, to pausing, to sitting with Black suffering, but also to what exists beyond and in excess of it—maybe what McKittrick (2021: 1) calls "black livingness," but I'm hesitant to say that because I just started reading her new book, and I don't know if this is quite the idea I'm searching for. You said elsewhere that you

> enjoyed identifying the process by which one is victimized in order to point the finger at exits. Not as escape hatches based on fantasy . . . but real ones. Ones in which the knowledge of the past . . . makes it possible for one to go forward honestly, carefully. (Frías et al. 1994: 275–76)

Your work builds worlds that turn the white gaze on itself, with the point, I think, of exposing it for the travesty it is and ultimately making it irrelevant; Blackness was and is the center (or like I wrote earlier, Blackness is recognized as *the* universe, which has no center but rather is ever expansive; Crawley 2020), and whiteness is dispensed with—or maybe just left to wither and die.

When I read *The Bluest Eye* again this time, I was struck by the small moments we get to spend with Pecola, and the gentle yet incisive nature of her relationship to the world. We witness the brief moments of tenderness she experiences with Ms. Marie, Ms. China, and Ms. Poland. We read about Pecola's meditations on disappearing and then belonging to the world (alongside the dandelions—a source of admiration and then the target of her brief but searing anger at the world). We see her gentleness with animals, and theirs with her. We sting in her ability to understand that her Blackness is the source of distaste in white people. We ache in her

question to Claudia, "How do you get someone to love you?" (Morrison 1992: 32).

Because of these glimpses into her inner world, her undoing feels all the more tragic, all the more a loss, but maybe not a surprise. I'm reminded of Saidiya Hartman's (2019) prose poem "The Plot of Her Undoing," which traces the historical and contemporary violence enacted on the titular "'her'—a collective figure whose dispossession forms the basis of our world" (Brooks 2020: para. 2). The piece is unrelenting in its descriptions of violence, the myriad ways the world dispossesses and disappears the most vulnerable of us. Then, toward the end of the poem, the refrain throughout the poem ("The plot of her undoing") becomes instead "The undoing of the plot"; Hartman shifts her attention to the hidden agency and furtive refusals that also define the "her," the "collective figure," who in this moment I cannot help but see in/as Pecola. She is undone by the world; yes, she is the receptacle (a mirror, maybe) for the ugliness of the world. Yet, I wonder if, in choosing to tell her story, you were attempting to undo the plot, to show the moments of her refusals of her undoing. Ultimately, she is undone. But in that undoing, sometimes I feel she is still refusing the world, in a profound way. At the very least, in telling her story, you change the focus from her undoing to the plot (i.e., the gaze, the world) that has undone her.

I'm reminded of Samah Jabr, one of the few psychiatrists in the West Bank of Palestine, who asserts that PTSD is a Western concept that cannot express the condition of her country and people, so she asks, "What is sick, the context or the person?" (quoted in Goldhill 2019: para. 2). This question is in some ways reflected in Claudia's final realization in *The Bluest Eye*:

> I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. (Morrison [1970] 2007: 206)

If the soil is hostile to certain seeds, if the world we have created kills those most vulnerable and delicate, what does that mean for those of us who survive? What does that say about those of us who tend the soil, or those of us who claim the victim had no right to live? What happens to those seeds that cannot grow? To put those questions in the context of the rest of this letter, what would it mean to meditate on Black suffering not as

a method of producing white empathy but as a way to destroy the world that demands suffering? What if this meditation allowed one to see the refusals of dispossession and disappearance that otherwise are not beheld? I don't know if this is possible. (Of course, none of this is really the point of your writing, is it? At least, what a white person does with it was not really a concern for you, because white feelings were not the focus of your work. Perhaps that is what makes your writing a liberating force. But still, I find myself asking these questions in relation to your work, and I would rather struggle through these questions than not, and discontinue producing the knowledge that my university and my family taught me to.)

To tie all of this back to my first question, what can Pecola's theorizing teach us white people about racism, about anti-Blackness? Or, to not let myself off the hook here, what do Pecola's ways of being and living and loving teach *me* about racism, about the world? This question begets others: What does it mean for me to (be)hold Black suffering and meditate on it through the eyes and experiences of a girl, a child? What does it mean for me to expose (and/or be exposed to) the violence of the world through the eyes of girlhood? What does it mean to be *moved*?

I'm not sure I can answer these questions, at least not with any certainty. Yet, this is my feeling: following Gray's (2021) writing, I am troubled by the ways that much of white anti-racist identity and work has been fueled by Black suffering, that white progress is dependent on the (ab)use of Black life. I think you wrote about this, too, in your critique of US literature: that the American self comes to know itself through its opposition to Blackness and that the "Africanist presence" (Morrison 1992: 6), as you called it, remains an unacknowledged force in shaping this country and world, both in literature and beyond. What I think is an important first step for us white people is to recognize this relation and then sit with the ways it is predicated on domination and "the mandate for conquest" (3). We consume and attempt to possess Black life and being, even in our attempts to rewrite ourselves as anti-racist, that is, always good and not implicated in this relation of domination. If, however, we were to start from your questions—"Who are you without racism? Are you any good?" (Rose 1998)—we might begin to ask more incisive, unforgiving questions of ourselves and of who we are and have been. Where that takes me is back to my girlhood and back to the ways I saw the world and was educated into whiteness. Perhaps by beginning there, starting with my girlhood, I might start to see and understand myself (and then others) beyond and against conquest and dispossession.

In the graduate course I am currently in that prompted this letter-writing, one of the overarching questions is, Who is the girl? I think about that now in relation to Pecola, to myself, to what *girl* has come to represent: the "'her'—a collective figure whose dispossession forms the basis of our world" (Brooks 2020: para. 2), and maybe also the figure through which the glimpses of liberation begin to take form. My own relationship to the girl becomes complicated as I realize my participation in the world that smashed Pecola, alongside the ways the world has sought to destroy me (i.e., we are all being undone by this world: the where and how and why and when and violence differ, but none of us escapes the undoing), and I recognize the small moments of escape, where the exits are illuminated and a way out and through reveals itself.

You said in an interview that the way forward was "honestly, carefully" (Frías et al. 1994: 276). I hope we find that way out before it's too late, like it was for Pecola. Until then, I'll return to your words and attempt to "honestly, carefully," attend to the girl described therein.

With love and appreciation,

Lucía

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Notes

1. I am reminded here of Spillers's (1987) reading of Moynihan's (1965) report two decades after your novel first hit bookstore shelves, as Spillers spoke to the way this kind of fatherless doom was institutionalized during slavery and its afterlives in the United States.
2. I'm thinking here about Ahmed's (2006) project on exploring how sexuality is lived as an orientation. She theorized orientations as being organized around discursive desire lines. We all learn where our line is over time, and the lines around which we orient ourselves both enable certain possibilities and obscure others.
3. For statistics on sexual abuse of children, see RAINN (n.d.).

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Chapter 3

Queer Like Me

Black Girlhood Sexuality on the Playground, under the Covers, and in the Halls of Academia

Adilia E. E. James

I find that women—myself included—both in and out of academia, talk an awful lot about the dangers of female sexuality. In my search for a market of lesbian pornography made by lesbians, I wonder if this small effort will really distract me from my gut feeling that I am still supporting a larger industry that is based squarely on female exploitation. I have been privy to a number of college classroom discussions that debate the responsibility of sexual health teachers in the age of abstinence education. We are always left wondering, just how harmful is it to tell adolescent girls that the only way to avoid HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases is to ignore their desire to have sexual relationships? I have battled with these tensions throughout my childhood and young adulthood. On the one side, there is familial and church community pressure to conform to a "proper," middle-class conception of Black womanhood with its (hetero) sexual conservatism. On the competing end, there is my overwhelming urge to explore my sexual desires—desires that are made even more blasphemous by their queerness, youthfulness, and consciously-enacted na-

Notes for this section can be found on page 85.

ture. The first side, I am told, will guarantee my physical safety and social/moral respectability. The latter would only let me loose into a world of exploitation, crippling indulgence, and regrettable indecency.

The sexual dangers are real and should continue to receive our attention, but not at the expense of those lessons found in women's stories about sexual pleasure. As Carole S. Vance heeded in her introduction to the collection, *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*:

> To focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women's experiences with sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live. (1992: 1)

Growing up as a Black girl who loved other girls, I remember moments in my childhood and adolescence when my secret quests to satisfy my sexual desires forced me to problematize several aspects of my developing identity: if I did not comfortably fit in either of the mutually exclusive categories of Black womanhood, where did I belong? It is my hope that these stories and others like it open up a new research space in youth sexuality studies that would encourage young Black girls to no longer view their sexual development as something to be feared in silence, but rather as an opportunity to cultivate self-awareness, or subjectivity, and personal agency through the exploration of their sexual urges. This research space could contribute to the construction of an integrated Black feminist, queer, and pleasure-centered model of sexuality education that allows youth to freely ponder/discuss/theorize about race, class, gender, and age tensions as they relate to sexuality. Sexual health educators could work together with Black girls to develop modes of addressing these tensions in ways that respect the vast variety of individual feelings on sexual pleasure and danger. Such an intervention is essential at a time when youth pretty much only have access to abstinence-only-until-marriage programs that fail to recognize sexual desire or oppressive interventions that seek to punish the erotic.

I adopt as my theoretical framework for this project Laura Alexandra Harris's (1996) queer black feminism, which she developed to disrupt the silences in feminist, Black feminist, and queer theories on issues of race, class, and sexuality. This theoretical site allows me to explore the significant—yet rarely discussed—intersection of sexual pleasure and the politics of race and class. As Harris argues:

> Queer and black allow me to bring the personal and the political together without having one circumscribe the other. . . . In this critical personal narrative, the

> queer modifies and is modified by the black which then doubly modifies the feminism. I contend that as these multiple modifiers illuminate contradictions and problems they produce an axis where pleasure and politics and feminist bodies can compile their histories. (1996: 4)

The stories from my childhood will illustrate a process of feminist identity development that, at its core, is different from that of the White, middle-class, heterosexual women that popular culture still largely identifies as leaders of the mainstream feminist movement. My identity is defined by a distinct racialized, classed, and heteronormative gender domination.

The fact that I have pursued a divergent sexual pleasure under these conditions means that I enter into feminist theory at an angle that opens up new discussions on young, queer Black girls' sexualities (Harris 1996). I seek to salvage a queer Black female body erased from the dominant White feminist agenda. I do not wish to disregard race, class, and sexual identities when researching Black girls' sexualities in order to maintain a fictitious single feminist identity (Collins 2000; Hammonds 1994). Neither do I choose to respond to the hypersexualization of Black women in the media and academic research with indignant silence. I research and publicly talk about Black girls' sexualities because Black women's silent resistance has not always proven to be an effective coping mechanism, nor has it curbed the abundance of racialized sexual stereotypes that permeate our culture (Collins 2004; Davis 1997; DiClemente, Harrington, and Davies 2007). Finally, I theorize from a position of pleasure in order to bring balance to the youth sexuality literature. The current research is narrowly focused on Black girls' sexual abuse and the dangerous consequences of their deviant behaviors (e.g., Johnson et al. 2005; Price 2004; Sparks, Peterson, and Tangenberg 2005). And as for the body of work that actually examines young Black female sexual pleasure, there is certainly room for deeper inquiry.

The most notable effort in this regard is Deborah L. Tolman's *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality* (2005). In her intimate interviews with girls aged fifteen to eighteen-years-old, she heard young women sheepishly deny any desire, choice, agency, and responsibility in their sexual relationships. These girls alleged that sexual intercourse was something that happened to them, often much to their surprise. Upon identifying contradictions in several of the girls' interviews, Tolman speculated that these reports were "cover stories" that her interviewees concocted with the hope of avoiding social stigma, restrictive moral obligations, and psychological torment. These girls live in a world where adults are invested

in limiting young female sexual subjectivity. Sexual health educators warn girls to "just say no" to sexually charged boyfriends, lest they ruin their lives with unwanted pregnancies. Media outlets, including teen magazines, sitcoms, and movies, chastise girls who have sex "too young" and "too frequently" by labeling them as "whores and sluts." Tolman's findings on these contradictions and tensions undoubtedly bolster our theories of young female sexuality. However, the limited demographic diversity in her respondent sample raises questions about differences across and within racial, socioeconomic, and sexuality groups. In addition to an underrepresentation of social class diversity among ethnic minority girls, her sample of thirty young females included only three queer girls (two bisexuals, one lesbian). Thus, this narrative of a "frigid" or "guilty" young Black female heterosexuality overshadows the stories of queer Black girls who have presumably questioned the heteronormative cultural messages thrust on them and gathered the courage to claim a "deviant" sexual identity in a sexist, homophobic, and racist society.

I am in search of sites where young Black female sexuality is joyfully expressed, and I have found one such site to be Black lesbianism (Hammonds 1994). I take up Audre Lorde's argument that the erotic—that is, the intense, spiritual, sensual "internal sense of satisfaction" (2007: 54)—"empowers [women], becomes the lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives" (2007: 57). In other words, the erotic may be so powerful as to actually compel us to examine such critical issues as racial, feminist, and queer identity politics as part of the struggle for more harmonious and fulfilling human relations. The stories from my childhood and adolescence show that the process of developing an erotic power can begin much earlier in life than many would imagine.

. . . Flies are in the meadow
The bees are in the park
Miss Suzie and her boyfriend are kissing in the
D-A-R-K, D-A-R-K, dark, dark

Dark is like the closet into which I followed Andre. I did not tell him that I was afraid of the dark because my curiosity was much more powerful than my fear. I wanted to know what it would be like to be Miss Suzie from the hand-clapping game rhyme that all us Black girls sang on the playground. As I shut the door, I kept an eye on the thin line of light seeping under the door. Without

a word or hesitation, Andre kissed my lips, neck, and chest. I stood perfectly still and remained focused on the light.

I do not know where my mother was during all of this, except that lunch was ready by the time we stumbled out of the closet. And I do not remember us doing much more than kissing, although when it was all done my white cotton underwear and undershirt were not on the same way as when I went into the closet. My mother did not spank me when she saw this, but this is my first memory of my mother's disapproving pursed lips and squinted eyes. I am not sure whether my mother was disappointed that I had let Andre do this to me without protest, or if she was saddened that I had learned the lesson of limited female sexual agency at the young age of five years old.

The prominent models of homosexual identity development generally agree that the first stage of identity awareness for queer youth involves a feeling of being different than one's peers (Beaty 1999; Cass 1979; Zera 1992). Indeed, I felt strange during my childhood because I could imagine a life without boys, so very unlike my female friends. The encounter in the closet with Andre was boring and a bit frightening. When my friend Cheryl told me one day that we were to ignore the boys in our classroom for as long as possible, I was relieved that someone else had finally concluded that these secret games were obviously more fun for the boys than for us. I was disappointed when I realized that this was merely a ploy to appear coy, drive the boys crazy, and ultimately gain *more* attention from them—a strictly heterosexual game of chase so common among elementary school children (Best 1983; Blaise 2005).

I spent my childhood and adolescence trying to hide and, at times, deny my desires to chase girls on the playground and pull them into closets. Although, it may be more appropriate to say that I spent this time negotiating my desires. That is, in one moment I would trade in my desire to be like all the other boy-crazy Black girls in order to enjoy pleasures under the covers with my boldly curious best friend, Graciela. In another instance, I reaffirmed my commitment to obtaining the fruits of heaven by piously turning away from the photos of nude women that I liked to view on the internet after the household went to sleep. While the models of homosexual identity development acknowledge identity ambivalence as a reasonable result of the general homophobia that permeates our society, these models do not actually consider the distinct consequences "outness" would produce for a young, Black girl like me.

My grandmother caught me in the bathtub, pushing my Barbie dolls on top of each other so their little plastic limbs were intertwined, and they were lost in each other's painted eyes. She let out a wild cry and pulled me out of the bathtub. My grandmother actually sat me down in front of the Bible—buck naked—while she flipped to Leviticus.

"See," she said. "It's written here. A man sleeping with another man is as nasty as a man sleeping with a pig! Do you understand that?"

"Well . . . OK," I thought. "But what does that have to do with my Barbies kissing?"

In the intermittent periods that I secretly acknowledged, accepted, and acted on my queer desires, I felt alienated from the Black church community. And since churches were the heart of Black social and political organizing in my community, I also felt as though I was losing a grip on my racial identity. Our Pentecostal church, along with the dozens of other storefront churches in my neighborhood, preached "Rehabilitation or hell for homosexuals!" on Sundays and spent the rest of the week gathering school supplies for children, delivering food and spiritual healing to the shut-ins, and holding political meetings to scrutinize city council members' commitment to their Black constituencies. What did it mean that I loved other females more than what was considered "normal" *and* I deeply appreciated these Black initiatives? I worried that if I continued my games of sexual exploration with Graciela, I could never get involved in a neighborhood service project without fellow residents questioning my curious lack of interest in "the men who are actually doing good in our community." Perhaps God might not infuse my hands with healing powers like He did in those of the elders in my congregation, and I would not obtain all the other privileges I looked forward to inheriting in my Black adulthood.

Also during the times in which I explored my queer identity, I feared that I would not be socialized into the Black woman that my family and community felt they needed me to be. Since my mother had given birth to me when she was just sixteen years old, many feared that I would grow up to be a "sexual deviant" as well. My grandmother was very serious about grooming me into a respectable, educated, and sexually pure young woman. This was a difficult task given that the Black women I watched on television and saw in magazine ads were mostly insatiable harlots, mannishly aggressive single mothers, and other racialized sexual stereotypes

that were created by a male power to denigrate and disempower the Black female population (Collins 2004; Crenshaw 1991; Lorde 2007). My grandmother, mother, and aunt instilled in me their expectations of heterosexual marriage in the hopes that a man would save me from the hard labor reserved for Black women like them with minimal education and I could gain some air of respectability in the eyes of the "smug" middle-class. The amount of self-sacrificing that was required of me in this mission to "uplift the race" seemed daunting and unfair.

Whenever her mother dropped her off on our doorstep, I quickly took Graciela by her wrist and shuttled her to my bedroom. No time could be wasted, for I never knew if my mother was going to be babysitting her for just a few hours or over the next several days. Graciela was my best friend because she shared the latest handclapping games from her school and, moreover, I loved her beauty. She defused any hostile jealousy that could have arisen inside me over her hair length and texture by allowing me to run my fingers through the long, black hair that rippled down her back.

On the nights that Graciela stayed with us, my mother placed an extra pillow on my twin bed. Graciela and I would peek and giggle at the body parts that our mothers had told us to always keep covered. We touched the places our other friends said were nasty. And it felt, simply, freeing and good.

My childhood memories reveal an intertwined course of queer, Black, and feminist consciousness-raising that emerged from my exploration of personal pleasure. It became quite clear early on that girls would be the only ones to unleash the euphoric erotic within me. How could a feeling that came so naturally be inherently sinful? I also came to realize that I was only allowed to dream of becoming one of two types of a Black woman: a sexual deviant who brings shame on the Black race, or a prudent wife whose humble life with her husband garners respect from the Black community. Would it be possible for me to create a hybrid identity? One, perhaps, that allowed my tremendous amount of service to the community to overshadow my secret relationships with women?

Managing my queer desires was becoming an impossible task by early adulthood, as my feelings of lust and love for other females would not subside. With my desires so obviously demarcated, I was forced to ask myself, "What makes you think you don't deserve to be physically and emotionally fulfilled?" I now feel obligated to share my lesbian relationship with

my family and break the silence surrounding female pleasure—both queer and heterosexual—so as to steer the youngest generations of girls from settling into pleasureless, loveless, and unequal sexual relationships like those our matriarchs whisper about when they think we are not listening. Also, as an academic, I call for interdisciplinary analyses of youth's critical engagement with sexuality issues. This research, when taken into consideration by parents, sexual health educators, and other adults who work with young Black girls, can make for more dynamic and relevant curricula that do not punish sexual desire.

I am a queer Black feminist who is constantly reflecting on my subjectivity and personal agency. While I am grateful for the personal progress that I have made thus far, and look forward to the lessons yet learned, this critical self-examination has occasionally made for a difficult career in academia. When I question the absence of race (other than White), class (other than privileged), gender (other than male), and sexuality (other than heterosexual) considerations from social theories—essentially, the blatant rejection of my existence in this world—some well-meaning academics inform me that a "professional" social scientist does not allow her political agenda to adulterate her scholarly critiques. Furthermore, I assert my personal agency by supplementing my formal education in the academy by consuming essays/poetry/art produced by feminist scholars, attending queer activist rallies, and participating in family conservations about politics/religion/everyday survival held over the kitchen table. Erotic power has given me strength, courage, and insight in many more aspects of my life than I could have ever imagined.

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Note

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Chapter 4

Black Girls and the Pipeline from Sexual Abuse to Sexual Exploitation to Prison

Nadine M. Finigan-Carr

> No one ever believed me. No one ever protected me. I kept telling them that my stepfather touched me. They didn't listen. They kept saying I needed to be a good girl and stop being such a fast-tailed girl, like I asked for my boobs to come in at eleven. I didn't ask for any of it. Even my teachers had it out for me, telling me to stop talking back and stop being so grown, when all I was trying to do was speak up for myself. I thought then that no one cared about me. So, when I met DJ and he told me he believed me and loved me and would take care of me, I was unprepared for what would come next. I thought I was in love and that he loved me. I didn't know that this love was going to turn into the worst days of my life.
>
> —Aja, nineteen years old[1]

Girls' so-called problem behaviors, such as aggression and disruptive behaviors in school, can be associated with an abusive and traumatic home life, including the experience of sexual abuse (Dembo et al. 1995; Kroneman et al. 2009). When Black girls[2] experience sexual abuse, the responses of the adults around them are not always supportive. At times, the

Notes for this section can be found on page 104.

responses serve to vilify and stigmatize rather than address the trauma resulting from the abuse. Sexually abused girls become confused about what constitutes kindness, intimacy, and safety, which may result in greater vulnerability to subsequent exploitation by adults (e.g., pimps, traffickers) who initially seem kind, protective, and safe (Cole et al. 2016).

Research on the effects of child sexual abuse has provided insight into how it may shape one's personality and affect interactions with others and with one's environment. Social cognitive theory considers that one's behavior, intrinsic qualities, and environmental factors have a reciprocal effect on one another, shaping behavior and the determinants of the behavior (Bandura 2001). School and home are the two main sociostructural environments that shape behavior and overall development for children and youth. For some, home is a safe haven providing the support needed to develop and grow. For others, home is the place where child sexual abuse occurs, leading to struggles and misunderstandings beginning from the initial sexual encounter. For many, it is some combination of both. Girls who have been traumatized are extremely vulnerable. Aggression then becomes a coping mechanism and defense against the helplessness they experience from being repeatedly abused. This aggressive response becomes a way to ward off further harm by the abuser and the world at large. Considering social cognitive theory, this is what we see when we examine the interaction between Black girls' behavioral responses to the trauma of sexual abuse and the result of such behaviors manifested in school settings.

In this chapter, I consider the reciprocal effect of Black girls living within spaces and environments influenced by structural racism who are subjected to abuse at higher rates. I argue that there is a uniquely gendered and raced pipeline for these girls that warrants closer inspection. Here, I describe the pipeline that leads from sexual abuse to sexual exploitation to prison as an extension of the school-to-prison pipeline framework. Critical race theory utilizes the term *pipeline* to describe how structural racism in institutions, especially schools, pushes Black youth toward imprisonment (Dutil 2020). Feminist theories add an additional layer in describing how the limited social welfare infrastructure and society fail to protect vulnerable youth, especially survivors of family violence and sexual abuse, and/or queer/transgender youth (Rennison 2014).

In the spirit of self-reflexivity, I acknowledge my standpoint as a Black woman who had three adverse childhood experiences before the age of four. I wrote this chapter as someone who was once a Black girl and whose life could have gone in a different direction if home had not been a safe ha-

ven and if school had not been a place that nourished me. I acknowledge that my positionality influenced this chapter to some extent in that my experiences and expertise in working with Black girls who have survived sexual abuse and exploitation fuel my passion for this work. I explore the pipeline from sexual abuse to sexual exploitation to prison as a space of entrapment for Black girls, with the hope of disrupting this gendered and raced pipeline.

The chapter comprises a critical appraisal of the extant literature related to the intersections of Black girlhood studies, child sexual abuse, and juvenile justice in concert with my own perceptions of the scope and structure of the issues related to the pipeline from sexual abuse to sexual exploitation to prison, based on my experiences and expertise both as a Black woman and a researcher. Following a brief description of the overall context of Black girls' development, I describe the impact of sexual abuse and subsequent sexual development in the presence of such abuse. Then, I offer a frank discussion of the racialized and gendered challenges that Black girls encounter in schools and how these exacerbate the trauma they may have already experienced. This leads to their vulnerability to sexual exploitation and juvenile justice involvement as they manifest disruptive and problem behaviors, which I discuss in the next two sections. Finally, I end with a discussion of steps we all can take to dismantle the pipeline from sexual exploitation to prison.

Context

School violence prevention research has examined what is commonly termed *aggressive behaviors* as an indicator of youth violence. Scholars have examined not only physical aggression but also relational, covert, and indirect aggression among girls in particular (Chesney-Lind, Morash, and Irwin 2007; Finigan-Carr et al. 2016). In an effort to be gender balanced in the approach to violence prevention and bullying, girls' nonviolent behaviors that manifest as relational aggression have been punished in ways that contribute to long-term negative consequences. Policing girls' noncriminal behavior in schools is a unique step in their school-to-prison pipeline. Black girls are more likely to be suspended from school and to be placed in juvenile detention than their white counterparts (Brinkman, Marino, and Manning 2018; Crenshaw 2015; Hockenberry and Puzzanchera 2020). In describing the racialized and gendered school-to-prison pipeline, M.

Morris (2016) described the ways Black girls are displaced from school disproportionately and enter the juvenile justice system. She described how girls' sexuality is policed in ways that marginalize them from the school environment. Placement in juvenile detention and/or in interventions designed for boys who may be persistent offenders could potentially have the unanticipated effect of extending girls' offending careers.

Rationale: Impact of Sexual Abuse

The majority of child sexual abuse occurs in the elementary school years and rarely by strangers (Amodeo et al. 2006). Typically, girls are sexually abused by a single perpetrator before or during their elementary school years as opposed to in adolescence (Sciolla et al. 2011). Approximately 40–60 percent of Black women reported some form of coercive sexual contact by the age of eighteen (Ritchie 2019; Tanis and Brown 2017). More specifically, 11 percent of Black girls in a national sample reported having been raped (Thompson, McGee, and Mays 2012). Approximately 15 percent of Black transgender K–12 girls reported being sexually assaulted, and 7 percent of them reported that the assault was committed by a teacher or school staff member (Grant, Mottet, and Tanis 2011). Numerous incidents of sexual violence have been committed by police officers in schools, youth engagement programs, and within the context of police responding to domestic and sexual violence calls (Ritchie 2017).

Child sexual abuse is associated with numerous short-term and long-term psychological problems (Leifer and Shapiro 1996; Wilson et al. 2015). It has been demonstrated that the experience of child sexual abuse affects a child's social, emotional, and cognitive development (Hassan et al. 2015). The literature suggests that many children show improvement in their psychological functioning over time, but there is still a large group (10–24 percent) who show worsening of symptoms that persist into adulthood (Grauerholz 2000; Leifer and Shapiro 1996; Wilson et al. 2015). For Black girls in particular, the relation between abuse and externalizing behavior problems persists over time, even for those who have sought mental health treatment (Wilson et al. 2015).

Despite the high incidence of sexual abuse, it often goes unreported for numerous reasons, including fear of additional violence or loss of family connection, or the belief that nothing will be done about it. Only approximately 12 percent of girls under the age of eighteen reported their

rapes to anyone because of fear of what would happen if/when they did (Black and Weisz 2003; Hanson et al. 1999). Black girls do not see teachers and school staff as safe to disclose sexual abuse and violence to, even when the schools provide teen dating violence prevention programs (Black and Weisz 2003). The younger a girl is when the sexual abuse occurs, the less likely it is that she will disclose it to an adult and the more likely it is that she will be silent about her sexuality and sexual behaviors as an adult woman (Sciolla et al. 2011).

Family violence exposure, especially if related to physical or sexual abuse, plays a huge role in Black girls' pathways to being labeled delinquent and encountering the juvenile justice system (Chesney-Lind and Okamoto 2001; Herrman and Silverstein 2012). Many girls who are subjected to abuse and neglect encounter the child welfare system, and their response to the trauma of being removed from their home coupled with the abuse they had experienced may lead to subsequent involvement in the juvenile justice system. Many of girls' "delinquent" acts can be seen as responses to the trauma of sexual abuse. In a study of juvenile justice–involved girls, Simkins and Katz (2002) found that 81 percent of the girls had experienced trauma in the form of abuse (43 percent physical; 38 percent sexual), and 38 percent reported witnessing family violence. Roughly one-third of these girls had experienced more than one type of trauma. Many of the acts which resulted in their delinquency charges can be viewed as directly in response to the violence in their lives (Chesney-Lind 2002; Simkins and Katz 2002).

Black Girls' Sexual Development

When Black girls have been victims of child sexual abuse, the need for conversations about sex and sexuality becomes even more important. Yet, sex and sexuality are rarely discussed with children in the Black community. Stigma related to these types of conversations perpetuates a culture of silence within Black communities. Many Black parents believe that teens need to first understand the responsibilities of heterosexual friendships before they can recognize what a committed romantic relationship entails (Akers et al. 2011). The primary motivation for Black parents to talk to their children (girls in this case) about sex is in response to child sexual abuse or to prevent them from experiencing molestation, assault, and/or dating violence (Akers et al. 2011). Black girls receive messages from their

families about how to dress and cover up their bodies, how to be ladylike, and not to be too "fast" (Crooks et al. 2019; Leath et al. 2020). Many of these messages draw from the politics of respectability (Crooks et al. 2019; Leath et al. 2020). These messages are also created in response to the media messages Black girls receive, especially those which focus on sexuality in a demeaning way, such as via the Jezebel stereotype (Leath et al. 2021), or in ways that suggest Black women are valued only for their physical beauty and ability to sexually gratify males (Crooks et al. 2019).

Often, when Black parents talk to their girls about sex, it is to convey the importance of self-esteem, self-respect, and demanding respect from sexual partners (Akers et al. 2011). The parents express concern about date rape and manipulation by a partner and tell their daughters that if they carry themselves in a certain way, with self-respect, then they will not choose bad partners or be taken advantage of. These conversations center more on avoiding the male gaze than on providing knowledge about sex and understanding their own sexuality (Crooks et al. 2019). This message is reinforced in school settings where educators focus more on how Black girls look in their clothes rather than on the inappropriate behavior of boys (M. Morris 2016). Even when schools provide sexual health education, the focus is on preventing pregnancy and/or protecting against sexually transmitted diseases more than on healthy relationships (Crooks et al. 2019; Jemmott, Jemmott, and Fong 1998; Lee, Cintron, and Kocher 2014). Black queer and transgender youth are left out of the discussion completely, and even when LGBTQ[3] issues are discussed, it is through white framing. This focus on heteronormative sexual socialization within Black families highlights how the wider cultural norms of sexual objectification undermines the development of all Black girls' self-esteem and body satisfaction (Crooks et al. 2019; Leath et al. 2020).

The majority of family sexual socialization research has not considered the normative experiences of Black girls, instead focusing on the risks of adolescent pregnancy and/or sexually transmitted diseases (Leath et al. 2020). Crooks et al. (2019) and Leath et al. (2020, 2021) used qualitative research to explore the diversity of sexual socialization experiences within families as it relates to Black girls' sexual development. However, missing from this discourse has been discussion of how those who have experienced childhood sexual abuse navigate a world where they are not considered by society to be worthy of being treated as a victim of sexual violence (Helman 2018) and where families primarily focus on the risks of sexual activity.

These Black girls' understanding of sexual relationships is developing in relation to both sexualized violence and Black middle-class notions of respectability. When the former is not addressed, there is a disconnect in understanding one's self and sexuality. Many of the girls are naive about their sexual health, psychologically unprepared for healthy sexual relationships, and unaware of how to have safe sex, which makes them vulnerable to sexual exploitation as they transition through adolescence into young adulthood (Crooks et al. 2019). Even when sexual exploitation does not occur, these Black girls are more likely to acquiesce to unwanted sex with a casual partner for reasons which include lack of perceived power to refuse sex (Crosby et al. 2002; Debnam, Milam, and Finigan-Carr 2021).

Reviewing Black Girls' Racialized and Gendered Challenges in Schools

Black girls encounter unique challenges in schools because of their raced, classed, and gendered status (Evans-Winters and Esposito 2010). This includes experiences of exclusion and marginalization in schools that differ from those of Black boys and are rooted in white supremacy. The discipline directed at Black girls has focused more on their behavior and comportment. As one researcher found, they were called "loudies" because they did not adhere to the educators' views of how ladies are supposed to behave (E. Morris 2007). Views that perpetuate stereotypes of femininity as quiet, passive, and docile are rooted in whiteness and heteronormativity (Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews 2020; Lei 2003). Educators, as a result, focus less attention on the academic progress of Black girls and more attention on their comportment (E. Morris 2007), social decorum, and even how their bodies look in their clothes (M. Morris 2016). As a result, Black girls are suspended, expelled, referred to law enforcement, and arrested on K–12 campuses at extremely high, disproportionate rates (Gibson et al. 2019; Ritchie 2019). These rigid disciplinary practices mitigate Black girls' learning and put them at risk for numerous negative behavioral risks as they develop through adolescence into adulthood.

LGBTQ youth experience disproportionately higher levels of childhood abuse (physical and sexual) as compared with their peers of any race (Baams 2018; Hunt, Vennat, and Waters 2018). Approximately 15 percent of Black transgender students in grades K–12 reported being sexually

assaulted by a teacher or school staff member (Grant et al. 2011). These youth experience discrimination and violence at school, both of which are associated with higher rates of mental health stress and substance use (Mountz 2020). LGBTQ youth are sanctioned for public displays of affection and gender-nonconforming dress, as well as held responsible when they act in self-defense to those who bully them due to their gender identity and/or sexual orientation (Mountz 2020). An understanding of how sexual abuse impacts the school-to-prison pipeline helps delineate how punitive responses and increased sanctions for behaviors, especially in schools, push LGBTQ Black girls into the pipeline as well.

Scholarship has demonstrated that the use of school punishment does not improve poor behaviors and may even increase the risks underpinning those behaviors (Corchado, Jalón, and Martínez-Arias 2017; Wolf and Kupchik 2017). Yet, Black girls in schools are routinely punished for their communication styles, their expressions, and their responses to the trauma they may have experienced (National Black Women's Justice Institute 2019). In addition to unjust punishment, Black girls are more likely to experience multiple forms of violence, such as sexual, mental, and emotional abuse at home; sexual harassment by boys in school; and discriminatory comments from adults, including school security officers (Dill 2015; Ritchie 2019). Girls who have experienced sexual abuse particularly tend to cope by manifesting aggressive, defensive, and self-protective behaviors (Simkins and Katz 2002). Sometimes these behaviors seem out of place or exaggerated in response to the actual threat presented. When Black girls exhibit these aggressive behaviors in schools, they are treated even more harshly for them, demonized, and not supported.

Zero tolerance policies negatively affect the relation between education and juvenile justice and are in conflict with best practices regarding adolescent development (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force 2008). These policies lead to excessive suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to juvenile justice, impacting students of color at the highest rates (Crenshaw 2015; Dutil 2020). Zero tolerance policies perpetuate anti-Black discipline and are a behavioral response to white femininity, which does not align with Black girls' femininity, especially as it manifests in school environments (Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews 2020). When used in response to aggressive behaviors manifest by Black girls who have experienced sexual abuse, zero tolerance policies set them up for experiences which impact their development into adulthood.

