"THIS STORY WAS INSIDE ME THIS WHOLE TIME, JUST WAITING": COMING TO BLACKGIRL STORYING

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ABSTRACT

"THIS STORY WAS INSIDE ME THIS WHOLE TIME, JUST WAITING": COMING TO BLACKGIRL STORYING

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This dissertation project explores the various ways Blackgirls (Hill, 2016) from across a New Orleans came together in a collective space to engage in discussions of Blackgirlhood, wherein they shared and developed insights into their individual and collective understandings of self and community. Collective members' multimodal storying, discussions, and reflections, are centered in this dissertation in response to an urgent need for more expansive presentations of Blackgirls. Informed by theories, methodologies, and pedagogies, including: Black feminisms and Black Girlhood Studies (e.g., Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2016; Hill, 2016; hooks, 1996; Owens et al., 2017), Indigenous storywork (Archibald, 2008), sociocultural perspectives of literacies (e.g., Street, 1984), and culturally responsive/sustaining humanizing pedagogies (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017; Paris & Winn, 2014), this study also builds with the works and examples as put forth by other Blackgirls and Black women, such as Toni Cade Bambara's (1996) "The Education of a Storyteller" to inquire into how centering Blackgirls and their narratives may move us towards what I conceptualize as "Blackgirl storying," a medium that we used to critically name and honor our lives and the plurality of Blackgirlhood.

To our Nola Blackgirls' collective and the loved ones we carry with us: Thank you for bringing all that y'all are and inviting me to do the same. Your creations push me to fight, to celebrate, and to build individual and collective homeplace(s).

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Ash, and Igni, four of my best friend.

To all parts and versions of myself, thank you.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In my earliest years, I grew up in a home filled with a sense of belonging. I'm talking

before I went to an independent school with predominantly wealthy White Christian and Jewish

Southerners. Before my time there, I have no memories of unbelonging. Occasionally, I was told

that I was shy, or quiet, but I don't recall ever holding those as attacks on my character. In

Uptown New Orleans's 12th ward, my biological, real, imagined, and fictive/play kin—Ma'me,

my grandmother, my momma, sister, aunts, uncles, cousins, parrins--built complex worlds in

liminal spaces. Growing up in a primarily Black Creole Catholic and Black Baptist

neighborhood, my racial and gendered literacies were always layered with cultural, religious,

and spatial ways of knowing and being. And while acknowledging the difficulties (the inequities,

navigating respectability politics, violence, etc.), I look back and see that in five blocks in nearly

all directions, I lived fully. In full awareness of both my freedom and precarity.

Shortly after enrolling as a kindergartener in my K-12 school, I realized that I was

different from my classmates. Not different in the way I had been before. It wasn't just that I was

quiet or anxious. There, I was a stain in an otherwise pristine kindergarten class picture.

Further, I was reminded that my proximity to whiteness was measured in part by my living

blocks away from the Magnolia projects.[1] I was told that my home was too Black, too dangerous.

And so was I. When I encountered microaggressions, racial epithets, and discriminatory

policies, my family always advocated on my behalf. And yet, rarely did any of us consider the

option of me leaving my school to attend one where I would, perhaps, feel affirmed. It was both

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[1] Officially the C. J. Peete Public Housing Development, I had only known of the Projects as the Magnolia Projects. In many ways, my own ethnic, race, gender, class, and spatial identities were shaped in relation to my proximity to the projects. Demolished following Katrina, the city built a mixed-housing development: Harmony Oaks. I don't know anyone that lives there anymore, but my mom says I do.

implicitly and explicitly messaged to me that to be successful, in large part because of my

Blackness, class identity, and gender identity, I must leave home.

When I began teaching, I was once again faced with confronting how anti-Blackness

demands the loss of self and home. I taught at a school in New Orleans's Ninth Ward which

predominantly served Black families from the community and the adjacent Lower Ninth Ward.

Most families rented homes in the area, though this often changed due to the rise in rental costs

as the area gentrified. This led to many difficulties for students, as they moved farther out of

their neighborhood and became dependent upon offers for rides, or forced to unenroll from

electives to catch the bus. I don't recall this issue ever being raised in meetings. Rather,

administrators brought up housing issues when we were unable to "track" a student or their

caregivers. Or, when youth needed and wanted to go home with a relative. Our school had lots

of cousins, siblings, aunts, and uncles. Sometimes in the same home, sometimes across homes.

The concept of multiple, shared homes within a community was addressed only as an

inconvenience.

During my last year, there was an increase in the school's ethnic, racial, cultural, and

linguistic diversity, especially as families sought schools with advocates for Special Education

and multilingual students. That last year, my final period of instruction was perhaps my favorite.

The last "core content" class before lunch, youth and I had collectively made it through most of

the day. Despite some students being worried about whether they would spend their lunch in

detention, we moved with a sense of relief that we had made it this far. With many students,

though not all, we had developed a mutual respect, appreciation, and care for each other. I owe

this in large part to my "moving up" with this cohort. I was not a remarkably better teacher than

the year before (I still received much of the same feedback from administrators: be more

assertive with students, establish more routines, stay on topic for the day's lesson, etc.), but my relationship with youth had deepened. It was audible in the low-hum of chatter as students individually and collectively completed the day's critical reflection. Towards the end of class, I reminded students to turn in their papers. I needed to get something substantial on their progress reports and we were nearing the end of our unit on the Holocaust far later than I had planned.

"Ms. LJ, what connection you trying to get us to make to this?" asked Antoinette, her eagerness to wrap up the class usually driven by her ability to attend Band practice during lunch. Vying to be the drum major in a school band with few girls, she wanted to be first in the Band room.

"Toi, they die. Talk about your people that died," Jerry remarked. And before I could find the words to address Jerry's suggestion, Mari spoke up.

"It's not just that they died, Jerry. You a cold lil'boy. It's the how. The why. It's about asking if hate can destroy innocence" Mari said, pointing to one of the guiding questions of the unit.

And before I could catch on, as I wish I did, the conversation moved on and another student raised their hand for individual support. Right before dismissal, we packed up, waiting for any announcements. Over the recording, the administrator went down the list, ending with a parade-related update. "We're recruiting teachers to march with you all. Over the next week, you can vote on teachers you'd love to have on the route with you." And before the final beep came over the speaker, students were already debating who they would ask: Ms. Roth ... Mr. Neely ... Ms. Nguyen. Justifications for who they felt the right teacher was continued as we walked down the hallway and to the first floor. I walked with those who trailed behind after I locked up.

"Mari, who are you voting for?" I asked in attempt to encourage her to share her thoughts. She was the First Chair Trumpet player and scored the highest in her grade. She was also one of the quietest and never rushed to anywhere, including Band. "No one," she shrugged, stopping right before we passed the Band room. Antoinette stayed by her side.

"Why?" I pushed, distracted.

"Because they only care about this stuff when they can be a part of it to look cool. They don't even like New Orleans."

"That's not true, Mari." But even as I said this, I resigned to let it go because I didn't think she was wrong.[2]

Mari's passing comment highlighted something that I felt when I was her age, something that I had then become complicit in reproducing: that her New Orleans was not worth investing in beyond events like Mardi Gras. Most students were constantly inundated with the message from teachers, administrators, and well-meaning family members that they wouldn't be successful unless they left their neighborhood, and the only way to do that was to score high on state achievement tests. And only we could help them. We marketed this to their parents when we were searching for new students, or even when we were trying to convince the ones we had to stay. Their neighborhood, cultures, or families were not mentioned at any other time. We didn't talk about the Lower Ninth Ward beyond holding moments of silence or when using it as evidence to justify "escape" as a necessary step in our narratives of success.

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[2] I'd like to think she knew what my resignation meant. The youth often knew when I was just saying things, in part because I'm a horrible liar, but also because after a month or so of my first-year teaching, I stopped working so hard to lie.

Weeks later, I walked in the gym on one of my off periods. It was mid-winter in New Orleans and raining. Nevertheless, it was still warm enough so that when everyone came in from lunch because of the rain, you could smell it. My mom calls it "smelling like outside". It's never a compliment. I expected to find Antoinette with her friends, circled up in ways that obviously showed they were on their phones. Instead, I found her with Mari, against one of the gym's walls. her backpack hanging off her like a messenger bag. Her face was red and tense, like she'd just come from an embarrassing situation or in from a run.[3]

"Toi," I said, approaching only somewhat. Toi liked to invite people in. When you went in without an invitation, she'd usually just walk away.

"I didn't get it," she whispered.

"Get what?"