Black Girls' Vulnerability to Sexual Exploitation

Childhood sexual abuse increases the risks in adolescence of revictimization by an intimate partner and vulnerability to those who would take advantage of the resulting self-esteem issues (Grauerholz 2000). Child maltreatment is linked to girls' runaway behaviors, substance use, and sexual denigration (Reid 2011). These vulnerabilities are all risk factors for commercial sexual exploitation of children[4] (Finigan-Carr et al. 2019; Kenny et al. 2020). Specifically, histories of child maltreatment put girls at high risk of commercial sexual exploitation (Naramore et al. 2017). In some cases, the vulnerabilities arising from child sexual abuse lead to manipulation by traffickers or involvement with peers associated with sex trafficking. Child sexual abuse has been consistently identified as a risk factor for future involvement in commercial sexual exploitation (Cole et al. 2016). Once exploited, girls may fear incarceration and/or involvement with the juvenile justice system, which can prevent them from seeking help from available services (Barnert et al. 2017). Race intersects with gender and class to disproportionately impact Black girls in ways that increase their vulnerability to sexual exploitation in addition to their child sexual abuse history (Butler 2015; Finigan-Carr et al. 2019).

In addition to the risks noted earlier, difficulty in school has been found to be associated with commercial sexual exploitation (Franchino-Olsen 2021; Reid and Piquero 2014). Schools have noted that they have insufficient time and/or inadequate resources to address the needs of students who are victims of or at risk for commercial sexual exploitation (Kruger et al. 2016). Transgender and gender-nonconforming youth who were physically or sexually assaulted in school were twice as likely to be forced into sex work and/or sexual exploitation (Grant et al. 2011). Predominantly poor and marginalized Black girls end up existing in a space where they are both vulnerable to sexual abuse and criminalized for prostitution. They are more likely to be adjudicated through the juvenile justice system and placed in detention, even if identified as a victim of commercial sexual exploitation (Ocen 2015).

> When I first got with DJ, everything was wonderful. Anything I wanted, he gave me: new clothes, a phone. But when I moved in with him, everything changed. He told me things cost money and I had to help make some. The first time he set me up on a date, he said, "You've been giving it up to your dad for free, so might as well give it up for some cash." After that night, my life was a rollercoaster. Some days were really good with DJ, and others were full of drama, but the

> lowest days were when I ended up in juvie. They picked me up for shoplifting, then kept me when they found out I was a runaway. I was there for almost three months, and DJ couldn't come see me. Being in juvie was hell. Most people treated us like criminals. Even in the so-called school, it was more like they were trying to punish us more than teach us. (Aja)

Black Girls' Juvenile Justice Involvement

It has been estimated that 70 percent of juvenile justice system–involved girls have experienced sexual or physical abuse as compared with 20 percent of their counterparts in the general population (Meichenbaum 2006). These types of abuse have been demonstrated to be important pathways for delinquent behavior in girls (Wilson et al. 2015). In the absence of discussion about sex and their burgeoning sexuality after experiencing child sexual abuse, many of these girls have been labeled as promiscuous. In reality, their experiences with violence, aggression, and victimization have had an impact on their behaviors and how they manifest in a society in which these girls are marginalized due to their race and gender (Debnam et al. 2021). It is not unusual for Black girls and young women who have been victims of sexual abuse and assault to acquiesce to unwanted sex with a partner rather than experience additional abuse (Crosby et al. 2002). Juvenile justice system–involved girls whose court histories have labeled them as exhibiting promiscuous behavior have not only experienced child sexual abuse but also reported that they "stopped saying no to boys because they didn't want to be raped again" (Simkins and Katz 2002: 1485). Running away to escape abuse and living on the streets with no viable survival options, many of these girls' coping responses are maladaptive, defensive, and self-protective (Chesney-Lind and Okamoto 2001; Kempf-Leonard and Johansson 2007; Simkins and Katz 2002). Their delinquent acts are responses to trauma, but these girls receive a juvenile justice response instead of a therapeutic one (Saar et al. 2015).

Status offenses are behaviors considered illegal because of a youth's age. Examples include truancy, running away, curfew violation, and alcohol possession. These behaviors are not crimes for adults but have legal consequences for youth who engage in them (Ehrmann, Hyland, and Puzzanchera 2019). African American girls especially are subjected to serious consequences of detention resulting from being charged with a status offense, including impacts on their mental, physical, and sexual health (Kim et al. 2020). Researchers have found that once charged with a status

offense, African American girls are more likely to encounter further involvement in the juvenile justice system and become involved in problem peer behavior networks (Kim et al. 2020). Basically, status offenses lead to reconfinement down the road.

Status-offending behaviors have been found to be indications of underlying risks from trauma, sexual abuse, family conflict, and/or school challenges that could be mitigated by early intervention rather than incarceration. For example, running away from home could be remediated by family support; truancy may be due to the need for academic services or a change in school climate. Policing girls' noncriminal behavior, both in school and in the community, encourages additional unnecessary control over girls and puts them more at risk for noncompliance with school rules and policies (Chesney-Lind, Morash, and Irwin 2007). This further exacerbates the risks for these girls and sets them up for engagement with the juvenile justice system (Stevens, Morash, and Chesney-Lind 2011).

Girls account for a significantly larger proportion of status offenses than boys. Kim et al. (2020) found that a large portion of African American girls are placed in detention for status offenses such as truancy (34 percent), and higher levels of runaway behaviors are reported for girls with felony or misdemeanor offenses. Once they encounter the juvenile justice system, Black girls report higher levels of risky sex, skipping school, and past year runaway history as compared with their peers from other races/ethnicities charged with criminal offenses (Fasula et al. 2018). Black girls with status offenses bore a higher burden for reconfinement and recidivism and were more likely to be charged with technical violation of probation from their original status offense, leading to further involvement with the juvenile justice system and further biases against Black girls (Kim et al. 2020). Instead of addressing the reasons why Black girls commit status offenses in the first place, the system pulls them in deeper and exposes them to peers who are problematic.

Although boys and girls are equally likely to run away, girls have a higher arrest rate for runaway status than boys (Kempf-Leonard and Johansson 2007). Girls accounted for 54 percent of all petitioned runaway cases in 2018 (Hockenberry and Puzzanchera 2020). Additionally, runaway girls are more likely to encounter sexual predators and experience sexual victimization (Kempf-Leonard and Johansson 2007; Tyler et al. 2004). Once Black girls, especially those who were sexually abused, run away, they are more likely to be forced into situations in which sex is traded as a means for survival or exploited by traffickers (Crenshaw 2015;

Dank et al. 2015). As a result, these girls may encounter the juvenile justice system for the actual runaway behavior or for criminal charges related to commercial sex trafficking.

LGBTQ youth experience heightened vulnerability to child sexual abuse, dating violence, and sexual exploitation (Dank et al. 2015), which helps explain the overrepresentation of queer and transgender youth as one of the most consistently reported variables in pathways to incarceration for girls (Mountz 2020). Queer and transgender Black girls are more likely to be charged with status offenses such as running away and truancy (Mountz 2020). For them, law enforcement presents an increased source of sanction when they run away. Queer and transgender Black girls have reported being routinely profiled by police, arrested unjustly, and subjected to increased violence and mistreatment, including sexual exploitation (Chesney-Lind and Eliason 2006; Mountz 2020).

Paternalism leads to a gendered approach when girls are involved in the juvenile justice system. This results in girls being remanded to juvenile detention for "their protection," leading to girls with status offenses being detained more than boys and more often for moral rather than criminal reasons. African American youth are disproportionately represented in the juvenile justice system (Kim et al. 2020). Layering on the gendered lens of this system, African American girls are further disproportionately impacted and experience detention at higher rates than all other racial and ethnic groups (Ehrmann et al. 2019).

The juvenile justice system regularly criminalizes girls who are victims of abuse in response to their acting-out behaviors (Simkins and Katz 2002). Girls are more likely than boys to commit delinquent acts in response to childhood physical and sexual abuse (Herrera and McCloskey 2001). When girls who have experienced trauma enter this system, the focus is on their aggressive actions in response to the trauma they have endured as opposed to the trauma and how it may have triggered the aggressive response. In not recognizing the trauma experienced, the juvenile justice system demonstrates that it is not in the position to adequately address girls' needs. This leads to a cycle of trauma, aggression, and inadequate treatment, which serves to drive them further into the system.

When Black girls encounter the juvenile and criminal courts, their ability to achieve future success and lead healthy lives is impeded. The time they spend in the juvenile justice system is time not spent in school (Crenshaw 2015). School absence limits their achievement and sets them up for academic failure. Furthermore, the education received while in the juvenile

justice system has an impact on how youth are integrated back into the school system once released (Annamma 2014; Leone and Fink 2017). A disproportionate number of youth remanded to juvenile detention have a history of receiving special education services, as well as suspensions and expulsions (Leone and Fink 2017). In detention-based education settings, Black girls, especially those with emotional disabilities, have noted that socializing practices, such as sitting up straight and showing proper affect, were prioritized over their academic needs (Annamma 2014).

The juvenile justice system ignores Black girls' intersectional identities, reinforces a new identity of being a criminal, and does not address their academic needs (Annamma 2014). Black girls have reported that their actual academic and emotional needs are ignored in favor of compliance with behaviors (e.g., sitting quietly with legs closed) that are not relevant to true rehabilitation and actual learning. Many of these behaviors are paternalistic and do not support varied sexual identities. These often militaristic practices lack responsiveness to racial and cultural practices, ignore Black girls' intersectional identities, and focus solely on the girls as criminals even when their offenses are minor. Queer and transgender Black girls in the juvenile justice system are concurrently invisible and hypervisible. If they are not comfortable expressing their sexual identity, they are forced to navigate the system as if they are straight. Those who are clearly queer or transgender navigate heteronormative environments segregated by gender which render them nonexistent (Mountz 2020).

Dismantling the Pipeline from Sexual Abuse to Sexual Exploitation to Prison

Typically, when scholars have discussed the needs of those who are ejected from the traditional school systems and encounter the juvenile justice system, it is gendered and raced in such a way that Black girls are left out of the discussion. Much of the school-to-prison pipeline literature examines males, particularly those of color (i.e., Black boys). When girls' issues were discussed, the focus was on white females, which leaves serious gaps in addressing the needs of Black girls. In this chapter, I provided an intersectional analysis of how Black girls, based on their experiences in schools, at home, and in society at large, encounter this pipeline. I theorize that it is the resulting pipeline from sexual abuse to sexual exploitation to prison that entraps Black girls and needs to be dismantled.

The 3P paradigm (prosecution, protection, and prevention) is utilized as a framework for addressing human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation worldwide (Barnitz 2001). In dismantling the pipeline from sexual abuse to sexual exploitation to prison, a similar approach is warranted for Black girls. The focus would be primarily on two of the *P*s: prevention and protection. Prevention intervention strategies should include starting discussions at younger ages about body autonomy, communicating openly with youth about making positive decisions about sex, teaching and rehearsing refusal skills for unwanted sex, and reinforcing positive values of not giving in to unwanted sex (Akers et al. 2011; Leath et al. 2020). Black girls need to be taught to have an appreciation for their bodies that emphasizes the positive and debunks the myths and stereotypes about ideal female beauty and sexuality (Crooks et al. 2019).

Prevention strategies are especially important for Black girls who have experienced child sexual abuse. Protection from the abuse is ideal; however, when already having been abused, it is imperative that they are taught that it was not their fault. Discussions about how to deal with their sexual development in light of the sexual abuse experienced that emphasize their autonomy would serve to protect Black girls from subsequent violence and vulnerability to those who would exploit them. Interventions involving parents need to address the values and assumptions inherent in the messages they convey regarding sex, sexuality, intimate partner violence, gender roles, and heterosexuality as the dominant sexual orientation (Akers et al. 2011). Girls wish they had a trusted adult to talk to them about sex and sexuality (Crooks et al. 2019). We all need to step up and break the culture of silence in order to prevent and protect Black girls from sexual abuse and exploitation.

Protecting Black girls and preventing them from entering the pipeline requires schools to use a trauma-responsive, victim-centered lens. Black girls must be seen as victims in need of saving instead of as complicit in their own trauma (Dill 2015; Helman 2018). To end sexual violence against Black girls in schools, police officers should be removed, and mechanisms should be created for students, parents, teachers, and counselors to co-create transformative approaches to school safety (Ritchie 2019). This includes the development of protocols ensuring that Black girls are protected from sexual harassment and bullying (Crenshaw 2015), eliminating practices which penalize Black girls based on their comportment (National Black Women's Justice Institute 2019), and abandoning zero tolerance disciplinary policies for victims of child sexual abuse (Saar et

al. 2015). Prevention interventions in the schools and in communities should seek to understand the factors that make youth vulnerable to sexual exploitation, in order to adequately design programs that prevent victimization, including factors related to the school environment or social norms (Crenshaw 2015; Franchino-Olsen 2021).

After-school and out-of-school programs have been found to have success with children and youth in reducing the impact of adverse childhood experiences, including the trauma of abuse (Finigan-Carr and Abel 2015). Trauma-informed approaches for children who have experienced child sexual abuse (Saar et al. 2015) and for girls who have been sexually exploited improve their motivation to seek and adhere to treatment (Laser-Maira, Peach, and Hounmenou 2019). Gender-responsive programs have therapeutic benefits for adolescent girls, on both their academic and psychosocial behaviors. These programs tend to develop safe spaces for girls, help them build community relationships, and can address their experiences with past trauma (Chesney-Lind, Morash, and Stevens 2008).

Successful gender-responsive programs designed for girls who are at risk for or have already encountered the juvenile justice system are those which specifically support their lived experiences of both racism and sexism (Chesney-Lind and Shelden 2014) and address the developmental stages of female adolescence (Bloom and Covington 2001). These programs work with Black girls to support their empowerment by building positive, supportive relationships between the staff and the girls. These programs succeed when they do more than offer a warm body to staff the program. Staff are trained in a trauma-informed care approach, which allows them to understand the impact of trauma on Black girls and offers ways to be sensitive to their unique needs, know how to support them in making their own decisions, establish appropriate boundaries, and foster positive mentoring relationships (Brinkman et al. 2018). In addition, gender-responsive programs for juvenile justice–involved Black girls who have experienced child sexual abuse and/or exploitation need to be able to address their sexual reproductive health needs in a nonjudgmental and victim-centered manner.

Conclusions

In order to dismantle the pipeline from sexual abuse to sexual exploitation to prison for Black girls, we all need to break the culture of silence and

challenge stereotypes which further stigmatize vulnerable Black girls. It is important that the juvenile justice system intersecting with the school system commits to addressing the structural and systemic issues which lead to girls' involvement in developing into lifetime engagement with the prisons by providing gender-responsive programs and procedures appropriate for the needs of girls, especially Black girls, including those who are queer or transgender. Teachers and staff in both systems need professional development that provides information on critical and culturally responsive pedagogy that incorporates an intersectional analysis among race, gender, sexual orientation, and in some cases, disability (Annamma 2014).

As I delineated in this chapter, at the intersection of systemic, societal, and structural racism, sexism, and possibly homophobia, Black girls are less likely to experience support from adults who care, both at home and in schools. This lack of a supportive network increases Black girls' likelihood of ensnarement in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems and contributes to their vulnerability to sexual exploitation. Addressing issues of school pushout of Black girls, the frequent movements associated with system involvement that eliminate access to education as a pathway out, and being responsive to the trauma of child sexual abuse are necessary to protect these girls. Rather than policing Black girls' behaviors in ways that marginalize them from the school environment even further, we all need to engage them and provide them with dependable, caring teachers who believe in their promise.

> When I got out of juvie, they made me go back home to my parents, and put me in a new high school. I was gonna give it a few weeks and then go back to DJ, but then I met Ms. S. She was the first person who saw me, like really saw me. I was seventeen, a sophomore in high school, but she treated me like a real person not a dumb girl. She told me that I was smart, and she helped me see that I could be somebody. She didn't just say it like a corny slogan. She really listened and showed me how smart I really was. I told her everything—the abuse, my life with DJ—and she didn't judge me. She worked with my social worker to get me out of my parents' house and into independent living. She helped me get my GED and got me into a job skills program. All I needed was someone to see me and believe me. (Aja)

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Notes

1. Aja's story is based on the stories of numerous Black girls I have worked with over the course of my career. As such, it is a composite case study of experiences. For a real-life example of someone impacted by the pipeline from sexual abuse to sexual exploitation to prison, look to the life of Cyntoia Brown, who was sentenced to life in prison as a teen for murdering one of her abusers.
2. Except where explicitly stated, *Black girls* refers to those of any sex or sexual orientation, including LGBTQ+ girls.
3. I use *LGBTQ* in this chapter as an initialism to represent lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning youth. In this usage, it is inclusive of intersex, asexual, pansexual, and other nonbinary sexual orientations.
4. *Commercial sexual exploitation of children* is a term used to describe various forms of childhood sexual exploitation, including child sex trafficking and child pornography.

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Chapter 5

Modern-Day Manifestations of the Scarlet Letter

Othered Black Girlhoods, Deficit Discourse, and Black Teenage Mother Epistemologies in the Rural South

Taryrn T. C. Brown

In retrospect as both advocate and researcher, I have come to understand how many beliefs go largely unexamined and embedded in a dominant discourse that place young mothers' realities in a deficit model with little to no malleability. Coming from a rural community where several classmates were parents before we graduated from high school, I often stood with and alongside peers who had to combat negative commentary and the stigma of teen parenting. I witnessed how their lives sat constantly under a looking glass and how their decisions and choices were constantly scrutinized as "wrong" or "bad" because their life trajectory did not mirror the dominant narrative. I also witnessed the differential treatment ascribed to the girls who became parents, in comparison with the boys who fathered their children: differences at the intersections of race, gender, and age that at the time I had no language for articulating in practice. This

social evaluation of teenage mothering was an experience I embraced then and that would come to further inform my desires for creating spaces for what I now call *othered Black girlhoods*.

Extending the ideas in Shange's (2019) "Black Girl Ordinary: Flesh, Carcerality, and the Refusal of Ethnography," my posited concept of othered Black girlhoods captures the social exclusion faced by Black girls located in lived experience outside of discourses of Black girl respectability politics (Madison and Muldrew 2021). This concept is further informed through inquiry, as I was able to develop more language for naming the social realities that had always existed around me. Witnessing the lack of opportunities for my peers to voice their needs, and the limited viability of their ownness to be a producer of their own knowledge and decision making, in this chapter, I capture the geographies (McKittrick 2006) of othered Black girlhoods by centering Black teenage mother epistemologies in the Teen Parent Success Program. Here, I create the necessary cognitive dissonance for key stakeholders of power in decision-making procedures associated with the policies and programmatic efforts for teenage mothers to rethink, and I question the complicity within and outside of the Black experience that perpetuates the deficit paradigm and stigmatization imposed on young Black mothers.

Rurality and Black Teenage Mothers' Locale

Shaming is isolating and alienating. It consumes its bearers in tangled webs of exclusion and othering. Rooted in symbolic rhetoric of identity and shame, Nathaniel Hawthorne's ([1850] 1947) *The Scarlet Letter* embodies the ideal of a young white woman's ability to transcend stigma and move toward liberation from social constructions, conventions, and expectations. This is a transcendence rarely, if ever, extended to the Black body, and a transcendence unreachable to Black teenage mothers, who navigate the modern-day scarlet letter by way of the physicality of the pregnant body and the hypersexualization of Black girls. Moreover, despite Black feminist scholars' and researchers' efforts to shift the deficit discourses of deficiency and depravity often used to describe Black teenage mothers, this model continues to fuel the stigmatization of being a Black teenage mother (Kaplan 1997; Ladner 1987; Moynihan 1965; Pillow 2004), denying the realities of Black girlhood and focusing solely on the negative stigma of Black motherhood.

Whereas the lives of teenage mothers are quite heterogeneous, being a teen mother is often portrayed as a singular, homogeneous identity. Collins (2015) suggested that motherhood can serve as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting themselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women's empowerment. From this study, we learned that the narratives about teenage childbearing are multiple, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory, coming together to juxtapose the discourse of power that presents the teen mom in monolithic fashion (stigmatizing the teen mom as a bad mother, not ready, irresponsible, promiscuous, immature, and a societal burden). This singular identity of a teen mom appears to the casual observer to have always existed in its present form rather than having been manufactured in the social imagination; its historical and underlying contexts are obscured. Moreover, this application is not accidental or random; it is accomplished and embedded within and through the work of social institutions (particularly education, public health, welfare, and the media) and takes on a life of its own at the structural level—a life that then imposes itself in the lived experiences of the young mother. In the United States, the predominant image of teenage pregnancy is that of an epidemic that plagues inner-city communities, which is where most research and programmatic efforts have occurred (Martin et al. 2021; SmithBattle 2013). However, data suggest that nearly a quarter of the nation's youth reside in rural areas, which are often characterized by high rates of poverty, social isolation, and constrained community resources (Martin et al. 2021; SmithBattle 2013); also, rural racial/ethnic minorities have been among the most understudied and underserved of all groups in the United States (Martin et al. 2021). The disadvantages and stigma associated with teenage parenting thus increase tensions among rural populations, who are also largely neglected in programmatic support and resources.

As posited by McKittrick (2006), Black geographies are consistent with four trajectories that inform experiences within and through locations of lived experience: the material, the imaginary, the representational, and the philosophical. Considering these four pathways of Black girls' experiences creates opportunities for centering their complexities across intersections of race, gender, place, and age. Across these geographic trajectories, in this chapter, I posit what I found to be Black teenage mother epistemologies or other Black girlhoods within spatial realities that dictated how social identity and locale shaped patterns of habitation and the negotiation of place

and space. Located in the rural South, through this study, I explored how Black teen mothers navigate the deficit discourses of teenage motherhood: the wrong-girl discourse (Luttrell 2003), the motherhood discourse (Austin and Carpenter 2008), and the good-choices discourse (Kelly 2000). I purposely sought to understand (a) how Black teen mothers navigate and challenge these discourses in and outside of school spaces and (b) how they resist the stereotyping and stigmatization they experience. Given the litany of information that problematizes the lives of Black teen mothers, it is important to understand how they defy, navigate, and work through their location within deficit paradigms. Moreover, it is consequential to document where and how they make space for themselves in places where they are often excluded.

Deficit Discourses of Black Teenage Motherhood

Historically, Black female bodies have been hypersexualized as spectacles for consumption (Collins 2000; Hill 2011; Schlyter 2009; West 1995). Social scientists who study teenage motherhood have continued to engage in the ongoing theoretical and often politicized debate around the dominant discourses of Black teenage parenting (Kaplan 1997; Ladner 1987; Luttrell 2003; Pillow 2004). With many of these discourses finding their historical roots in the hypersexualization of Black women and girls, the body politics embedded in the perspectives of Black teenage mothering find their intersectional origins in racist and gendered narratives throughout US history (Ross 2017). The idea of the Black woman as naturally and inevitably sexually promiscuous dates to the institution of slavery (Ross 2017; West 1995). This belief has been propagated by innumerable images of pregnant Black women with numerous children (Hill 2011; Ross 2017; West 1995). As an extension of the cultural trope of jezebels (ascribed to both Black women and Black girls), Pilgrim (2023: para. 11) centered the legacies of young Black girls whose histories were framed by "'anticipatory socialization' for their later status as 'breeders.'" To this end, Black women and girls and the geographies they have navigated historically continue to perpetuate deficit discourses that critique and ridicule them, making Black women a scapegoat for many social ills.

In previous scholarship centering Black girls' critical literacies (Bettis and Adams 2005; Butler 2018, reprinted as Chapter 1 in this volume; Muhammad and Haddix 2016; Neely and Samura 2011; Richardson 2019;

Sealey-Ruiz 2016), the foundations for the relation among race, gender, and space make way for a rich critical examination into the politicized locations of Black teenage mothers. Black girls experience realities where the public domain functions as judge, jury, and subsequent policymaker (Pillow 2004). Blame is often placed on Black girls rather than on the social structures that sustain and perpetuate poverty and oppression (Collins 2000; Kaplan 1997; Luttrell 2003; Richardson 2019; Sealey-Ruiz 2016). Thus, these dominant discourses uphold inequitable structures, policies, and programs that further marginalize Black girls. By excluding the context and outcomes related to teenage pregnancy and implementing social welfare and public policies, dominant Eurocentric perspectives continue to reinforce material hardship for and stigmatization of Black teenage mothers. Consequently, deficit discourses of Black teenage pregnancy and parenthood persist as commonly negative and stereotypical. These same discourses that situate the realities of teen mothers are removed from the myriad structural inequities they face (Duncan, Alexander, and Edwards 2010; Ellis-Sloan 2014; Kelly 2000; Luttrell 2003). Forcing Black teen mothers to continue to navigate stigma (Ellis-Sloan 2014) and experience exclusion from needed support services (Craig and Stanley 2006; de Jonge 2001) disproportionately locates these girls at the center of policies that compound rather than alleviate the challenges of young parenthood (Duncan 2007).

The race, ethnicity, social class, gender, and age of women who have children in their teens all figure into a bundle of American cultural beliefs that have dominated public discourse and social policies. With a large body of research dating back to the mid-1970s, the image of teenage pregnancy has continued to be viewed as an epidemic social problem, specifically for young Black girls (Martin et al. 2021). Few studies specific to Black teen pregnancy have been positioned opposite of the possibility of dismal social consequences. The following sections highlight three of the primary pervasive deficit discourses navigated in teenage motherhood and identified in the literature centering teenage parenting: wrong-girl discourse, motherhood discourse, and good-choices discourse. By centering the pervasiveness of these discourses in experiences of young mothers, movement can be made in disrupting the weight of the realities of Black teenage mothers.

Wrong-Girl Discourse

Sociologist Wendy Luttrell (2003) discussed the role of a wrong-girl discourse on the realities of teenage mothers. This discourse has been con-

sidered one of the more dominant acting discourses for the public in the exploration of teenage pregnancy (Weis 2008). Wrong-girl discourse is embedded in social, religious, and economic conservative ideas (Luttrell 2003) and can be understood as the placement of individual critique as a means for explaining the experience of teenage pregnancy. The teenage mother is seen as being individually flawed (Luttrell 2003). Wrong-girl discourse alters the understanding that there are complex pieces that construct and perpetuate challenges present for teenage girls (Luttrell 2003). Underlying the premise of this discourse is the idea of a normative life trajectory that follows an older woman's pattern for entering into the experiences of motherhood (Weis 2008). The deficit positioning of wrong-girl discourse not only places blame on the individual mothers but also distorts perceptions of how social realities and cultural forces create situations that isolate teenage mothers and trouble their relationships (Luttrell 2003). The wrong-girl discourse thus acts upon the lived experiences of young mothers in shaping their individual perceptions of self and how they feel others perceive them.

This schema has continued to be perpetuated, as Luttrell (2003) suggested, because deviance theorists who ascribe themselves to deficit thinking in relation to teenage pregnancy have had an underlying premise that the traditional timeline for motherhood is when one is older, more financially stable, and preferably married. The underlying premise is the idea of a normal life trajectory for entering into the realm of motherhood, which negatively situates those who do not follow this norm. Pillow (2004: 63) also contributed to the notion of deviance theory in her exploration of "contamination discourse" that "circulates [around] the idea that the presence of a sexually active female student (as a pregnant student or as a mother) will contaminate the student body leading to an epidemic of immoral and promiscuous behavior." Contamination discourse, like deviance theory, inscribes teen mothers and pregnancy as an illness and/or problem, with the young mothers as the contaminators (Pillow 2004). Deviance theory thus seeks to problematize the psychological or social attributes that differentiate the girls who get pregnant from those who do not. It avoids intersectional identities and the complexity of each individual mother, creating a distraction that avoids details that also contribute to the realities of these young mothers. Attention must be given to the intersection of motherhood as it relates to self-validating and self-valuing the experience of all women and girls.

Good-Choices Discourse

An individual's choices and decisions in life often parallel a dominant narrative that dictates certain choices or realities as either good or bad. Both conservatives and liberals are said to carry the belief that becoming a mother in your teenage years is a bad choice, although each group comes to their conclusion through differing means. The tendency to criticize the choices of teen mothers demonstrates how the ideas of a good-choices discourse ultimately "fail to acknowledge the complexity of the human decision-making process" (Kelly 2000: 50) and "lead those with relatively more power in society to think about limiting or controlling the choices of those with the least power while appearing on the surface to be neutral with regard to gender, race, and class" (64).

These dominant narratives that follow a good-choices trajectory often shape and dictate the policy and programming around the sexual and reproductive rights and lives of young people. However, these narratives limit the complexities that exist in the larger social and economic realities that shape our choices and lives, specifically related to the different positions we have through descriptors such as age, gender, race, class, and sexuality. Our social and material realities can largely influence the choices we face and in what ways we choose to face them. The structured inequalities that exist in the social context of the varying choices that are a part of the decision-making process of becoming a teenage mother thus continue to be embedded in the discourse that disregards the differences that emerge in class, gender, and racial power relationships that often shape the realities lived by those who might become teen mothers.

Motherhood Discourse

Mothering is treated as a stable, inviolable category, which is self-evident, rather than as an activity, which is informed by and reflects the sociopolitical preoccupations of the time and place (Glenn, Chang, and Forcey 1994). Mothering, like most societal measures, is a socially constructed perspective that cannot continue to be analyzed in isolation. In the book *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, written by feminist scholars Glenn et al. (1994), we are given an understanding into the social construction of mothering in general terms and the ways in which social institutions over time have defined and constructed the ways in which forms of mothering are accepted as either right or wrong. From a feminist perspective, gender roles are the product of local norms and

social pressures (Durkin 1995). The idea of mothering plays a huge role in the perceptions and social pressures that shape many women's experiences (Glenn et al. 1994). As a major dominant discourse that shapes the experiences of Black teenage mothers, the motherhood discourse finds validity in the opinions that shape understandings of selves as adequate or inadequate mothers (Glenn et al. 1994). Glenn et al. centered most of their work on the issues of a socially constructed idea of motherhood on minority groups not represented in the dominant ideology. The dominant discourse of teen pregnancy is the assumption that adolescent mothers are not competent to be good mothers (Macleod 2001). It also has been argued that a teen mother is not yet physically and psychologically equipped to deal with parenthood (Cunningham and Boult 1996) for the following reasons: she is relatively immature and less knowledgeable, displays high levels of stress (assuming that she cannot cope), and is less responsive to her baby (Durkin 1995; Macleod 2001). Within the context of this argument, there exists an underlying assumption of what it means to be a good mother (Macleod 2001), an assumption that a good mother is an adult mother.

Intersectionality and Black Teenage Mothers' Epistemologies

Intersectionality, a concept emerging from contributions in Black feminist thought, refers to the kind of oppression occurring at the intersection of race, gender, class, heteropatriarchy, and sexuality. In "Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas," Collins presented the tenets of intersectionality:

—Race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, nation, ethnicity, and similar categories of analysis are best understood in relational terms rather than in isolation from one another.
—These mutually constructing categories underlie and shape intersecting systems of power; the power relations of racism and sexism, for example, are interrelated.
—Intersecting systems of power catalyze social formations of complex social inequalities that are organized via unequal material realities and distinctive social experiences for people who live within them.
—Because social formations of complex social inequalities are historically contingent and cross-culturally specific, unequal material realities and social experiences vary across time and space.

—Individuals and groups differentially placed within intersecting systems of power have different points of view on their own and others' experiences with complex social inequalities, typically advancing knowledge projects that reflect their social locations within power relations.
—The complex social inequities fostered by intersecting systems of power are fundamentally unjust, shaping knowledge projects and/or political engagements that uphold or contest the status quo. (2015: 14)

Centering intersectionality to help identify themes of intersecting systems of power, Collins's (2015) article created time and space to highlight counternarratives of Black teen mothers. These counternarratives go beyond the telling of stories that take place in the margins to centering Black teen mothers' epistemologies through alternative points of view to create complex narratives that uncover systemic issues and stigmatizing discourses that impact realities. Intersectionality brings into view and makes visible the complex ways in which social identity categories interact to shape and affect experiences in place and space. It repositions the narrative from one that solely relies on dominant ideas to one that includes those whose voices are often missing within the Black feminist perspective. Intersectionality also challenges researchers and scholars to understand that the experiences of being a mother differ tremendously within different social identities, especially given the various new roles that the mother must take on. Thus, I used intersectionality as a theoretical tool of analysis for critical inquiry to allow for broad explorations into the lived experiences of Black teenage motherhood in the rural South.

Method

The stories of Black people are shaped by histories, geographies, and social locations (Annamma 2017; Butler 2018; Richardson 2019). In this chapter, I offer a divergent perspective from the deficit-centered norm that centers the stories of Black teenage mothers. The relations between research methodology and process are centered constantly in my experiences in the academy. I am often reminded of my unique social location as a Black feminist researcher who aims to trouble deficit-oriented discourses at the intersection of race, class, age, and gender. Collins (1986: S14) coined this

concept as the "outsider within," which places emphasis on the privilege of Black women functioning both within the academy, as credentialed insiders, and as outsiders through decentering in the academic contexts of one's racialized and gendered identities. Directly led by my collective interest and experience as a Black girl, sister, and friend to countless others in my community and by a lens of Black feminist epistemology, I sought to provide avenues for the knowledge of those inhabiting the experience of young Black motherhood for truth and validity of their lived experiences. Situated in a variation of intersectional realities that make their experiences unique by an array of social implications, many Black teen mothers navigate a lived experience that is stigmatized. The challenges that persist among Black mothers call for qualitative research that provides an outlet for the voices of these young mothers to be heard. In conducting this qualitative interdisciplinary research project, the narrative methodologies seemed best situated for analysis highlighting the voices and richness that emerge from within intersectional identities.

Narrative and Black Teen Mothers' Epistemologies

For this chapter, I employed a critical narrative approach to illustrate how Black teen mothers create and experience different discursive environments. In organizing the narratives that emerged from this research project, I had to understand as the researcher that the narratives were all stories of experience that are placed within normative structures of race, gender, and class: narratives situated at an intersectional reality (Andrews et al. 2013; Collins 2015; Ewick and Silbey 1995). By operating within the constant reflection of this theoretical lens of analysis, these expressions of lived experiences illustrated how privilege, or the lack of privilege, revealed dimensions of oppression that existed in different realities (Collins 2015; Ewick and Silbey 1995). Narratives are cultural productions reflecting specific social time periods. Furthermore, the sharing of narratives is especially significant because it reveals influential social relationships, particularly those reflecting power and resistance, which often might not be evident in the dominant narratives around various issues.

Narrative analysis within this research project was a mutual enterprise. As a Black feminist researcher, I came to know that power did not exist solely in the hands of the researcher but was shared between me and the participants. The young women centered in this project and I, as researcher, were on a journey to understand what it was like to be a teen mother. Thus, the narrative relationship of researcher and participant for

this study challenged traditional power structures, demonstrating that power enters interactions at various locations and has multiple meanings. In the context where multiple stories about teen pregnancy and parenting circulate in the media, schools, and clinics and among the young women themselves, it is important to consider the stories these young mothers tell and also how and why they tell them (Barcelos and Gubrium 2014; Collins 2015). Using this methodological approach in this study, space was created to construct and reconstruct the personal stories and experiences of young mothers, situating them as the storytellers of their own narratives (Collins 2015; Connelly and Clandinin 1990). Rather than considering young motherhood in terms of right and wrong, or whether teens should be mothers, the use of narrative analysis allowed for a more nuanced approach to an overall understanding of both young mothers and their children. This includes knowing more about not only the mothers' lived experiences and reflections of motherhood but also the barriers that might exist within their education, identity development, and representation. This study highlights the relevance, capacity, and potential for disrupting deficit framing of Black mothers by amplifying their stories and voices.