"Band major. I'm not the band major. At first, Mr. C said, 'we'll see.' So, I kept working. Then he I wasn't tall enough, but I'm as tall as some of those boys. Now he says, 'maybe next year' and that I need to watch the boys, watch Dante. But he told me that last year. Fuck. I'm taller than Dante. I go in harder than Dante. What Dante got that I don't got?"

She looked at me, searching. Trying, but failing to keep a straight face, I returned a laugh.

"Yeah, you right. But that's not fair."

"It ain't fair, Ms. LJ," Mari chimed in.

"No, it's not. I'll talk to Ms. Roth and maybe we can go talk to Mr. C. Toi, you been working hard for this." And she had. She drummed on everything. She adhered to whatever rules Mr. C, the Band Director, came up with.

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[3] I always find it strange when people argue that Black people do not and/or cannot blush.

"That won't do no good," Mari said. Toi nodded.

Right before our after-school meeting began, Ms. Roth and I talked to Mr. C. He was only ever there for the first 15 minutes because of after-school Band practice. Mr. C swore up and down that Toi just wasn't ready. I tried to explain what a leader she was, in class and on the soccer field, pointing to our trophies and her schoolwork. Ms. Roth, who had been at the school for several years long than me, spoke about how Toi had more experience and leadership qualities compared to past drum majors.

"Dante needs this more," Mr. C said. "He's ready."

"And Toi doesn't? She isn't?"

I don't remember what happened after that. Just that Toi never got the chance to be the drum major before she graduated high school. I think in the last years she stopped dreaming it.

Where are the Blackgirls of Central City?

In part, what gives way to the continued damaged-centered framings and practices in New Orleans schools and Black neighborhoods, as well as in many places across the U.S. nation-state, is the notion that Black lives and homes are inherent problems. This includes the communal networks, the homeplaces (hooks, 1992) that we build within ourselves and alongside each other, as well as the physical spaces where Black youth often reside. Black youth and their communities are surveilled and pathologized by institutions and individuals working to sustain anti-Blackness, capitalism, and cisheteropatriarchy in U.S. society (Browne, 2015). Oftentimes, perhaps even without realizing, projects across industries reify and sustain engagements with surveillance. For example, in June 2018, *The Times-Picayune* and *New Orleans Advocate* published a series entitled "The Children of Central City," documenting the lives of the 9-10-year-olds on the A.L. Davis Park Panthers football team (Bullington & Webster, 2019a). The stated mission of the project was to highlight the trauma experienced by the children and families living in the Central City neighborhood[4], and make a case for more systems and institutions, such as education and the criminal-justice system, to be trauma-informed. According to writers,

> the series focuses on children who grow up in Central City– one of New Orleans' most
>
> culturally significant neighborhoods, a nurturing home to second-lines and Mardi Gras
>
> Indians, and the epicenter of the city's civil rights movement. But the 2,900-plus children

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[4] The Central City neighborhood of New Orleans, like many within the city, is segregated by race and class. It continues to be a primarily Black neighborhood in New Orleans, though it is bordered by wealthier and Whiter neighborhoods and communities. According to the 2000 U.S. census, 87.5% of Central City residents identified as Black or African American. In a more recent survey, The Data Center analyzed the *U.S. Census 2000 Summary File* and *2015-2019 American Community Survey*, to find that 68.7% of residents identified as Black or African American (Data Center, 2021). This is consistent with studies that continue to document the displacement of Black residents in New Orleans alongside Katrina, city politics, gentrification (both by home-owners and commercial companies that buy up New Orleans property to market as short-term rentals, such as AirBnB) (Berlin, 2019; Peck & Maldonado, 2017).

and teens who call Central City home face rates of crime and poverty significantly higher

than in other parts of the city. (Webster & Bullington, 2019, para. 11)

Throughout the series, reporters profile members of the neighborhood and report on chronic

exposure to violence as experienced by Central City youth and their families, as well as insight

into how charter schools and policymakers have come to exacerbate these issues. There were

many reactions to the series, including those of Melissa Sawyer and Kenneth Polite, Jr. (2018),

who wrote that "there are hundreds of children in [New Orleans] who are struggling to overcome

immense challenges that were caused by no fault of their own - and like it or not, their struggles

are all of our problem" (para. 2).

Across several articles, reporters feature advocates for children, including family and

community members, educators, mental health care workers, and children themselves, who call

for attention to and belief in the negative impacts of post-traumatic stress disorder experienced

by children. And as noted, the series brought a lot of attention to Central City and New Orleans,

winning several national honors (Webster & Bullington, 2020). The series also garnered

attention from organizations which pledged and awarded money to support current infrastructure.

As of May 2020, however, the city had yet to contribute to funding (Webster & Bullington,

2020).

While the series brought much necessary attention to the plight experienced by the

Central City community, much of the narrative is situated within incomplete, damage-centered

framings (Tuck, 2009). For example, one article within the series begins with, "Central City is

one of New Orleans' most violent communities" (Webster & Bullington, 2019b). Not once is the

neighborhood discussed alongside constructions of celebration or desire. These narratives, in

part, were designed as pleas, as offerings for consumption for individuals, systems, and

institutions in the city to change course. Nevertheless, many of those same systems and

institutions, including the City of New Orleans, continue to ignore the community. In some

lensings, Black children were positioned as inherent, always already problems of the city to raise

awareness. This is evident within an op-ed written in response to the series, as the authors,

undoubtedly well-intentioned, write, "if we continue to ignore the basic and immediate needs of

our children, the cycles of violence and poverty that we have grown to accept in New Orleans

will continue, and we will all suffer for it" (Sawyer & Polite, 2018; para. 2). And while the

structures are critiqued for being insufficient, the reasons as to why New Orleanians "have

grown to accept" inequitable access to resources, violence, and poverty that disproportionately

affects the city's Black people and neighborhoods are never addressed. Where and how in this

example is anti-Blackness rooted and sustained in the construction of New Orleans? And

further—what I flipped through the paper several times to try to answer—where are the stories

from Black girls and young women from the Central City neighborhood of New Orleans? Why

were their stories absent from the series?[5]

Before I move forward, I want to name that in this writing I use both "Black girl" and

"Blackgirl", one word, as put forth by Hill (2016). I understand "Blackgirl", in building with

Hill, as a way to reject projects of containment that work to separate, or refuse to name, how our

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[5] It is not my intention to engage in discussions wherein I am comparing various groups and identities, placing them in positions where they are competing for the bottom. My asking where Black girls are—even in stories that offer incomplete depictions of their lives—does is not entirely exclusive from the question of where and how Black people, including gender non-conforming people, non-binary people, and boys and men, live their lives. Collins (2009), in contemplating our futurities, argued that Black feminist though may prompt African-American women to "explore the epistemological implications of transversal politics" (p. 270). Collins noted that in doing so,

> Eventually this approach may get us to a point at which, claims Elsa Barkley Brown, "all people can learn to center in another experience, validate it, and judge it by its own standards without need of comparison or need to adopt that framework as their own" (1989, 922). In such politics, "one has no need to 'decenter' anyone in order to center someone else; one has only to constantly, appropriately, 'pivot the center.'" (p. 270)

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Blackgirlness lives on and within us. In communication with Hill, Boylorn said that Blackgirl as one word

> speaks to the twoness and oneness of my raced and gendered identities. I am never only Black or only girl/woman, but always both/and at the same time . . . I merge the words to make them touch on paper the way they touch in my everyday existence. (as cited by Hill, 2016, p. 2)

Up until recently, I have always used "Black girl" to reflect my own dispositions and identities; however, during this study, I came to seek ways that represented the simultaneity of our lives. Ways that rejected the either/or we are so often presented with. Why can't we be all? What do we see when we're not rendered through fragments we ourselves did not curate and collage? And so, when I presented "Blackgirl" to collective members, the majority of whom felt it strongly resonated with them. I then, primarily use Blackgirl in referring to myself, our collective, to our storying, and to the various insights that emerged.

In attempt to answer Sealey-Ruiz's (2016) call for researchers to engage in work that responsive to how Black girls experience education inequality, I am curious as to how attending to their lives through their own storying may "create strategies and actions to interrupt" the inequities that impact Black girls and young women (p. 294). In this presentation of my research inquiry, I offer brief historical and contemporary insights to where we are—how Black New Orleanian girls and young women move through places already marking them absent. First, I think through anti-Black heteropatriarchy in New Orleans and the U.S. Here, I draw upon scholarship as well as popular media to consider how the current climate. Next, I attempt to think through these ideas, particularly at the site of schooling. The stories take me home, but also to the lives of Sylvanie Williams, Marie Couvent, and Ruby Bridges to consider how Black girls

and women are markedly "hyper(in)visible". Next, I present my location alongside this project, my research questions, and a summary of subsequent chapters.

Anti-Black Heteropatriarchy, New Orleans, and the U.S.