Research Site and Sample

An important aspect of this study was the locale in which it took place. During conversations with local community service workers and the school social worker, both of whom reside in the same community that this study took place, I learned of the challenges that they had witnessed in their community among young Black girls who entered motherhood. These adults had witnessed their community, in rural northeast Georgia, transition into one that offered little support, programming, or initiatives centered on the issues specific to Black girls. The adults' emotion and assistance in this research study solidified my commitment to exploring these realities in a rural part of Georgia. As the researcher, I learned that support and programming initiatives were limited, if present at all, in the rural portions of the state, especially programmatic efforts that support teens who are already pregnant and/or parenting. For these reasons, I intentionally sought to highlight the narratives of young mothers from a rural area to bring more attention to how they experienced their mothering realties.

Located in a rural area of northeast Georgia, Hope County has the smallest land area of any of the state's counties. As a unified city-county

government, Hope is entrenched in intergenerational poverty. A study commissioned by the US Senate identified Hope as among the "persistently poor" counties located in eleven Southern states, making up the nation's poorest region (Womack 2007). Counties with persistent poverty are defined by the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2012 (2011) as those where 20 percent or more of the population live in poverty as measured by the US Census Bureau. US Census Bureau data (2015) indicate that there are only four counties in the country with populations greater than 100,000 that have higher rates of poverty. Also, the data show that 17 percent of Hope County households live below the 50 percent mark of the poverty level, as compared with the 14 percent of national households that live below the 100 percent mark of the poverty level (US Census Bureau 2015). The Hope community, being defined as persistently poor, thus suffers from many of the challenges and issues that coincide with high levels of poverty.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021), poverty appears to lead to early childbearing, with 60–80 percent of the teenagers living in poverty giving birth to a child each year. This brings into consideration one facet of the structural implications of teenage parenting (National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy 2007). Specifically for the sake of this study, the teen pregnancy rates within Hope are said to closely coincide with the economic hardship present within the county. Hope's teen pregnancy rate was at 59 births per 1,000 teens in 2015 according to Northeast Health District, approximately 50 percent higher than the state average of 41.3 births per 1,000 teens. In the surrounding counties, the rates were closer to the state average (Sweeney and Raley 2014). These data have pushed agendas toward increased teenage pregnancy prevention efforts for the county exponentially; what has been limited, however, are the support programs and narratives from the young girls who become mothers in their adolescent years. The combination of all the data provides a rich space for inquiry into exploring the social determinants and experiences of teen mothers and how they navigate those realities in northeast Hope County. The participants in this project (see Table 5.1) were in the Teen Parent Success Program housed in the local high school in the northeast area. This program brings together expectant and current student parents to provide them with advisement and educational resources in becoming successful parents and students. This program was one of only two in the region that provided school and parenting support for girls who ultimately became mothers as

Table 5.1. Participants at the outset of the study. Created by the author.

Pseudonym	Age	Child
Adrianna	16	9-month-old son
Anissa	15	5 months pregnant with a baby girl
Kia	17	10-month-old son
Rianna	19	1-year-old daughter

teenagers. The program had been in place for ten years in advance of my partnership for this project.

Data Collection

For this study, from 2017 to 2018, I collected data through three different modes: two semi-structured interviews, sixty to ninety minutes each; photo elicitation; and field notes taken as a part of my participation with the Teen Parent Success Program within the high school that the girls attended. This multimodal, interconnected approach was essential to establishing shared meaning and centering the girls' narratives.

Semi-structured Interviews

All four young women in this study participated in two 60–90-minute semi-structured interviews. In *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*, Seidman (2013: 9) stated that the function of qualitative interviewing allows for "understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience." The interviews took place on a one-on-one basis to allow the teen mothers to feel more comfortable talking about their pregnancy and mothering experiences, a very sensitive and personal topic among women in general. Face-to-face interviews were beneficial because they allowed me to pick up on social cues and other nonverbal communication that gave way to insights in the interpretation of the participants' experiences. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, each of the young women chose their own pseudonym, which I use throughout this chapter. Additionally, I altered all other identifying information in the storage and collection of materials so the participants' identities were protected. Each participant, upon expressing interest in the study,

contacted me through a phone call and/or text message to schedule an introductory meeting.

This meeting allowed the space needed to go over confidentiality and informed consent guidelines. The informed consent forms, which were signed by each participant prior to inclusion in the study, educated the participant on the intentions and goals of the study, as well as the fact that she was able to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Because the ages of my participants ranged from thirteen to nineteen, those who were under eighteen had to have their parents and/or guardians present during the confidentiality and consent form introductory meeting. This meeting took place in the home of each young woman and offered an in-depth guide through each component of the consent form. It also provided the opportunity to allow the women and their guardians to interject with any questions that emerged along the way. This initial consent form meeting was beneficial, as it allowed the participants to have and gain full understanding of the meaning and intention of the study and their role within it. The meeting also contributed to the relational component between the young mothers and me, as an invited guest into their personal home spaces. Additionally, these visits allowed me to engage with the entire family units, as each girl had siblings and/or other family members who were present during the introductory meeting.

After the completion of the introductory meetings, each girl scheduled her first interview. In this interview, we explored the girls' maternal journeys of pregnancy and motherhood, how they navigated relationships and managed school and work responsibilities, and whether and how they experienced perceptions and stigma in their realities as a teenage mother. In the second interview, we further explored their mothering journeys after reflecting on their initial responses and my field notes to cover areas for more insight from the first interview. This interview also incorporated the photographs that the girls had submitted as a part of the photo elicitation activity. This meeting allowed them to elaborate further on the process they experienced in selecting images to share, as well as the meaning made as they captioned their photos based on the stories they shared behind each image.

Photo Elicitation

Photo elicitation is simply based on the idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview. The benefit of using images and text simultane-

ously reduces the possible limitations as compared with those present in the utilization of a traditional interview alone (Harper 2002). Symbolic representation in the creation of narratives can emerge in different ways. For this research project and the population and intentionality of the work I sought to do as both researcher and advocate, a multimodal approach resonated most in the process of story creation. The young mothers in this project were given the access and space to explore the symbolic representation that they felt was best as they sought to share their lived experience. I tasked all four girls with gathering five photos that would be discussed at the second semi-structured interview: something that represents how you navigate through challenging situations, something that shows how you feel now as a current or expectant mom, something that represents strength, something that represents support, and something that demonstrates your future. During the second interview, I printed and brought two copies of the photos selected by the girl for the project: one copy for myself for the research project and the second copy for the girl to keep in memory of the experiences we shared together throughout the study. Each girl shared stories connected to the images she selected to share. At the close of the interview, the girl was then asked to caption the photos based on the narrative she shared during the interview.

Field Notes

Throughout the course of the study, I wrote field notes that described the young women, their environments, and conversations we had during the interview and at any other points of exchange. Beyond the interviews, I had the opportunity to conduct further observation through my ongoing role as a volunteer with the Teen Parent Success Program. I took condensed field notes during each interview and observation experience in the program's meetings and then further developed them into expanded field notes immediately after I left the location. The field notes enabled me to keep track of any patterns that emerged during the study and to maintain an awareness of my own reactions, feelings, and preconceptions during and after the interviews and during my interpretation of the data. Additionally, the use of field notes enabled me to reflect on the overall research process. Given the nature of reflective process in this study, field notes were pertinent, as I engaged with these mothers outside of the interviews, when we traveled from one destination to the next, which happened in cases when the mothers reached out to me for traveling assistance. Field

notes also allowed me to note behaviors, activities, and events that I observed within the research process. I utilized my field notes to record personal and social meanings and understandings connected to the climate, culture, and social situations that I witnessed as I progressed through my research study.

Data Analysis

As detailed earlier, the data consisted of interview transcripts, photographs, and condensed field notes that I wrote during each interview and observation experience in the Teen Parent Success Program meetings. For this study, because photo elicitation was used and integrated into the second interview, I analyzed the interview and photo elicitation data together. However, I took note of the types of photos the girls selected that were specifically connected to the ways those images were related to future endeavors in the girls' thought processes. This provided a stronger understanding of the meaning posited from the girls as their narratives were constructed. After conducting interviews with each participant, I transcribed each interview and scanned all photos into NVivo, the qualitative data management software I used. After storing all data electronically, I printed copies of each participant's transcripts and images because it was important for me to tangibly hold each transcript and have copies of the transcripts where I could write and make notations for connections that could be made. I started by reading each interview transcript multiple times to get a sense of each participant. I then reread the interview transcripts and took notes in the margins while focusing on how participants articulated their stories and what they emphasized, until I had a better understanding of the participants and their narratives. From the multiple readings, I was able to develop an in-depth participant profile for each girl. This gave me a better understanding of who they were as individuals.

After transcribing and reflecting on both sets of interview data, I moved forward with an open-coding process, which led to 182 potential codes for analysis. I then placed the codes under the tenets of my theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and of Black feminist epistemology, which allowed me to collapse codes that were similar and overlapping. I then analyzed the data using intersectionality and Black feminist epistemology to capture each young mother's awareness, as agent of her own knowledge as she reflected on her own personal lived experiences.

Analysis of the Interviews Using Intersectionality

The ontological stance of intersectionality can be used as an analytical tool. As such, it "can be conceptualized as an overarching knowledge project whose changing contours grow from and respond to social formations of complex social inequalities" (Collins 2015: 5). As an approach to understanding different realities, intersectionality divulges an analysis that emphasizes the intersections that function within and through the lived experiences of its participants (Collins 2015).

Thus, I used an inductive data analysis process to answer my research questions. The purpose of this project was to explore the narrative experiences of Black teenage mothers' lived experiences in navigating deficit thought around teenage pregnancy and motherhood. I explored two questions through this study: (1) How do the narratives of Black teenage mothers problematize deficit discourses? (2) How are the stories of Black teenage mothers demonstrative of their resiliency?

There are two ways to inductively analyze narrative data: holistic analysis and categorical analysis (Josselson 2011). The holistic analysis approach required me to understand the text in whole for each participant rather than looking solely for similarities and differences across cases. I used a mixture of the two and integrated the findings in the end, first using holistic analysis by developing an in-depth profile for each participant. This approach allowed me to see how the girls navigated stigmatizing discourses, and ultimately informed my identification of themes of analysis across the girls' intersectional experiences.

Analysis of My Field Notes

Field notes require a description and also an interpretation about the meaning of people's actions through the researcher's perspective; however, the researcher must be mindful of the hegemonic implications of power that could emerge through the interpretation of their own notes connected to their area of study (Collins 1986). Similar to the analysis process for the interviews, I read my field notes multiple times to get a sense of the experience from the lens of a Black feminist epistemology and then an intersectionality theory lens. I then analyzed my field notes for codes and themes related to my research questions. In the end, I integrated the field notes into my overall interpretation of the lived realities and mothering counterstories of the Black teenage mothers in this study.

Legitimate Voices: Centering Othered Black Girlhoods

Summarily, through this study, the girls' narratives offered insight into their engagement with deficit discourses. In this section, I introduce each of the girls in more detail. Following their introduction, I move into the findings of the project, which center the negotiation of deficit discourses that each of the girls worked through differently given their spatial locations within school, community, and personal spaces. After uncovering their experiences in working through stigmatizing discourses, I then move into findings from my second research question, which highlights self-defined resiliency as articulated in the girls' experiences as Black teenage mothers. These narratives of defined resilience inform what emerges as primary themes of consideration in the future direction of scholarship centering epistemologies of Black teenage mothers.

Meet Kia

> Me having a child actually, it was like a turning point. It made me look at life different and, you know, made everything important, like now you have a reason why you need to graduate.

Kia is easygoing, generous, and benevolent. As an active participant in the Teen Parent Success Program at the local high school, she enjoys talking, laughing, and sharing with others about her goals, thoughts, and feelings. Sitting directly across from me during my first visit to the Teen Parent Success Program, Kia smiled and offered a confident greeting of hello to me as a visitor in the space that has been and continues to be a support for her in her mothering journey.

Meet Rianna

> My daughter's the one that makes me outgoing. If it wasn't for her, I would still be in my little cage. When I had my daughter, it made me more motivated. It's like, alright, God is like, "You might need this right here to make you kick on forward because, without this, you might go downhill."

A true example of fortitude, as a current student in a GED program, Rianna had received the information for my study from some recruitment materials I had left with the program coordinator. This program, which targeted men and women ages fourteen to twenty-four, also focused on providing work life skills and fundamental development and educational opportunities for youth, as well as individuals connected to the juvenile

justice program. I remember the strength in Rianna's voice as she introduced herself and shared her interest in wanting to participate in the research project.

Meet Adrianna

> Being a mother . . . at first, I never thought I would . . . could be a mother, would be a mother. I was like, "I don't know how I'm going to do this." But now, it's like . . . I have someone depending on me. I know being a teen mom does get challenging, it does get hard, but you have to be strong for you, your family, and also your child.

A powerful force in a small frame, Adrianna speaks with confidence and drive. Upon further unpacking my research study with the local school social worker in charge of the Teen Parent Success Program, I was immediately informed of Adrianna as an ideal person for my project. The social worker had shared how Adrianna had naturally fit in as a group leader in the program during the current school year, assisting in planning and organizing events and meetings for the other teen mothers. She also stepped up as an advocate of the Teen Parent Success Program: if she learned of any girls on campus who were pregnant but not aware of this support offered through the school counseling office, she would tell them about it.

Meet Anissa

> I want to be the best mother that I can be.

Soft-spoken and shy in her interaction in group spaces, Anissa described herself as "kind" and "caring." As the only participant in the study who was currently still expecting—five months pregnant with a baby girl—Anissa provided a perspective that stood out among the data, as her narrative was more demonstrative of perceived expectancy of teenage motherhood rather than lived reality. I met Anissa during one of my first visits to the Teen Parent Success Program meetings; she had come in a little after the other girls were already seated.

Research Question One: Challenging Deficit Discourse

My first research question in this study was to learn how the counternarratives of Black teenage mothers challenged deficit discourses. In the cri-

tique of societal representations of teenage motherhood emerges an effort to redistribute the power relationships that shape and reinforce deficit-positioned narratives that often limit these girls' experiences. When narrators tell a story, they give narrative form to experience. They position characters in space and time and, in a broad sense, give order to and make sense of what happened, or what is imagined to have happened. Thus, it can be argued, narratives attempt to explain or normalize what has occurred; they lay out why things are or have become the way they are. Deficit perspectives of a group are often based on a series of stereotypes and misrepresentations related to individuals, families, and communities in disadvantaged areas. Moreover, no consideration is given to macroeconomic or societal contexts affecting these areas. The use of a narrative approach in this research made allowance for these different heterogeneous components to be highlighted. Using "instead of" inquiries to emphasize the strengths of the participants in this research allowed me to produce anti-deficit research that does not promulgate the current narrative, but instead stands in opposition to it. In this section, I suggest the benefits of that type of research when applied to the experiences of those who navigate deficit social discourses, which are imposed on them just as much as on individuals in and outside of the four walls of the school.

What we learn of teen pregnancy is that discrimination against pregnant and/or parenting students is strictly prohibited by Title IX, the federal law banning sex discrimination in public schools, but it is still widespread nonetheless, especially through the function of deficit thought and discourse. Pregnant and parenting adolescents experience unique challenges as they transition to and navigate within early parenthood. In this study, I found how important it is for school administration and staff to acknowledge this distinctive intersection of adolescence and parenthood. By law, adolescent parents are allowed to continue school while pregnant and return after their child is born.

However, many pregnant and parenting adolescents find it challenging to stay in traditional high school settings during and after pregnancy, partly because of experiences of stigma from peers and school personnel. Fortunately, for three of the four participants in this study, these common realities for teenage mothers were not a part of their narrative, although they all alluded to the deficit thought and stigma that played a role in their lives. Sometimes even the subtlest forms of discrimination can be enough to push pregnant teens out of school, both literally and figuratively. Deficit-positioned narratives that were navigated in the narratives of Kia, Rianna,

Adrianna, and Anissa occurred at different levels: as an individual, through the familial dynamics, and through communities surrounding the teenage mothers' reality. The levels can be correlated to the three dominant deficit discourses that foreground teenage pregnancy: wrong-girl discourse, motherhood discourse, and good-choices discourse.

The following summary provides a coaxial analysis of how Kia's, Rianna's, Adrianna's, and Anissa's narratives challenged these different levels of discourse in their experiences of teenage motherhood.

Motherhood Discourse

Arguments for traditional familial deficits tend to focus on the perceived deviance or dilapidation of the Black family and the image of the ideal mother, which typically is not applied to the teenage mother. The young mothers in this study, however, challenge the very idea that they are inadequate in their ability to mother effectively. Each mother in this study had connected with different familial and community resources to ensure that she provided the best possible parenting experience for her child. One of the themes resonating across all participant narratives conveys the study participants' realization that prior to becoming pregnant and having a child, their adolescent views of self, love, sex, romance, and life's general demands were not like the reality of meeting the challenges of being a new parent. The young mothers described motherhood as rewarding, enjoyable, and oftentimes difficult. When asked to discuss their experiences of motherhood, the girls revealed the complexities of negotiating single parenthood, adolescence, and young adulthood. Kia shared how she navigates and challenges the motherhood discourse:

> I can hear somebody say, "Well I won't have a baby 'til I'm married." I know, they're probably not referring to me, but it's like, it's hitting home because I'm a teen parent, and you know, things happen. So, it's like, it wasn't planned for me to get pregnant while I'm in school and stuff.

Kia demonstrated the way she must manage the motherhood discourse but also pushed back on its imposing nature as she asserted, "things happen." The counternarratives put forth by Kia, Rianna, Adrianna, and Anissa not only demonstrate the diversity of thinking among these young mothers but also affirm how self-aware they are, while challenging stereotypes of who and what these students represent as young mothers. The complexity of their thinking as current and expectant mothers providing the best for their children challenges the idea of a universal way of being a

mother and caring for one's child. In negotiating the dominant narrative of the motherhood discourse, these girls' truths and motivations of mothering dispel the narrative that would deem them inadequate to provide and care for their child.

Wrong-Girl Discourse

Perceived low ambitions in life are a large proponent of the wrong-girl discourse that stigmatizes the realities of teenage mothers. As a deficit discourse often applied to girls who become mothers in their adolescent years, and more directly imposed on girls of color, the wrong-girl discourse was demonstrated at several different points throughout the study as the girls navigated schooling and community stigma and perceptions of their new identity. The quotes in this section demonstrate the ways Rianna and Anissa navigate the wrong-girl discourse and also push back as they speak out against its stigmatizing function. In her narrative, Rianna shared, "Some of them think it comes from the parent. So, like, 'Your mom didn't teach you, you know, about sex ed.'" Rianna's intellect is challenged as individuals blame her for her experiences as a teenage mother. She went on further in her narrative to challenge this notion, through reinforcing the fact that she was aware of what and how to access contraceptive care.

Anissa shared a similar narrative around how she experiences the wrong-girl discourse:

> Because a lot of people make mistakes, everybody's entitled to them. People changed. 'Cause when they found out I was pregnant, they changed dramatically. They stopped talking to me, they just walked past me, they didn't say anything else to me. (Anissa)

Anissa immediately challenged the notions of this stigmatizing discourse as she shared that "a lot of people make mistakes." She seeks to redirect the gaze of her reality as a flaw that she inhabits. Thematic connections across all the narratives in this study demonstrate the way one can see the mothers challenging the deficit idea that their motherhood would end their educational endeavors and future aspirations. The mothers in this study, however, showed that teen mothers indeed possess high aspirations and goals, as all four girls could name both future educational and career plans that were even more of a priority given the conception of their children.

Through this, we learn how limiting the positioning of their counternarratives from the wrong-girl discourse can be. In the traditional dominant narrative of blaming and problematizing the realities of teenage

mothers, the real truths of the girls in this study are silenced. To broadly state, blame, and negatively position that all teen mothers possess low aspirations and are morally wrong because they have entered motherhood within their teenage years would be to mislabel the mothers in this study.

Good-Choices Discourses

Another stigmatizing discourse in the experience of teenage motherhood attributes an individual's success or failure to the individual decision-making process as the determinant for how teenage mothers and their actions are viewed as either right or wrong, good or bad. This discourse is utilized to ease the conscious of the accuser of a teenage mother as a way to problematize the choices of the girl rather than the girl herself. Very closely connected to and represented by the wrong-girl and motherhood discourses, the good-choices discourse deems the very fact that these girls decided to have a child as wrong. However, the counternarratives of Kia, Rianna, Adrianna, and Anissa suggested that their decision to keep their child was the reasoning for the growth, motivation, and successes they have continued to experience.

In the following quote, we hear Adrianna challenging the stigmatization she feels in her choice to become a teenage mother: "Just because you're young doesn't mean your future stops." Like the other young mothers in this study, Adrianna constantly has to challenge the idea that her decision to be a teenage mother has been a bad choice. The four girls' choice to be a mother, from their own lived truth, has been a positive decision because they have redirected and committed to accomplishing their personal and professional goals. As another predominant discourse on teenage pregnancy centered on poor outcomes, one gleans from this study that the relevance, capacity, and potential of an intersectional narrative approach for self-representation provides the needed counternarratives to these dominant negative teenage pregnancy discourses.

Research Question Two: Conceptualizing Resilience

My second research question in this study was to explore the ways the counternarratives of Black teenage mothers were demonstrative of resilience. The girls in this study provided examples and stories of how they felt they were able to overcome the challenging realities of their new or expectant motherhood. The girls' examples almost always juxtaposed their

strength and progress against a negative assumption that they would not be able to work through or overcome their situations or circumstances. Their stories also always included both internal and external sources on which they relied that were key to their own understandings of being resilient. These internal and external sources were very essential in assisting them as they worked or were working through hardships. More specifically, three of the teen mothers acknowledged belief in a higher power, and all four teen mothers referenced family and community support, confidence in oneself, and self-determination as being key in the development and demonstration of resilience. Like the suggestions offered by the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents (2008), in understanding the resilience and strength of these Black teen mothers, I had to first acknowledge their experiences from their own lived truths and then recognize the oppressive and discriminatory practices that affected their daily lives.

The quotes in Table 5.2 center the ways Kia, Rianna, Adrianna, and Anissa view their own definitions of resilience as centered on their experi-

Table 5.2. Resilience at the intersections. Created by the author.

Pseudonym	Sample Resilience Narrative
Adrianna	"Being a mother . . . at first, I never thought I would . . . could be a mother, would be a mother. I was like, 'I don't know how I'm going to do this.' But now, it's like . . . **I have someone depending on me**. I know being a teen mom does get challenging, it does get hard, **but you have to be strong for you, your family, and also your child**."
Anissa	"**Quitting means that you're not trying**. But if you stay and you keep going and **keep going and pushing yourself to make something out of yourself**, then at the end you will get your reward for it."
Kia	"**Me having a child, actually, it was like a turning point**. It made me look at life different and, you know, **made everything important**, like now you have a reason why you need to graduate."
Rianna	"**My daughter's the one that makes me outgoing**. If it wasn't for her, I would still be in my little cage. When I had my daughter, it made me more motivated. It's like, alright, God is like, 'You might need this right here to make you kick on forward because, **without this, you might go downhill**.'"

ences as a teenage mother. The resilience expressed in these four mothers' narratives emerged strongly within the intersections of who they shared themselves to be. The boldfaced words demonstrate and counter the ideas represented in the stigmatizing discourses the girls combat in their experiences of teenage mothering. These quotes show how each mother defines her own understanding of resilience in her own words, a central piece of the value of this research.

This research provided opportunities for the participants to articulate not only the ways in which adolescent motherhood had been difficult but also the ways in which they have demonstrated resilience, on their own terms, in the face of this life-changing event. In this way, the interviews and the use of photo elicitation served not only as opportunities for the four girls to discuss and share their experiences but also as a counternarrative, because their strengths were illuminated as well. The girls' counternarratives within this study also accounted for their resilience as defined by Walsh (2006), who asserted that resilience can be seen as the process of identifying or developing resources and strengths to flexibly manage stressors to gain a positive outcome, a sense of confidence or mastery, self-transcendence, and self-esteem, all of which can be seen within each individual girl's story. The findings from the counternarratives of all four participants support those of previous resilience research (Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents 2008), which has foregrounded that resilience emerges in spaces of challenging situations or crises, all realities to which Kia, Rianna, Adrianna, and Anissa can attest.

Black Teenage Mother Spatialities

The radical act of spatial creation centers a potentiality for the (re)imagination of one's own worlds (Cahill 2021). Spaces, without interruption, allow the Black girl imaginary to thrive boundlessly. Hunter et al. (2016) posited that Black girl place-making actualizes as sites of endurance, belonging, and resistance, which propels social interaction both intrinsically and extrinsically. The silence around the lived experiences of teenage mothers in dominant narratives, the plight of these mothers, is both hidden and simultaneously hypervisible in the negative discourses that emphasize solely negative circumstances and realities. Their social location at intersections of identity persist, muddled in stigmatizing discourses

within both external and internal perspectives. In drawing attention to the narratives of pregnant and parenting teens, in this research, I made space for powerful tools of illustration and representation in Black teen mothers' own realities to be named by them and not by an other. This section captures major themes that emerged across all the narratives that will be helpful as we all move toward future implications for this work in recognizing spaces for Black teen mothers' need for attention to hypersexuality and Black girls' body politic, intergenerational support, and access to programming and adequate spaces for resources.

Black Girls' Respectability Politic: Negotiating Spaces for the Body

The concept of body politics, specifically connected to the experiences of Black girls, emerges from a Black feminist tradition of taking and acknowledging the political nature of women's bodies within society. Black feminist researchers have often centered the narratives of Black women and body politics as impactful and oppressive realities in the experiences of Black women and Black girls (Combahee River Collective [1997] 2015). Stigma was experienced differently, as their growing bellies physically made visible their future realities. For all the participants, this heightened gaze upon their changing bodies, while the girls were still navigating different social settings (e.g., schools, church, community spaces), proved to create more challenging internal and external tensions and conflicts. Adrianna shared her experiences in navigating the body politics of her pregnancy after having to switch from an obstetrician-gynecologist to a midwife because of the stigmatization she felt she had experienced from the doctor:

> We found a midwife, and um, ever since I went there, I give them their props. They're awesome. They took good care of me while I was in labor and . . . were there when I delivered my son. She was so sweet and helped me a lot. And they always, every time I went in there, they was like, "Just because you're young, doesn't mean your future stops." And so, they, they pushed me forward.

All four girls shared stories of having the experience connected to the physicality of carrying a child heightening the ways in which they experienced stigma in different spaces. This stigma followed them within school and community spaces and was something that grew over time as they progressed through their pregnancies.

Black women and girl's bodies are often on display for critique and ridicule and utilized as scapegoats in public discourse. This gaze is often

exacerbated through assumptions of hypersexuality in the lived experiences of both Black women and girls. With roots in anti-Black messaging, this subconscious/conscious gaze often influences how Black women and girls experience perceptions of their sexuality. Through this research, one sees not only race and gender at play but also the increasing interaction of the role of the physical body on the realities of these young mothers in the spaces that move in and throughout. This theme is important to note, as another layer of deficit discourse is added to the experience of a Black teenage mother. This research highlights yet another way, the performance of the body as spectacle in public places, that can be damaging to those who must navigate these spaces. More directly, the portrayal of Black girls as even more sexually promiscuous, amid the already pervasive narrative in the adultification of Black girls, created traumatic spaces where the shifting physicality of these girls' bodies called into question the way they navigated both internal and external stigma at the intersection of being Black, teen, and mother. The assumed hypersexuality of the mothers in this study showed itself as mutually stigmatizing in both internal and external exchanges of their body politic. This theme resonated in the narratives of all four girls and is important in understanding how they experienced and navigated their lives. By openly confronting the hypersexual stereotypes of Black teenage mothers, we all can disrupt the narratives that problematically situate their experiences. In the same vein, we can also move toward dismantling the centuries of anti-Black harm that has been inflicted on Black women and girls through these stereotypes, with direct intentionality on the body politic of Black girls.

Intergenerational Support: The Power of Familial Spaces

By and large, from this study, I learned that teen mothers want to do what is right for themselves and for their children. Because they are teens and parents, they need strong support networks and a comprehensive array of resources to help them parent effectively while working toward becoming self-sufficient adults. The findings of this research demonstrate, in several places throughout each girl's narrative, that the most valued support is rooted in the intergenerational relationship between mother and daughter. Each girl spoke directly to the maternal guidance and support she had received from her mother upon learning of the pregnancy, although most of the girls acknowledged that there was initially some fear and worry of the responses they would receive from their mother.

Like the traditional responsibility of motherhood, in this study, the major theme of intergenerational support emerged from the maternal relationship present within each girl's narrative. This support was present in the relationships between mother and daughter and between grandmother and granddaughter. An example of this is seen in Kia's narrative as she shared about her familial support from her grandmother:

> The support system I have, it's like, um, if I, if I think things get tough or if somebody feel like, "Okay, you need a break," they offer. It's not like I need [to ask] when I need something. Like my grandma, when she sees that I'm tired and she sees that I just want to go to sleep, she offers to get the baby. I don't never have none of my family or either my baby daddy. His side, they don't never be like, "Oh yeah, it's hard to be a mom." Like, they don't, like, throw that up in my face. They just support me.

Kia's narrative demonstrates the importance of the support she receives from her grandmother without judgment. This highlights how some means of support, if embedded from a negative and/or judgmental perspective, might be more damaging than helpful. What is important for Kia is knowing that her grandmother recognizes her efforts to do the best she can. In the moments of feeling overwhelmed, her grandmother stepping in and being helpful is what is most important to Kia. This type of support provides the needed autonomy to parent for your child but rest in the comfort that support is nearby if needed.

Empowerment for a teen mother to take the reins, to find ways to make things work out, and to do the responsible and right thing as defined by her also emerged as important in this study. With that said, all may not agree on what the right thing is. Most needed are support systems in place that reaffirm the young mother in an array of deficit discourses that do the opposite. Teen mothers, like all mothers, need individuals around them who reinforce the idea to trust that things will work out, because one way or another, they will. They may not work out how the girls had initially planned, but they will indeed work out. Adrianna contributed to this tenet of support for teenage mothers:

> Well, my mom is always here, always. No matter what the situation is, she's always here, and she's just like saying, "You give me my strength," and always saying, "You can do it. Never give up." She powers me, and my son does, too.

First-time mothers might need extra guidance, education, and support, as well as acceptance and reassurance, but as these findings suggest,

teen mothers should be approached from a nonjudgmental perspective that also makes the necessary space for empowerment and autonomy. All the girls in this study were able to glean and have this support from their mothers and grandmothers. Because these research results are consistent with previous findings (Kelly 2000; Luttrell 2003; Pillow 2004) indicating that adolescent mothers most often rely on their own mothers for support, encouraging the healthy development of this dynamic and process is essential. This study also revealed that in addition to the adolescents' mothers, other family members, such as siblings, grandparents, cousins, and uncles, and those a part of kinship networks are also depended on for support. Kia, Rianna, Adrianna, and Anissa shared about moments when they were unsure and scared of the unknown, and they attributed the most important support they received to their ability to navigate this portion of their narratives more effectively; this needed care included familial, school, and community supports.

Access, Resources, and Programming: Collective Care and Community Spaces

The findings of this research confirm that very few schools offer adequate support, particularly on-site day care, and other forms of programming that would enable teen mothers to attend and participate fully in regular public schools. Creating a positive climate in all areas of the school setting is imperative to facilitate teenage mothers' engagement and connectedness with the school and ensure that they feel involved and invested in achieving their short- and long-term goals. Pregnant and parenting teens seldom are asked what resources and types of support they feel are important for reaching their desired level of educational attainment. I noted this in this study in the narrative of the school social worker, who was instrumental in ensuring that this type of support existed for the girls in her school via the Teen Parent Success Program. Importantly, as mentioned earlier, this program is the only one of its kind in Hope County for teen mothers enrolled in the public schools. The findings suggest that this frequently omitted step of support and programming can be instrumental in allowing teen parents access to programs that can help them strategize their needs and goals. As three of the four participants emerged from the Teen Parent Success Program at the local high school, this theme emerged in their narrative as a key part of their mothering realities.

Adrianna shared how the program provided the support and help she needed: "When I came to school, I didn't know that it existed. I didn't think people would, like, help somebody like this, but I met the, the head leader of the group, one of our school counselors, through a good friend." Adrianna highlighted how she never thought supports would be present for teen mothers. Feeling alone in the parenting journey is something that resonates for almost all the participants, and in the presence of this support program, they have been redirected to a healthier space of creating a plan of action for moving forward in their motherhood.

Another key theme in the role of access, resources, and programming that emerged for all four girls was access to and information on community supports. In addition to familial support, and encouragement within academic spaces, the participants relied heavily on community resources, such as aid from the WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) program, Medicaid, and welfare. The participants demonstrated across all narratives that they were unsure at times about what questions to ask an educator or healthcare provider, as well as how to comply with the advice they received on caring for their infant. As portrayed by some of the participants' behavior in this study, when they were asked to share their feelings and queries related to being a new parent and caring for their infant, they often felt distant, unresponsive, or unable to verbalize their thoughts and emotions. These actions through a deficit lens would ground them as lazy, ill-prepared, or bad mothers. Thus, the reality is that adolescent mothers need more to feel understood and supported by key stakeholders who can provide age-appropriate instruction and welcoming opportunities for the adolescents to voice their concerns and frustrations with being a parent.

As a part of the Teen Parent Success Program, three of the four participants in this study garnered access to these resources through workshops and community site visits. Traditionally, for other teen mothers, these experiences are often challenging due to many of the negative perceptions and deficit thoughts around their realities as teenage mothers. All the participants spoke about how access to these types of community resources and information was an extremely necessary component of their success as teen parents.

Rianna, the sole participant not connected to the program, was also able to get support by reaching out and connecting to other resources and programs she researched and found through internet searches and her GED program. These included information on skills that linked her to basic women's healthcare, access to social services, and learning basic

principles of parenting offered through different organizations within the community. Rianna shared her experience in navigating some of these resources:

> I needed a ride everywhere, like WIC office, to her doctor's appointment. And she was so little, and I'm like, How am I going to do that? Not knowing that if I called the back of her health card, I could get a transportation ride.

Rianna had to utilize different means to create the types of support she needed for both her and her daughter. Being removed from the structured program that the other three girls had access to, however, made this process more challenging for her. This finding thus suggests that the presence of more organized programmatic efforts directly in place for pregnant and expectant teenage mothers is a necessity in creating more inclusive environments that seek to support this population. Like intergenerational support, this means of support for these young mothers needs to be guided with limited judgment and intentionality, which was often the opposite of the way each girl shared in casual discussion of their experiences in navigating social services and other community supports. These programs and relationships with key stakeholders that can provide this type of support are essential in the successes of the teen mothering experience. Access to support programming and resources could also give these young mothers tools necessary not only for the needs of the child but also for the mother.

Seeing All of Us: Theorizing Black Teen Mother Epistemologies

A Black teen mother epistemology is needed for the affirmation of Black teen mothers' lives and voices. Recognizing the strength that comes from spaces co-created with and for Black teen mothers means moving toward alternative knowledge claims in which connections can be made between actual lived experience and advancements in supporting, caring, and loving *all* Black girls. Rooted in and extending Collins's (2000) dimensions of Black feminist epistemology, Black teen mother epistemologies also rely on centering these mothers' lived experiences as criteria for meaning, the use of dialogue, the ethic of personal accountability, and an ethic of care and include recognizing the role of Black girl geographies as central to the material, imaginary, representational, and philosophical pathways in

and of Black teen mothers' experiences. A centrality of geography and locale in Black teen motherhood creates opportunities for the complexities across intersections of race, gender, place, and age. In the present study, theorizing Black teen mother epistemologies demonstrated the possibilities of understanding the social location of Black teen mothers and how their funds of knowledge and viewpoints offer a more accurate and valid perspective in the ownness of their own empowerment and resilience. It also created space for unmaking the pervasive discourses that implicitly and explicitly consume the spaces that move within and outside of the communities in which these girls reside.

As participants in one of only two school-embedded teen parent support programs across the state, the girls in this study staked their claim in their own space and place-making both within and outside of the program. Their narratives highlighted their resilience and created space for their Black mothering stories to be central as they navigated deficit, stigmatizing perspectives of teenage motherhood. This study holds implications for practice, theory, and future research. Themes from the study revealed implications for school and community programming to support and empower Black teen mothers. The study also centered why the stories of Black teenage mothers matter and why we all must create more space for valuing lived experience and ways of knowing for those navigating multifaceted intersections of oppression and stigma. This study exposed the pervasiveness of the deficit paradigm that shapes many social realities for people in society, while simultaneously highlighting the resilience—specifically Black teenage mothering resilience—despite those barriers. This is important in helping researchers, school support staff, and other helping professionals understand and center, through their own voices, how and what these young Black mothers feel they need to thrive across all spaces. More directly, through counternarratives, the Black girls in this study pushed against the dominant discourses that seek to limit and silence their voices at the intersection of what it means to be Black, girl, and mother.

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Chapter 6

"You Know, Let Me Put My Two Cents In"

Using Photovoice to Locate the Educational Experiences of Black Girls

Lateasha Meyers

In the late 1920s, at the early age of four, Esther Jones began her career as a performer known as Baby Esther. She was a Black girl who first grew in popularity in Europe due to the unique baby-like voice she used when scat singing. Later, she grew her platform and popularity in the United States. Eventually, the performativity of her singing style (scatting) was stolen by a white woman, Helen Kane, who gained profitability and was known most for performing as the character Betty Boop (Samuels 2016). In 1932, Kane attempted to sue Max Fleischer and Paramount Publix Corporations by claiming that she had inspired the character Betty Boop and was due compensation for the character's popularity. Although Kane had studied Jones's Baby Esther character in order to appropriate her unique style, Jones was never given the proper acknowledgment. Kane eventually lost her case because her former manager proved that the voice and persona she presented were stolen from Jones, who was never financially compensated for the appropriation.

Notes for this section can be found on page 167.

According to Feierman and Sawyer (2019), a variety of tactics have been used in the United States to silence and steal the voices of Black girls for several decades. Those tactics include not taking Black girls' protest of injustices seriously, misappropriating their voices, disciplining Black girls for speaking up for their childhoods, and denying them their childhoods altogether. At an elementary school in Florida, a six-year-old Black girl named Kaia Rolle was arrested for throwing a "tantrum." The video clip recorded on the officer's body camera circulated throughout the nation and is disturbing. During her arrest, she cried not to be taken into custody, saying very clearly, "No, don't put handcuffs on. Help me!" (Zaveri 2020: para. 1). Even with her cries and pleads, her voice went ignored. Unfortunately for Kaia, she was not seen as a child. She was viewed as not performing "ladylike" behavior, so, regardless of her age, the violence against her body was deemed to be justified. There is a long history of Black girls being treated more like adults. As a result, Black girls are often not given the benefit of the doubt. Baby Esther and Kaia are linked not by time but by the lack of space their voices were given to thrive.

Black girls are aware of the expectation for them to act "mature." When asked to tell me a little bit about herself, one of the co-collaborators I worked with for the current chapter described herself as "mature":

> You know, let me put my two cents in. I think I am too [mature], actually, because the way I was growing up, I really had to, like, babysit my brother and my sister. Like, I was, like, basically they mom. So, it was like I had to be mature, and I did stuff at that age. (Research interview 2019)

The expectation to perform adultlike duties contributes to the "molding" of Black girls into adulthood, often at very young ages. E. Morris (2007) documented how Black girls are seen in schools as needing to be molded into "ladies." Specifically, teachers and administrators in his study perceived Black girls as loud and assertive, without "proper" manners. Further, Black girls are listened to only when they play into respectability politics. Nyachae and Ohito (2023) demonstrated that even when extracurricular or after-school initiatives attempt to center Black girls, a singular lens continues to be reproduced in terms of trying to mold Black girls into more "respectable" human beings, meaning conforming to white supremacist, patriarchal expectations of what it means to be a girl or a woman. This further illustrates the importance of listening to how Black girls locate the world through their multifaceted eyes, in addition to listening to them speak their truths directly from their perspectives.

I begin this chapter by providing an explanation of why it is important to listen to Black girls and do research with/on Black girls in educational spaces. I then move to provide context on the purpose and rationale of the current chapter. Next, I outline my theoretical framing of Black feminist theory (BFT) and Black girlhood studies, specifically the concepts of voice and space. Following this discussion, I explain the methods and design of the research that informed this chapter. Finally, I provide concluding thoughts and reflections on how educational spaces can improve, based on the voices of the Black girls I worked with.

Listening to Silenced Black Girls' Voices

It is important to acknowledge that this chapter is not another piece of research about "giving" Black girls voice. As the lead researcher of the project discussed throughout this chapter, I believe that Black girls already have voices. However, as educators, we often are not listening to their voices. I commonly heard, "They don't listen to us" and "You're not listening to what I am saying" while working with Black adolescent girls in Girls Purpose Squad (GPS; pseudonym), an after-school mentoring and leadership movement.[1] GPS is located within a community-based organization in a historically Black neighborhood. The "they" the girls often referred to usually reflected a variety of adults in their lives, such as parents, community members, and teachers in their schools. As a Black woman working with Black girls, it was important for me to listen to what they had to say. I tried my best to listen, but sometimes I fell short and was placed in the "you're not listening" category. Therefore, I began to reflect on two questions: What does it mean to truly listen to Black girls? What does it mean to listen to them and locate their knowledge and narratives in the broader context of education? These questions are important for educators who work with Black girls. Given the inequities they tend to face in education policies and curriculum, it is important to understand Black girls' experiences directly from their voices. We can mobilize these voices to improve the context of education and better understand educational spaces. As I continued to reflect on locating Black girls' voices, I thought about the ways in which their voices could be located not only audibly, but also visually. Moreover, I reflected on what Black girls say both visually and audibly when we listen.

Black girls being pushed out of the formal context of school has been documented continually (Crenshaw 2015; M. Morris 2016). Racism, sexism, and classism are interlocking systems of oppression (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991) that historically have affected and continue to influence the educational experiences of and opportunities for Black girls. These interlocking systems have played a significant role in how Black girls experience school and construct their identity. Although this is the case, Gibson (2015: 201) noted, "There is limited research that solely focuses on Black teenage girls' gender and racial identity construction within the context of educational institutions." Furthermore, few educational reformers have investigated how to amplify the voices of Black girls to understand how the interlocking systems of oppression affect the girls' educational experiences. This lack of research demonstrates the need to know more about how Black girls are making sense of and experiencing educational spaces, how this may affect their understanding of self, and how they choose to locate their voices through these spaces. Therefore, for this chapter, I looked at how Black girls situated themselves via photos documenting their educational experiences.

Purpose

Through this chapter, I seek to chart an emerging terrain in how Black girls participating in GPS, a leadership and intergenerational mentoring movement, used an after-school space to (re)claim their voices about their educational experiences using photography. I highlight one major finding from a larger study (Meyers 2020) that suggests visual methods are a compelling way for Black girls to display and locate their voices and epistemologies through a creative medium. I also provide nuance into the diverse and multifaceted experiences of Black adolescent girls.

Rationale

Over the last decade, several studies have focused on the disciplinary experiences of Black girls in school (E. Morris 2007; M. Morris 2016; Winn 2011; Wun 2016, 2018). In addition to these studies, narratives that Black girls are "good" have also become prominent because of their academic

achievements, attainment, and ability to be resilient in the face of inequities (Apugo, Mawhinney, and Mbilishaka 2021). Although important, fewer works have deconstructed and expanded on the complexity of Black girls' experiences in education, particularly works centering the voices of Black girls themselves. Specifically, limited research has concentrated on how Black adolescent girls reveal their understandings of voice, place, and space. There continues to be less work locating and theorizing the meaning of girlhood from Black adolescent girls' perspectives (Evans-Winters 2015; Wun 2016, 2018). Additionally, a gap exists in empirical studies focused on Black girls from an asset-based stance. In the study discussed in this chapter, I centered the emerging conversation on education from Black girls' perspectives. According to bell hooks,

> For those of us who dare to desire differently, who seek to look away from the conventional ways of seeing blackness and ourselves, the issue of race and representation is not just a question of critiquing the status quo. It is also about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews and move us away from dualistic thinking about good and bad. (1992: 4)

Given the continual evidence of Black girls—including their voices, thoughts, and ideas—being physically pushed out of school spaces the results displayed in this chapter pushed to move representation beyond dualistic thinking in terms of seeing experience as only negative or positive. Rather, I acknowledge that educational experiences happen beyond the dichotomy the education context tends to create. The adolescent Black girls in this study used photography as a way to provide visual voice (Burke 2005) and add layers to understanding their experiences. It is rare to see literal and figurative images that Black adolescent girls create about their experiences: therefore, this chapter provides insight into how Black girls use research to share their knowledge through visuals and their voices. Beyond locating their voices, this chapter provides insight into what Black adolescent girls in GPS said could be done to create educational spaces for them, with them in mind.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framing

As a Black woman scholar who was once a Black little girl, this work is both a professional and personal endeavor. BFT and Black girlhood stud-

ies allowed me the space to illuminate the voices of the Black girls I worked with. The foundations of BFT and Black girlhood studies were both important in centering the Black adolescent girls in this chapter. BFT centers the experiences and knowledge of Black women. Black feminism is both a theoretical and praxis-oriented philosophy that opposes multiple forms of oppression, such as patriarchy, sexism, and misogyny (Crenshaw 1991; hooks 1992). Additionally, hooks (2000: 33) asserted that feminism is "a movement to end sexist oppression [and] directs our attention to systems of domination and the interrelatedness of sex, race, and class oppression." Therefore, in my approach and analysis, BFT was key. It allowed me to specifically center the voices of the Black girls I worked with, paying close attention to their racialized and gendered experiences. Furthermore, as the researcher focusing on Black girls, I recognized BFT was born out of Black women experiences, and I wanted to complement this theory with a field of thought born out of girls' childhood locations.

Although Black women and girls have similar and overlapping experiences in a society that is often anti-Black and anti-women, it is important to understand how these experiences differ for Black girls because of their spatial location of being marked by childhood. Therefore, I coupled BFT with Black girlhood studies theoretically. Black girlhood studies centers the lives of Black girls and their diverse experiences (Brown 2009, 2013; Chatelain 2015; Cox 2015; Crenshaw 2015; Evans-Winters 2011; Simmons 2015; Wright 2016). The study of Black girls by Black women in particular has grown and expanded over the last decade.

Historical Context

The historical legacy of enslaved Black women and girls has meant that Black girlhood has not been acknowledged or allowed to thrive in institutional structures and everyday life. As demonstrated by the historical legacy of slavery, Davis (1981) explained, Black girls are still not afforded their childhood. Davis provided the following example to illustrate this: "for most girls and women, as for most boys and men, it was hard labor in the fields from sunup to sundown" (1981: 2). Given this historical context, Black girlhood studies serves as a counter-discourse, a literal and figurative time and space to center the experiences of Black girls and celebrate their everyday joys and struggles (Brown 2009; Evans-Winters 2017; Wright 2016), including their right to name their realities. Both Black feminist and Black girlhood theories offer important concepts in centering the voices, experiences, and visuals of Black adolescent girls. In this

study, I used voice from BFT and space from Black girlhood studies as my analytical lenses.

Voicing, Naming, and Constructing Reality

Within Black girlhood studies and BFT frameworks, voice is a central construct. Having a voice, being able to name yourself, and using your voice to change sociocultural inequities continue to be essential components of both frameworks. Edwards, McArthur, and Russell-Owens (2016) displayed how providing space for voice—that is, allowing Black girls to name their experiences—is essential in working and doing humanizing research with them. In *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, hooks (2015) explained that the importance of moving from silence to speech is a site of struggle and healing for oppressed people, but ultimately it liberates them. This was evident in the current study in how the co-researchers I worked with named and (re)claimed their experiences.

What Does It Mean to Name?

I conceptualize voice as "naming one's own reality" (Ladson-Billings 1998: 13). Voice, or lack thereof, continues to be an important factor in both BFT and Black girlhood studies and research focused on Black girls (Ault 2017; Brown 2013; Edwards et al. 2016; Evans-Winters 2017). Providing a space where Black girls can vocalize their experiences is crucial to better supporting them and understanding their diverse perspectives from their point of view. That is not to say that Black girls do not have voices; however, their voices have been silenced in and out of school spaces in intentional ways. Black girls also have used deliberate silence as a means of survival and coping with stereotypes (Asia Thomas 2021). Naming one's reality is important because it demonstrates how "much of 'reality' is socially constructed" (Ladson-Billings 1998: 13); allows marginalized groups to self-preserve through speaking their truths, which allows for the examination of narratives that are often overlooked or generalized; and can influence oppressors' perspectives. Naming one's reality allows the illumination of experiential knowledge which is often undervalued (Edwards et al. 2016). Finally, naming is also important because Black girls have often been given names and labels forced onto them without their consent or approval (Asia Thomas 2021). Thus, it is important to understand exactly how schools intentionally silence Black girls and how Black girls use their voices as a form of resistance and resilience.

Conducted with Girls for Gender Equity, Venus Evans-Winters's study (2017) displayed how girls of color naming their reality became a perceived threat to the status quo and school administrators and how the bodies of girls of color tend to be read as dangerous by school officials. The girls' naming their reality through research exposed the oppressive nature of the school's disciplinary bias and also displayed how they talked back against oppression (Evans-Winters 2017; hooks 2015). Locating these counternarratives, experiences, and understanding is significant in better understanding the sociocultural experiences of Black girls in schooling spaces. The issue of voice and naming sits at the crosshairs of power, violence, and resilience, which continue to be a part of many Black girls' experiences in and out of school spaces. Furthermore, Evans-Winters's example reveals the deeply entrenched, ingrained, and endemic pervasiveness of controlling images that locate Black girls through a deficit perspective. Therefore, there is a continued need to hear Black girls' voices both audibly and visually.

Methodically Mapping Youth Experiences through Visual Research

Youth voices and experiences have continued to be located through visual research (Del Vecchio, Toomey, and Tuck 2017; Porterfield 2017; Templeton 2020). Although visual research with youth has increased over the past decade, more work with Black girls is still needed. In Porterfield's study (2017) on the visual discourse of a high school environment in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, she investigated what Black working-class girls learned from the visual culture in the school that adults created. She was specifically interested in the lessons Black girls learned concerning race, gender, and place. Porterfield found that even in a high school recognized as highly acclaimed and open-minded, a hidden curriculum through the visual culture of the school encouraged the Black working-class girls in the study to assimilate. She stated that Black girls

> are often softly encouraged to change and or are re-programmed into more palatable, commodifiable versions of themselves that both sustain and advance the school's identity as different. This 're-programming' often requires young Black women to alter their dress, speech, and physical demeanour in order to find belonging in a larger school culture dominated by a discourse of inclusivity and diversity. (Porterfield 2017: 301)

Porterfield's study displayed the importance of visual culture in and around educational spaces.

Other Black women scholars have used photography as a means to critically reflect on their experiences from girlhood into womanhood. Hampton and Desjourdy (2013) collaborated on a photographic self-study in order to illuminate their experiences related to race, class, gender, and ability. Finally, other scholars have used photography as a means to interrogate education and popular culture in order to center the voices of Black women and girls (Taaffe 2016). With this emerging way to work with/for Black girls in research, community, and education, it is important to propose the question, What kinds of layered visual cultures do Black girls create about their experiences?

According to Evans-Winters (2017), girlhood is being redefined (by girls) as a stage of fortitude and active voice. Understanding how Black girls represent their experiences and use their voices is important because these girls tend to be seen in precarious ways through their racialized, gendered, and classed bodies. In *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy*, Brown (2009) explained that she has been asked several times to speak to girls but never to inquire about how they see the world and how they think the world sees them.

This chapter contributes to answering the call from Edwards et al. (2016: 437) to complete research that "affirm[s] and support[s] Black girls while simultaneously rejecting over-simplified, decontextualized, and reductionist views of the Black girl experience." More than offering a "good" girl or "bad" Black girl discourse, my hope was to collaboratively amplify, critique, locate, and complicate Black girls' outlooks on Black girlhood and Black girls' educational experiences. Furthermore, I do not intend for this chapter to romanticize youth or focus on them being victims of structural systems; rather, my purpose here is to complicate the discourses and representation that exist (Ginwright 2008). This chapter is ultimately about raising and locating Black girls' voices through the visuals they create.

Research Design

Youth participatory action research (YPAR) allowed me to engage with photovoice from a youth-centered standpoint. Moving beyond pathologizing frameworks, YPAR offers a framework that critically engages youth as co-researchers with adults in addressing various social justice issues

that are important to their communities (Cammarota and Fine 2008). Utilizing photovoice as my method—that is, using photography in the hands of youth and asking them to visualize and talk about their experiences—further complemented YPAR. With YPAR as the methodology and photovoice as the method, centering Black girls' voices was essential. YPAR coupled with photovoice allowed for remapping an alternative geographical space for Black girls to visualize how they want to be located. The Black girls were involved with the design, questions asked, and implications of the study. Although not the focus in this chapter, the girls also co-designed a community exhibition to display their pictures.

Photovoice

Photovoice is a participatory method that uses photography and narrative as the main sources of data. *Photovoice* was coined by Wang and Burris (1997), and the method has three central goals: "to (1) record and represent their [participants'] everyday realities; (2) promote critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community strengths and concerns; and (3) reach policymakers" (Wang 2006: 148). The key focus of photovoice is how participants produce knowledge through pictures, narratives, and words. "Photovoice creates intellectual space for innovation by extending conventional boundaries and providing qualitative and arts-based researchers with increased options and opportunities for creating new knowledge, transformation, and social change" (Delgado 2015: 28). Black girls are their own best authors; that is, they are the experts on their experiences and the various injustices they face (Goessling 2020). Black girls need to be provided the space to speak on their own behalf about their experiences. Moreover, these spaces need to allow them to create.

Next, I provide more information about the Black girls I worked with and show how they used their voices to provide knowledge on what could be done to improve, change, and enhance their educational experiences. Their suggestions and images connect to a larger conversation on how we can locate Black girls' voices and move forward to effect positive social change, especially as it pertains to educational spaces.

Black Girls Voicing Experiences from Perspectives of Space and Place

The Black girls in this study not only named but also mapped out, so to speak, their experiences and what they desired and wanted done about the inequitable conditions they faced in educational spaces. The girls were

aware of how media (i.e., news, television shows, social media) tended to misrepresent them and how the schooling environment tended to rely on controlling images about their identities and also worked to push them to confirm and perform their identities in ways deemed respectable. Porterfield's 2017 conclusion, that Black girls are often encouraged to modify themselves into more "respectful" versions, was also supported through the work I did with the co-researchers. The Black girls I worked with also received messages from their schools via images, policies, and practices that encouraged working-class girls to change their behaviors to align with dominant perspectives of girlhood. The girls in this study pushed back against this narrative by demanding not to be controlled, but rather to be embraced and included in spaces as their whole selves. The girls offered important knowledge they constructed to provide solutions that can be incorporated when thinking about ways in which we can make the educational system more equitable for Black adolescent girls.

Black Girls as Co-researchers

It was important for me as a Black woman scholar to include the girls I worked with as co-researchers as much as possible. As a Black woman who came from a background similar to that of these girls, I was invested in hearing them and providing a platform where their voices would be taken seriously. Five adolescent Black girls participated in my study to provide their insight. Four of the girls were freshmen in high school, and one was a sophomore. Each girl selected her own pseudonym; during the time of the study, Blai was fifteen years old, Lil Ken was thirteen, and Phoo'j, Kayla, and Jale were fourteen. Although Jale participated in most of the study, she decided not to allow her pictures to be used in the study, so, I respected her voice and did not include any of them. Although her visual representations were not included, she allowed her audible knowledge to be shared. The girls I worked with came from working-class or low-income backgrounds. The girls represented two school districts in the Midwestern region of the United States.

In terms of demographics, in 2020, the Hamilton City School District, where two of the girls were enrolled, was composed of the following student population: 62.1 percent white, 18 percent Hispanic, 12.5 percent African American, 5.8 percent multiracial, 0.8 percent Pacific Islander, 0.6 percent Asian, and 0.2 percent Native American (Niche 2022b). In Hamilton City, approximately 22 percent of children lived in poverty. The other two participants were enrolled in the neighboring school district of

Fairfield. This school district's student demographics were 53.3 percent white, 21.6 percent African American, 12.6 percent Hispanic, 6.4 percent Asian, 5.8 percent multiracial, 0.2 percent Pacific Islander, and 0.1 percent Native American (Niche 2022a). Seventy percent of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch in the Hamilton district versus 37.7 percent in the Fairfield district (Niche 2022a, 2022b). In 2018, the Ohio Department of Education recognized the lack of diversity of teachers in comparison with the diversity of the student population. To address this gap "Ohio's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) state plan, approved in January 2018, clearly outlines the commitment by the Ohio Department of Education to increase the diversity of the educator workforce in Ohio" (Ohio Department of Education 2019: 3). However, as of 2019, when I was working with the girls in this study, they still felt there was a racial/ethnic mismatch between their teachers and the diverse student body. Although this is a nationwide issue, it is important in locating the girls in the larger context of education literature.

Listening to Black Girls' Voices

The main findings that I focus on in this chapter are from a larger data set. However, for the purposes of this chapter, the data discussed here focus on only one of the findings from the larger study which emphasizes voice. This finding is represented by the girls' pictures and audible narratives.

Lil Ken: "Include and Embrace Us"

Throughout the study, several of the co-researchers mentioned feeling invisible, ignored, and excluded in school. Although this was a common thread, it was very salient for Lil Ken. She had a tumultuous relationship with her school that ended with her being suspended and ultimately expelled for a nonviolent offense. Although she had a trying relationship with her school, she ultimately wanted to feel accepted and allowed to be herself without feeling like her behaviors were constantly under a microscope. Her picture of the embroidered art piece displays this (see Figure 6.1). She wants to both be herself, and, at the same time, be included in the school community.

"Include and embrace us" may seem like a simple request from Lil Ken's picture, but her visual displays an even deeper reality. Several girls in this study did not feel included in the schools they attended. Their feelings

Figure 6.1. Lil Ken's image, "Include and Embrace Us." Author photo.

of exclusion were further intensified by the "energy" their teachers gave them. Phoo'j described it in this way:

> Like when they're [teachers] giving negative energy towards you. It's like you sit in the back of the class, and like, every time you try to raise your hand, they go around or they'll call somebody else before they call you, like just stuff like that.

This statement by Phoo'j not only displays the negative vibes the girls felt and heard but also connects to the importance of providing a place/space that fully embraces and includes them. This involves understanding their experiences, not going around them, and not ignoring their questions. Imagine what it must feel like to know educators are intentionally excluding you from the classroom conversation because the assumption from the moment you walk in the room is that you are a disruption. Furthermore, this highlights the importance of having positive relational spaces (Rogers and Butler-Barnes 2022) that cultivate a sense of belonging for Black girls.

My co-researchers discussed feelings of being left out at school because of notions of exclusion largely. The girls explained how the schools seem

like they are under the ownership of white people. The following transcript provides commentary from Kayla and Phoo'j about this ownership:

Kayla: Like I was saying, like if it is just more populated with white people, it just seems it comes off as if it's [the school] their territory. So, it seems as if they do [own it], but in reality, they don't.

Phoo'j: I mean, if you think about it, probably they do. The white people probably built the school.

Me: What do you mean by that?

Phoo'j: Like, it probably really is theirs. I mean, if you think about it, it's the government's, and if the government—it just depends on who's in the government might be white. You know what I'm sayin'. So, it really is the white people's.

Phoo'j located ownership of schools with white folks because she explained that whoever owns the schools owns the education system. Evans-Winters (2019) reminded us that this fallacy of thinking is widespread and has been purposely taught to students both formally and informally. She explained, "White people do not own education nor knowledge; we are only led to believe that they possess and are the guardians of both" (Evans-Winters 2019: 79). Several others have also argued that whiteness has been equated with ownership (Ladson-Billings 2009; Leonardo and Broderick 2011). In some form or fashion, Phoo'j was led to believe that white people own the school because it belongs to the government. Therefore, in her rationale, if the government's representation is largely white, then it made sense to her that the white kids own the school. She offered an important critique of the schooling space.

This conversation displays the necessity of assisting students in critically examining representations that work to further marginalize, silence, and add to the idea that knowledge and education do not belong to Black folks. On the other hand, if one investigates Phoo'j's statement in more depth, perhaps she is onto something. Scholars have argued that school curriculum, schools, and policies, as they currently and historically have existed, are constructs that largely uphold whiteness and perpetuate anti-Blackness (Collins 2009; Dumas 2016; Hines and Wilmot 2018; Ladson-Billings 2009; Leonardo and Broderick 2011; Young, Foster, and Hines 2018). Furthermore, these constructs both consciously and subconsciously silence marginalized histories and perspectives that confront the dominant society's perspectives (Ladson-Billings 2009). Therefore, Phoo'j's observations of schools makes sense. It is not that white people themselves actually own school institutions, knowledge, or education;

rather, it is that schooling institutions have been used to uphold white supremacy and whiteness.[2] That is, schools have been used to further reinforce whiteness as superior. Phoo'j named an ideological issue that Black girls continue to wrestle with in schooling spaces. Her ability to use her voice to discuss this issue is an important contribution for educators. Phoo'j's assessment of schools provides further justification for why spaces like GPS are important to Black girls. This is illustrated through her photo in the subsequent section.

M. Morris (2019: 132) stated, "Educators must prioritize creating opportunities for girls to create organic and supportive networks among themselves. When this happens, girls with problematic educational histories begin to consider the school *their* [emphasis added] school, as opposed to just the school that they attend." It is evident from Kayla and Phoo'j's conversation that the supportive networks Morris talked about were not cultivated at their school. The co-researchers' conversation displayed why it is important that schools have a variety of representation and diversity in the material they use to teach students; why it is crucial for students to feel like the school, and education more generally, is a part of who they are; and finally, the importance of the environment of the school to feel inclusive and center culturally relevant pedagogies and practices. Kayla and Phoo'j's conversation illustrates what we can learn from Black girls when they are provided space to name their reality and listen to their voice: a Black girl space, one that "intentionally pull[s] them in rather than push[es] them out" (Rogers and Butler-Barnes 2022: 50).

Phoo'j: "Every Black Girl Should Have a Place to Go to Freely Be Theirself"

To counter the negative energy the co-researchers often felt in educational spaces, they tended to emphasize the need for having an affirming place and space to go to. When asked what the community (i.e., school, the general community they live in) could do to address how they experienced school, and education more broadly, Phoo'j responded that the community could provide more spaces where girls can "be theirself." It is important to note that she used the word *theirself* to acknowledge how the space created should belong to Black girls. Her play on language exhibits the importance of identity and creating space that supports a sense of belonging with Black girls at the center. Her picture represents a space that affirms Black girls' identities, and it displays a variety of activities and events done within GPS (see Figure 6.2).

Figure 6.2. Phoo'j's image. Author photo.
Note: In order to maintain the confidentiality of the organization and the girls I worked with in this study, I cropped out the organization's name at the top of the picture.

As a result of feeling affirmed, several of the girls, including Phoo'j, participated in GPS for several years. GPS represented a safe place, where the girls felt they could freely express themselves. Phoo'j specifically said, "Yeah, and I just said do more groups like GPS, like get all the kids off the street. Either if it is white or Black, involve them in the community, like period." The community she mentioned is where most of the girls in the study lived. During the study, there was an increase in violent youth crime there. The youth in the community were well aware of the effects this was having on their everyday lives. A variety of community members began meeting to think through how to address the increase in youth violence. Although this was the case, the Black adolescent girls in this study also had ideas about what could be done to decrease the violence, such as Phoo'j exclaiming, "like get all the kids off the street." The school was not seen as a safe haven; rather, community spaces were. This knowledge that Phoo'j has about the community contributed to her response. Furthermore, when I asked her what these spaces and places might look like, she responded, "like just do little groups, like stuff like we're doing, basically," specifically referring to the activities the girls do in GPS. Examples of activities include taking the girls in GPS to see the movie *The Hate U Give*, which is based on Angie Thomas's (2017) young adult novel, and having an analytical conversation about it; talking about media representation of Black girls and women; creating "I am" poems to proclaim who each girl is; and hosting a health awareness booth at a local health fair in the community. These are just a few examples of the "stuff" Phoo'j was referring to within GPS. Moreover, she not only called for spaces for Black girls in the community, to freely be "theirself" but also called for small groups that affirm youth in the community.

I sense that Phoo'j's call for more small-group spaces was connected to the influence GPS has had on her life and the increase in violence she has witnessed within her community. In addition, she has seen firsthand the influence GPS has on the girls who participate. She further stated that "discussion" is a necessary component of these groups. Having a place/space to go where youth are affirmed, discussing topics important to them, and being heard by everyone became a common thread that every participant in this study discussed in some form or fashion, in the sense of not only just hearing them but also listening to what they say and taking their words seriously. Furthermore, several scholars have demonstrated the positive and necessary effects of having groups and spaces that center Black girls' multiple identities, literacies, and epistemologies (Brown 2013; Jones 2015; Muhammad 2012). Black girls need not just any space but a group that allows them to critically examine their materialized conditions and interrogate power relations and structures (Evans-Winters 2017; Weems 2018). These spaces and places must center Black girls' varied epistemologies and ideas to allow them to be completely free to be who they want to be.

The Strait Visual Analysis

A strait in geographical terms is a narrowly formed area that connects two bodies of water. The metaphorical visual strait allows for further connection between the interpretation of the pictures created for this study and the larger societal context. As a reminder, Lil Ken used a picture of an embroidered art piece made by a local adult artist to display what educators can do to be more inclusive of Black girls. She said that including and embracing Black girls, not for who society thinks they should be but meeting them where they are, is important. When one looks at her picture (see Figure 6.1), one sees a variety of vibrant colors. Everything in the picture is connected; even the circle that includes the words "embrace" and "include" are connected to the background of the quilt. From my perception, this further emphasizes the importance of togetherness.

Unlike the US melting-pot narrative that assumes we all "melt" together and, in the process, lose our individual forms to create a false sense of a communal form, Lil Ken's picture allows each of the colors to contribute to the art piece while maintaining their uniqueness. In other words, none of the colors fades into the background, not to be embraced. Fur-

thermore, no color seems to be more dominant than the others. I link this image with Lil Ken's desire to be embraced and included without having to lose the essence of who she is. She wanted to feel incorporated without having to give up her own individuality. Black girls are often expected to change who they are in order to be accepted by the dominant society. This further illustrates how Black girls are only included and accepted in mainstream society if their behaviors and actions are consistent with what the dominant society expects from them. According to Hines and Wilmot (2018: 63), "Black girls are being chastised and criminalized for meritless infractions including having 'too much attitude,' chewing gum too loudly, and talking 'unladylike.'" Lil Ken used her chosen picture to voice a statement on behalf of all Black girls to take us as we are, because we want to be included and embraced fully as our whole selves. Furthermore, including Black girls in educational spaces means valuing their input and voice on things that affect them and their peers.

Phoo'j chose to take a picture of images that displayed various activities she previously engaged in at GPS. In the photos, one can feel a sense of community and joy. Phoo'j, Kayla, Blai, and Lil Ken felt like GPS was an important space within their community. GPS became a space that not only affirmed Black girls' identities, but also provided space for them to navigate the complexities of the world. In her study on Black adolescent girls' interpretations of how the media portrays Black girls and how Black girls use writing to discuss how they want to be portrayed, Muhammad (2012) found that they need spaces where they can go to navigate representation of self and identity. In the larger context of mapping Black adolescent girls' experiences in education, this is increasingly important because very few places and spaces have celebrated Black girls and allowed them to explore their intersectional identities. These spaces must be places where Black girls can interrogate the controlling images that society puts onto them, in addition to being spaces where Black girls can develop, cultivate, and express their voices and where adults can advocate rather than suppress Black girls' voices (Griffin 2021). To create a space that is inclusive, adults who work with Black girls must critically reflect on and work through assumptions they may bring before creating this space. In this context, inclusivity means interrogating inequitable power structures for all Black girls to be welcomed in the space. It must not be a space that merely replicates the same inequitable power structure Black girls face in educational spaces. A space is needed where all Black girls can dream and be future makers (Turner and Griffin 2020).

Final Thoughts

In this chapter, I examined how Black adolescent girls constructed their educational experiences in and through after-school spaces and (re)claimed their voices using photography. I highlighted Black adolescent girls' use of photography to map their realities in order to (re)claim their voices in an after-school space in the US Midwest. This chapter ultimately contributes to the literature which directly centers the voices of Black girls and values their ability to (re)claim their knowledge through educational spaces.

As educators in school and after-school spaces, we need to do more to make the educational landscape more equitable for Black girls. This fact continues to be apparent in the experiences the Black girls in this study provided. Creating spaces and places where Black girls can go to learn, interrogate, and critique power and representation is a necessity. Furthermore, the adults working with these youth must also take the time to interrogate, reflect, and learn about their own relationship with power and how it affects the way they work with and see Black girls. Crenshaw (2007: para. 3) explained, "it's not about supplication, it's about power. It's not about asking, it's about demanding. It's not about convincing those who are currently in power, it's about changing the very face of power itself." My challenge to educators is that we need to critically reflect on how we can provide spaces that both include and embrace Black girls, as the girls in this study mentioned is important to them. Let us stop waiting for permission to provide these places and spaces. Let us change the face and landscape of power and demand change as a necessity rather than just an option. Most importantly, let us work together to deconstruct and diversify the narratives that work to oversimplify and generalize the voices and experiences of Black girls in education.

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Notes

1. The founder and director of the program describes GPS as a movement rather than a program because she wants what the girls do within GPS to go beyond the four walls they inhabit. Additionally, she believes GPS will affect social change in the community where the girls live and in the larger scale of society in general.
2. The term *whiteness*, as I use it in this chapter, "is defined as an ideology untied to certain bodies, but an articulation of disparate elements—some racial, some not—in order to build a racial cosmology that benefits Whites in absolute ways and minority groups relative only to one another" (Leonardo and Broderick 2011: 2209).

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Chapter 7

"They Were Like Family"

Locating Schooling and Black Girl Navigational Practices in Richmond, Virginia

Renée Wilmot

> Don't touch my pride
> They say the glory's all mine.
>
> —Solange Knowles, "Don't Touch My Hair"

When I close my eyes, I can still feel my classroom. It is small, rectangular, contained by beige cinder block walls and worn, beige tiles. Light from the afternoon sun comes through the window and shines gently onto my desk. The walls are decorated with colorful student work and book covers, such as *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, *Animal Farm* by George Orwell. If I am still long enough, I can hear the walls talk:

> "Ms. Wilmot, when is this due?"
>
> "Ms. Wilmot, me and my friend saw the new Annabelle movie. Do you wanna know what happened?"
>
> "Ms. Wilmot, I got into JMU [James Madison University]!"
>
> "Ms. Wilmot, I got a new job!"