There are many angles from which one might critique the "Children of Central City" series. One analytic approach is to consider the role that anti-Blackness holds in the piece. Similar to the dominant news media's approach of documenting "disasters that happen in Black spaces and to Black people", such as in the case of Hurricane Katrina and Black New Orleanians, the "Children of Central City" series serves Black people's "'pain for public consumption'" (Elizabeth Alexander as cited by Sharpe, 2016, p. 66). The authors recognize, perhaps, that the dismissal of Black youth and Black lives have dire consequences; however, viewed through a lens of anti-Blackness and heteropatriarchy it seems that only when such consequences are spilling over, spatially and economically into other parts of New Orleans, that this issue needs attention. The city's lack of response in turn speaks to U.S. society's construction of Black people as necessary for labor and economic growth, though simultaneously disposable. Much like within the U.S. wherein Black people and Black women are devalued and dehumanized (Browne, 2015; Collins, 2009, Roberts, 1999; Wacquant, 2001). Hartman (2007) argued,

> If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery. (p. 6)

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Hartman's (2007) demonstration that Blackness and Black lives have long been devalued by intentional and enduring "racial calculus and political arithmetic" offers insight into why the newspaper series lacks a critique of the systems and institutions that sustain Black suffering within New Orleans and within the U.S. more broadly. There is little reflection in the series about the policies that have long relegated Black New Orleanians to certain neighborhoods, jobs, schools, etc., while also making health, economic, and education resources largely inaccessible and unavailable.

These systems and institutions that sustain Black suffering within New Orleans are indeed enduring. Scholars in various fields have long explored anti-Blackness and heteropatriarchy in historical and contemporary New Orleans institutions. Analyses that position New Orleans alongside anti-Blackness and heteropatriarchy stand in contrast with the versions of New Orleans that exist within popular culture. Heralded by the city's elite -- as well as those invested in anti-Black heteropatriarchy, the city's tourism industry, and even at one point by many historians, New Orleans is often depicted as an exotic, Old World city far removed from historical and contemporary race relations one might find elsewhere in the South, U.S., and globally.[6] This chasm is visible in New Orleans's monikers: "The city that care forgot", "The Northernmost Caribbean City", "The most African City in the United States", "Chocolate City", "The Paris of the South", and "America's Most European City".

Arguments that anti-Blackness is not endemic in a predominantly Black city wherein Afro-Creole and Afro-Caribbean culture is not only celebrated (to an extent), but promoted, ignore Black communities' historical and contemporary experiences with Black suffering

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[6] I want to carefully note that even as I discuss white supremacy in the U.S., the South, and in New Orleans, Louisiana, I reject a North-South dichotomy that often exists in neoliberal progressive rhetoric. The South as a place and space, in the many ways it is imagined and constructed, is not inherently "more" racist than the dominant constructions of other U.S. regions.

(Souther, 2006; Thomas, 2014). Central to sustaining this narrative is the marketing of stereotypes and flattened Black cultures alongside the reproduction of systems and conditions that contain Black people and Black life to oppressive conditions.

And although local efforts and recent historiography have made efforts to revise dominant narratives centering whiteness, and incorporate more perspectives, the notion that New Orleans is either a city with exceptional race relations and/or one wherein all residents consent to living and sustaining a mythic, romanticized antebellum city still prevails.

There are several examples spurring from the design and engagement of the "300 for 300" project, a tricentennial project designed in part by one of the prominent news media institutions, Nola.com | *The Times-Picayune*. For example, despite so-called attention to inclusivity and diversity, ongoing calls to "decolonize the tricentenial of New Orleans" ("Bulbancha is Still a Place: Indigenous Culture from New Orleans", 2018; Darensbourg, 2018) were given little attention. These efforts included bringing attention to the ancestral, traditional, and contemporary lands of Bulbancha, which was and continues to be the name of the lands called New Orleans, and to the many nations who live, use, and travel through these lands, including the Acolapissa, Bayagoula, Chitimacha, Choctaw, Houma, and Tunica. The tricentennial project's ignoring of decolonizing efforts makes sense as a settler-colonialist and white supremacist project. Decolonizing rejects spatiotemporal demarcations, including both the name "New Orleans" and the idea of a "300-year anniversary" for the city.

Another example of the project's erasure is by way of anti-Black heteropatriarchy. With the goal of recognizing 300 New Orleanians who play(ed) pivotal roles in the city, one of the project board's aims was to honor Sylvanie Williams, a Black woman educator and activist, by celebrating those "overlooked over the years, whether because of their race, their gender or

simply because of mere circumstance" (Scott, 2018, n.p.). However, of the 290 individuals on

the list, 33 percent are women and 35 percent are listed as "nonwhite" (Scott, 2018). Perhaps to

absolve the obvious reproduced erasure, the author wrote,

> Ideally, both numbers would have been higher, particularly where race is concerned,
>
> given that New Orleans is a majority-black city. At the same time, those are pretty
>
> impressive numbers when considering the reality that both groups were held back and
>
> overlooked for so long.
>
> All in all, I think Sylvanie Williams would have been pleased.
>
> Still, it gives us something to aspire to when we put together our list for the city's 400th
>
> anniversary. (n.p.)

Even with a goal to name those long excluded, New Orleans institutions knowingly fall

short. The remarks above are an attempt at absolution, as the author uses the legacy of Sylvanie

Williams to pardon the role that systems, institutions, and individuals have in sustaining Black

women's erasure. Sylvanie Francoz Williams (1855-1921) was a Black school teacher, principal,

and founding member and president of the Phillis Wheatley Club in New Orleans where she

fought for African American women's rights to vote (Dunnaway, 2011; White, 2009). Though I

cannot imagine what Williams would feel or think about the project, to suggest that nearly one

hundred years after her passing, she would be pleased with the list is a rhetorical move of

absolution; however, it demeans Williams's activism and from Black New Orleanians' historical

and contemporary demands for more institutional representation. The editorial's author further

demonstrated anti-Blackness in their suggestion that New Orleanians who are not direct benefits

of white supremacy and cisheteropatriarchy wait another hundred years for more equitable

recognition. This demonstration of neoliberal progressive politics by way of interest

convergence, wherein women and "nonwhite" people receive acknowledgement only when benefiting predominantly White heteropatriarchal institutions, is embedded within New Orleans and U.S. social practice.

The "Children of Central City" series also brings forth questions of geography and place-relationality. "Central City" as a place and space is treated as synonymous with Blackness. Popular rhetoric in New Orleans, present across institutions such as media and schooling, have long positioned Black New Orleanians, their communities, and the s/places they inhabit as problems. In this news series, Central City is described as "toxic", dangerous, and destitute. There are few adjectives or characteristics attributed to the neighborhood and the lives of Black children that are not damaged-centered (Tuck, 2009).

The treatment of mapping Black people and s/places where Black people exist alongside toxicity as a natural and neutral occurrence can be traced by the city's project of disposability, contamination, and white supremacist acts of purification. This issue, though not inherently unique to New Orleans, reverberates throughout the city as, according to Ansfield (2015),

> Low-capital black residents have been forced into a discursive pit. Because they themselves carry the contamination the reconstruction effort seeks to abate in the creation of a 'safer, stronger, smarter City,' their continued erasure is the cornerstone of the rebuilding of the city. (p. 137)

This displacement and erasure of Black communities is pointedly carried out through residential segregation, which "forcefully concentrates the negative effects of marginalization" (Vargas, 2010, p. 41). The "Children of Central City" project uncovered much of what Central City community members already knew: Central City and the youth of Central City are being ignored by individuals and institutions in New Orleans and Louisiana. Though the series brought urgent

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attention to how a New Orleans neighborhood and residents experience various forms of violence, including a lack of resources, it does not name anti-Blackness, racism, and white supremacy as the city's current project. In doing so, Black people and Blackness, as well as the spaces and place Black people live their lives, may be read as a problem rather than the systems they interact with. Thus, this intervention reifies the scripts and stories it intends to challenge.

Anti-Black Heteropatriarchy and Schooling in New Orleans and the U.S.

In an interview with *Time Magazine*, Toni Morrison remarked that "Black people are victims of an enormous amount of violence. None of those things can take place without the complicity of the people who run the schools and the city" (Angelo & Morrison, 1994, para. 29). As demonstrated above, U.S. institutions -- such as the news media in New Orleans -- and systems, are complicit in sustaining Black suffering. Schooling as an institution is another site at which to consider how anti-Black heteropatriarchy is produced and fortified.