Notes for this section can be found on page 196.

"Ms. Wilmot, do you think Pecola [the main character in *The Bluest Eye*] can ever be happy?"

"Ms. Wilmot, I almost cried when Tea Cake [the main character's husband in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*] died."

"Ms. Wilmot, when do we get to watch the movie?!"

"Ms. Wilmot, do you think true love exists?"

My students' counterstories deconstructed and reconstructed what I thought it meant to love oneself. As I reflect on my experience as a teacher, I also acknowledge the lies I had to unlearn about my understanding of education, as many of my beliefs were informed by white, middle-class norms. Listening to my students' counterstories made me confront Eurocentric ideals that I had internalized. Ladson-Billings (1998: 14) discussed that "naming one's own reality" is a central theme in constructing counterstories that can "heal the wounds of pain." I am grateful for the ways my students challenged me to see my own and their reality, pushing me toward a paradigm shift that was both healing and expansive. The student population of Church Hill Academy in Richmond, Virginia, is 100 percent Black. Having attended two predominantly white institutions, this was the first time I ever had the privilege to be in a predominantly Black space. Through "naming [their] own reality" (Ladson-Billings 1998: 14), the students taught me that grades are not an indication of intelligence. They taught me that I should value the non-academic just as much as the academic. They taught me that degrees and credentials do not make you better than anyone else. Importantly, each lesson of unlearning and learning taught me how to better love myself and love my students.

You will read about my former students in this chapter. I had the pleasure of teaching and learning with them in their ninth-, tenth-, and eleventh-grade years. Over the course of these school years, my students led, mentored, and cared for their peers with consistency and boldness. Doing research with my former students and their (grand)mothers created a space for me to see more of their experiences and legacies beyond their brief time in my classroom. This was an opportunity for me to see and hear the stories that brought them to Church Hill Academy, as well as the familial experiences that made the girls, now women, into who they are. This project was truly beautiful, and it was a privilege for me to be welcomed into their stories.

"Don't Touch My Pride": Black Women's Legacies in Richmond

African American[1] girls and women hold positions of "multiple jeopardy" (McCluskey 2014: 11). We experience oppression in more than one way, including, but not limited to, that which is based on gender and race. As early as the 1800s, prominent African American women in the South, such as Lucy Craft Laney, Anna Julia Cooper, and Mary McLeod Bethune, advocated for the full liberation of African American women and girls and, furthermore, asserted that this liberation would result in full liberation for humanity (Muhammad and Haddix 2016; McClusky 2014). Current education researchers are also drawing upon these notions by centering the voices of African American women and girls' schooling experiences. As Muhammad and Haddix (2016: 300) posited, "focus[ing] on excellent educational pedagogies for Black women and girls . . . lay[s] the foundation for advancing education for all." In this project, I worked with three recent high school graduates, two mothers, and one grandmother[2] about the ways race and gender influenced their schooling experiences in Richmond. In part one of this chapter, I contextualize the histories and geographies of Black and, specifically, African American women in Richmond against the backdrop of white supremacy. In part two, I connect a through line between the historical and the contemporary to illustrate how Black women's navigational practices contribute to a legacy of survival and collectivism.

Drawing on the scholarship of Black women, in this chapter, I consider the schooling experiences of Black women in Richmond and foreground their narratives. I utilize Black feminist theoretical and participatory methodological approaches in order to offer narratives of Black women in Richmond. Black women have a long historical legacy as activists and educators in the city, but this work has been largely overlooked. Moreover, historical and contemporary events in Richmond often work together as actors to suppress the narratives of Black women. Specifically, the women live and go to school in Church Hill, a predominantly and historically African American neighborhood in the East End area of Richmond marked by landmarks of colonialism and slavery, as well as the contemporary, rapid increase in gentrification. Constructing counternarratives that draw on the intersections of geography, race, age, and gender creates a unique understanding of the decisions and lives of Black women and girls in this city.

Two research questions guided me in this study: (1) What practices do Black women and girls use to make decisions about schooling and navigate oppressive societal and educational structures in Richmond? (2) How do the present-day counternarratives of Black women illuminate a through line to the historical navigational practices of Black women in this city? My goal was to center the narratives of African American girls and women using portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997) as a method to reveal the tension and harmony between their desired and lived schooling experiences. I used portraiture to interview Black women several times over the course of six weeks and worked with a Black woman photographer[3] to take individual and familial portraits of the women at the end of the interview experience. In overlapping the historical and contemporary navigational practices and decisions of Black women in Richmond, I point to a legacy of Black women's navigational practices in the city. Through my two research questions, I intentionally aimed to take up a community-centered approach to the project. The significance and authenticity of this project were driven by the women and context of Richmond.

From Monument Avenue to East Broad Street: Mapping Richmond's History

It was seven o'clock on a Wednesday morning in spring. I left through the back door of my basement apartment and walked into the community garden that leads to the gravel-covered back alley. The sun shone between the row houses, and I passed through the hidden park toward my car on Strawberry Street. My drive toward the East End took me down Monument Avenue, and I contentiously, sheepishly, looked up at the statues of Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee, enshrined in my neighborhood. I continued through the campus of Virginia Commonwealth University and downtown, where the streets are shaded by towering Wells Fargo and BB&T buildings. Then, the buildings cleared, and the sunshine returned. I drove up to Church Hill, a tree-lined neighborhood with century-old row houses. I passed by St. John's Church, where in March 1775, Patrick Henry proclaimed, "Give me liberty, or give me death!" (History.com Editors 2009: para. 1). I tried not to think about what that phrase would mean for the Black families living here today. Where is their liberty, or is it only death? Eventually, the street ends at a stop sign, and a Confederate

Civil War cemetery forces a hairpin right turn. Down the hill, my car easily glided by the historic, African American Evergreen Cemetery, hidden deep behind the trees and closed off to the public. At 7:15 a.m., I parked my car and attempted to shake off any residual thoughts of indignation. After all, school would start soon.

Richmond's history plays an important role in contextualizing the historical and contemporary experiences of Black women and girls in the city today. Through the use of participant interviews and historical data in this study, I sought to highlight a through line between past and present experiences of Black women. This section has two main purposes: to provide a brief overview of a few prominent Black women in the city's history and to discuss the historical significance of Richmond, specifically the Church Hill and Jackson Ward neighborhoods.

There is a legacy of Black women taking up space in Richmond. Particularly, Maggie L. Walker's bank and Janie Porter Barrett's and Virginia E. Randolph's schools. However, throughout the city were abundant and massive monuments, removed only a few years ago, that marked space and served as a daily reminder of Richmond's white supremacist history (Schneider 2020). These monuments retold the dominant narrative of the city's story while erasing and suppressing any counternarratives (Black and Indigenous histories) that challenge whiteness. In this section, I highlight the tension between white supremacists' and Black women's histories as they took up physical space in Richmond.

Richmond is the capital of Virginia and was the capital of the Confederacy from 1861 to 1865 (Greenough 2022; Marszalek 2011). During the Civil War, the city limits were layered with barricades protecting the Capitol building. In the early twentieth century, several monuments were erected and museums were constructed across the city to commemorate the war and its leaders. The installation and insulation of these institutions solidified the celebration of the Confederacy, and many of these institutions still exist today. Richmond has a tenuous and dichotomous history stained by blatant white supremacist and anti-Black structural, social, and political movements, such as slavery, the Civil War, segregation, redlining, massive resistance, and the construction of the Richmond–Petersburg Turnpike. Nevertheless, at certain points in its history, Richmond had a flourishing and resilient Black community (Zehmer and Winthrop 1978). Several historical Black leaders were entrepreneurs, bankers, doctors, lawyers, and educators. In this chapter, I highlight Maggie L. Walker, Virginia E. Randolph, and Janie Porter Barrett because of their explicit commitment to

education and the Black community. During the early twentieth century, these women utilized their oppositional knowledges, networks throughout Virginia, and indignation to navigate Richmond's institutionalized white supremacist macro- and microstructures.

As a prominent leader and businesswoman, Maggie L. Walker utilized her position and success to empower the Black community. In 1903, she was the first African American woman to open a bank—now the Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site in Virginia—in the United States (McNeer 2019). As a member of the Independent Order of St. Luke and the later founder of the affiliated St. Luke Penny Savings Bank, she played an integral role in making insurance, commerce, and finance accessible to Black people in Richmond. Through these institutions, over six hundred Black families were able to buy homes, start businesses, and afford burial arrangements. Throughout her career, Walker consistently showed her commitment to thwarting oppressive institutions and creating pathways toward economic stability and wealth for Black Americans. As a philanthropist, she also made several donations to Richmond-based organizations, including annual Christmas presents to the Black girls at Janie Porter Barrett's industrial school. Today in Richmond, Walker's house is a historic site, and down the street is a governor's school named in her honor.

In 1886, Virginia E. Randolph graduated from Richmond Colored Normal School, which was later renamed Armstrong High School[4] (Henrico County n.d.). She began teaching at the age of twenty (Belsches 2022). In 1893, she began teaching in Henrico County, near Richmond. Her pedagogy focused on agriculture and industrial training for African American youth; she "believed in educating the spirit, hands, mind, and heart" (Belsches 2022: para. 5). Additionally, she cofounded multiple local organizations to advance social welfare and justice reform for African American girls. Two of Randolph's endeavors were establishing the Black chapter of the Red Cross in Richmond and succeeding Maggie L. Walker as an integral board member of the Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls (founded by Janie Porter Barrett). Randolph committed over fifty years of her life as an educator, leader, and advocate for Black people across the State of Virginia. In 1949, she retired from her position as the supervisor of African American schools in Henrico County. One of her colleagues compared her with Booker T. Washington when describing her indelible mark on African American education. Today, several schools and academic programs are named in her honor, including the Virginia Randolph Education Center and the Academy at Virginia Randolph.

Janie Porter Barrett was a Black women educator and an advocate for Black girls in a time when many white people mostly viewed Black girls as venues for cheap labor (Muth et al. 2009). In 1915, Barrett opened the Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls to protect Black girls and Black girlhood from white supremacist institutions such as slavery and prison. Through her school, she sought to humanize Black girls who had been criminalized (Webster 2020). This was especially important because even though the institution of slavery had been abolished, many Black girls were still living in enslaved conditions (Muth et al. 2009). Through the establishment of her school in Ashland, Virginia, she provided a safe place where Black girls could learn how to cook, clean, garden, take care of themselves, and advocate for fair working conditions. Barrett's desire and pedagogical practice focused on building a sense of trust, community, and respect toward Black girls, who are a multiply oppressed group based on age, gender, and race.

In the mid-1950s, many white politicians in Virginia strategically used massive resistance to avoid desegregation (Library of Virginia n.d.). By 1970, their actions led to a rise in the establishment of private K–12 schools by and for white families, whereas many Black students in Prince Edward County lost five years of schooling (Library of Virginia n.d.). Decades later, the impact of massive resistance can still be seen in Richmond's private and public schools (Allbrittin 2021). Today, the city's private schools remain predominantly white and middle/upper class, whereas the public schools are under-resourced and serve predominantly Black and Brown student populations.

In addition to the leadership of these three Black women leaders, the location and infrastructure of the city have been a testament to the Black community's strength and success, as well as white supremacist "Blacklash" to their success. Here, I delve into the history and historical landmarks in two major, predominantly Black neighborhoods in Richmond: Jackson Ward and Church Hill. Many Black families lived in the Jackson Ward neighborhood from the late 1800s into the early 1900s, when it was known as the "Harlem of the South" (McNeer 2019: para. 50). Black-owned banks, such as Walker's Consolidated Bank and Trust Company, were established in the Jackson Ward neighborhood and gained national and international attention (Zehmer and Winthrop 1978). Jackson Ward was a flourishing Black community until 1954, when the Virginia General Assembly voted to build the Richmond–Petersburg Turnpike (Zehmer and Winthrop 1978). The highway runs through the heart of Jackson

Ward, stunting any further growth of this thriving community for decades to come. Many Black businesses closed as the tight-knit community was displaced.

Church Hill is a predominantly Black neighborhood marked by historical landmarks of colonialism and slavery, as well as contemporary, rapid gentrification. The historical narrative continues to contextualize the city today. Church Hill has several historical landmarks and sites, and in this chapter, I discuss four sites: two churches and two cemeteries that highlight the dichotomous history of this neighborhood. Much of Richmond's history can be traced in the city's many cemeteries and churches. As a Southern city and the capital of the Confederacy, Richmond has cemeteries that tell a lot about the people who lived and died in the city and has churches that tell about social engagements. The Oakwood Cemetery is a Confederate burial ground near the back of Church Hill. Nearby is a privately owned, historically African American cemetery called Evergreen Cemetery, where several prominent African Americans are buried. These places are embedded in the neighborhood, and I drove by them each day on my way to work as a teacher. Oakwood is a larger, more prominent cemetery which is easily visible from multiple roads. A large US flag flies in the cemetery just beyond an iron gate and brick pillars. Evergreen is hidden behind trees, down a secluded, windy road. In recent years, both cemeteries have struggled to maintain their grounds, but Evergreen has also faced racist attacks. In August 2020, Maggie L. Walker's grave was vandalized, leading to the privately owned cemetery to require appointments for visitation (Suarez 2020).

I situate this chapter as a contemporary narrative of Black girls' navigational practices within the broader context of Richmond's history. Black women's enactment of Black feminist epistemologies and ontologies guide their navigational practices through oppressive institutions of schooling, and these practices are part of a historical legacy of Black women in the city.

Theoretical Framework

For this chapter, I used critical race feminism, Black feminist epistemology, and Black girl cartographies as theoretical lenses to analyze the data. Critical race feminism is rooted in critical race theory, which emerged from critical legal studies in the late 1980s (Yosso 2005). Since then, crit-

ical race theory has been used frequently as a framework for scholars to employ research to interrogate the role of race and racism in law, education, and other fields. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) explained the five tenets of critical race theory: (1) racism as normalized, (2) the idea of interest convergence, (3) race as a social construction, (4) the ideas of anti-essentialism and intersectionality, and (5) the valuing of experiential knowledge and counternarratives. Although informed by each of these components, I focused primarily on tenets four and five. Anti-essentialism disrupts the idea that all people within a particular identity group subscribe to one essential way of being (Delgado and Stefancic 2017; Wing 2003). Crenshaw (1989: 140) argued that a "single-axis framework" erases the experiences of "multiplicative identit[ies]" (Wing 2003: 7). Wing (2003: 7) introduced critical race feminism to argue that "women of color are not merely white women *plus* color or men of color *plus* gender. Instead, their identities must be multiplied together to create a holistic One." Through critical race feminism, our multiplicative identities as women of color can be illuminated by examining the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality. In part two of my project, the women discussed their experiences as both raced and gendered beings in school, as well as the multiplicative effect of these identities. In other words, their experiences could not be separated as either raced or gendered, but rather were specifically rooted in both identities. Furthermore, regarding tenet five, through counternarratives, the women's experiential knowledge is explicitly valued and uplifted. I believe critical race theory's use of counter-storytelling created space in the research project to highlight the importance of the Black girls and women's schooling experiences.

Black feminist epistemologies forefront the ways Black women have historically and continually cultivated oppositional knowledges to validate and reify Black women's experiences and resist white supremacist epistemologies. These oppositional knowledges, as outlined by Collins (2002), are marked by a particular sense of self-definition which actively rehumanizes and recenters Black womanhood, thus forcefully upending the white gaze. Black women's epistemologies can be traced to West African ontologies and epistemologies. Collins's argument explicitly calls out the ways intellectualism can be a white supremacist tool, even when embodied by Black women. An important intentional tenet of Black feminist epistemologies is the inclusion of all Black women who actively resist the oppressive hegemonic gaze, in and outside of the academy. Collins acknowledged Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth as foundational to the

cultivation of Black feminist epistemologies, a move to explicitly separate educational status and Black feminist embodiment. Through this chapter, I aim to forefront oppositional knowledges as narratives of self-definition and independence (Collins 2002).

Butler's (2018: 33; reprinted as Chapter 1 in this volume) conceptualization of Black girl cartography provides a frame that encourages a commitment to "an ongoing dialogue with past, present, and future Black girls and women, especially one's self." Butler used a transdisciplinary approach to examine the ways sociopolitical and historical contexts transform geographical locations, as this impacts and intersects with Black women and girls' daily lives. Black girl cartography explores Black girl navigational practices and charting toward constructing a map of one's story. Black girl navigational practices emphasize Black girls' collective mindset and insistence on bringing whole selves into school spaces. Black girl navigational practices are important in understanding the ways Black girls conceptualize their own identities at the intersection of race, gender, and location(s), such as the school or their neighborhood. In my study, Butler's use of Black girl cartography pushed me to consider the ways politics, history, and gentrification impacted Black women's schooling experiences and navigational decisions in Church Hill and the broader city of Richmond. I utilized Butler's theory to draw connections between Church Hill's segregated and racialized history and Black women's present-day counternarratives and navigational practices.

I drew from critical race feminism, Black feminist epistemologies, and Black girl cartographies because the intersection of these frameworks shows how my women participants' oppositional knowledges are evident through their counternarratives and their cartographies. These frames allowed me to illuminate the ways the women's schooling experiences and decision-making not only create individual counternarratives but also contribute to a legacy of oppositional knowledges and navigational practices that are developed and shared with their families and the larger community.

Literature Review

There is a robust body of work on African American girls in school spaces (see, e.g., Annamma et al. 2019; Esposito and Edwards 2018; Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews 2020; Watson 2016). Some recent studies have

critiqued previous education research that overrepresented African American girls as discipline problems, thereby reifying stereotypes rather than centering Black girls' needs or humanity (Crenshaw 2015; Morris 2016; Nyachae and Ohito 2023). More recently, scholars have taken up culturally relevant, Black feminist, and critical race frameworks to better contextualize and locate the experiences and social identities of African American girls. As a former teacher and current researcher, I must consider how these identities inform Black girls' schooling experiences. My literature review is categorized by three subthemes: Black motherhood, Black girls in school, and Black girls' counternarratives. I use these subthemes to provide background for the intersection of Black grandmothers', mothers', and daughters' individual and collective relationships to school and schooling.

Studies on Black motherhood often have considered the intersecting oppressive structures that impact Black mothers' decisions. However, more recent work by scholars such as Gumbs, Martens, and Williams (2016), Nash (2018), and Nzinga-Johnson (2013) utilized Black feminist theory to reimagine Black motherhood as a site of political empowerment, spirituality, and reverence. These works shared humanizing narratives and complex choices Black mothers make to care for their children and communities. Richardson (2019) explored how Black mothers utilize critical literacies to navigate intersecting identities of race, gender, sexuality, and class. The study forefronted the ways Black mothers resist stereotypes and forge new narratives from themselves and their children. Richardson found that mothers often navigate systems of economic, gender, and racial oppression, even as they attempt to protect their daughters from these same experiences in schools. Powell and Coles (2021) positioned the narratives of Black mothers as sites of knowledge that can inform understandings of Black children's schooling experiences, especially as they relate to discipline. Similar to Richardson, Powell and Coles found Black mothers contending with the oppressive nature of schools, such as low expectations and disrespectful interactions with school faculty.

Many scholars have explored the oppressive and harmful experiences of Black girls and women in the academy. Studies have shown how school policies and teachers constantly enact white supremacist, patriarchal violence onto Black girls (Annamma et al. 2019; Carter Andrews et al. 2019; Crenshaw 2015; Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews 2020; Morris 2016; Wun 2018). Morris (2016) and Crenshaw (2015) illustrated the intersecting oppressive structures that push Black girls out of schools, such as dress codes, attendance and bathroom policies, and subjective behavioral stan-

dards. Black girls are often targeted by these school policies that expose Black girls to unsafe schooling environments. Further, Carter Andrews et al. (2019) showed how Black girls are constantly compared against white girls and expected to embody an impossible standard of whiteness. Many school dress codes and behavioral standards are based on middle-class standards of whiteness, which additionally contribute to Black girls' vulnerability. From these studies, we learned that Black girls in particular are vulnerable in school settings.

Furthermore, research by other scholars has explored Black girls' counternarratives (see, e.g., Evans-Winters 2019; Halliday 2019; Muhammad and Haddix 2016; Winn 2011). Evans-Winters (2019) argued that empowering Black girls' ontologies and epistemologies in and outside of schooling structures contributes to research that more authentically represents Black girls' experiences and stories in academia. This draws contrast to traditional research on Black girls that has framed them through deficit lenses and viewed them as problems. Muhammad and Haddix (2016) explored the historical legacy of Black girls' literacies and posited that uplifting educational experiences for Black girls will enhance quality education for all students.

Too Many Rivers (Positionality)

> I can't be a singular expression of myself,
> there's too many parts, too many spaces.
>
> —Solange Knowles 2019, "Can I Hold the Mic?"

In this section, I call upon the lyrics of Solange's song "Can I Hold the Mic?" (Knowles 2019) to contextualize my positionality. In these words, she illustrates the complex constellation of a Black woman's identity. The repetition of "too many" defies the monolithic images and narratives often ascribed to Black women. Instead, she offers us a deep dive into the multiple intersections and experiences that inform Black womanhood. She illuminates the imagery of parts, spaces, manifestations, lines, curves, troubles, journeys, mountains, and rivers, which form the constellations of Black womanhood. Here, I extend the metaphor of rivers because it parallels my positionality in this chapter. This metaphor employs characteristics of movement (fast and slow), life (rivers help sustain ecosystems), change (rivers can dry up or overflow), and perseverance (moving rivers can overcome debris).

I conceptualize my positionality from three rivers: my identities as (1) a Black, middle-class woman from Northern Virginia; (2) a former secondary English/language arts teacher in Church Hill; and (3) a current doctoral candidate who explores the historical and contemporary schooling experiences of Black women and girls. I now recall the images of my classroom described in this chapter's opening vignette. As I approached this project, I thought about the stories and lessons my students shared with me. For years, I watched my students grow in community with one another: they cared for, loved, and held one another accountable. I wanted to honor this relationship dynamic in my research by mirroring those same themes: care, love, and accountability. While pursuing this research, I noticed the rivers move, mirroring the shifts in my positionality. I realize and contend with the ways I am viewed by my community and the women in Church Hill, as this image contrasts with my perception of self. These three rivers inform my connection with the Church Hill community, the women participating in the project, and how I engage in self-reflective practices. Even though I see myself and want to be seen primarily as a Black woman, I realize that the community and the women likely see me primarily as a teacher and/or researcher. Understanding the dissonance between how I want to be seen and how the community and the women see me, I sought to tease out when and where the three rivers of my positionality shifted and made this gap more visible throughout the research process.

Method and Methodology

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997: 9) explained the role of portraiture as a method through which the rigor of science and creativity of art converge. Portraiture creates space for "the coexistence of strengths and vulnerabilities" in the expression of the portrait and narrative. This complexity, in part, is revealed in the process of building relationships among the researcher and the participant. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis further explained that portraiture "requires careful, systematic, and detailed description developed through watching, listening to, and interacting with the actors over a sustained period of time" (1997: 12). Through this relationship, portraiture can be a tool to achieve authenticity, wherein the participant feels seen. Portraiture as a research method can be used to

reach beyond the academy and within communities to put forth insights which prompt social change.

I chose portraiture for this study because of the way it intentionally operates to center and uplift participant narratives. This project builds on previous research that took up an asset-based, community-oriented lens. Using counterstories, as encouraged by Wing (2003) and Evans-Winters (2019), I focused on the empowering and nuanced stories of Black girls and women in Richmond. Extending these ideas, this project's focus on portraiture offers a unique contribution to the field by connecting the historical legacies to the present within Richmond. Using portraiture allowed me to explore Black women's narratives from multiple perspectives: their self-image, my perspective as a researcher and their former teacher, the photographer's vision, and familial (e.g., a mother talking about her image of her daughter). The various layers of perspectives intersected to create a multidimensional narrative.

I used the works of Tuck (2009) and Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) as a guide in developing this study within a desire-based framework. Tuck described the desire-based framework as "an antidote to damaged-centered research" (2009: 416) that can overly emphasize societal ills such as poverty and low literacy rates through the lens of "historical exploitation, domination, and colonization" (413). Tuck and Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis agree that pathologizing community problems has the potential to lead toward centering failure, in which people can be viewed as victims. In response, the authors prompted researchers to take up theoretical and methodological frameworks that can center "health and resilience" (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997: 8). Here, I turn toward Tuck:

> I write this letter to communities . . . that have troubled relations with research and researchers. The trouble comes from the historical exploitation and mistreatment of people and material. It also comes from feelings of being overresearched yet, ironically, made invisible. (2009: 411–12)

With this letter, Tuck encouraged me to wrestle with the ways Black folx in Richmond are being displaced and their histories erased. As a result, in this study, I focused on how Black women and girls "can exercise a bounty of decision-making power" (2009: 412) as they navigate schooling.

In this approach to research, portraiture first asks its participants, What is good? This question prompts the participant to reflect on and consider the strengths within their community from the onset. Authen-

ticity is cultivated in the ways the participant's experiences, perspectives, and desires are expressed over time. As the complex narrative emerges, it reveals vulnerability and strength, a contradiction that aligns with blending the empirical and the aesthetic (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997).

For part one of this project, I interviewed three young women: Ayanna, Altira, and Da'Kalia, who all recently graduated from Church Hill Academy, a predominantly Black high school. Additionally, I interviewed Ayanna's mother, Airest; Altira's mother, Tyra; and Da'Kalia's grandmother, Delmore (see Table 7.1). I met with the women four times over five weeks between June and July of 2019. The participants chose the locations of their interviews, based on convenience and familiarity. The interviews were held in three locations across Richmond's East End neighborhoods: the local public library, a coffee shop, and Church Hill Academy. I audio recorded the interviews, which were each thirty to forty-five minutes long, and designed them to be semi-structured (Fontana and Frey 2005). Between interviews, I listened to the recordings and developed new questions in preparation for the next session. I wrote up the interview questions and emailed them to the women prior to each interview meeting.

During our meetings, the women chose to be interviewed with their familial partner or individually. Delmore and Da'Kalia chose to be interviewed together, whereas the others chose to be separate. In aiming to situate this project in the community, a friend, Black woman and Richmond photographer Cheyenne Varner, took portraits of the women (see Figures 7.1, 7.2, and 7.3). While taking their photographs, Cheyenne asked questions such as these: "What makes you proud to be (name)'s (daughter/mother/grandmother)?" "What did you enjoy about this inter-

Table 7.1. The participants' names and relationships. Created by the author.

Note: The women elected to use their real names as an authentic way to share their stories in this story.

Name (relationship)		**Name (relationship)**
Ayanna (daughter)	↔	Ariest (mother)
Altira (daughter)	↔	Tyra (mother)
Da'Kalia (granddaughter)	↔	Delmore (grandmother)

view process?" "What did you learn about your (daughter/mother/grandmother)?" "What did you learn about yourself?" Through this experience, the women laughed and cried with each other. Finally, I transcribed the interviews verbatim.

Figure 7.1. Ayanna and her mother, Ariest. Photograph by Cheyenne Varner. Author-contracted photo.

Figure 7.2. Tyra and her daughter, Altira. Photo by Cheyenne Varner. Author-contracted photo.

Figure 7.3. Da'Kaila and her grandmother, Delmore. Photograph by Cheyenne Varner. Author-contracted photo.

In analyzing the data, I first listened to all of the interviews and took notes on themes or interesting remarks that I noticed. Next, after having the interviews transcribed, I read the transcriptions and highlighted words that came up often or insights into the women's perspectives regarding schooling and society. I looked for patterns over the course of the weeks of interviews and developed themes. Our conversations tended to focus on the city of Richmond, its public schools, and the decisions each pair of women made together to navigate the city. I considered these themes' connection to Richmond's ever-present history that seemed to continue to impact the women today.

Findings

> Don't test my mouth
> They say the truth is my sound.
>
> —Solange Knowles, "Don't Touch My Hair"

There is still a strong Black community in Richmond that relies on collectivism despite structural impediments of this community's survival and

success in the city. Although physical spatial markers may not be as explicit, Black women today, much like women in the late 1800s and early 1900s, create networks through family, friends, and neighbors to uplift one another. In this section, I present two main findings: Black women rely on their community to find physical school spaces that foster a sense of belonging, and Black women practice reflexivity in a way that challenges white dominance and questions harmful schooling structures while creating a path for themselves. As the study participants reflected on their girlhood(s), they shared many experiences at the intersection of family, neighborhood, race, and gender. These aspects of their stories illustrate how they used their oppositional knowledges, collective decision-making, and kinship to inform their navigational practices.

Belonging in School

> It just amazed me how the kids were. They were like family.
>
> —Tyra

Tyra, Ayanna, and Altira each expressed the importance of a tight-knit community, which fostered a sense of belonging during their schooling experiences. Tyra raised three daughters in Church Hill, all of whom had experiences in both public and private schools in Richmond and the surrounding counties. Tyra reflected on her own experience of going between several schools in Richmond city and the surrounding suburbs, a personal experience which made her more aware of the differences between the city and suburban schools. When Tyra's eldest daughter was starting high school, Tyra initially planned for her daughter to live with a relative so she could attend a county school rather than one in the city school district. When a young woman in Tyra's neighborhood recommended Church Hill Academy to her, she was grateful that her daughters could go to school close to home. She explained how her experiences in school guided her decision to enroll her three daughters in the private school: "The school, I loved it so much." Because her two older daughters attended this school, it felt natural that Altira would attend as well. Tyra said she loved that the school was smaller and that the students received more attention from their teachers and were more community oriented. Tyra said "they didn't judge" one another based on appearances, which made her feel like her daughters would be safe: "It just amazed me how the kids were. They were like family."

Butler (2018: 31) discussed the lineage of Black women searching for and creating their own physical and epistemological spaces for "reclaiming

a sense of belonging." Physical spaces include homes, stores, places of worship, and epistemological spaces are "locations in a field of study or discipline" (30). For Tyra, it was important for her to find a school that would be a physical space for her daughters to feel safe and cared for and receive a good education. As a small, all-Black, affordable, private school, Church Hill provided a space for her daughters to express themselves, grow, and learn. Tyra expressed her admiration for the school and compared it to an accepting family. In this way, the school became a welcoming space wherein Black girlhood was valued and celebrated.

In Ayanna's story, trusted family and community members outside of the formal school context led her to find the right school for her. While she was in middle school, she and her parents and brother moved from the Hampton Roads area and to Richmond. Ayanna spent her elementary school years hopping from school to school, not really feeling settled in one place. During her first year in public school, she got into fights with her classmates and her grades slipped, so Ayanna and her parents began researching other schools. A friend of the family put in a good word for Ayanna and her younger brother with a local private school, Emmanuel Academy (pseudonym). At first, she was not admitted because of her grades, but at the last minute, she was able to take the school's placement test and gain acceptance. Ayanna expected to begin ninth grade in the fall, but after she took the placement test, the school recommended she reclass into eighth grade. Ayanna said, "It was fine because I was going to get the education that I should've got" in middle school. After her tenth-grade year, Emmanuel Academy closed, and Ayanna and her brother began looking for another school to attend. When they initially applied to Church Hill Academy, they were rejected because they lived outside the school's zoning. However, Ayanna emailed the head of school, asking to attend Church Hill and explaining her situation and commitment to learning. An exception was made for Ayanna and her brother to be admitted to the school.

Ayanna described Church Hill Academy as an ideal school community that was "more family-like than school-like," and described the teachers as caring. The school partnered with local organizations in Richmond that worked with students to get part-time jobs and college scholarships, prepare college applications, and study for the SAT. Church Hill Academy provided Ayanna with access to opportunities that she may not have had access to at other schools.

Butler's (2018: 30) Black girl cartographies forefront how "Black girls and women's liberatory practices have been, and will continue to be,

rooted in spaces that we demand, seek, create, and cultivate." She argued that Black girls and women have a legacy, from Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, to seek and advocate for our collective freedom. Growing up, Ayanna had to contend with moving from school to school and finding a supportive school community in both Hampton Roads and Richmond. When Emmanuel Academy closed when she was a tenth grader, Ayanna took on the onus of seeking out a better education for herself and her brother and found the opportunity for them to attend Church Hill Academy. Despite being reclassed at Emmanuel Academy and her initial rejection from Church Hill Academy because of zoning, her persistence cultivated a path forward. Through her advocacy and confidence, she demanded more for herself and reclaimed her sense of belonging at school.

Collectively, Tyra's and Ayanna's individual stories illustrate how Black women and girls navigate their schooling experiences and choices by relying on their community and family. Whether they are contending with segregation or gentrification, the women's communities and families provided protection and guidance.

Reflexivity in Practice

> I'm still trying to figure out why we're paying to live on Earth when Earth was given freely to us.
>
> —Altira

Butler (2018) described the practice of reflexivity in Black girl cartographies as Black women questioning everyday oppressive structures and policies while creating a new path forward. This was echoed in Altira's persistent questioning of schooling structures and capitalism and in the ways Janie Porter Barrett challenged oppressive structures such as slavery by teaching Black girls how to advocate for themselves. Tyra's daughter, Altira, attended and graduated from a predominantly Black, private school in Church Hill. Altira reflected on her experience attending high school during the height of gentrification in her neighborhood. She saw her Black classmates from elementary and middle school leave for the suburbs for better educational opportunities while many white people moved in. Although she graduated at the top of her class, she acknowledged the cognitive dissonance between her schooling experiences and lived experiences:

> I feel like sometimes school is just a waste of time cuz half of the stuff I'm not gonna be doin' in actual real life. . . . I think high school should be like college . . . just take the courses that you actually need. (Altira)

Altira's disappointment in her education seemed to be juxtaposed with her concern as she entered adulthood in a neighborhood that was becoming increasingly expensive due to gentrification. She later said, "In society, you need a whole bunch of money to survive. . . . I'm still trying to figure out why we're paying to live on Earth when Earth was given freely to us." Even though Altira was studious and graduated at the top of her class, the navigational skills she learned and used as a high school student have not easily applied to postsecondary life. For her, growing up during gentrification shaped her girlhood and complicated her transition to adulthood. She has had to find new ways to navigate school and her neighborhood. As her navigational practices evolve, she is forming a new path forward that will hopefully allow her to stay in Church Hill.

Discussion

Historic and modern experiences of Black women and girls in Richmond have been marred by racism, sexism, and social and financial divestment. Even still, Black women and girls continue to utilize oppositional knowledges and collectivist notions of family and community to carve out pathways toward success and liberation for themselves and their families.

Tyra's and Ayanna's counternarratives parallel the legacy of Maggie L. Walker. Tyra and Ayanna relied on family and community to find a safe and engaging school environment. Similarly, Walker took initiative in her community to create an opportunity for economic stability and growth. Whereas Ayanna advocated for herself and Tyra advocated for her daughter, Walker advocated for the needs of the Black community in order to establish a bank. In these collectivist ideas of community, each individual becomes an integral part toward the success of everyone in their community.

Tyra's story illustrates her family's legacy in Richmond as it intersects with school. As a girl, she and her family navigated various schools across Richmond and the surrounding areas, looking for better educational opportunities. As a mother, she utilized these past experiences to make decisions on behalf of her daughters. As a girl then and a mother now, her community and family collectively informed how she and her daughters navigated school in Richmond. Tyra's navigational practices are a part of a legacy of Black families, particularly in the South, seeking the best educational opportunities available (Anderson 1988). Furthermore,

Tyra's schooling experience lies in the wake of Richmond's legacy of Black women, such as Maggie L. Walker, Virginia E. Randolph, and Janie Porter Barrett, who strived to create schools for Black children and build a successful community.