Black people's educational attainment has long threatened white supremacy, in large part because Black communities' quests for education is a liberatory enactment. As "freedom and school books and newspapers go hand in hand" (an April 1865 issue of the *New Orleans Black Republican* as cited by Anderson, 1988, p. 18). Prior to the Reconstruction era, Black people often depended upon schooling institutions that operated outside of the official New Orleans public for access to educational attainment, including private, parochial, and Freeman's schools sustained by philanthropy and the collective efforts of Black New Orleanians (Anderson, 1988; Boselovic, 2014; DeVore & Logsdon, 1991; Stern, 2018). The Ursuline convent was an example, as it operated in ways that simultaneously challenged and reproduced anti-Black heteropatriarchy in New Orleans. In the early 1700's the Ursuline nuns committed to offering spiritual and academic education to girls and young women of New Orleans. By 1728, the nuns established a

school that educated White, enslaved Black, free Black, and Indigenous girls as borders and day-attendees (Stern, 2018). Focused on young women's spiritual development and educational attainment, the nun's dedication to including Black girls was critical in the literacy education of free and enslaved Black New Orleanians.

The Ursuline convent also served as one of the few documented sites of formal education for Black New Orleanians prior to Marie Couvent's L'Institution Catholique des Orphelins Indigents. Prior to arriving in New Orleans as a free Black woman, Couvent was kidnapped in western Africa and enslaved in Saint-Domingue. Through various economic endeavors, she eventually amassed social capital, property rights, and wealth in New Orleans. In her will she bequeathed "the establishment of a free school for the orphans of color of the Faubourg Marigny" (Neidenbach, 2015, p. 1). This was followed by many other attempts and establishments of schools dedicated to Black students, such as the Pioneer School of Freedom; however, not all sites of learning shared the same pedagogical beliefs or curricular objectives (Anderson, 1988).

I bring forth these two examples because in New Orleans, access to public schooling resources has long been tethered to gender, racial hierarchy, and spatiality. Both the Ursuline convent and Couvent's school resided and operated near (and at times, within) spaces wherein Black people had fostered communities. Couvent's school was located in the Faubourg Marigny, a downriver neighborhood wherein free Black people were able to buy land, often on credit (Stern, 2018). Black communities' long fight for access to equitable education often overlapped with their demands for access to space, place, and housing resources (Anderson, 1998; Stern, 2018; Melancon & Hendry, 2015). Schools were both the consequence of and the vehicle for maintaining a white supremacist heteropatriarchical racial order. This of course is not unique to

New Orleans; however, the city's lack of habitable land pushed people of varying demographics together in tighter spaces, though Black communities were always engaged in the struggle of sustaining access to schooling. Throughout the 20th century, efforts to establish equitable public schools for Black people were often thwarted by White and Jewish residents who worried that a visible increase of Black people moving throughout self-designated White neighborhoods, seeking to obtain schooling, would correlate to a decrease in property values and investment opportunities (Stern, 2018). Because wealthy White families were able to somewhat ignore calls for universal access to public education, as many sent their children to private schools, Black people's education advocacy often fostered even more ire from middle-class and poor White people (Anderson, 1998; DeVore & Logsdon, 1991).

Within this vast scholarship, there are still few texts that center the racial, gender, sexuality, spatial, and class experiences of Black New Orleanian girls. Nevertheless, scholars such as LaKisha Simmons (2015) and Jessica Marie Johnson (2020) are working to bring forth "an accountable historical practice that challenges the known and unknowable, particularly when attending to the lives of black women and girls" (p. 5). Additionally, at the site of education research and beyond, there are scholars building with Black Girlhood Studies who speak to the intersections of Black girlness, space, and place (Butler, 2018). The work occurring within Black Girlhood Studies brings me back to Sylvanie Williams and "The Children of Central City" series to consider the many other Black New Orleanian girls and women who go unnamed yet work tirelessly to sustain both grassroots and institutional efforts.

And so, I was sadly not surprised by the absence of Black girls and young women present in the printed newspaper or in the online videos. For a series dedicated to "The Children of Central City," there was a noted erasure of the experiences of Black girls from the neighborhood.

This is, of course, not unusual or new. As I note in more detail in my discussion of Black

Girlhood Studies, though there is a history and current increase in the studies building with Black

girls and Black girlhood, Black girls have long been ignored by institutions in the U.S. Black

girls and young women "are (mis)read, hyper(in)visible, appraised through historical and cultural

windows by tropes of Blackness and white femininity" (Hill, 2018, p. 383). This manifests in

education research, for example, wherein Black girls' experiences are often obstructed in

literature where "Black" and "African American" is often synonymous with "Black boys" and

"African American boys". Moreover, in conversations, histories, and policies impacting girls and

young women, it is often found that "girlhood" is only considered through the lensing of White

girls and young women. Throughout all of this, Black girls' experiences are obscured and

ignored (Brown, 2009; Crenshaw et al., 2015; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Hill, 2018;

Lindsay-Dennis, 2010; E. W. Morris, 2007).

      Across dominant institutions and throughout history, Black girls have been positioned as

"hyper(in)visible". In preparing me for my own experience as the sole Black girl in my school

year, and one of two Black children, my mother often referred to the story of Ruby Bridges.

Bridges, like many Black girls across the U.S., was at the forefront of integration efforts in

public schools. At six-years-old, she was charged with integrating William Frantz Elementary

School in New Orleans's Ninth Ward. On Bridge's first day and throughout the year, she

endured daily walks past White segregationist protestors who hurled verbal assaults and

threatened her with physical violence (Bridges as cited by Gates, 2013). Bridges recounted,

> Once we were inside the building, the marshals walked us up the flight of stairs ... There
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> were windows in the room where we waited. That meant everybody passing by could see

us ... All day long, white parents rushed into the office; they were upset and urging and

pointing at us.

After my mother and I arrived, they [white parents] ran into classrooms and dragged their

children out of the school ... That whole first day, my mother and I just sat and waited.

We didn't talk to anybody. When it was 3:00 and time to go home, I was glad. I had

thought my new school would be hard, but the first day was easy. (n.p)

While inside, Bridges's movements were heavily regulated. During her first year, she

spent every school day alone in her classroom with her teacher, unable to enter the cafeteria or

play on the playground (Bridges as cited by Gates, 2013). Bridges's experience with integration

is one in which she was "hyper(in)visible". The task of integrating an all-White public school,

which for Bridges was an opportunity to receive better educational resources, placed a young

Black girl at the center of Black people's centuries-long struggles for access to equitable

education. And yet, Bridges remarked that she was not read as a young Black girl, sharing, "they

didn't see a child. They saw change and what they thought was being taken away from them.

They never saw a child" (Bridges as cited by Gates, 2013). As she moved through and across

schooling spaces--spaces which Black communities often sought for liberatory possibilities,

Bridges's girlhood and humanity were disregarded. Though she was subjected to adultification,

many popular narratives of Bridges's experience often overlook the nuanced out-of-placeness

she may have felt.

I share the story of Bridges as school locales, policies, curriculum, and educators

continue to reify anti-Black and gendered violence as experienced by Black girls and young

women (Edwards, 2020; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017; McArthur & Lane, 2019; M. A.

Morris, 2016; Neal-Jackson, 2018; Owens et al., 2017). When Black girls and young women are

often written about, they, too, are pathologized. Eurocentric surveillance and policing emerges through schooling and respectability politics, as Black girls are positioned into spaces of containment, one in which they are forced "'between 'good' and 'ghetto'" (Jones, 2009). Schools mark Black girls as "deviant" based upon what they wear and how they speak, to their performance and embodiment of girlhood, femininity, and sexuality (A. Henry, 1998; Jones, 2009; Koonce, 2012; E. W. Morris, 2007; M. A. Morris, 2016; Richardson, 2003; Smitherman, 2006; Walker, 2020). In many ways, Black girls' multiple ways of living and knowing threaten systems, institutions, and individuals that label them as problems.

And so, when Black girls are excluded from a series dedicated to highlighting and eradicating Black children's trauma, the question of "where are Black New Orleanian girls and young women?" arises. Evidently, as they remain "hyper(in)visible", and their stories are only shared to demonstrate narratives of neoliberal progressive politics, opportunities for Black girls to story their own experiences may serve as one way to challenge, resist, and restory their erasure and hyper-visibility.

As this is a project wherein Black girl narrators are centered and listened to in the telling of their own lives, I acknowledge that this work is also in conversation with discourse about New Orleans education and youth. Despite the ample scholarship concerning the current state of racial inequities in New Orleans schools, few pieces include Black youth's literacy practices and schooling experiences across contexts. Of the work that does exist, fewer account for gender and sexual identities. Black girlhood in New Orleans is silenced due to broader discussions of Black youth and education, or rather, around the supposed dangers that the existence of Black youth imposes. My dissertation project, then, is designed to center the literacy practices of Black girls and young women in Greater New Orleans. And as their knowledge and practices are informed

strategies of resistance due to anti-Blackness, sexism, and patriarchy, Black girls and young

women's ways of knowing and being are also informed by joy and pleasure.

Locating Blackgirl New Orleanians and their Literacies

In June Jordan's (1981) "Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person," the poet stated that

"Body and Soul, Black America reveals the extreme questions of contemporary life, questions of

freedom and identity: How can I be who I am?" (p. 46).[7] Penned in response to Black and Puerto

Rican students' five demands for visible changes in the City College of New York's admissions

policies, faculty hiring, and curricula, Jordan's position supported students in their demand for

curricular and admissions changes. She argued that universities, as the violent machines they are

designed to be, did not offer Black and Puerto Rican students the community they insisted upon.

She saw Black Studies as not only a space for community, but a space to study human life.

Jordan's posing, "how can I be who I am", leads me to ask, "how and where can Black girls be

who they are". My inquiry into New Orleanian Black girls' literacies considers how and where

they locate themselves, as often they are marked by hyper(in)visibility. This inquiry offered an

opportunity and invitation to learn with and from Black New Orleanian girls as they shared their

own experiences through stories, interviews, discussions, and artifacts from our various

activities.

In doing so, I also consider what it means for Black girls to be in community in dynamic

and fluid ways not bound by spatiotemporality, but perhaps informed by space, place, and

temporal contexts. Spaces that are designed to forefront Black girls' and youth's literacy

practices (Kinloch, 2010; Muhammad, 2014; Price-Dennis, 2016; Price-Dennis et al., 2017;

Sealey-Ruiz, 2016; V. Watson & Beymer, 2018), while engaging with and enacting a range of

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[7] June Jordan's essay, "Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person," originally appeared in *Evergreen Review*'s October 1969 issue (Jordan, 1981).

Black feminist ontoepistemologies (Butler, 2018; Edwards, 2020; W. Watson, 2019), and are embedded in care, home, and memory (Dillard, 2020; Edwards et al., 2016; Hill, 2019; Kelly, 2021; Haddix, 2016) have an opportunity to serve as liberatory conduits. Rooted in the fields of Black Girlhood Studies, Black Geographies, and language and literacy, my dissertation project seeks to document several contradictory and simultaneous facets of New Orleanian Black girls' embodied literacies and place-making practices.

From Where I Story

I exist in this work as a queer Blackgirl, a New Orleanian, guided by intersectional Black feminist onto-epistemologies (Bambara, 1996; Brown, 2009; Butler, 2018; Collins, 1989, 1996). The critical self-reflexivity I attempt manifests in many ways. One manner of which is my repeated questioning of, "What does it mean for me as a queer Black and Black Creole New Orleanian, raised Catholic in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Uptown New Orleans during the nineties and early 2000's, who spends the majority of my time away from my various homes, to be present in this work?" As a component of Black Girl Cartography, which I detail further later, Tamara Butler (2018) wrote that often Black Girl cartographers' work is a method of engaging with "younger and future selves" (p. 33). In exploring Black New Orleanian girls' and young women's literacies alongside them, I am revisiting, recreating, negotiating, and re- and un-learning my own literacies. Despite being 10-15 years older than collective members, as well as an English educator, I do not intend to position myself as an expert, while also knowing I am never not negotiating power as a "grown" woman and researcher with academic capital.

Research Questions and a Summary of Chapters

This dissertation project blends together case study research (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2000; Yin, 2006), ethnographic inquiry (Anderson-Levitt, 2006; Geertz, 1973), narrative

research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Kim, 2015; McClish-Boud & Bhattacharya, 2021), and storying (Archibald, 2008; Bambara, 1985; San Pedro & Kinloch, 2014; Smitherman, 1977) to explore Black New Orleanian girls' and young women's literacy practices. Using a variety of sources, including qualitative interviews, artifacts, and audiovisual recordings of the collective's meetings, this dissertation presents various ways Black New Orleanian girls and young women enact their literacies when engaging in joy and pleasure, navigating anti-Blackness and cisheteropatriarchy, and when naming their relationships with space and place across sociocultural contexts. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What does a pedagogy of storying, centering Black feminist thought, look like and offer to New Orleanian Black girls and young women?

2. What occurs when Black girls and young women are invited to individually and collectively consider their readings of self, home, and community through storytelling centering Black feminist onto-epistemologies?

Throughout this dissertation, I explore this question through the listening and telling of stories that arose from my time with the collective.

CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF FOUNDATIONAL LITERATURE

I don't think I was ever the Black girl anyone wanted me to be. I've long felt that I am an amalgamation of too many contradictions in too many worlds. And though I am becoming a home for myself, much of my life has been spent making a case for that home, for my own storying of self. Though I did not realize it at the time, teaching propelled me to consider the ways I am beholden to other Black girls who seek to make homes for themselves and narrate their life using the literacies they choose. I was just shy of 22 when I first began teaching in my own classroom. At my school, it was customary for educators to wear the school uniform throughout the first week of each semester and sporadically thereafter. As one of the few Black teachers of "core content", when I wore the school uniform, I was frequently mistaken by colleagues, youth, and families as a student. Being read as one of the students in moments often positioned me to hear and see the extent to which educators attempted to wield power over Black girls.

Whether in class, in the hallway, after school in Band, Majorettes, or the "Ladies of Distinction" club, the administration explicitly demanded that our curriculum mold Black girls into "academically successful ladies". Being loud was not ladylike. And they were told to laugh quietly, or to not laugh at all. It was disruptive. Being assertive was not ladylike. Advocating for oneself through talking back was not ladylike. Hair that was not long, dark brown, and straight was not ladylike. Brass instruments were not ladylike. Scrapes were not ladylike. Loving other girls was not ladylike. Resistance was not ladylike, and anyone not ladylike was punished. This is typical in many schooling spaces, as E. W. Morris (2007) shared that in her research she found that, "teachers did subject Black girls to a particular form of discipline, largely directed at their comportment. This discipline stemmed from perceptions of them as challenging to authority, loud

and not lady-like" (p. 501). When I consider my enforcement of that script, I think of how Black

educators "are often disciplined into thinking through and along lines that resinscribe our own

annihilation" (Sharpe, 2016, p. 13). As a queer Black woman who in many ways still identifies

as a Black girl, my policing was violent to the Black girls I taught, as well as to myself. And in

other times, my presence along with that of several others, offered safety and subversive

moments of joy. This spectrum of engagements and enactments brings me to read and write my

dissertation alongside the foundational literature I share, particularly nuanced and

emancipatory endeavors.

Introduction

In this chapter, I offer a review of foundational literature relevant to this project.[8] As

noted throughout this piece, in my own storying of my family, in theory, and in my findings,

collaboration and collectivity is highly valued in the many communities I am a part of, those I

am invited into, as well as in those centering knowledge that I build with. To tell any story, at

least where I'm from, requires an acknowledgement of that collectivity. It's not uncommon back

home, in-person or on the phone, for one of the first greetings to finish with, "Who you (here)

with?" This statement is an acknowledgement, an invitation, a tracing of genealogy, and

sometimes, an inquiry situated in caution. I see this chapter as, in part, answering the question of

who and where I'm with.

My research is in conversation with the fields of Black Girlhood Studies and Language

and Literacy, drawing upon a myriad of theoretical and conceptual frameworks and relevant

studies. The chapter is an interweaving of theories, concepts, and scholarship—the practice and

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[8] In some ways, I find this review of foundational literature reminiscent of the way my eldest aunt tells stories. She gives you ample background, setting the scene and letting you in on the characters and their relationships all before getting to the "well what had happened was". Some may liken them to tangents, but for her, I think the tangents have always been the story.

praxis, and how they collectively inform each other. The theoretical frameworks I use to guide my project are Black feminist theories, primarily Black feminist thought, Black Geographies, Critical Race Theory and BlackCrit, and Sociocultural Literacies. I am also informed by research concerning the literacies of Black girls, Black women, and their communities.

On Black Feminist Thought

Growing up in Uptown New Orleans, where the neighborhoods of Milan and Central City touch, I was educated on what it meant to be a Black girl in my family—especially by other Black girls and women—in the streets—by where and with whom I could move, and in school, by negotiating being the sole Black girl in my year. However, I didn't learn of the scholarly world of Black feminist thought until college. I recall telling my mother about some of my readings on feminism in a first-year course. We spoke every day. I was homesick, and being the only person of Color in most of my courses, and most often the only one from the U.S. South, left me struggling to find connections to home. However, since my mother had never gone away to college, I very much felt like she was on this journey with me. And so, after I recounted some of what I learned, I asked if she identified as a feminist. In so many words, she pushed back, saying "I don't have time to be burning bras…".