Ayanna's story illustrates how Black girls and their families utilize community connections to navigate schooling for themselves and with their parents. Ayanna and her family learned about both Emmanuel Academy and Church Hill Academy through family friends and community members. When applying to Church Hill Academy, Ayanna also advocated for herself and her brother to attend the school, balancing her individual desires and her responsibility as an older sister to look out for her brother. Again, the theme of family arose when she likened her schooling experience at Church Hill to family, citing the significance of familial connections at school. The sense of community and family that Ayanna built with teachers and classmates at school created safe and foundational space for her growth and learning. Her advocacy and persistence fall in line with a legacy of Black women in Richmond who have advocated on the behalf of their families and communities toward success.

Maggie L. Walker advocated for the economic stability of Richmond's Black community. As a banker and philanthropist, she prioritized the community's need for commerce and financial opportunities. Her legacy shows a sense of community that meant leveraging her position and voice to create pathways for others. Walker used her national and international network to grow her reputation and strengthen her bank, even during the Great Depression. Through these connections, she also ensured that Black families in Richmond had a safe and stable bank to rely on for decades.

Black women and girls have navigated white supremacist ideologies and structures for generations. Utilizing their oppositional knowledges, Altira and Janie Porter Barret pushed against oppressive, white supremacist, patriarchal, and capitalist structures. Altira critiqued the function of schooling and capitalism. She questioned the purpose of schooling as an outdated learning experience that did not help her transition into adulthood. Further, she stated that in her adult world, she no longer utilizes the concepts that were uplifted in school, whereas the skills she needs now were downplayed. School taught her to decenter her own thoughts and focus on curriculum; therefore, through her critique, she recentered herself and reclaimed her agency. Furthermore, she pushed against capitalist notions of labor and property, citing that the Earth was given to

us, but through settler colonialism and capitalism, land has been commodified. Witnessing Altira's process of unlearning and reclaiming self illustrates the development of her oppositional knowledges that undergird her perspective.

Similarly, Janie Porter Barrett challenged the harmful and oppressive working conditions of Black girls in Virginia. When she saw that Black girls were enslaved or imprisoned, she enacted her oppositional knowledges to not only rehumanize herself but also humanize Black girls. She saw how white families across Virginia sought to re-enslave Black girls, abuse them, and deny their rights. Barrett had the resources and support to act. Through creating a school, she provided a safe haven for Black girls to learn, build healthy relationships, and receive medical care.

It is imperative for teachers and leaders to celebrate and protect Black girlhood, because Black girls in schools experience disproportionate rates in discipline and are pushed out of schooling (Crenshaw 2015; Morris 2016). Black girls are faced with "the impossibility of being White" (Carter Andrews et al. 2019: 2562; Woodson [1933] 1990), meaning they are constantly expected to embody stereotypical traits of white girls, such as meekness and eager obedience. The demands of US public schools are impossible because even when Black girls achieve these standards, they are still unrecognized, unprotected, and sometimes even punished (Morris 2016). Black students, especially Black girls, femmes, and trans and nonbinary students, deserve to feel safe, celebrated, and affirmed in schools. Teachers play an important role in making school a supportive learning environment. By sharing these women's stories, I frame their experiences in an asset-based lens. I encourage teachers and school leaders to also take up an asset-based lens to better engage and support Black girls and their families. The Black women in this study relied on trusted community members to find safe and uplifting school environments. Consider the ways you listen to and engage with your students and their families. How can you make them feel welcomed in your classroom or school? Do your students feel seen? Do they feel cared for?

Conclusion: "The Glory's All Mine"

When I close my eyes and envision my classroom, I see students' art, I hear their questions, I feel their energy. Each day in that room, I made space to listen to them and get to know them as young adults. We talked

about what excited them, such as prom, horror movies, and summer jobs, and also what frustrated them, such as low grades and feeling disrespected or ignored. We had open dialogue, and we collaborated to find resolutions. We loved, we cared, and we held one another accountable.

As written in the Combahee River Collective Statement, "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression" (Taylor 2017: 22–23). Knowing our legacies as Black girls and women empowers us to learn, grow, and express ourselves more authentically. Even though Black women and girls hold legacies, oppositional knowledges, and collectivist attitudes in our bodies, we are often not taught where or who those knowledges and dispositions come from. There is a freedom that comes from knowing. The knowledge passed down by Black women has the potential to shape Black girls' decisions as they navigate school and their communities. Drawing these through lines between the past and present, contextualized with a specific geographical location, provides lineages of nuanced and complex counternarratives that build on our histories. It is important for Black women and girls to know our histories and counternarratives that center our voices for the same reason that collectivism is important: the stories and needs of the individual build toward the unity, strength, and success of the community. Black women's definition of self, as developed through their counternarratives, not only are sites of self-empowerment but also can illuminate an imagining of Black girl–centered schooling. When school systems—administrators, teachers, policies, and curriculum—collaboratively listen to Black girls and women's counternarratives, school buildings can become safe places for Black girls to be their whole, authentic selves.

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ban Teaching Scholars Program at Boston College, where she earned her MEd with a concentration in urban education and secondary English education.

Notes

1. Throughout this chapter, I use both *Black* and *African American* to describe the experiences of the women and girls. I use *African American* to highlight the descendants of Africans enslaved in the United States and the historical lineage of their experiences and oppression. I use *Black* to describe current women in the study who are descendants of Africans enslaved in the United States and the African diaspora.
2. Overall, in this project, I sought to uplift Black girls and women. Throughout this chapter, I use the term *Black women* because I asked women to reflect on their experiences as Black girls.
3. Portraits for this project were taken by Cheyenne Varner, a Black woman doula, designer, photographer, and writer. Learn more about her work online at http://iamcheyennevarner.com/.
4. Armstrong is the public high school in the Church Hill neighborhood. Delmore, a study participant, graduated from this school in the 1970s.

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Chapter 8

On Young Ghanaian Women Being, Becoming, and Belonging in Place

Susan E. Wilcox

> The last leg of the three-hour trek to Asesewa from Accra is through winding mountain red dirt roads made hard by the steady flow of traffic. The ride is bumpy and dusty, and my driver, Yao,[1] has turned on the air conditioner so we can close the windows. As we ascend, I take in the lush hills and quietude that is broken each time we roll through a town, by the sounds of children chattering on their way to school, by roadside sellers hawking fresh produce from wooden stands, and by tro-tro conductors calling out for passengers. I do not yet know that these journeys will linger as clarion memories many years on. On this first trip, I rest my eyes to contemplate how to state my request to the assistant headmaster. (Adapted from my researcher journal 2014)

In 2014, I was on my way to Asesewa, Ghana. Remembrances of prior times in Ghana and of my work with Black young women were like the rays of light bouncing off Yao's windshield when the trees gave way to the sun, shimmering autobiographical artifacts reminding me how I came to be on this road but not fully revealing a way to make my research request. I have built long-term relationships with Ghanaian partners, but going into this research, I knew my time with initiates of Dipo (the rite of adulthood for girls and young women practiced by the

Notes for this section can be found on page 217.

Krobo), whose experiences I wanted to learn from and about, would be brief. I was unsure how I would be received, but I planned to present myself as someone come to exchange life lessons with them in the long tradition of Black girls and women talking story around open fires and kitchen tables (Haddix et al. 2016; hooks 2000; Ohito et al. 2023). As Yao focused on avoiding potholes, I was thinking about how to pose my interest in studying Dipo as an exchange of reciprocal value although I had come to them. Arriving at Asesewa Senior High School, I began the dance between layers of the school's administration, introducing myself and describing my study until, all protocols observed, I ended the morning by aligning the school's calendar with my iCal, assured that I could move forward. Conceding the research was my mission, not the initiates', I knew I would dip from the well of Black women's knowledges and perspectives (Muhammad and Haddix 2016) to be in right relationship[2] with the young women.

Working from my temporary base in the Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies at the University of Ghana–Legon, I was studying how initiates of the Krobo Dipo rite assess its influence on their sense of agency or ability to enact the leadership (Duggins 2011; Zimmerman and Cleary 2005) expected of Krobo women (Adjaye 1999; Boakye 2010; Steegstra 2009). Sixteen years earlier, I had created Sister Sol, a rite-of-passage program for Black and Latinx young women of The Brotherhood/Sister Sol in New York City, New York, and established its international program, for which Ghana is a regular destination. Bro/Sis, familiarly, uses a pedagogy of African diasporic history, culture, and thought. Sister Sol members participating in both programs, I noticed, wove an interior landscape from the texts, discussions, and other curricula from their overseas experiences into complex personal narratives inclusive of their shared identity as people of the African diaspora. What they learned in the rites space uniquely materialized and was amplified in the place-based experience of Ghana (Wilcox 2007).

My Bro/Sis colleagues and I had invested in rites of passage to nurture young people's holistic well-being, and in Ghana, I was able to study an actual traditional rite. After months of reading up on Dipo, I realized that what was really sparking my curiosity was learning from young women who had gone through the rite about how they situate this tradition within their modern lives and interpret its influence, particularly in cultivating Krobo womanhood. Rereading the paper I presented at the end of my appointment at the University of Ghana–Legon, I be-

gan to think about the knowledge generation of the Dipo initiates related to the interplay between being and becoming, the liminal space of adolescence and Dipo, and the meaning(fulness) of place and space, concepts I thread throughout this chapter. By placing the Dipo initiates in Blackness that transcends geographic boundaries, a larger argument unfolded. Belonging offers a place of embodiment and freedom for Black teen girls, as illustrated in the geospecific cultural context of Dipo and through remembering Sister Sol's "critical pedagogy of love that lets both learners and teachers intimately explore the affective landscape of corporeal pleasure [and] makes possible gratifying learning spaces and conditions" (Ohito 2019: 142). Through Black girlhood studies, one understands the intricacies of their stories using a feminist lens that calls to mind Audre Lorde and bell hooks and reveals nuanced identities that have been ignored, undertold, and overshadowed (Halliday 2019; Smith 2019). Although rites of passage are a common topic within the genre, scholars have mainly focused on the Global North. This study adds to the conversation.

This chapter is a weaving of research and lived experience, including those of my own being conjured. I begin with descriptions of rites of adulthood (Dipo and Sister Sol), followed by conceptual and theoretical framing that traces Black girlhood across the African diaspora. I describe the makeshifting methodology I used, then bring together what I am learning about being, becoming, and belonging from the initiates and what this tells us about the geographies of Black girlhood.

Rites of Adulthood: Dipo and Sister Sol

The need for ritual to recognize and celebrate different life passages is universal across Africa (Somé 1998), and those that signify the transition from childhood to adulthood, what Ampim (2003) referred to as the "Rite of Adulthood" (para. 6), are some of the most important. Initiates enter a rite with all of their life experiences, knowledge, skills, preferences, and aspirations and, upon completion, have learned how to act in accordance with their newly acquired social standing and are now authorized to do so (Adjaye 1999; Ampim 2003; Sarpong 1977; Somé 1998). The role of their community is to publicly approve, acknowledge, and affirm the performance to inspire initiates to fulfill their life purpose (Somé 1998).

The Brief on Dipo

Dipo is practiced by Krobo girls whose ancestral mountain home (Klowem) and shrine (Nana Klowɛki) are in Ghana's Eastern Region. Hiking up Klowem one day during the department's annual field school for fourth-year students, Emmanuel, who later introduced me to Asesewa Senior High School, bent down to pick up a small blue Dipo bead and handed it to me. Had I had seen it in the dirt, I would have left it in place, but as a gift, even if lighthearted, I added it to a strand of even tinier gold and blue beads that I wore as a kind of talisman. Some Ghanaians might call this juju, similar to how some people perceive Dipo as unchristian.

Dipo initiates become Krobo women, approved and prepared for marriage to Krobo men, accepted into their husbands' families, and permitted to contribute to community decision-making (Adjaye 1999; Boakye 2010; Steegstra 2002, 2009). Historically, Krobo are known to acculturate other ethnic groups into their community by performing Dipo on incoming female members (Adjaye 1999; Boakye 2010; Steegtstra 2005). Researcher and Dipo initiate Boakye (2010) said the ritual originally lasted three years on Klowem, then one year, then six months, until it was reduced to its current five to seven days, with activities in initiates' hometowns. Dipo was also previously performed in preparation for marriage, but with very young girls participating, it raises the question, Is Dipo still a rite of adulthood (Adjaye 1999; Boakye 2010; Steegstra 2005)? What has remained consistent is Dipo's three main stages (Steegstra 2002):

1. Preparation includes divination to receive spiritual permission to perform the rite, cleansing of the girls, and gathering of materials and fees for performing the ritual.
2. Separation includes undressing the girls, shaving their heads, drinking libations, adorning the girls with waist beads, and preparing the millet drink they will imbibe.
3. Climax includes killing the goat and pouring its blood on the girls, visiting the "old lady" (Nana Klowɛki), outdooring of initiates (presenting them to their families and community), and taking photographs to prove Dipo was performed.

The authority of the Dipo spiritual leaders is unquestioned, particularly during the separation stage when, removed from their homes and daily

routines, initiates are "passive and humble" receivers of teachings about Krobo morals, taboos, and social responsibility (Ampim 2003).

The unrestricted role of Dipo priestesses/priests and the belief that the rite conflicts with Christian values have opened Dipo up to criticism. Human rights advocates and political leaders say it contributes to promiscuity, unwed pregnancies, and higher HIV rates (Adjaye 2002; All-Africa 2005; Smith-Spark 2006) and subjects initiates to "oppression at the hands of dominating and unequal ritual officiants who are the repository of cultural values, norms, [and] attitudes" (Adjaye 1999: 21). While writing this chapter, I searched Ghanaian media to see how Dipo was currently discussed in the public sphere and read that Nene Tettey Kwao I of the Luom-Osu-Doku Council (which has authority over the rite) wants to reduce teenage marriage by limiting Dipo to girls ages eighteen and older and requiring approval from the council to confirm the criterion is met (Hagan 2017). I also went back to my notes:

> I read and frequently heard that Dipo leads to female promiscuity and the increase in HIV infection in their community. A colleague asked me if my research would lead to any recommendations and specifically those having to do with reducing young women's promiscuity. He also noted that if a male is raised in a family in which his father and grandfather are polygamous, it is a natural lifestyle for him to live. But for women raised in a monogamous household, polygamy could cause emotional turmoil that would somehow need to be dealt with. I'm not sure if he meant polygamy should be accepted or not, but the supposition that African men are naturally polygamous alongside the critique that Dipo fosters promiscuity and increases teen pregnancy presents a tricky imbalance. (Researcher journal 2014)

One afternoon, Emmanuel, who is Krobo, told me his teenage daughter could not have Dipo performed because she is an unwed mother. Just barely containing his rage, Emmanuel stressed that she is undeniably Krobo, and he longed for her to be a confirmed Krobo woman. The pull to have their daughters secure the cultural prestige of Dipo is such that some Krobo Christians will have the rite performed before their daughters receive the Christian sacrament to ameliorate its figurative effects and in hopes that there remains no memory of the experience (Adjaye 1999). How and why has Dipo endured? Some of my University of Ghana colleagues would place Dipo among long-held traditions intentionally harnessed for the future (Anquandah, Kankpeyeng, and Apoh 2014). It is a culturally nimble and potent pronouncement of Krobo womanhood that, like culture writ large, is passed down by women (Boakye 2010; Steegstra 2009).

Sister Sol Rites of Passage

Whether or not a Ghanaian girl participates in a cultural rite of adulthood, she—like Black girls everywhere—will come of age through sociopolitical means upon reaching legal adulthood (voting and drinking age) or by gaining respect, maturity, or prominence as a married person, parent, provider, and/or community leader (Adjaye 1999; Lesko 2012). Esteeming the cultural, ancestral dimensions of development to reclaim heritages lost through slavery, more and more Black young women in the United States are participating in rites of adulthood inspired by African traditions.

Sister Sol scaffolds edifying, cathartic experiences and celebration of seminal milestones rooted in a Pan-Africanist and social justice curriculum with ritual phases adapted from The Brotherhood (founded before Sister Sol). Sister Sol chapters create a collective mission statement and definitions of *sister*, *woman*, and *leader* to cohere them as a group that will formally convene for four or more years. During their last year, members craft individual oaths of dedication about their aspirations and commitments, which characteristically include a review of their Sister Sol journey.

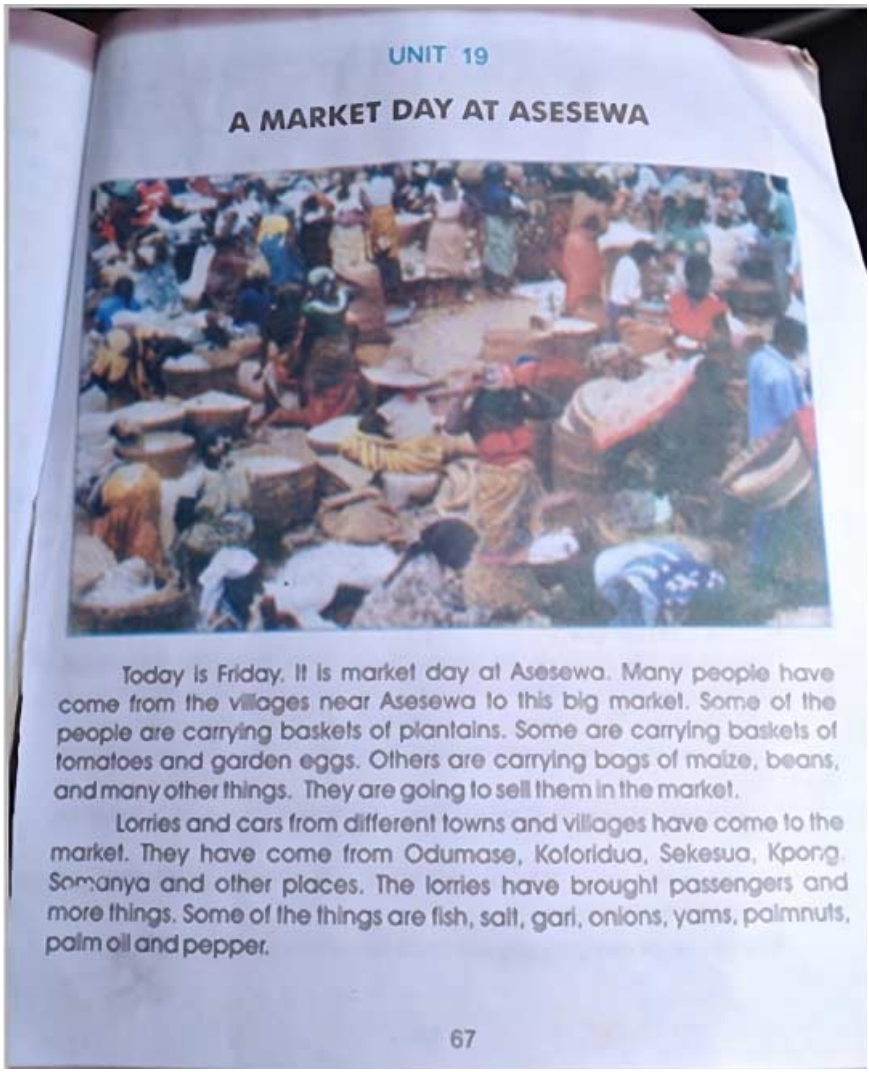
Reclaiming their African identities has been foundational to the Sister Sol members' self-knowing (Wilcox, Lazarre-White, and Warwin 2004), layering onto their strengths and wisdom (Dillard 2020) and fulfilling a vital need to connect them to female role models and deconstruct pervasive objectifying messages about Black women (Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003). Although some Sister Sol members enter the program with low trust thresholds, most leave strengthened by rituals experienced in solidarity with sister-friends. In Sister Sol, they bear witness to one another and lay bare their own vulnerabilities, sharing joys, sorrows, epiphanies, and hard-earned wisdoms (Wilcox 2021).

Theorizing Black Girlhood across the African Diaspora

Before theorizing about the Dipo initiates, I first introduce them here. They ranged in age from fifteen to nineteen and were Form 2 students (equivalent to seventh or eighth grade in the United States) at Asesewa Senior High School, a boarding school and the only senior high school in the rural Upper Manya Krobo District. All but two of the initiates are from Krobo towns. The average age they had Dipo performed was four-

teen, but a few were as young as nine years old. Save one, they all remembered their rite experience.

Asesewa was once a major market crossroad between Ghana's north and Accra on the southern coast, so significant to Ghana's economy that an English reader for primary school students featured the story "A Market Day at Asesewa" (see Figure 8.1). In 2002, the area was described as the



UNIT 19

A MARKET DAY AT ASESEWA

Today is Friday. It is market day at Asesewa. Many people have come from the villages near Asesewa to this big market. Some of the people are carrying baskets of plantains. Some are carrying baskets of tomatoes and garden eggs. Others are carrying bags of maize, beans, and many other things. They are going to sell them in the market.

Lorries and cars from different towns and villages have come to the market. They have come from Odumase, Koforidua, Sekesua, Kpong, Somanya and other places. The lorries have brought passengers and more things. Some of the things are fish, salt, gari, onions, yams, palmnuts, palm oil and pepper.

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Figure 8.1. Page from a primary school reader featuring Asesewa. Author photo.

most deprived in the region (Kofoya-Tetteh 2012). In 2012, GhanaWeb reported that the immorality of students and tutors at Asesewa Senior High School was widespread and that there were allegations of sexual incidents and abortions, which the initiates confirmed, but that the school was also committed to academic achievement. These are some of the contradictions in which the initiates were swimming.

Dipo Initiates' Identities: Blackness, Place and Space, and Cultural Literacies

Dipo is foremost a cultural performance for the "accentuation of gender" (Adjaye 1999: 21) that assumes cis and binary gender identity as the norm. When I returned from Ghana in 2015, stating one's gender pronouns was becoming standard practice in teen spaces. I recognize that the absence of a discussion about nonbinary, non-gender-conforming identities is glaring and conflicts with Black womynist thought that urges criticizing categories that cannot contain the Black feminine fullness (Green and Bey 2017). I am willing to concede this tension in this reporting given Dipo's context.

My focus on Blackness in Africa is not meant to conflate Black American[3] and African experiences, or Blackness with Africanness (as if each could be simplified into a singular reality); rather, I see them as old sister-friends sharing *his*tories of patriarchy, colonialization, and structural racism and *her*stories of resistance, alchemy, and joy (Haddix et al. 2016; hooks 2000; McKittrick 2006). I use *Blackness* in the tradition of Pan-Africanism at a time of reenergizing unification of African descendant people around the world (Hudson 2020). Black is a common geography where physical proximity is inconsequential when "space and place give black lives meaning in a world that has, for the most part, incorrectly deemed black populations and their attendant geographies as 'ungeographic' and/or philosophically undeveloped" (McKittrick 2006: xiii).

When I step off the plane in Accra, I am immediately restored by the damp air that hits my skin. I hear Twi being spoken and breathe it in to release my weariness from America's incessant racism. I have been going to Ghana for thirty-five years, I lived there for a couple of years, and I have spent over a year if counted in weeks in the Ewé village of Wusuta. I have been told that I move like an Ewé, but I am not naive. My American English and nil command of any Ghanaian language, among so many other things, mark me as *yevu* (a foreigner). Yet, Ghana is a geography to which I regularly return to relocate myself in ancestral knowledge and the bonds of chosen family.

Even if Dipo initiates do not name Black as an identity, varied geographies have historically in-placed Black female bodies in subservient social roles and as sites for sexual and violent imagination (McKittrick 2006). Like Black American girls who are socially adultified (Epstein, Blake, and González 2017) and thought to not need tenderness or protection, Black femmes must continually locate their true selves and, for the Dipo initiates, find grounding between modernity and a traditional rite (Akomolafe 2020). Place is also a tangible geography where social relationships, power dynamics, and exploration of one's known and emerging identities play out (Rentschler and Mitchell 2016). Paying attention to the places and spaces Black girls enter alone or together, whether figurative or material, uncovers sites of resistance, resources, and more humane possibilities (Butler 2018, reprinted as Chapter 1 in this volume; McKittrick 2006; Tuhiwai Smith 1999).

Theorizing Being, Becoming, and Liminal Spaces

I conceptualize *being* as a perpetually fluid becoming (Attia and Edge 2017), and the in-between (liminal) space is infinite abundance. The liminal, or middle, state of a rite transverses being and becoming. It is a threshold or portal crossed only after successfully completing the spiritual quest and leaving behind nonbeing, so to speak, to be remade anew (Adjaye 1999; Steegstra 2002). Adolescence also has been described as a threshold in research primarily conducted in the Global North, therefore too narrow to contain African teenhood (Adichie 2009). More salient in an African context is the project of adolescence that serves to create policies for social order and spaces of adult surveillance with predicable foreseen and unseen instabilities (Lesko 2012). This framing gives authority to adults who may want to usher young women from a controllable childhood into an adulthood of self-control, as if these are dependent variables. In African societies where generational delineation runs deep and is manifested in gender relations and ritual symbolism (Abbink 2005), affirming initiates as Krobo women may push them through aspects of social interactions that are troubling in the hands of young women.

As I wrote this chapter, precise memories of the pleasures and discontents of being a Black female teenager were stirring. When asked why I work with youth, I often tell the story about my eleventh-grade health education class. Tucked in the turret of my school's Gothic building, an unusually intimate space for a New York City public school, a class of

racially mixed but mostly Black and Latinx female students were being taught sex education by a white, female gym teacher. On a day when we were learning about birth control options, I thought it appropriate, and admittedly brazen, to ask my teacher about her preferred method. I anticipated some reticence, maybe brief embarrassment, but truly thought she would overlook my cheek and give us a real answer. In the steadiest voice she could muster, dripping with an unspoken "How dare you?" she said, "It's none of your business." The Black young women I know embody contradictions of being "simultaneously mature and immature, old and young, traditional and innovative" (Lesko 2012: 184), living in the liminal pocket even when they have adult responsibilities. I knew my teacher meant to shame me, but I recognize it now as something more treacherous: it was a missed opportunity to be in right relationship; instead, she could only engage with us as disembodied beings.

Makeshifting Methodology

I am an educator and artist by training, practice, and disposition. The Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies (at the University of Ghana) was not an obvious fit for me, but it was open to what I had to offer. If you want to gain a wide-ranging grasp of the history and culture of a place, an archaeology and heritage studies program in which the researchers are from the places they are studying is a good start. I learned firsthand about the finesse needed to excavate fragile artifacts from dirt pits, the dexterity necessary to build community in Ghana where the sites are on private and public lands, and the discipline of ethnoarchaeology[4] (ethnography practiced by archaeologists). These new insights added to the close attention I already gave to my positionality as a researcher and learner. Balancing remembering and learning, knowing, and producing new knowledge (Dillard 2020), I saw that my challenge here was to avoid flattening my data, analysis, and reflexivity, so I engaged in the labor of imagination, conceptualizing, and creativity that is makeshifting (Thomas 2020). Makeshifting boosted my ethnographic process of "excavating" initiates' place- and space-based knowledges while bringing in remembrances of Sister Sol and my own being/becoming as a Black teen. It centered flexibility and being in right relationship with the initiates despite time and other constraints.

Engaging with the Dipo Initiates

Between April and June 2014, I met with the Dipo initiates during four sessions, each lasting at least two hours. I administered an intake survey with quantitative and qualitative items on the initiates' demographics, post–senior high school plans, and Dipo assessments, and an outro survey to elicit any shifts or nuance in their perceptions about Dipo. Adapting from and bringing Sister Sol into the space, I facilitated an identity exploration exercise in which initiates defined attributes of a girl, a teen, and a woman (see Figure 8.2), and screened a Sister Sol video as a visual text.

As a treat and a chance for us to interact away from the school gaze, I asked the initiates to decide where we should go for an outing after our third session. They chose market day at the riverside village of Akateng, and off we went, accompanied by Mrs. Yansey, their housemother and the teacher assigned to assist me. Mrs. Yansey attended each session to be a watchful eye and to translate my American English into Ghanaian English. The mother of three Dipo initiates and someone who works with Krobo students, her knowledge of Dipo was incredibly useful.

At Akateng, I watched the initiates running from one vendor to the next to look for small trinkets and rolling up their school uniforms to

Figure 8.2. Dipo teens defining *girl*, *teen*, and *woman.* Author photo.

wade in the river. Had I closed my eyes and merely listened to their chatter and laughter, if they had been wearing their own clothes instead of uniforms, if the setting had been the Harlem Meer, it could have been a Sister Sol trip. Any sense I had as an outsider gave way to a diasporic belonging that made it possible for me to feel Sister Sol in our midst. I was a bridge between the girls of Asesewa and those of New York City, a corpus connecting our Blackness (see Simmonds [1997] 1999; Spillers 2006) and bonding these Black young women across our geographies.

Dipo Teens' Definitions: Girl*,* Teen*, and* Woman

Before and after our outing, the Dipo initiates and I conversed. I listened to them define and deconstruct *girl*, *teen*, and *woman*. Half of the initiates self-identified as a teen, followed by girl (five) and woman (three). Essentially describing themselves, they spoke about teens' biological (e.g., menstruation, broadening of hips), emotional (e.g., sadness, happiness, shyness), and social (e.g., feelings for the opposite sex) characteristics. They compared themselves to their mothers, saying they are more socially aware than their mothers due to "white people's technology" (e.g., movies, television, social media) exposing them to global popular culture. As if speaking to her mother, one initiate puffed out and thumped her chest and said, "My breasts are bigger than yours," implying that her mother had little to teach because the initiate is physically grown.[5] With further discussion, the initiates challenged their own bravado, saying of teens, "We think we know better," or that teens hide their body from their mothers and consequently "do not learn how to bathe and take care of it properly."

The initiates' definitions of *girl* were less robust. A girl was described as "a person who is not yet a teenager," is unknowing and uninformed, and "reacts anyhow because they don't know anything about life," how to talk or dress, marriage, the "puberty rite of her society" (how they define Dipo), or things in the society. They are also aimless, "restless during the day because what they think is what they do." These critiques aside, initiates admitted that "girls of today know something."

The initiates first defined *woman* as a grown or adult person who is a family caregiver, wife, mother, teacher, and social and cultural transmitter. Because "she involve [*sic*] her idea with her husband in terms of decision-making," may enjoy her responsibilities, and passes down culture, she is agentive. A woman teaches her children, including how to speak to and respect elders, practice good menstrual hygiene, and "live [a] moral life and their traditional customs, such as traditional dances, wearing of

traditional cloth, etc." Giving further thought to their definitions, some initiates said women are not always moral or good role models and that "sharing ideas with husbands and children" depends on the nature of the relationship (which might be affected by women working outside the home) or a love of money.

I was curious to learn who the initiates would identify as women leaders due to the role Krobo women are said to play in their communities. They named Mrs. Yansey because she "has a vision of the future of youth" and "organizes us," and they said women are leaders in general because they "impart knowledge to youth," including how to walk, dress, and "speak in a harmony way." The initiates characterized leadership skills as "God-given gifts" yet described obstacles to effective leadership as human failings (i.e., having to face embarrassment, disagreements, fighting, disrespect). By saying, "a lot of your actions and duties must please people, and you too should take ideas from people," one initiate characterized leadership as a give-and-take.

Who Am I Being and Becoming as a Dipo Teen?

"Every tribe has they [*sic*] own culture, and Dipo is also my culture, so I have to perform it," one initiate said and most all others agreed. It is a rite all Krobo girls should go through, but as another initiate asserted, "to practice our culture is good, but some things need to stop." These things were initiates' having to walk naked in public (during the separation phase) and having goat's blood poured on them during the climax.

Stories heard about Dipo from their mothers were constant reminders of the risk of the initiates being "sacked" (put out of their homes), which made Dipo unappealing. However, during its performance, initiates said they experienced excitement and joy, describing it as a "social celebration" with other girls who "know what you're going through, though [they] are from a different community and families." Even if not substantively transformative, through Dipo, the initiates learned history, Ananse[6] stories, and important skills alongside co-initiates, with whom they exchanged stories. The initiates felt "confident and capable," a sense of self- and family pride.

The initiates understood three functions of Dipo: (1) to "gain interest of Krobo man for marriage" and the attendant skills of housekeeping, mothering, and being a wife; (2) to maintain cultural norms and practices (e.g., how to speak to elders, traditional dance and drumming); and (3) to avoid being "sacked" from their home with a "broom and spatula" and shunned as an "outcast" for getting pregnant before marriage. They said

Dipo "helps in protection of our virginity" and "falls under custom and tradition to show our dignity and preserve girls." A term they repeatedly used was *mentality*, the mindset required to resist engaging in premarital sex, although it is culturally permissible. To avoid compromising their aspirations, several initiates expressed a commitment to abstinence before marriage. In an aside to me, Mrs. Yansey shared a sobering assessment about the initiates: she believed only a third of them would realize their goals before becoming pregnant.

Alluding to a precarious balance between being "free to do whatever we want to do" and being troubled by the perception that they are "chasing boys anyhow," the initiates affirmed critiques about Dipo while explaining that their parents were less protective of them, allowed more unsupervised activities (e.g., access to the Internet), and sometimes demonstrated low morals. Some adults charged with teaching and guiding the initiates in their schools also regularly sexually harassed them, perhaps with the promise of trinkets and good grades (Mojola 2014).

At the close of our last day together, an initiate asked me, "What do we get out of this?" I immediately worried that after three months, the group had not understood the purpose of my research. Then others spoke up and I understood they were reflecting on a question I had not sufficiently posed. They apparently learned something about planning, that they could "speak too with my colleagues," and that "you don't have to be shy" or "hide." One said she learned to "think deeper, put my ideas and views out, try to raise my own point," and another noted, "I can share stories with my own parents." As I was wrapping things up, the initiates were dropping gems, demonstrating the agency they recognized in their mothers and implying the study had reciprocal worth.

Being, Becoming, and Belonging in Place

Before completing Dipo, it could be said that initiates were *being* teens or girls. They gathered self- and familial pride and more confidence but otherwise did not believe Dipo delivered them into adulthood. I know that the seeds educators plant may be imperceptible to young women until many years on, and the initiates may in time look back on Dipo with new understandings. At the time, they seemed content with being teens who were more knowledgeable than girls and could challenge adult wisdom but who did not have the responsibilities of *being* women. Dipo

is *the* means for becoming a Krobo woman, an embodied space that is tightly coupled to sexuality and sexualization. The initiates successfully met the cultural requirements for becoming Krobo women but could not freely locate themselves in an identity that demands nimble maneuvering of self-protection from sexual silencing, shaming, and harassment (Fine 1988; Mojola 2014).

I knew one of the members in the Sister Sol video was obviously pregnant, and for a moment, I questioned whether I should screen it because I did not want to suggest I had a particular agenda. Offering an authentic Sister Sol story was ultimately preferable, and it brought out more of the initiates' thinking. They were visibly in awe that a pregnant Sister Sol member was featured and had not been sacked from the program. They commented that when she was most in need, Sister Sol had not punished her for what they called "her mistake." Her pregnancy was not the final determinant of her *becoming*.

Can the liminal space between being and becoming hold a place of belonging for Black young women, spaces where their bodies can exhale and be playful? During our outing to Akateng, the initiates raced through the market with abandon and, later that afternoon, ran up and down a hillside of boulders they picked as a backdrop for a photo shoot in which they inserted me as their photographer and themselves as my muses. One initiate stopped running to stealthily pull her panties to one side and pee while still standing. I thought, What dedication she has to squeeze out every bit of pleasure, and what gracefulness. I was taken back to an amusement park trip with Sister Sol where they ran from ride to ride, periodically checking in to breathlessly ask how many more rides they could take.