My Black Creole Catholic mother later explained that she had encountered very few women who looked like her, who lived like her, and explicitly identified as feminists. She knew of Angela Davis and Assata Shakur and Shirley Chisholm. She read the works of Maya Angelou and Octavia Butler and Toni Morrison. However, my mother often saw explicit engagements with feminism either as something championed by exceptional Black women, or as an engagement of leisure, incompatible with her every day. In her every day, her gender was and race were intertwined, always touching. And so, when she referenced a show neither of us can

now remember, she pointed to the primarily White cast and said, "See? They're talking about feminism, but none of us are up there talking with them," it made sense. What my mother was searching for were engagements with women of color feminisms, with Black feminist thought. Black feminist thought "emanates from an insistence that the lives of Black women, in particular, and the sociocultural realities around them, are intellectual and cultural bedrocks best theorized, examined, reimagined, (and critiqued) by Black women" (Hill, 2015, p. 386). But there were no Black women in this television segment.

And so, as I began discussing with her what I was learning in my courses, I was also learning with and from my mother. Homesick for my mother and my neighborhood,[9] I insisted that when she had time, we reread Maya Angelou, Octavia Butler, and Toni Morrison together. Our discussions of Black feminist thought were more than us trading "well, this is what it said" and "I've been telling you that". It was an invitation and welcoming into what it meant for me to dialogically take part in our collective world-making, wherein formal and traditional distinctions between girlhood and womanhood were challenged, unlearned, and reimagined. This same invitation taught me early on that, "[t]o look for Black feminism by searching for U.S. Black

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[9] I went to college in the Twin Cities, in Minnesota. I remember during my first semester, a group of people on the dorm floor on which I lived, sat around and casually remarked the things they missed about home. When it was my turn, I shared that I missed the way home smelled—everything from my mom's cooking to the smell of the city along river. One White woman, whose name I still recall, laughed, "you mean the smell of filth and dead people?" What I remember most about that moment was the way my eyes burned. I desperately wanted to find someone, anyone to commiserate with. I wanted to find someone talk to who could let me know how to leave (there were other reasons). I didn't know where to go. I called my momma.

My first year, 2009, 3.25% of enrolled students are identified as "Black, African American" people. During the fall of my graduating year (2012-2013), 2.80% of enrolled students are identified as "Black, African American" people (this number changes to 4.15% when considering students who self-identified as Black and with one or more other racial and/or ethnic categories), Both numbers reflect international students' reported racial identities. "Black, African American", "Hispanic", "Asian", "Native American, Alaskan Native", "Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander", "Two or More Races" students (grouped under the category "Students of Color") reflected 18.69% and 20.92% respectively.

women who self-identify as 'Black feminists' misses the complexity of how Black feminist practice actually operates (Collins, 2000, p. 31). Learning this through my mother's teaching, not only revised my conceptualizing of feminism, but it also layered and invited me to think of the ways I engaged with Black feminist practices prior to becoming "'hung up on 'articulating [Black women's and my own] feminism'" (Nnaemeka as cited by Collins, 2009, p. 31).

This lesson is one I took with me when working with Black girls and young women in our collective. I did not want to become "hung up" on thought in such a way that it became more valued than practice in the collective. This was also a reminder that positioned me to hold onto the fact that a popular misconception about any genealogy of thought is that it is always cohesive and homogenous. This flattening perspective is one I have encountered often with Black and Women of Color feminisms. Though I may reify this in some ways in sharing such a brief overview of the aspects of Black feminist thought that I draw upon, I hope it is evident that this synthesis of several ideas put forth by thinkers such as the Combahee River Collective, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Kimberlé Crenshaw cannot and does not attempt to encompass all Black feminist theories.

In considering how Black girls story themselves, and from where they story, I draw upon theories of intersectionality. Many position intersectionality as "the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies … has made so far," (McCall, 2005, p. 1771). Alongside such a claim is the evidence that many scholars feel that intersectionality has become institutionalized by the neoliberal academy (Cho et al., 2013; Nash, 2019a).[10] As Nash (2019a) argued, the

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[10] Jennifer C. Nash (2019a) asks, "What does it mean to feel that the symbols of one's body and intellectual production have become the cornerstone of women's studies programmatic ambitions and wills to institutionalism?" (p. 32). Considering the institutionalization of intersectionality, Nash (2019a) argued in her second book, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*, that Black women's property claims to the analytical framework of intersectionality, the tight grip of ownership, is an act of holding on that often becomes Black women's primary intellectual labor in the academy. Thus, she critiques "the proprietary impulses of Black feminism in an effort to reveal how the defensive affect traps Black feminism, hindering its visionary world-making capacity" (p. 3). I am

academy's flattening purview of intersectionality is evident in the attribution of Kimberlé

Crenshaw's (1989) coinage of intersectionality is perhaps most often cited as the "origin story"

of the term. Nevertheless, theories of intersectionality can be chronologically traced prior to

Crenshaw's publication, visible in the theorizing of Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper (1892),

the work of the Combahee River Collective (1977), and Collins (1990).

Admittedly, I came to learn of intersectionality, by name, through the work of Crenshaw;

however, in thinking with Mahalingham's (2008) writing of intersectionality as naming the

"interplay between person and social *location*, with particular emphasis on power

relations among various social *location*s" (emphasis mine) (p. 45), I eventually came to realize

that I was socialized from a young age with the knowledge that intersectionality can be mapped

in many ways, sometimes through the geography of our bodies.[11]

In working with and writing about Black girls and Black women, I primarily turn to

Black feminist thought, which invites us to "build new knowledge about the social world in order

to stimulate new practices" (Collins, 2016, p.13). By intentionally revisiting Black feminist

thought through foundational texts and literature, I seek to disrupt research that speaks of Black

girls and youth, yet remains dismissive to the specificity of Blackgirlness and Black youthness.

This is a specificity that recognizes the dynamic, multifaceted, and continually refasioned

contours of Black girls' and women's standpoints (Collins, 2009). Collectively, I am curious as

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still unsure of my own thoughts and feelings and thoughts about my feelings about what Nash proposes. I'm curious about her stance-taking of Black feminist defensiveness wherein defensiveness is "single affect that has come to mark contemporary academic black feminist practice" (p. 3). I am also intensely compelled by her situating Black feminist theory as a site of debate and tension. Nash (2019b) wrote that her intervention is in part due to her own exhaustion, and in response to the exhaustion of Black women broadly: "I see the defensive posture as taking a toll on black women intellectually and emotionally, politically and psychically, and even as foreclosing certain acts of critical imagination by insisting that we already know what intersectionality is, what it can do, and where it came from, and that the answer to all of these questions begins and ends with black women" (n.p.).

[11] Many of my corrections from various people started or ended with some form of "as a girl and a Black girl at that…" or "as a Black person in America, and as a Black young woman at that…" and were usually in relation to how I performed and moved… or how I didn't.

to how these theories, concepts, and fields may offer ways to render complex understandings of New Orleanian Black girls' and young women's literacies.

Black Geographies

In a poem reflecting on her rights, June Jordan (2005) wrote,

my status as a woman alone in the evening/ alone on the streets/ alone not being the point/ the point being that I can't do what I want to do with my own body because I am the wrong sex the wrong age the wrong skin. (n.p.)

I offer June Jordan's (1980) poem, as her writing elucidates the embodied and material intertwining of Black femininity, space, and place. My research is heavily informed by Black Geographies, a body of work wherein much of the early theory building occurred in Katherine McKittrick's (2006) *Demonic Grounds*. Considered one of the first scholarly texts to focus on the multiple and intersectional dimensions of Black geographic thought and Black womanhood, McKittrick's scholarship continues to serve as an intervention in Eurocentric, cisheteropatriarchical conceptions of geography and feminist theories, as the author draws upon archival work and literature across space, place, and time to consider how Black women embody the diaspora and the afterlife of slavery. Alongside highlighting Black women's negotiations with place in the Caribbean, the U.S. and Canada, McKittrick also demonstrated how a sense of place is informed by and bound within power struggles. Following McKittrick's text, there is a growing body of work and approaches centering Black senses of place and geographic visions. Taken up to speak to a wide array of histories, experiences, knowledges, and issues within Black communities (including environmental catastrophe, surveillance and policing of Black neighborhoods, Black foodways and practices, and global displacement), Black geographies are responsive to Black lives. As Katherine McKittrick (2006) wrote, "black lives are necessarily

geographic, but also struggle with discourses that erase and despatialize their sense of place" (p. xiii).

Geography and cartography as a discipline and practice have informed and have been informed by settler colonialism, colonialism, enslavement, and imperialism (Hawthorne, 2019; Kobayashi, 2014; Pulido, 2002). As Hawthorne (2019) argued, the Enlightenment ushered an era of understanding race as intertwined with space in a manner which "bound individuals and groups in place, classify[ing] them according to their geographical locations, and arrang[ing] them in a spatio-temporal hierarchy" (p. 3). As in many disciplines, contemporary scholars in geography have ushered the field in different directions, or rather, different paths are taken in addition to more traditional ones. This is visible in critical spatial theory, often used to address the relationship between space and difference and the stance-taking that spatial and social processes are fluid and intertwined. Much of this work, which had been taken up by Marxist geographers and other critical geographers, interrogated power and inequality primarily through prioritizing economic and gendered lenses while forgoing inquiries considering racial difference and inequalities (Hawthorne, 2019; Neely & Samura, 2011).

As political project, Black Geographies works to attend to the inquiries of Blackness, gender, race, and difference. I first came across Black Geographies as an intervention after encountering *Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas* by Rebecca Solnit and Rebecca Snedeker (2013). Flipping through the collection of maps and essays designed to render visible the complexities of New Orleans and New Orleanians alongside space and place, I got stuck on the entry titled "People Who" (p. 26-27). In considering how people of New Orleans identify themselves alongside "contradiction and conundrums," Solnit and Snedeker alongside cartographer Molly Roy, artist Bunny Matthews, and writer Lolis Eric Elie wrote, "it makes

more sense to map New Orleanians by the verbs of their avocations and practices than by the nouns of their ethnicities" (p. 25). Descriptors include: "sell nuts and bolts", "could pass for white but don't want to", "speak in tongues", "face Mecca", "eat frozen vegetables", "intermarry", "live without papers", "live outside", "make millions", "dance on cars", and "have courtyards" (p. 26-27). Are these avocations? How are these cartographies read when these avocations are mapped onto physical spaces that are already racialized in the atlas (and arguably, in this very map) and the lives that people of New Orleans live?

After flipping through *Unfathomable City* numerous times, I always return to "People Who". I question how despite being introduced with the caveat that boundaries in New Orleans are extremely fluid, the cartographers chose to superimpose fixed and flattening descriptors onto a map of New Orleans. What may it mean to situate singular definitions upon whole neighborhoods and people? Taking these wonderings, alongside technologies of anti-Blackness present within the lives of Black New Orleanians, the storying of Katrina, schooling policies, and gentrification, I fell into the work of Katherine McKittrick.

In *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, McKittrick and Clyde Woods (2007) offer a foundational collection of scholarship tasked with offering understandings of the relationship between racialization and the production of space. McKittrick and Woods put forth three trajectories, grouped thematically, central to the project of Black Geographies:

1. "... the ways in which essentialism situates black subjects and their geopolitical concerns as being elsewhere (on the margin, the underside, outside the normal), a spatial practice that conveniently props up the mythical norm and erases or obscures the daily struggles of particular communities."

2.   "... how the lives of these subjects demonstrate that 'common-sense' workings of modernity and citizenship are worked out, and normalized, through geographies of exclusion, the 'literal mappings of power relations and rejections.'"

3.   "...the situated knowledge of these communities and their contributions to both real and imagined human geographies are significant political acts and expressions." (p. 4).

McKittrick and Woods's naming of these interventions is largely influenced by Black Caribbean intellectuals, the Black Radical Tradition, Black feminist theory, and scholars of the Black Atlantic. In large part because of its genealogy, the field of Black Geographies works to reject white supremacist and Eurocentric geographic understandings and approaches, especially alongside critical theories of race, gender, sexuality, and citizenship. That said, Latoya E. Eaves (2017) cautioned against an analysis focusing on "Blackness in relationship to these fixed renderings of space and time [which] misses the opportunity to explore a Black sense of place and the broader political, economic, and social connections of local lives across multiple scales" (p. 84). She argued that these flattening renderings of Black life and Black spaces reify structures and epistemologies already working to contain Black life.

Through the work of countering flattened renderings, a framing of Black Geographies challenges popular myths that Black people are "ungeographic" (McKittrick, 2006) and those narratives positioning Black people solely as victims of s/place, approaches and outlooks which erase Black senses of place (McKittrick, 2011). This is visible within the long history and contemporary times of regulating Black people, wherein Black people were marked as "out of place" when moving between spaces, thus subjecting them to questions and assault by government and communal policing (Hawthorne, 2019). The manner of naming the positioning

of Black people and Blackness as "out of place" and "ungeographic" as a technology of anti-Blackness relates to a range of work not explicitly named as geographical, such as those by Fanon and Wynter, though much of Black Geographies scholarship builds with these thinkers. I move with Black Geographies in part to contend with inescapable encounters with possessive geographies. Similar to Harris's (1996) discussion of "whiteness as property", Sullivan's (2006) naming of possessive geographies addresses how "white people act and think as if all spaces – whether geographical, psychical, linguistic, economic, spiritual, bodily, or otherwise – are or should be available to them to move in and out of as they wish" (p. 10). Though I differentiate between White people and whiteness, Sullivan's words underscore how a critical race theory analyses of New Orleans education thus necessarily forefronts "whiteness as property". In seeing schooling and the sociocultural contexts through which Black New Orleanian girls and young women move as sites to investigate possessive whiteness and anti-Blackness and heteropatriarchy (as well as many other interlocking systems of oppression), Black Geographies offers an opportunity to locate Black girls and women in the worlds within which we live. As the field of Black Geographies demands space and place for non-traditional geographic sources, such as the lives and stories of Black people, food practices, enactments of the quotidian, literary fiction, dress, festivals, and protests, it offers a genealogy with which I may situate Black girls and young women's literacies.

Critical Race Theory and BlackCrit

Though conversations concerning CRT is extremely prevalent in our current news cycles, it has existed as a field of scholarly thought for nearly half a century. In the 1970s, critical race theory (CRT) emerged from critical legal studies (CLS) and radical feminism. At this time, civil rights advances of the 1950s and 1960s, including work to dismantle discrimination within

institutions such as housing and schooling, "had stalled and, in many respects, were being rolled back" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 4). Simultaneously, CLS failed to take up critical engagements with race and racism in the U.S. (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). In response to the backlash and the shortcomings of CLS, legal scholars, lawyers, and activists such as Derek Bell, Alan Freeman, Charles Lawrence, Richard Delgado, Lani Guinier, Mari Matsuda, Patricia Williams, and Kimberle Crewnshaw developed CRT as an explicit engagement with race, racism, and white supremacy (Crewnshaw, 1995; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Taylor, 1998). Critical race scholars view CRT as a framework through which we may "analyze the role of race and racism in perpetuating social disparities between dominant and marginalized racial groups" (Hilrado, 2010, p. 54). As such, CRT is now widely taken up beyond the field of legal studies and has a sustained home in the field of education.

Extending from Ladson-Billings's and William Tate's (1995) article "Toward a Critical Theory of Education", many education scholars use CRT to make visible and address dominant perspectives of the world while centering the pervasiveness of racism in schooling and related institutions. Leonardo (2013), for example, argued, many educators continue to "think of race as attached only to issues of curricular transformation led by multiculturalism" (p. 3). And while in academia there is an ongoing increase of CRT scholarship so much so that "even non-CRT-oriented research on race has appropriated the label" (p. 11), there remains continued and widespread challenges and attacks to CRT both within academia, in broader U.S. society, and internationally (Schwartz, 2020). Moreover, the proliferation of CRT has led to variations not only to how many tenets constitute CRT, but also in the positioning of tenets as holding a "prominent" or "primary" status. This is often visible the more specific engagements with CRT become, and it is not uncommon to read scholarship as building not with CRT, but with "CRT in

education" or "CRT in higher education". That said, many researchers using CRT note that the framework is not singular, and thus, no single set of tenets compromises the critical race theory. Additionally, Delgado and Stefancic (2017) carefully noted that not all critical race theorists may subscribe to each theme of CRT and across branches of CRT. And so, below I briefly offer and discuss various tenets of CRT alongside themes relevant to this study.

- Racism as normal. Many critical race theorists hold that while race itself is a social construction, not having a biological reality, society nevertheless wields race as a way to organize people and create and sustain hierarchies. In CRT frameworks, racism is endemic to and pervasive within the United States, deeply embedded within America's social, political, and economic systems structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2013). The centrality of race and racism is not only evident in the obvious enactments of race violence, but also within "the subtle and hidden processes that have the effect of discriminating, regardless of their stated intent" (Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 40). These acts include what is often considered the everyday and mundane (Ladson-Billings, 2004).