Belonging in place, I saw the Dipo initiates' and Sister Sol members' playfulness (R. Brown 2013) and liberation: running, chitchatting, laughing, bending, and taking up space for their desires, while probably making some adults uncomfortable.

> Their choosing the spot and getting the "leaders" to ask me for snacks was reminiscent of US teens, the testing of adults, of how far they can go, how much they can ask for, how they can make an adult project fit their desire. I can't hate them for that. (Researcher journal 2014)

Enmeshed in the messages of traditional and contemporary cultures, the Dipo initiates were visibly free in the market, as I suspected they would be, and I wondered if they (un)consciously chose Akateng because Afri-

can markets are typically controlled by women traders (see Lyon 2003). This is complex, iterative work at any age, but if one understands Black girls' self-knowing as multifaceted, dynamic, and complex (Muhammad and Haddix 2016), one can envision the initiates making meaning from conflicting messages to resist control (McKittrick 2006).

Always Being, Always Becoming, Hopefully Belonging

> People don't just happen. We sacrifice former versions of ourselves. We sacrifice the people who dared to raise us. The "I" it seems doesn't exist until we are able to say, "I am no longer yours."
>
> —Saeed Jones, *How We Fight for Our Lives: A Memoir*

Dipo and adolescence appear to be future oriented, whereas the initiates are natural Afrofuturists, being and becoming across their past (a traditional rite space), present (their day-to-day lives), and future (including the anticipated Dipo climax). Applying *being*, *becoming*, and *belonging* to adolescence and a rite of adulthood highlights an artificial distinction between past and future, before and after, childhood and adulthood, control and chaos, and competence and inability, which shifts ideas about time, space, identity, power, and potential. At least three ideas have been raised by this inquiry.

First, becoming an adult speaks to societal questions about the nature, quality, and role of power, and its rights are then negotiated (Durham 2000). Young Black women are awash in layers of authorship, authorizing their participation in a traditional rite, defining adolescent norms, and determining what is suitable and proper. Who are Black young women *being*, we need to ask, before pushing them toward *becoming* something else? How are they naming themselves before we name them? In the slipperiness between Black girlhood and womanhood, how are we co-creating with Black young women places of belonging where they can play like girls and think deeply like women? I think we must hold Black young women close and allow them to soar and listen to the richness in the cut, what Green and Bey (2017: 444) called "the moments of existence before the name or the category came to do its work upon the body."

Second, Black young women are makeshifters, sometimes quietly and other times boldly creating spaces to assert control of their lives and inhabiting places that offer possibilities. Black young women pull on tradi-

tional and contemporary cultures and on internal dialogue and external expectations to figure out complex, often conflicting notions. What are we noticing about their adaptiveness? What is the sweet spot between their modernity and diasporic traditions of coming to adulthood? How and where is the abundant gap between girlhood and womanhood showing up?

Third, identity is an ongoing construction of lived experiences. Liminal spaces contain rituals, memories, and an unknowable future. What knowledges and unique personhoods of Black young women do we overlook, neglect, or ignore for the sake of nurturing them onward? How are we being inattentive to the consents and restraints of their emerging sexualities and other identities that make us uncomfortable? What literacies do we need to be in right relationship with them?

To these questions, I can safely say we need a pedagogy of love, in spaces and places that evoke corporeal wisdom and pleasure and where young woman can sit languidly with their *being*, *becoming*, and *belonging*. The particularities will undoubtedly come through makeshifting.

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Notes

1. Apart from the school and town names, all proper names are pseudonyms.
2. Patel (2016) reminded us that there are many knowledge traditions in which right relation has a presence (see Gumbs 2010; Tuhiwai Smith 2007). Describing how Mary Hooks, the organizer, centers the principle of being in right relationship, a. brown (2020: para. 5) wrote, "your ancestors did not fight fair, and they didn't teach you to be in right relationship with anyone. they didn't give our ancestors time to wonder, ask for help, course correct, negotiate."
3. Throughout this chapter, I use *Black American* when citing specific literature and when it is important for clarity.
4. Per Gavua (2012: para. 1), "ethnoarchaeology is the strategic gathering and studying of ethnographic data on human behavior and its ramifications by archaeologists."
5. For many months before her eighteenth birthday, one of my Sister Sol members declared, "I'm about to be a grown-ass woman." I cannot write these words without working my neck as she did. Many years on, we have had good laughs about this, as she now understands that she was hardly grown back then. She and other, older Sister Sol chapter alumnae still work that phrase as an audacious statement about becoming women.
6. Ananse is a spider and trickster folktale character of the Akan people of Ghana. Ananse stories are an oral tradition that play an important role in passing down knowledge from elders to children.

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Chapter 9

A Luo Girl's Inheritance

Esther O. Ohito

> All my life, I have heard only one story . . . What kind of story is that to grow up with?
>
> —Deborah A. Miranda, *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir*

> I had this terrible need to confess . . . It's a bid to be loved, in some way. And to be really loved; the immense difficulty of intimacy.
>
> —Hilton Als, quoted in Emma Brockes, "Hilton Als"

> I am most interested in confessional writing when it allows us to move into the personal as a way to go beyond it. In all my work I evoke the personal as a prelude. It functions as a welcoming gesture, offering the reader a sense of who I am, a sense of location.
>
> —bell hooks, *Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work*

JaLuo 1: *Arito, afoul*. Okay, we came from the UK, United Kingdom. We landed in Sudan in Africa. We turned Black due to the climate changes and repercussions.

JaLuo 2: Of course.

JaLuo 1: Then, due to things that were happening in Sudan, we fought our way into this East Africa, Eastern Africa. We beat people,

we took the lake region, we started fishing for trade and our survival. So, we now occupy the western part of Eastern Africa, especially the middle of Eastern Africa, near the lake region.

JaLuo 1: We surround Lake Victoria.

JaLuo 2: We surround Lake Victoria. And it's now landlocked due to Luos, and we are still powerful, a powerful culture. That is to say, we are *unbwogable*.

JaLuo 1: As I want to correct it, as we were in Sudan, when we are turning Black, some of us separated in some other ways. There is some who went to northern Uganda and the entire Uganda region. Some of us went to Zaire, Congo inside, interior. You have heard some Zaireans singing here. Those are all our culture. Then, others settled around Lake Victoria, where we started fishing and practicing that. In Congo, they are called the Aluru, and in Uganda, they are called Acholi, *gi ki ang'o. Ang'o macha cha kendo*?

JaLuo 2: So many more. Acholi.

JaLuo 1: Aya. But all of them collectively, we say they are *unbwogable*.

JaLuo 2: Yes.

(GidiGidi MajiMaji 2002)

1. *Achiel*

Knock, knock.

Who's there? *Mano en ng'a*?

Ai yawa, it's me. *Anyalo donjo*?

Me who?

Me who hates meandering introductions.

2. *Ariyo*

A long time ago, when I was a girl, I asked my mother why she would not leave my father. Bewildered, she replied, "Mama, if I leave him, where will my body be buried?"

3. *Adek*

"The dead don't go anywhere. They're all here. Every man is a royal cemetery, in which our grandmothers and grandfathers are. The father and mother, the wife, the son. Everyone is here all the time" (Singer, as cited by Kaminsky 2022).

4. *Ang'wen*

I'm now interested in the *nowness* of things. I go around asking people stupid questions like, "What happened to the five-year-old you used to be? Is it like the Russian dolls, and you just grow over new skin and new skin?" And they say stupid things like, "Well, you know, scientists say that every seven years you grow new skin."

. . . And it made me think, How does time work? (Chang 2013: paras. 20–21)

5. *Abich*

You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. "Floods" is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory—what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our "flooding." (Morrison 1998: 198–9)

6. *Auchiel*

The flood that burst out of my tear ducts startled everyone in the unventilated classroom, most of all, me. I had expected the presentation in my visual methodologies class to unfold uneventfully. I had not expected an

otherwise ordinary evening to morph into the setting for a strange waterworks festival starring me. I buried my face in my perspiring palms, pushing the wetness into my skin. A budding education researcher, I was among a small group of Teachers College, Columbia University students who flocked to the class week after week. All semester long, I fed on theory under fluorescent lights, filling my mind with knowledge of immigrant and transnational children's experiences, many of which mirrored those of students I had taught as an English teacher on the South Side of Chicago or my own. The professor's directions for the assignment that opened the floodgate of tears were straightforward: we were to peruse the extensive archive of photographs and videos she had amassed as part of a study in a working-class elementary school, choose a focal child, view a video recording of that child scrutinizing his or her own photographs, and then visually analyze the child's interpretation of the still images.

Was it simply serendipity, or did Jamesha choose me? I wonder. All I know for sure is she stopped me in my tracks with her wide eyes, puckered lips, and brown nose pressed into the lens of the camera responsible for the first photograph I touched. I held the image between the thumb and index finger of my right hand. A giggle escaped my mouth. I put the glossy photo paper on the tip of my nose as if to say, "Hello. I choose you, too." Then, we exchanged banter for a bit:

Her: Um, why'd you gimme a fake name like Jamesha? It's kinda boring. If you'd have asked, I would have told you I'm much more like a, uh, I don't know, Samantha.
Me: Knock, knock.
Her: Ugh! OK, I'll play. Who's there?
Me: Jamesha. Now, did you know your name means one who is "courageous, honest, determined, original and creative . . . a leader, especially for a cause . . . bold, independent, inquisitive and interested in research" (Seven Reflections n.d.: para. 1)?
Her: You're funny. I didn't know that.

A toothy smile pasted on her face, Jamesha stretched out her arms and snatched me out of my world. She pulled me into her orbit and introduced me to her family. Happiness tinged her voice as she spoke to an interviewer, me, about her father. Jamesha enchanted me. Spellbound by her ebullient voice, I fiddled with software and created a video, placing her insights in conversation with a photograph from my archive of family albums.

In that photograph (see Figure 9.1), my father, mother, and I, at age five or so, are in Ligega, near the colonial border separating Kenya from Uganda, outside the home my father later inherited from my paternal grandfather. My mother and I are staring at the camera. My father is holding me close to his chest. He is gazing at me lovingly, I tell myself. I am multitasking, busy balancing a half-empty bottle of Fanta Orange soda in my small hands and suspiciously eyeing the mysterious photographer.

I captioned this photograph with a reference to Lucille Clifton's (1969) "Good Times." I read the poem aloud in class, crumpling in front of my alarmed colleagues as the last few lines fell from my mouth. My tears found refuge in the space between my nose and upper lip. I had not expected to cry at all, let alone so deeply, so loudly, so publicly. Drenched in salty tears and the hot shame of embarrassment, I stilled my nerves long enough to mumble my way through the rest of the presentation.

The truth is that my childhood remembrances of my father involve few recollections of good times. My father was a bruised man and, in Gramscian terms, an organic intellectual (Gramsci 1999). The truth is that his brainpower did not make him fast enough to either outrun the torment of his childhood or tame the demons that, in adulthood, inhabited the dark recesses of his beautiful mind. The truth is, he broke me. My

Figure 9.1. Daddy, Mommy, and me. Author photo.

daddy was a tornado, and my idea of childhood innocence, a necessary lie, was lost in the debris of his destructive path.

Perhaps I cried in class because I was mourning the ideal father and perfect childhood that the photograph reminded me I desired but lacked or lost on the road to adolescence and adulthood. Perhaps I wept because I was wise enough to know that despite the missing borne of mourning, parental perfection is a fiction, even in familial contexts less turbulent than my own. Perhaps I was shaken by the truth documented in that photograph, which tells of a time when my mother was not carrying or holding a child. For a moment, she was free of the burden of motherhood. For just that fleeting moment, she was free.

I fled class as soon as I was free to leave, but I could not fight back a fresh torrent of tears. En route to my apartment, as the train dove under the Harlem River, I replayed the scene I had made. Between sobs, I became more keenly aware of the tender spot that family photograph had touched. I needed to probe that rawness. I needed to remember where I had been and what valleys I had run through to locate the source of my river of tears. I needed to journey along that emotional path to find my way back home, to my original place.

7. *Abiriyo*

In 1993, two decades before I became yet another poor graduate student submerged in a tidal wave of tears on a subway in New York City, New York, my mother was living in the city of Columbia, studying at the University of South Carolina. English was not her mother tongue. Despite the prestige of being named a Fulbright scholar, she harbored insecurities about her ability to write skillfully in the Queen's English. Still, her struggles with the psychological effects of linguistic imperialism did not prevent her from penning and publishing two essays in *Sunrise*, the in-house print journal associated with the university's English Programs for Internationals. She explained how patriarchy propelled gender disparity in her home context:

In many African countries, Kenya included, female children are bred by a paternalistic society that imprisons and confines them to the back-

stage throughout their lifetime. In Kenya there are 42 different ethnic groups. Each group has its own traditional beliefs and practices. These vary slightly but generally there are a lot of similarities regarding the way the women are treated.

In the past the female child grew up in a very hostile environment. Right from infancy, the female child was treated less compassionately than the male child. There was marked preference for male children over female children. The parents argued that sons would take care of them in their old age and that daughters would be married off elsewhere and so would not be very useful to them. If in a family there were both boys and girls and their parents did not have enough money to educate them, then ways had to be found to get some money to pay school fees for the boys. The girls would be forced to provide cheap labor somewhere else or get married off. It was a traditional practice for the bridegroom to pay some dowry to the parents of the girl. This boosted the parents' income and could help pay for the education of the boys in the family.

In other circumstances, the girl child was in danger of being married off at an early age, sometimes as early as 10 years old. The child bride, more often than not, was married off to an old man five or six times her age. If this happened, then it meant the girl was joining a polygamous marriage. The planning and the decision for such marriages was done by the male members of the girl's family without any consultation with the girl.

Once married, the role of the woman was to give birth to children, rear them and take care of household matters. As no family planning existed, most women had very many children. It was not uncommon to find one woman with as many as 15 children. In addition to their role as mothers, they were also expected to grow subsistence crops. The women worked very hard and for long hours every day while the men spent their time in beer halls discussing how to discipline their wives. If the women complained of maltreatment by the men, they were beaten.

There were also certain foods that women were forbidden to eat even though they were the cooks for the men. Among the LUO ethnic group, for example, foods like mutton, chicken and eggs were strictly for men and their sons. The wives and daughters were fed on less nutritious foods. Moreover women were exposed to certain health hazards. Due to poor nutrition, hard labor and lack of proper medical care, many of them died of complications during childbirth and other poverty related

diseases. The average life expectancy for women was only 40 years. This was the world in which my greatgrandmother and grandmother lived.

With the coming of Christianity those traditional beliefs that were considered harmful were discarded. However, some customs that discriminated against women are still being practiced today. Most men would like to retain their traditional way of life as much as possible but they have to accept certain realities. Recently, in 1963, the constitution was changed to make life easier for the Kenyan woman. Dowry, child marriages, and wife beating were banned. Free education at the primary level for all children was introduced. Consequently today the ratio of girls to boys in primary level school enrollment is 2:3. There are also more girls attending secondary school level education than there were 30 years ago. In the universities, the proportion of female students is only about 10 percent but is steadily rising.

The traditional way of marriage is also dying slowly. Modern parents rarely accept dowry from their son-in-law. Furthermore as more and more girls attend school, the age at marriage is also increasing and now they can choose their partners.

However, there are still other problems that face women. Kenya's birthrate is 4 percent per year. This is quite high by any standard. Family planning is practiced by only 30 percent of Kenyan women. There is high maternal and infant mortality rates. The root cause of these problems can be traced to poverty. In fact poverty makes it more difficult for Kenyan women to acquire educational skills needed to get more desirable and highly paid occupations so that they can improve the standard of living of their families. There is also continued marginalization of women. Women and men are not evenly represented in every consequential aspect of national life. For example, no woman has ever been appointed to a ministerial position since our national independence. Women are kept away from national politics by a tradition that regards them as docile, submissive, and inward looking human beings. The woman has no business breaking the past. If she does, she is branded a dissident. Society views with suspicion women who contradict traditional expectations.

Hopefully, it is not too late for Kenyan women to be held back by backward beliefs. They need to work very hard for their rights. In the future our society should make a conscious effort to involve women in development projects, especially in the areas of agriculture, environment, education and health. This should be done through a reduction

of disparities in access to educational levels for both men and women. Positive gender roles should be portrayed and women should be allowed equal access to information and decision-making bodies. Family planning should target men who by virtue of tradition have greater influence on family affairs. Men should not see women as a threat but as equal partners in development.

It is pathetic that women all over the world are being discriminated against. But there is hope. If the United Nations can recognize this as a human rights violation, take it seriously, and debate the issues, then all women, including Kenyan women, can hope to live in a better world in the near future. (Ohito 1993: 46–48)

8. *Aboro*

Once, my father saved my life. Twice, my daddy nearly killed me. I was to blame the first time, at Uchumi supermarket in Lang'ata, when the palm of his right hand landed heavily on my left cheek once, then again and again and again and again and again and again and again. In a dimly lit room with nary an air vent in sight, his flesh slapped against mine, each strike a hailstone landing on soft ground, one after the other and the other and the other and the other and the other and the other and the other. A fluorescent-strip light fixture dangled from the ceiling, directly above a metal table. Two black walkie-talkies on the otherwise barren table were the only clue that a security control room was the setting for this raging storm.

A framed portrait of Jesus, red fabric draped over his shoulder, brown beard complementing his pink skin, hung near the door, to the right of a slightly larger portrait of President Daniel Toroitich arap Moi. Rumor had it that the president had the eyes of a goat. Rumor had it that nearly a decade earlier, in 1982, the year after I was born, he survived the betrayal of soldiers who swarmed the RAF Eastleigh Air Base in a failed coup attempt because of his horizontal pupils. He could spot danger lurking on the periphery. My eyes were shut as the final slap brought the right side of my head in contact with the table's edge. The taste of iron overwhelmed my mouth as I hit the floor. My outstretched arm had failed to break my fall. I moved the swollen tip of my trembling tongue across my gums and teeth,

pushing into fleshy meat and uneven enamel edges. A loose molar buckled under pressure, sending shooting pains to the roof of my mouth full of blood. I grimaced. Eyes shut, still, I placed my right hand on my forehead as other sounds in the room floated into my ringing ears: the quiet sobs of my pregnant, swollen-footed mother who sat lopsided on a metal chair in the corner of the sparsely furnished room, her neck grazing the collar of a blue muumuu; the loud raspy voices of the two men who had trailed me around the store; the stealthy starving cats who had watched me slip a small bottle of nail polish into the pocket of my school uniform, then pounced. The shorter man, the one with a protruding belly the size of a large watermelon, had kind eyes. I wondered what he saw when he looked at me now, prey sprawled on the tiled floor of a badly lit room. I wondered if he recognized my uniform, a pink gingham dress paired with a persimmon-colored V-neck wool sweater. I wondered if he recognized me.

I bopped past the supermarket in Lang'ata daily on my way to and from school. Uchumi was my favorite place to be, despite its misnomer of a name, given that little there was economical for the average Kenyan. "Unachotaka"—what you want—would have been a more apt moniker; everything in the store stoked desire. My leisurely trips to Uchumi occurred monthly. On the first day of each month, Daddy and Mommy would pick up her salary, then pick up "the kids"—my sisters and me—from school. Our crammed car would then barrel down Ngong Road until Uchumi was on the horizon. Our parents' laughter in the car foreshadowed a good afternoon. How much laughter indicated how good of an afternoon we would have. Boisterous laughter meant Daddy would be home the next morning before Sister and I left the house to board a *matatu* to Wilson Airport, then a bus to Kenyatta Market, before embarking on a longish walk on an unpaved road, where racing cars blew ginger-colored dust onto our onyx-black hair as we approached St. Nicholas Primary School. Silence was a warning sign: we were to be well behaved while patiently waiting in the car until Daddy and Mommy rejoined us, Mommy carrying white plastic shopping bags. Sister and I played our version of a guessing game in the car to bide time and kill boredom:

"Knock, knock. Hodi. What's there?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing what?"

"Nothing you want!"

Giggles erupted from our cores. Between gasps for air, we guessed what we could not afford to buy this month. Sister was usually right. Homeward

bound, we would drop Daddy off at the strip of bars in Nairobi West. There was a ritual: Mommy would pull a wad of banknotes out of the white envelope kept concealed in the zippered pocket of her black purse, and hand it to Daddy, who would slip the money into the left front pocket of his pants. Then, Daddy would disappear. Once his back was swallowed by the buzzed and buzzing crowd of Nairobians, Mommy would drive off, her shoulders dropping as the distance between him and us increased.

Uchumi was enthralling. Exhilaration surged through my veins as I ran my fingers across items stacked neatly on shelves, touching the promise of rebirth. A wondrous new existence awaited me in the sweets aisle by the Cadbury Bournville Old Jamaica and Dairy Milk chocolates. There, I could transform into Princess Diana, plucked from obscurity by a dashing future king with rosy skin. In the meat aisle, beside the freezer stocked with packages of Farmer's Choice sausage, I could be a benevolent dictator's daughter swept off my feet by the derring-do of my beloved, or the captive of a handsome rebel soldier trapped in a castle in Luxembourg. I could live my grandest life in the makeup and nail polish aisle, reincarnated as a pop singer, a Mariah Carey, a brown-haired chanteuse with flesh the color of light pink fish. I could stand in the middle of the aisle and belt out a love song for an admiring audience under bright lights on an elevated stage while my music producer paramour, a *mzungu* like Tommy Mottola—ponytailed, wealthy, and white—stared adoringly as I crooned.

What scenarios would my dissociative dreams consist of now that an evening at my sanctuary was concluding with the imprint of Daddy's right hand on my left cheek and stubborn blood spots on my uniform? I had never imagined a protruding-bellied man in Uchumi placing his cigar-length fingers on Daddy's shoulder, telling him sternly to stop. We made a solemn exit out of the supermarket as the sun set. Before our departure, Daddy and the man with the watermelon stomach reached an agreement: to atone, I would spend a day in prison with my kind, sinners.

"It was my idea, of course!" Daddy roared a week later. Uncle listened intently, perched on the golden velvet couch occupying most of the living room in the two-story Rubia Estate house. The brothers were thick as thieves. Uncle frequently disappeared for weeks. Whenever he reappeared, as he had done today, Daddy's guttural growl would echo in every room. "She's a thief!" he barked. By my count, his proclamation bounced around the house three times: She's a thief! She's a thief! She's a thief!

Uncle called for me, tapping the soft cushion to his left when I appeared at the living room door. I nodded, plopping close enough for his

body to emanate heat that warmed my cold thighs and finding comfort in the familiar mélange of Brut cologne, floral-scented perfume, and old tobacco that mingled close to his chest.

"Nyandere, you did a bad thing," Uncle chastised.

"Yes, I know, Uncle," I said, head hung low.

"You must be punished. When you are bad, you must be punished."

"Yes, I know, Uncle."

Satisfied by my contrition, Uncle patted my thigh, signaling that it was time for me to stand, then told me to go upstairs to the bedroom I shared with fourteen-year-old Sister. I obeyed his command. I left the sitting room with my chin stuck to my chest, walking past the sapphire wall, then up the two sets of cement stairs that connected the first and second floors, wiggling my loose molar the whole way. I did not want the tears to cascade down my face. I wanted the punishment I had earned.

Daddy had ordered me to be spiffily dressed the next morning before the first rooster crowed. Years later, I would remember this as the Day of Reckoning. What he would do, he told Uncle as they exited the house headed for Nairobi West, was drop me off at the front office of The Prison.

The countdown to the neighbor's fat rooster's morning cry began as soon as the cold heels of my bare feet touched Sister's warm toes. Her right palm pressed into my stomach, quieting its shrieks. "What do you think it's like in there?" Sister whispered into my ear. I pretended like I didn't hear her, like her words did not send high-voltage electrical currents through my sacral nerves, like the wetness spreading in the mattress did not matter.

The cock's crow found Daddy and me seated in Rabbit, the baby blue Daihatsu Charade that he and Mommy had bought from a Japanese expat, a former soldier who had retired from the outskirts of Tokyo to a custom-built two-story house in Lavington with a garden full of red, white, and pink carnations that invited thoughts of Eden. The lop-eared Japanese man had stuck a white flower in my hair as Daddy charmed him with tales of his time in the Kenya Defense Forces. Daddy eventually bargained down the Daihatsu's sale price to a few hundred shillings less than Mommy had placed in a white envelope with his name on it. Today, Daddy sat in the Daihatsu's driver's seat, the pants of his pinstriped suit hiked up slightly at the knee, making it easier for his left foot to reach the clutch. He had placed his jacket neatly on the passenger side, and from time to time, he glanced at the rearview mirror. I avoided his glowering looks, keeping my chin to my chest and my mouth closed for the dura-

tion of the ride. My skin, the color of a ripe plum, glistened in the rising Nairobi sun.

That morning, I had used my index finger to scoop and slather scented Vaseline on my round face as Sister simultaneously rubbed the thick, gooey substance onto my bamboo legs. She saved a smidge of the petroleum jelly made to smell like a newborn baby's bottom for the surface of my black Bata shoes, which she helped me slip onto my feet. She had ironed and starched the pink dress with white stripes that I wore only on special occasions. The dressmaker, a slim tailor, asked my age when he took my measurements. He lingered as he wrapped a tape measure around my chest and grazed my grape-sized nipples. "Ten," I replied. His eyes enlarged. "You look much younger," he said, his tongue stroking the scaly, dry skin on his lower lip.

I would not leave The Prison alive if the place was anything like I had heard through the rumor mill. This was the truth I could not share with Sister as she held my stomach during the night or, that morning, combed my hair, taming it into a ponytail the size of an acorn. I was going to meet death. This was not conjecture. My teacher, Mrs. Mwangi, knew someone who knew someone who knew someone's husband who had a friend whose cousin patrolled the grounds at The Prison. On the occasions when Mrs. Mwangi observed questionable behavior in the classroom, she would suck her teeth, then remind us that bad children were sent to The Prison to be killed. A veil of terror would fall over the silent class. I would imagine shit-smelling, muscular men with sharpened teeth and tattered clothes clanging metal bars while menacing guards paraded up and down narrow hallways. They would kill me at The Prison; I knew this with certainty. But death at a prisoner's hands seemed to be a less painful, less shameful demise than the one certain to arrive if my principal, Mrs. Njuguna, discovered that I was a thief. And she would, most certainly, find out because for the second time this term, I would be marked absent from school today. Mrs. Njuguna would notice, if only because this time my school fees were paid.

Rabbit flew by the open-air market outside Kenyatta National Hospital, where young women with old eyes and old women with dead eyes carried in their calloused hands guavas, mangoes, onions, and tomatoes for sale and where the eyes of starving teenagers with skin leathered by the unforgiving sun beckoned, promising that for the right price, you could purchase more than fruits and vegetables. I craned my neck as we passed All Saints' Cathedral where, weeks prior, I had peered into a pol-

ished cherry wood casket carrying the body of my dead classmate, Brenda. Until the day she died, Brenda, too, had perfect attendance, so I intuited that something was awry when her seat was empty on a Friday morning a few weeks ago. At Morning Assembly the next Monday, Mrs. Njuguna announced that Brenda had died, then led us in reciting the Lord's Prayer:

> Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Before Rabbit bolted past the church, it had not dawned on me that Brenda may also have met death at The Prison. I wondered if they would remember her at The Prison. I wondered about my own funeral, too. Would I lie in a velvet-lined casket while my father and mother eulogized me? Would Daddy tell everyone I was a thief?

The Prison's parking lot teemed with life. There were scores of prisoners there, most of whom would likely find themselves fighting diarrhea, tuberculosis, scabies, or worse while serving time for armed robbery, rape, drug trafficking, murder, or any other such violent crimes. I wondered about the men tending the grounds as Daddy drove the Daihatsu through the metal gates, halting at the spot closest to the main door. What lives had the prisoners lost? What pasts were they forced to confront while rotting in the place they now called home? My abdomen cramped. My throat tightened. My heart rate endeavored to catch up to my increasingly rapid breathing as Daddy and I walked into the front office. I bargained with God's son in song:

> I will trust and obey
> for there's no other way
> to be happy in Jesus
> but to trust and obey.

The nondescript interior of the front office at The Prison resembled that of the front office at St. Nicholas Primary School: there was a large wooden desk in one corner of the room, by the windows with rusty metal bars. Standing beside the desk with a stack of papers in his hand was a tall man dressed in a brown suit that matched the brown frames of his glasses. He touched the forest green tie on his neck as Daddy and I approached the desk. Daddy spoke, and as he explained the purpose for our presence at The Prison, the look of confusion on the man's peanut butter brown

face intensified. Then, he shook his head vigorously, released a sigh, and said, "*Owada, awuoro*. You cannot just leave this girl here."

Daddy appeared startled, dismayed. He pressed the tip of his right index finger into the middle of my oily forehead. "*Osiepa*, she's a thief! Nyako ni is a thief!"

The warden peered over his glasses. Moments of silence elapsed. Then, he pursed his lips, shrugged his shoulders, and said, "OK."

Daddy smiled broadly, shook the warden's hand, then turned to leave the office. Warm liquid trickled down my inner thighs and collected in my shoes as I watched him walk out and disappear into the parking lot. Once the Daihatsu was out of sight, the warden sighed again and cleared his throat.

"Come here," he commanded, his deep baritone booming. My heart raced even faster. Had the odor from my wet panties wafted into his wide nostrils?

"Come," he repeated, his voice softer.

I obeyed, my pee-filled shoes squishing as I put one foot in front of the other trepidatiously. "Here," the warden whispered, as he reached into his pocket and handed me a half-eaten Cadbury Fudge Bar. "You will be my assistant for the day. Now, sit there," he said, pointing to a metal chair behind the desk. I obeyed, chin grazing the collar of my dress.

Daddy returned to The Prison at dusk. That night, after supper, I collapsed onto my twin-sized bed. I had shut the door before falling onto the lumpy mattress. Sister lay across from me in a similar bed and kept her back turned toward me. I launched into a recitation of the Lord's Prayer loudly enough for Daddy and Mommy to hear as they fell asleep in the adjacent room. Palms clasped and eyes facing the ceiling, I prayed fervently, asking God to "forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

Sister had been silent since I had arrived home from The Prison. I didn't know why. Maybe she can smell my *susu*, I thought. No. Maybe she's angry with me. Are you angry with me? I wanted to ask. I didn't confess. I didn't betray you. I didn't tell, I wanted to whisper. I didn't tell Daddy it was your idea. I kept your secret. I keep your secrets. I keep our secrets. I keep our secrets. I keep our secrets. I keep our secrets. I keep our secrets. I keep our secrets. I keep our secrets. I keep our secrets. I keep . . . our secrets.

I . . . keep . . . our . . . secrets.

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"Esther? Are you awake?"
"Yeah," I replied hoarsely, eyes shut.
"When I grow up, I'm going to join the Israeli army."
"What? Why?" I asked, eyes open.
"I hear they train the best killers," Sister said calmly.
"You want to be a killer?"
"No, but I want to kill him. I'm going to kill him."

9. *Ochiko*

Once upon a time, on Lake Victoria's shores, there lived a JaLuo named Nyamgodho wuod Ombare. Nyamgodho, the son of Ombare, was a fisherman by trade. This means that he was a very, very poor man. Perpetually starving, he spent dusk to dawn daily seeking food, shelter, and the kindness of fond strangers.

Early one morning, Nyamgodho woke up startled, his empty stomach wailing. I'm going to die, *yawa*, he thought, as hunger pangs ravaged his intestines. He shook his head in part disbelief and part resignation. Cradling his crying belly, he used the lingering remnant of strength he possessed to walk to the lake and waddle into its fresh waters. "Perhaps God will bless me today," he muttered as he cast his fishing net, "*Nyasaye nyalo mia ndalo mang'eny*." Seconds later, he felt a tug. Had God heard this poor man's lament at last? Marveling at the possibility that the good Lord had delivered a long-awaited response, Nyamgodho hurriedly pulled at the net until its contents lay at his jigger-infested feet. He squinted, then looked closer at the mass of flesh he had fished. "*Ai yawa, awuro*!" he exclaimed, shocked to see a woman in his net. But she was not just any woman; this woman was exceptional.

Nyamgodho suspected God had a perverse sense of humor. Truly, what value was there to be found in a hideous, one-eyed woman? What was he to do with a burden such as this? Nyamgodho sucked his teeth, furious that his precious energy reserves had been wasted on saving something, someone, so useless. He was prepared to toss the net and its contents back into Lake Victoria's eager waters, but the woman pled for mercy. Her powers of persuasion worked magic on Nyamgodho. He agreed and not only kept her out of the lake but also married her, making her his first wife. "I will make you wealthy in return," she promised, but on one condition: "You must swear to keep the story of my origin secret." Nyamgodho, seduced by the allure of riches, agreed without hesitation.

True to her word, the woman of the lake worked very, very hard, making Nyamgodho very, very rich. Newly prosperous, he acquired many cattle and more wives. As his possessions increased, so did his pride—a disposition others called arrogance—and penchant for moonshine.

Late one night, Nyamgodho arrived at his homestead so drunk that none of his wives would have him. Even his first wife, the woman of the lake, refused to entertain him. Nyamgodho was floored by what he deemed disrespectful behavior. "How dare you!" he seethed outside her front door. "You are the ugliest of creatures, yet I rescued you from the lake. How dare you refuse me!" But the woman of the lake was unmoved. "Nyamgodho, *chuora*, have you forgotten our agreement?" she asked, her voice steady. Nyamgodho cackled. He had become a wealthy man and, by his calculations, could not afford a disobedient wife. "I curse you!" he shouted, wagging his index finger as he sauntered away from her door.

The woman uttered not a word. She calmly collected the few items she owned and departed on foot, headed for Lake Victoria. Nyamgodho watched her from the window in his *simba*. His indignation soon turned to indifference and then horror as a long procession of cattle followed her, vanishing, one by one, into the freshwater lake, until there was none left in the homestead. The woman waded into Lake Victoria at Nyandiwa Gwassi, but only after creating rock formations shaped as footprints of the bovine companions that accompanied her back to her original place.

They say that during low tide in Nyandiwa Gwassi, the animal footprints are visible. They say there is medicine in the waters that flow over the footprints. They say this is where the JoLuo congregate for healing. They say there is a tree shaped like a human being that grows by the lake. They say this is what became of Nyamgodho, this is what the woman of

the lake made him before she dove into its fresh waters. They say, after God, fear Luo women (Osunde 2021).

10. *Apar*

In 1858, the London-based Royal Geographical Society sponsored an expedition to Africa for the purpose of locating the source of the river Nile. That year, Captain John Hanning Speke (1864) of the British Indian Army stumbled upon a body of water known to the locals, the JoLuo, as Nam Lolwe. Speke must have reasoned the lake needed a name that could roll off the tongues of *jonango*, so he gave it that of his country's queen, Victoria. I wonder what the JoLuo thought, watching from afar as this man with salmon-colored skin flopped around like a tilapia in waters that belonged to the woman of the lake.

In 1936, Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1965) traveled to Luo country. During his six weeks of fieldwork, he produced a body of data that included a photograph depicting a tall man wearing a white collared shirt underneath a jacket, standing beside a woman seated on a wooden chair (see Figure 9.2). Like the man, she is barefoot. Her hands are clasped, and she appears to be holding on to the baby, who—despite being dangerously close to sliding off her lap—appears more interested in the texture of his brother's skin than the fact that his mother's strength is the only thing keeping him safe. The three children are holding on to the woman's arms in different ways, even as their eyes refuse to meet the camera's lens, perhaps illustrating different degrees of (un)attachment. The man's arms are behind his back, suggesting that his fingers are intertwined. He is holding on to himself.

The caption speaks for the photograph, verifying a visual lie. Captured in this still image is a cluster of people commonly conceived of as a nuclear family, a concept foreign to the Luo of the time. What the photograph documents is the JoLuo consanguined by blood but framed within a colonial definition of family. The photograph is a miseducative artifact about Luo sociality and relationality. The image does not tell the truth about how we know ourselves to be in relation to ourselves and to other human beings and living things. A wealth of Luo knowledge about land, ancestry, heritage, customs, and gendered cultural practices is lost within the image's frame. The photograph illustrates colonial violence vis-à-vis the erasure of Indigenous epistemology. Unanchored to that knowledge,

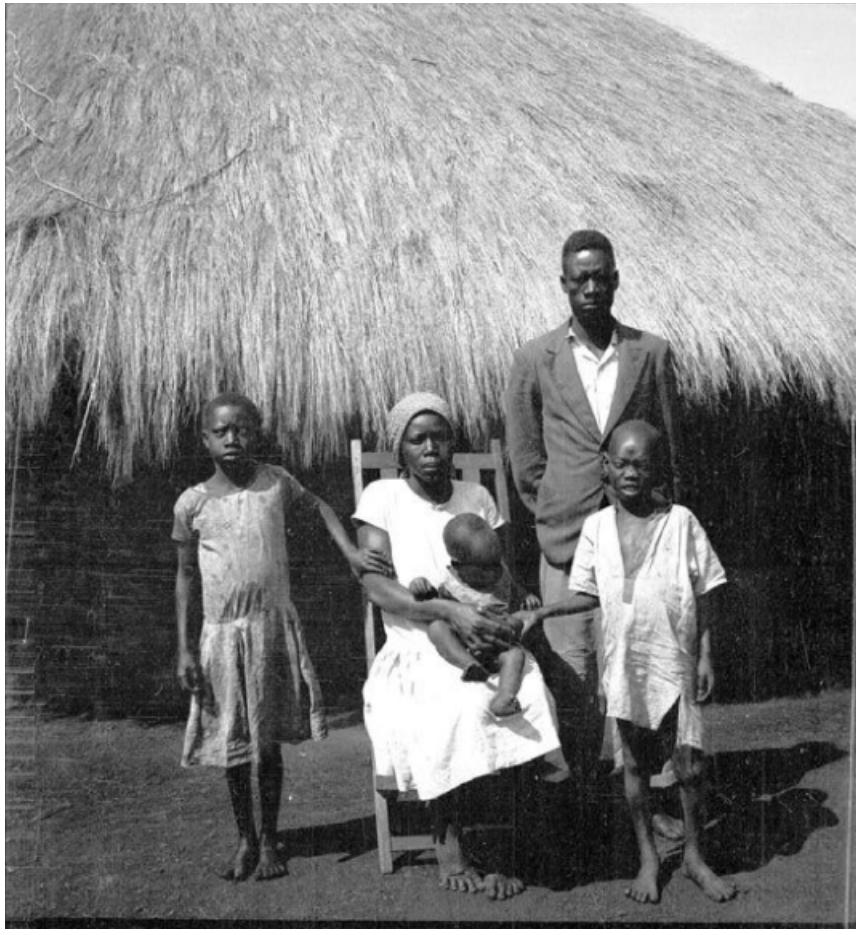

Figure 9.2. "A Portrait of a Luo Family outside One of Their Thatched Houses, Identified as Josiah and Family." Photograph by Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1936). Pitt Rivers Museum Luo Visual History, Oxford, UK. 1998.349.139.1.

we are displaced, destined to forget where we belong, what to believe and value, what is worth knowing and treasuring about ourselves, and how to cure the pains that ail our bodies, minds, spirits, and hearts—pains inextricably linked to the human condition. What truths do we deserve to reclaim? What knowledge is owed to us, the living, by the dead? What must we remember in order to weather assaults on our ways of knowing and being? What knowledge of ourselves do we have a right to (re)write in our own voices?

The caption also speaks for the photographer. A researcher born in 1902, Evans-Pritchard remains widely regarded as among the most notable anthropologists of the twentieth century. He is a seminal figure in a discipline "rooted in colonial extraction: of resources and knowledge, destruction of sacred spaces, and the intentional disruption of language, customs, spirituality, and cultural identity" (Mohammed et al. 2022: para. 6). It has been argued that he "broke new ground on questions of rationality, social accountability, kinship, social and political organization, and religion, as well as influentially moving the discipline in Britain away from the natural sciences and towards history" (Morton 2019: blurb). Parenthesizing Evans-Pritchard's celebrated contributions to anthropological knowledge and methods of inquiry, I wonder about his impact in Luo country and on Luo people. What imprint did his research leave on JoLuo? What epistemic consequences among JoLuo resulted from his positioning of us as objects to be known rather than subjects with expert knowledge of our own human experience? If Evans-Pritchard had perceived himself to be a curious pupil rather than a master teacher, then perhaps he would have learned from the native informants, who fished in Nam Lolwe's waters and tilled the land, that only a poor Luo man would find satisfaction in one wife and three children and that only a piss-poor Luo man bereft of pride would allow his poverty to be preserved for eternity in a white man's photograph. Evans-Pritchard would also have discovered that on Luo land, a man with no pride is no man at all.

Singh, a scholar of languages and literatures, postulated that

> a colonial master understands his superiority over others by virtue of his ability to have conquered them materially *and* by his insistence on the supremacy of his practices and worldviews over theirs, which renders "legitimate" the forceful imposition of his worldviews. (2018: 9)

Behind the lens, the photographer is God. "Click," shutters the camera, instantly creating a picture in His image that evidences a disappearing feeling, a dissipating presence, a fading present. Yet, a photograph "cannot be understood through visual content alone but through an embodied engagement with an affective object world, which is both constitutive of and constituted through social relations" (Edwards 2012: 221).

Conceptualizations of family vary depending on historical, social, and cultural context, but a constant truism is that families contain some of the densest entanglements of social relations known to humans. This explains the force of family photographs, which move us, affectively, to our origin,

whether or not we wish to revisit the truths and lies buried in that place. Family photographs prove that we are put in place by familial bonds, however broken or betrayed. These images can be glue when we find ourselves pining for the past or, in the present, piecing together fragments of ourselves, our families, and those parts of ourselves lost to ourselves and our families. The light enters at the broken place, Rumi is rumored to have remarked. Family photographs can be floodlights illuminating the path toward that wound, visual reminders that sometimes we tell ourselves fictional stories about our families to make sense of ourselves and to make ourselves make sense. Sometimes we need fictions to face facts. Sometimes we need to filter through facts and fictions to face hard truths about lies. Sometimes lies are true stories, too.

11. *Apar Gachiel*

The other day, Brother rang. I do not usually pick up the phone when he calls. This time, I did, not knowing why. Brother is not really my brother. I mean, he is, but it is a long story.

Him: I'm in Hawaii. You've been here before, right?
Me: Yeah, but I can't remember which island I visited. I don't know.
Him: You have such a bad memory.
Me: I do, don't I?

Oh, brother. Maybe I do. Sometimes I think I choose to forget.

12. *Apar Gariyo*

The tall man wearing a white collared shirt in this photo (see Figure 9.3) is my grandfather, the Honorable James Ezekiel Mbori Yogo of Saye Village, Rachuonyo South Sub-County, son of the late Yogo Ong'ondo and Maria Acholla. Born in 1932, my grandfather began his career in education, then transitioned to politics, serving as the minister of Parliament of Kasipul-Kabondo Constituency and the assistant minister for local government. My grandfather, wuod Ong'ondo, was survived by two of his four wives and by most of his twenty-four children, fifty-one grandchildren, and seventeen great-grandchildren. He died in 2017, on the seventeenth day of June.

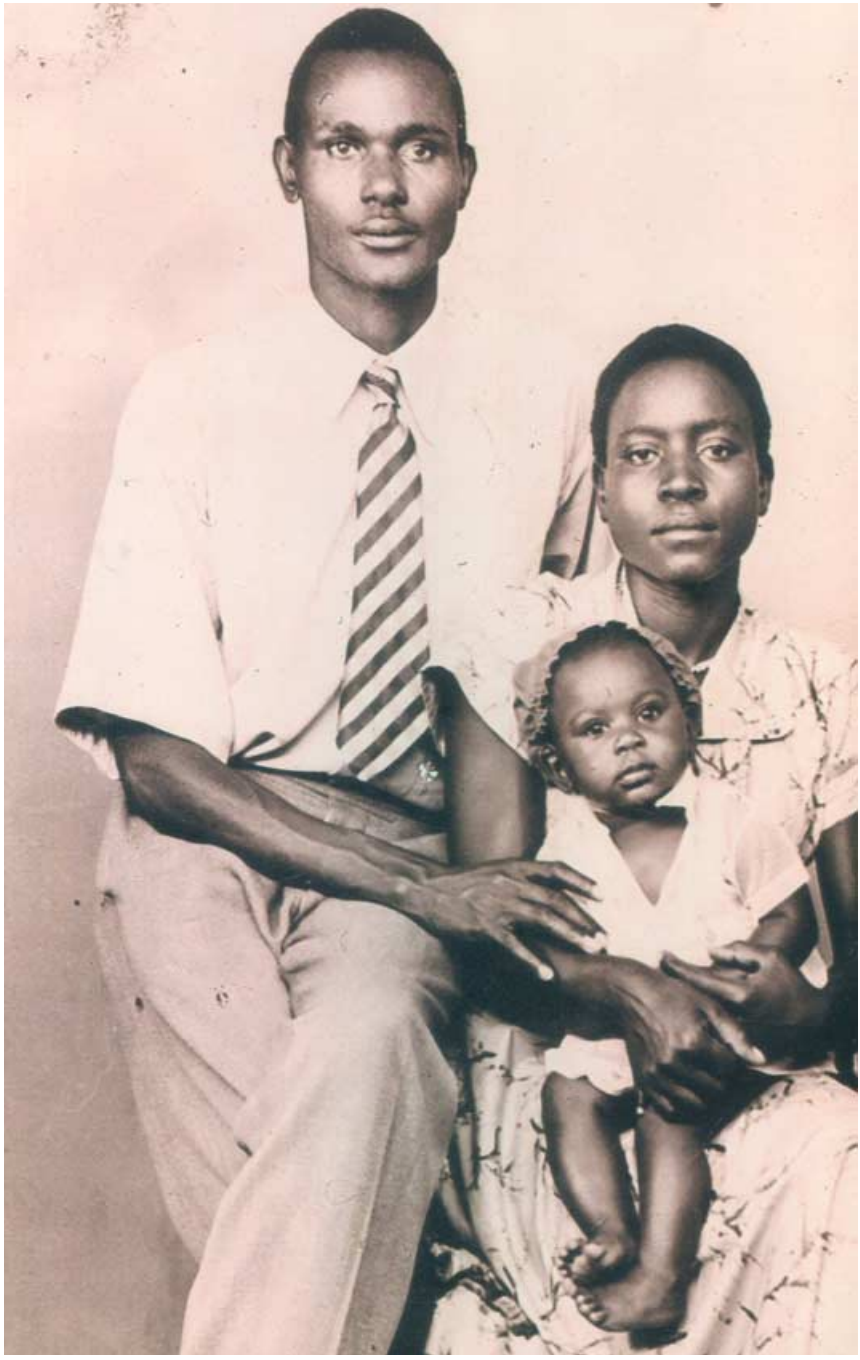

Figure 9.3. Grandfather, Dani, and Mommy. Author photo.

The woman in this photograph is *kwara*'s first wife, his *mikayi*. Mama Esther—*jok moko luonge ni* Oganda, Nya'Sango, Nyar g'Odongo, *koso* Min Nyiri—is my grandmother, my namesake. The baby in this image is reaching for her mother, my grandmother. The mother is there. The mother is always there. The baby is safe. The baby will become my mother. I will not know her as a baby or a girl, only as a mother. This means I will hardly know her at all.

Barthes (1981: 53) claimed that "in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes." The French philosopher proposed that focusing on the facts surrounding a photograph, the historical, social, and cultural contexts, offers only partial insight. Engaging the feelings that arise from probing the aspects of a photograph that capture the viewer's attention—for example, noticing my grandfather's elegant, veined hand resting on my grandmother—creates avenues for discovering the old anew. Photographs, in this regard, are not merely artifacts; they are keys to unlocking memory, and tools for remembering and (re)constructing the family and the familiar.

13. *Apar Gadek*

Cousin philosophizes intermittently on Instagram. Months ago, she posted a recent photograph of my grandmother, along with a lengthy caption:

> A home without girls is like a river without a source. That's the woman from where I've come from if you didn't know. She is very learned and was a teacher by profession. She didn't drop out of school to get married like other women did. She taught her children and grandchildren morals and lessons; one of the things she taught is your sister is your best friend, *en jakori*. Never get married to your sister's husband. *Kik itim nyiego gi nyaminu. Mano ne en kwero. Aheri ahinya Dana nya nyakach. Mama maonge ngama inyalo pim godo. Nya nyadhi yaani class*. I love you grannie, *nyasaye omedi ndalo mangeny*. (Awuor 2021)

14. *Apar Gang'wen*

Sometimes we tell ourselves fictional stories about our families to make sense of ourselves and make ourselves make sense. Sometimes we need fictions to face facts. Sometimes we need to filter through facts and fictions to face hard truths about lies. Sometimes we imagine that lies are true

stories, too. Sometimes we try to twist history, to turn wrongs right and write happy endings where none exist.

15. *Apar Gabich*

Knock, knock.
Who's there?

Esther O. Ohito, EdD, is a creative writer, curriculum and cultural theorist, and educational researcher. She is an associate professor of English/literacy education at Rutgers Graduate School of Education. Broadly, her lines of inquiry concern the entangled politics of Blackness, gender, race, and knowledge production at the nexus of curriculum, pedagogy, embodiment, and emotion. Her research agenda is split into three overlapping strands: the poetics and aesthetics of Black knowledge and cultural production, the gendered geographies of Black girlhoods, and the gendered pedagogies of Black critical educators. Her interdisciplinary research is as inspired by Black intellectual traditions as by (memories of) her lived experiences, including her stories as a multilingual, transnational, first-generation Black/African/Kenyan immigrant student in the United States, a teacher in the Chicago Public Schools system, and a US–based teacher/educator in various educational spaces across the African diaspora. She is a member of the Black Girlhoods in Education Research Collective.

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Conclusion

As Queer as a Black Girl

Navigating Toward a Transnational Black Girlhood Studies

Lucía Mock Muñoz de Luna with Esther O. Ohito

> If only we could remember: we were small and full once, and the sky was wide open. Whether our situation was ideal or not, we could still imagine something else, and we did so with ease. This imagining was not a burden—it was the point.
>
> —Yrsa Daley-Ward, *The How: Notes on the Great Work of Meeting Yourself*

> *Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different. . . .*
> It was a while before we came to realize that our place was the very house of difference.
>
> —Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

> [O]utsiderness is always a combination of things: it might be queerness, but also class consciousness . . . ; it might be queerness and disability . . . ; it might be old age, illness, and a rapidly changing world. . . . The outsiderness is never just one thing and can't be reduced even to the terms I've just used. But because of that,

Notes for this section can be found on page 260.

> it takes on this universal sense that I think a lot of readers of all stripes relate to. Being an outsider is a fundamental human experience.
>
> —Jenn Shapland, quoted in Monika Dziamka, "Jenn Shapland on 'My Autobiography of Carson McCullers' and Uncovering Queer Identities"

> Queerness is a methodology of desire that allows us—and it is "us," not "I"—to "see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" so we may "think and feel a then and there."
>
> —Stephen Dillon, quoting José Esteban Muñoz, "Blackness and the Aesthetics of Freedom"

> Queer is not just an aesthetic or a professed politic—it's an erotic practice and a material relationship to power.
>
> —Savannah Shange on Twitter

One of my clearest memories as a girl is the Christmas that my grandmother (who my family called La Mae, pronounced "la mī" in Spanish) came to visit us in North Carolina, all the way from Spain. I (Lucía) was about eight years old, and we had been living in the United States for a few years, so my relationship with my grandmother was distant, literally and figuratively. I remember her in my mind as a towering figure, cunning and short-tempered, particularly when it came to my mother.

On Christmas Eve, we opened our presents, including ones La Mae had brought for us. Knowing that money was tight for our family that year, she had bought my older brother and me very nice gifts: a remote-controlled toy car for him and a doll for me. The memory that matters most here is that in all of my childish honesty, I could not hide my disinterest in the doll she had gifted me, marveling instead at my brother's remote-controlled car and helping him figure out how to make it work. I recall this story here, which in many ways was just a small, insignificant moment, because it is the first time I distinctly remember seeing disappointment in the gazes of my grandmother and mother at me—or at least what I understood as disappointment of my disregard of what was deemed appropriate for a girl. Of course, now I look back and am ashamed by my lack of gratitude for La Mae's kind gift, but I am also struck by my recognition that their disappointment was not only in my thoughtlessness but also in my inability to be a "proper" girl.

These moments of recognized disappointment accumulated throughout my girlhood, so by the time I was fourteen and starting to realize that my most intense and prolonged crushes were on other girls, I understood

that queerness was one more thing that would be met with deep-seated disappointment in those who loved me. Twenty years removed from that realization, I can now see that the disappointment of a girlhood unfulfilled is a through line in my family, with most of us women somehow finding a way to subvert the imposition of a normalized girlhood onto our bodies, desires, and ways of being. But in those moments, the lessons learned were life-altering and, at times, crushing. I am glad to now understand this disappointment as an opening for otherwise, for the possibility of girlhood outside of what has been deemed appropriate, while also still marveling at how profoundly a girl can understand her self in relation to being a disappointment, a disturbance to the comfortable ascriptions of girlhood.

This narrative about La Mae marks my epistemological place of origin. I chose to begin this volume's conclusion with a story because

> stories have the capacity to open avenues for new conceptual frameworks and forms of praxis. . . . In the burgeoning literature, scholars agree that stories are more than representations of worlds of experience and feeling, they have the capacity to create radical openings that move people to act and imagine in ways that can shift and change a terrain of struggle. (Clarke and Mullings 2023: blurb)

From La Mae, I learned disappointment as a way of knowing my self and the world. I share this story of disappointment as a queer white woman in a decidedly Black space. My racialized positioning necessitates my presence here, in this book, as contingent; I introduce myself to you through this queer disappointment to gesture toward how we might be in relation to one another within and against the world as it exists now, that is, outside of separation, domination, and violence. What might we learn from traveling the terrain of disappointment? What might we learn from how we have disappointed and felt disappointment in this world?

Disturbing Factors: Queer and Black in Emplaced Relation

Esther and I titled this piece "As Queer as a Black Girl" to gesture toward how queerness and Blackness inform each other and necessarily disrupt and disturb hierarchical categorization and normalizing discourses in place. As Malpas posited,

> place cannot be reduced to any one of the elements situated within its compass, but must instead be understood as a structure comprising spatiality *and* temporality, subjectivity *and* objectivity, self *and* other. Indeed, these elements are established only in relation to each other, and so only within the topographical structure of place. (1999: 163)

The authors in this volume, then, have sought for their respective chapter to be a disturbing factor in normative educational spaces, particularly those that enclose and are used to control Blackness and gender.

To think through the concept of disturbance, we turn to Hartman's (2019: x) *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. The book begins with this epigraph: "She was, she knew, in a queer indefinite way, a disturbing factor." Taken from Nella Larsen's (1928) novel *Quicksand*, this nearly century-old observation by/about a young Black woman growing up in the United States animates Hartman's inquiry and serves as inspiration for this volume's embrace of transnational Black girlhood studies. The poignancy of Larsen's words comes in the knowledge (of self, of space, and of the world) embodied in her narrator, that she is a disturbing factor—echoed in Hartman's various descriptions of Black girls and women as "riotous" and "troublesome." Important, too, is the queerness of it all—the *disturbance*. Hartman dedicates her writing to lovingly speculating on the lives and loves of young Black women in early-twentieth-century New York City and Philadelphia: how they (re)negotiated kinship, intimacy, and sexuality in the aftermath of Reconstruction and in the midst of seismic shifts in life in the United States. The book shares stories of various girls and young women whose presence in the historical archives has largely been dictated by sociologists, reformers, and others who reduced their lives to pathology, lives in need of intervention or saving. In refusal of this archive, Hartman instead paints each character as complex and agentic, as radical in their own undertaking of life and love. These girls knew themselves as disturbing factors.

Important, too, is Hartman's (2019) method of critical fabulation—forgoing the formal archive in favor of imagination, in the yearning for what could (or should) have been, or maybe was but was not recorded. That is, Hartman is a storyteller, treating each of her characters as worthy of love and attention in the absence of that care in the archive. Through each story, desire abounds as Hartman tends to the sensual practices of these young women, imagining how they built their lives and families in the afterlife of the destruction of kinship that slavery wrought. The kin-

ship bonds and practices formed in these stories are undeniably queer, in the way that hooks described it:

> I think of . . . being queer, and not as being about who you're having sex with. That can be a dimension of it, but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live. (2014: 1:27)

In this volume's Introduction, Esther and I argued that Blackness and girlhood themselves remain undertheorized within the field of Black girlhood studies, rarely theorized and/or articulated as contested beyond topical references to fixed notions of race and gender. In this Conclusion, we further develop what we previewed in the Introduction: a transnational approach to Black girlhood studies located in the Black queer spatial imaginary. Drawing from the authors' contributions as the basis for a framework for the study of Black girlhoods with theoretical and methodological utility, in this volume, we seek to bring together Black feminist spatial theory (and, specifically, Black feminist geographies), Black/queer theory, and Smith's (2019) conceptualization of transnationalism, to think through a queer/transnational approach to Black girlhood studies.

Schooling Desire and Sexuality

Schooling spaces have historically been modes through which young people are educated into whitened gender and sexuality. From the reform schools of the twentieth century that sought to correct "deviant" sexual behavior in young women and educate them into gender and sexual normativity (Zaborskis 2020), to the contemporary sex education programs (both through formal curriculum and the informal, hidden curriculum) that have remained firmly entrenched in cisheteronormativity, schools are spaces where gender and sexuality are thought and made. Zaborskis's article on an early-twentieth-century reform school for Black girls details both the ways Black girls' existence was pathologized and the ways education was framed as a tool for intervention and correction, where sexual normativity was taught in order to "be able to draft African Americans into citizenship and humanity" (Ferguson, as cited in Zaborskis 2020: 374). Implicit in these interventions was the belief that Black girls' deviant sexuality was not only inherent but also compounded by their supposed "criminality" (Zaborskis 2020: 374).

Over a hundred years later, the echoes of this foundation for educating Black girls remain firmly present in the overcriminalization of Black children in schools, and in the renewed battles over sexuality and gender being fought in educational spaces. As Kromidas (2019) noted, the work of molding children into the image of the Wynterian Man has been a deeply philosophical endeavor tied to the production of a cohesive, totalizing figure of humanity through whiteness and against Black life and being. Queerness has no space in the figure of Man, so schools and schooling practices have become spaces where cisheternormativity is normalized and invisibilized. Likewise, consideration of Black girls' sexuality has remained on the periphery of education research and practice, engaged mostly in the context of pathology and the need for interventions (Chapter 5 in this volume explores this topic through engaging with Black teen mothers). With a few notable exceptions (e.g., Curtis 2009; Garner et al. 2019; James 2011; Ohito 2023; Shange 2019; Tucker 2021), relatively few scholarly inquiries have dwelled on the ways sexuality and pleasure can be a source of knowledge for Black girls, and this is even more pronounced when considering queerness.

We framed this Conclusion by tracing the normalization of cisheteronormativity in schools, and the implications for Black girls, in the context of a larger interest in how sourcing from the potentiality that abounds in Black girlhoods, inherently queer bodies, might create space for particular forms of educational activism, resistance, refusal, and/or transformation. Our argument here is anchored to queer potentiality with regard to the unsettling of the structures and strictures of race, gender, sexuality, and other categories that suggest being, becoming, and knowing. In this regard, we suggest a queer/transnational approach to Black girlhood studies as a frame through which to challenge the tenacity of bounded logics and orientations, which are tethered to whiteness. We wonder, what might Black girls' queer/transnational imaginaries look, sound, and feel like on educational terrain? How might we grapple with and make meaning of the possibilities for Black girls' liberation brought forth by these imaginaries in the context of a multipolar world? Fundamentally, we propose that the study of and about Black girlhoods demands (re)orientation to capacious conceptualizations of identity and belonging across spectrums of power and difference, and intentional theoretical and methodological pivoting away from normatively derived dichotomies (e.g., human/nonhuman, boy/girl, Global North/Global South).

So, what is the "potentiality of queer worldmaking outside of the confines of social pressures and expectations in the material world" (Alaoui 2023: 192)? How might we all, as storytellers and story gatherers in the field, source from that potentiality to queer approaches to studying and learning about Black girls' ways of being and becoming Black girls in educational spaces? How do we queer knowledge of how Black girls (re)claim ownership and repossess worlds both interior and exterior (McKittrick 2006)?[1] These are questions of theory, method, perception, positionality, and posture. We organized this Conclusion, therefore, around two questions: Theoretically and methodologically, how might a queer transnational approach to Black girlhood studies call attention to the embodied and emplaced knowledges, needs, and lived experiences of Black schoolgirls? What might this lens bring to view?

Toward a Queer/Transnational Black Girlhood Studies

We begin our navigation toward a queer/transnational Black girlhood studies by engaging Smith's (2019) notion of transnationalism as both a spatial analysis tool and a site for queer potential to flourish. Smith's concept of transnationalism exceeds the bounds of nation-states to instead understand borders as part of the social and cultural categorizations that delimit what and who is a "proper" girl, alongside what is (im)possible for those marked as girls. "[T]ransnationalism, in the literal sense, has to do with the ways in which borders between nation-states are becoming less rigid and more porous rather than impermeable," yet metaphorically, transnationalism "can function, too, as a way of describing a weakening of cultural and other ethnic imperatives" (Smith 2019: 1). In discussion of Gardini's (2019) chapter, Smith noted that "the border between idealized girlhood and the experience of real lived girlhood needs to be broken down if girls are to be believed, taken seriously, and have their voices heard and respected" (Smith 2019: 10–11). In that vein, the authors in this volume engage transnationalism by focusing on how Black girls across the Black diaspora illuminate the porosity between and among the (commonly viewed as) static borders of Blackness and girlhood, and produce knowledge with the potential to transgress and guide our practice of freedom (hooks 1994).

Black girlhoods unsediment notions of "proper subjects" (Eng and Puar 2020: 2) and immutably bordered and bounded places and spaces. Black girlhoods are queer, understanding queerness as an embodied and

emplaced refusal (of fixedness) and recognizing indeterminacy as generative for knowledge creation. Given that, one opening for possible answers to the essential question anchoring this Conclusion was illuminated by Bey's (2022) *Cistem Failure: Essays on Blackness and Cisgender*. Bey argued that *Blackness* and *cisgender* are necessarily antagonistic and that the system (or "cistem," as Bey deemed it) that creates, and is created by, cisgender categorization is invariably white and, therefore, unable to behold Blackness. Speaking of their book, Bey explained,

> What this treatise attempts to convey is how the cistem is as it is because of its exclusion of blackness, *and*, to be sure, because of how those who rebel against the cistem are invited into a dissent by blackness. (2022: xiii)

If Black girls, then, are always already excluded by the cistem, this perhaps allows one to understand Black girlhood as productively queer, given that, as Bey (2022: xiii) posited, "those proximate to blackness invite the necessary failure of the system of cisgender." This failure would cause a totalizing failure of the figure of the Wynterian Man that has been overrepresented itself as the only way to be human. We hope this volume invites you to delight in the possibilities of what a theoretical and methodological framework for Black girlhood studies that delights in the disappointment of failure might consider.

Black girls are embodied and emplaced reminders of the many complex and diverse ways to be human, Black, girl—and, and, and—all at the same time. We propose here that movement toward a queer/transnational Black girlhood studies demands increased theoretical and methodological attention to four interconnected axes with regard to the knowledges, needs, and experiences of Black girls:

1. Subjectivity (as plural, evershifting, embodied, and emplaced)
2. Spatiality (and the transgression of borders)
3. Relationality (as the praxis of being human)
4. Affect (care and connection as bonds)

The framework we present here is a theoretical and methodological tool that offers and invites paths to new ways of showing up to study and interact with Black (girl) life in "hostile geographies" (Rogers 2022). It is a scaffold for storytellers and story gatherers of narratives of Black girlhoods to understand the process of and possibilities for paying close(r) attention to the dynamic circulations, movements, and mobilities that constitute

and sustain Black girls in myriad educational spaces and places, both material and metaphorical.

Important to this framework is a careful consideration of what it means to tell and gather stories (Miles and Akinboyede 2021). What does it require and demand of researchers, scholars, and educators of Black girlhoods? These, of course, are not new questions for research, but the study of Black girlhoods, in our understanding, necessitates that we all revisit the importance of gathering and holding one another through story. In fact, as Kromidas (2019: 67) wrote of Sylvia Wynter's work, storytelling is the very essence of how we all continuously become human: "Wynter insists that humans become human, are nourished or malnourished, in the amniotic fluid of *symbols, stories and representations* [emphasis added]." Thus, the work of gathering stories is paramount; it is not something to be done carelessly. For those of us who care for and love Black girls, our work must be to think about method and methodology (our story gathering) differently, that is, understanding story gathering not through a lens of accumulation and/or possession but as an act of love, as a way to find one another, and as a way through. We must also embrace a refusal of the academy's unquenchable thirst for knowledge and mastery. Shange (2019: 41) described her own work on queer Black girlhood as "a missive from the Black queer space that *demands to be thought, but refuses to be known*," echoing Tina Campt's conception of the Black gaze that shifts ideas of "'looking at' to 'looking with, through, and alongside another'" (as cited in Dillon 2022: 421). The work of storytelling and story gathering is perhaps akin to that of freedom dreaming. When asked during a podcast (Center for Race & Gender 2019) what a free Black girl is, Shange responded that she does not and cannot know because freedom is something not yet realized. Rather, she suggested, the demand on all of us is to capacitate the conditions for a Black girl's freedom; then, that girl can tell and show us what freedom is and can be. We hear the imperative to capacitate the conditions for freedom as a demand to think about Black girlhoods expansively and queerly.

This Conclusion is anchored to the theoretically and methodologically significant question of how a queer/transnational approach to Black girlhood studies might call attention to the embodied and emplaced knowledges, needs, and lived experiences of Black girls, and what this lens might bring into focus. Collectively, the chapters in this volume move the field of Black girlhood studies in that direction, illustrating stories that paint Black girlhood as an affectively and otherwise textured landscape, complicate ideas of freedom in relation to Black girlhood, center the periph-

eral (the disturbing/disturbed), understand disturbance as an invitation to inquiry not as a foreclosed predicament or foregone conclusion, and cultivate capaciousness for complexities and multiplicities in Black girls' embodied and emplaced voices and subjectivities.

Each chapter contributes to this shift in important ways: Tamara T. Butler's (2018, reprinted as Chapter 1 in this volume) spatial analysis both complicates ideas of freedom and belonging and urges each of us to pay careful attention to the complexities of the navigational practices of Black girls. The letters to Toni Morrison penned by Katelyn M. Campbell, Lauryn DuPree, and me (Chapter 2) offer a capacious method for collectively thinking *with* Black girlhoods through and across difference, positioning our wounds as an opening for inquiry and solidarity. Taryrn T. C. Brown's (Chapter 5) careful attention to Black teen mothers' ontoepistemologies centers those girls still labeled by dominant schooling practices as disturbing, insisting that their motherhood and girlhood are not predicaments but rather spaces for knowing the world differently. Nadine M. Finigan-Carr's (Chapter 4) work on the pipeline from sexual abuse to sexual exploitation to prison confronts the disturbing factors of abuse directly, challenging us all to reckon with and redress the ways schooling exacerbates harm. Adilia E. E. James's (2011, reprinted as Chapter 3 in this volume) meditation on her own evolving queer desires helps us think about theorizing from the space of desire and disturbance. Susan E. Wilcox's (Chapter 8) beautiful writing (see Nash 2019) about young Ghanaian women insists that we consider the complexities of freedom through the lens of Black girlhood, echoed as well in Lateasha Meyers's (Chapter 6) use of photography to show us how Black girls visualize and share their notions of self and liberation. Renée Wilmot's (Chapter 7) intergenerational exploration of girlhood and education in Richmond, Virginia, gifts us with a story of family and city across space and time, bringing together multiple voices and images to offer an expansive vision of Black girlhood. Finally, Esther's chapter (Chapter 9) offers a glimpse into the type of interdisciplinary methods of inquiry necessary for and possible in the expanse of a queer/transnational Black girlhood studies.

A World as Queer as a Black Girl

The first time I (Lucía) read Toni Morrison's (1970) *The Bluest Eye*, I was about nineteen years old. Although the feeling I recall most acutely was

grief at the sexual violence and unrelenting hatred exacted upon Pecola, I also remember being struck by Claudia's commitment to her friend (Pecola), and Claudia's own relationship to her Blackness and girlhood. Claudia recounts a story of a doll she had torn apart because of its reverence of white girlhood. I remembered La Mae and my inability to love the doll she gifted me. In some ways, I recognized Claudia's rage against this idealized white girlhood and felt comforted by the ways her righteous anger was an instigating force for her incisive critiques of the world she and Pecola inhabit. Claudia's refusal of normative girlhood, along with her fierce (if complicated) devotion to Pecola, made me love her. I loved Claudia's queerness and her unflinching insight into the world around her, and her own participation and refusal of this world. I wanted to love that in myself as well.

Claudia's disappointment with/in the world helped me recognize the contours of my own disappointment, the texture of my wounds. *The Bluest Eye* ends with Claudia's meditation on the soil that kills of its own volition and the world that forsakes Pecola and other Black girls. For me, Claudia's damnation of this world offers no resolution or comfort to our feelings about Pecola's wounding and also offers (demands) the possibility of shaping a politic that holds Pecola and Claudia with care and love. What future (and present) world is possible when that world is as queer as a Black girl? What stories will we tell of that world? Although that world might be unknowable, it demands to be thought of, about, and with. Perhaps, as is the case of Claudia's care for/of Pecola, it is always already happening in the spaces Black girls create for themselves and for one another. Perhaps, too, we can articulate that world in our own relationships. Perhaps we can do so by asking ourselves these questions: "What if our politics are shaped by the texture of wounds rather than the identity of selves? What possible future will have been opened up by posing that very question?" (van der Zaag 2022: 37).

To be a storyteller and a story gatherer of tales of Black girlhoods is to be a creator and curator. Regarding the former, it is important to note that "your job as a creator is to open a portal of connection. A door that reminds us that we all exist together on this flawed plane. The world explodes into chaos when we forget that we are one" (Ruffin 2022: para. 20). We hope this volume supports you in lovingly and carefully doing creative and curatorial work with and for Black girls. We hope that as you absorbed the curated narratives contained in these pages, you were moved to question who you are and desire to become in relation to the truths and fictions of

childhoods, your own as well as those of the Black girls you encountered in this book and those with whom you coexist on this earth. We hope you remember and return, again and again, to your core self as you toil with and for Black girls. We hope you have found value in engaging a womanist understanding of the intimate geographies of Black girls in educational spaces. We hope the stories shared here provided you with generative lessons on how to build and cultivate spaces conducive to Black girls living vibrant, viable lives (Jeffrey and Dyson 2022) in spite of the suffering (Dumas 2014) borne of a world bent on the decimation of Black girlhoods.

With love,

Lucía and Esther

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Note

1. With deference to Dionne Brand, McKittrick (2006: ix) wrote, "the earth is also skin and . . . a young girl can legitimately take possession of a street, or an entire city, albeit on different terms than we may be familiar with."

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