- The possibilities of voice and (counter)storying. CRT prioritizes uplifting voice through (counter)storytelling, a method through which to honor and affirm stories while challenging preconceptions and myths, especially dominant narratives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). As outlined by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), Delgado offered three rationales for counterstories as method: (1) society is constructed and reproduced through storytelling, and sharing counterstories and prioritizing the voices of Asian, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Pacific Islander people and their communities often challenges notions of positivism, neutrality, and singular

universal truths; (2) storytelling offers possibilities for the "psychic preservation of marginalized groups" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 57); (3) counterstories have the potential to challenge realities held by those oppressively wielding power.

- Whiteness as property. CRT names an intersection between race and property that correlates whiteness as a property interest. Engaging in connections between space, place, and race, Cheryl Harris (1995) argued that property rights are intertwined with racial domination. Harris discusses the enslavement of Black people and the theft of Indigenous lands as primary examples and enactments of whiteness as property, noting that while whiteness nor property are static concepts, there remains a relationship among the two. Harris suggests four "property functions of whiteness," (1) rights of disposition; (2) rights to use and enjoyment; (2) reputation and status property; and (4) the absolute right to exclude…

- Interest convergence. In his coining of "interest convergence", Derrick Bell argued that civil rights affordances for Asian, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Pacific Islander people and their communities, most often occur when such gains primarily benefit the interests of White people and white supremacist institutions. In CRT, interest convergence is often used to highlight "limits to reform via law and policy making, and shows how even apparently radical changes are reclaimed and often turned back over time" (Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 41).

- A critique of liberalism. CRT critiques liberalism, particularly colorblindness, neutrality, meritocracy, and incremental change. Within education, scholars have used critical race theory to highlight the embedded racism of colorblind policies, such as those which attach school funding and resources to "merit" without accounts for the racial realities

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students, teachers, and communities face (Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2009). Further,

more recent CRT research has critique neoliberal policies and attitudes toward diversity,

equity, and inclusion (Leonardo, 2013).

- Interdisciplinary and social justice commitments. CRT is interdisciplinary,

  transdisciplinary, and multidisciplinary, reflecting multiple perspectives and approaches

  in an effort to challenge and disrupt various forms of discrimination and oppression.

  Many critical race schools take up CRT to inform both social theory and social activism,

  moving toward transformational praxis (Kohli, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).

Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit). I delve deeper into the present inquiry centering the literacy

practices of Black girls and young women in New Orleans by taking up Black Critical Theory. In

discussing their conceptualization of BlackCrit alongside CRT, Dumas and ross (2016)

challenged treatments of CRT as an inherently "*Black* theorization of race" while arguing that

"only critical theorization of blackness confronts the specificity of antiblackness, as a social

construction, as an embodied lived experience of social suffering and resistance, and perhaps

most importantly, as an antagonism" (p. 41). In building with Wynter's (1989) naming of "the

specificity of the Black", Dumas and ross (2016) aimed to disrupt assumptions that CRT itself is

a critical theorization of Blackness. Here, the authors addressed in brevity the building and

branching of racialized critical theories--such as LatCrit, AsianCrit, and TribalCrit. These "crits"

were created to name the specificity of racial oppression as experienced by Latinx, Latinas,

Latinos, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Indigenous peoples as well as to critique the "Black-White

binary" within CRT (Brayboy, 2005; Chang, 1993; Hernandez-Truyol, 1997). Dumas and ross

raised that while these approaches extend our understandings of race alongside nuance:

their existence either presumes that CRT functions in the main as a BlackCrit, or suggests that "race" critique accomplishes all that Black people need; Black people become situated as (just) "race," whereas other groups, through these more specifically named crits, offer and benefit from more detailed, nuanced, historicized, and embodied theorizations of their lived racial conditions under specific formations of racial oppression. (p. 417)

This, of course, is not to say that CRT in its origins and continued existence does not privilege the experiences of Black people. As noted above, there is an undoubted history of such. However, as the authors suggested, there is an inherent issue in treating racism as synonymous with or interchangeable with anti-Blackness. In doing so, broad applications and understandings of race and racism may be informed by the experiences of Black people, but are often not building such understandings alongside theories of Blackness. Thus, CRT alone is inadequate in addressing anti-Blackness and Blackness.

Critical Race Theory and BlackCrit inform my research as these theories and approaches are in some ways aligned with my onto-epistemologies as well as the project of seeking to understand, learn with, and extend Black New Orleanian youth's literacy practices. CRT and BlackCrit also address the material conditions that many Black New Orleanian youth engage with across spaces and places in their daily lives. For example, through placing and engaging with concepts such as "whiteness as property" and "interest convergence" in my study alongside BlackCrit, I seek to understand what we may learn from Black New Orleanian girls in their discussions of, for example, their relationships with schooling across space and sociocultural contexts, their narrativizing of home, and their own mapping of themselves.

BlackCrit offers an opportunity to consider "the specificity of Blackness". Much education research exists featuring examples of Black youth sans examples of Blackness, or rather, Black youthness. This is common in research which may feature Black people but still places them within "the white gaze" through writing their Blackness absent. Though I do not identify my dissertation as having a CRT or BlackCrit analysis, I am nevertheless informed by BlackCrit, and Dumas and ross's (2016) call for thinking unapologetically steeped in theorizations and enactments of Blackness. My layering of the theories and empirical literature I take up—or the make-up of "who I'm with"—resists simplification to nuance my own understandings of collective members' literacies. Thus, in naming how CRT informs my study but does not feel wholly adequate for discussions of gender, age, race, ethnicity, culture, and embodiments of place, I call out the contradictions and misalignments. As Leonardo (2013) argued, CRT does not offer theorizations of race, but rather racism. And while there of course exists Black feminist theory in CRT (Crenshaw, 1989), its rootedness in legal interventions and justice, or lack thereof, prevents me from seeing it as comprehensive enough to center the ways Black New Orleanian girls and young women locate themselves alongside Black girlhood, place, anti-Blackness and cisheteropatriarchy.

Sociocultural Literacies

Collins (2009) argued that because of Black women's ongoing struggle against the ways White men interpret the world, Black women's onto-epistemologies "can best be viewed as subjugated knowledge," which has led African-American women to use music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday behavior as important locations for constructing a Black feminist consciousness" (p. 252). Exploring Black girls' literacies on their own terms, multimodal and dynamic, offers opportunities to understand how they construct their own critical consciousness.

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Thus, I look to sociocultural theories of literacies—and particularly critical literacies—layer alongside Black feminist thought. Sociocultural theories of literacies share some commonalities, though broadly, with Black feminist thought. Black feminist thought theorizes and honors the interplay of social locations through which Black girls and young women live and story their lives while sociocultural theories of literacies considers our interpretations of the world as socially and culturally situated.

As "[f]ew other theories have shed so much light on the education of people whose language, literacy, and very being have traditionally been marginalized or disenfranchised in schools and societies," sociocultural theories of literacy have been widely used to disrupt violent beliefs of learning and schooling practices. (C. Lewis et al., 2007, p. 3). The "social turn" within literacy research is often traced back to the 1980s, a time in which scholars often associated with the tradition of New Literacy Studies (NLS) engaged argued that literacy is a set of practices intertwined with society's various cultural and power structures (Street, 1984; 1996). This differed drastically from previously held traditional psychological views of literacy as (solely) cognitive processes and skills.

Street (1984), a key theorist of sociocultural literacy theory, published *Literacy in Theory Practice* in which he challenged "the autonomous model" of literacy, which positioned schooling and literacy as distinguishable from the sociocultural contexts in which they exist and are enacted. Street instead proposed an "ideological model", in which literacy is understood alongside the various sociocultural practices and ideologies in which they are embedded. The NLS shift challenged theories and practices defining literacy as a set of cognitive skills and through a mental function approach to language and learning by pushing the field to consider literacy as situated and multiplicitous sociocultural engagements, contextualized by different

people, groups, and institutions as they enact various cultural ideologies (Bartlett, 2008; Bloome & Green, 2015; Gee, 2015).

In subsequent publications, Street (1993) further argued that:

literacy practices are aspects not only of 'culture' but also of power structures. The very emphasis on the 'neutrality' and 'autonomy' of literacy by writers such as Goody, Olson, and Ong is itself 'ideological' in the sense of disguising this power dimension. (p. 7)

The rejection of neutrality along with an often-argued limitation of sociocultural theories of literacy--its incompatibility with methodologies that claim possibilities for generalizability-- are several reasons I see it fitting for my theoretical framework (Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Perry, 2012; Purcell-Gates, Perry, & Briseño, 2011).

In my use of sociocultural literacy and literacies, I am careful to remember that not all work challenges power structures, nor are they all informed by projects of liberation. In a reflection of historical and contemporary perspectives and issues concerning Indigenous literacies, de Souza (2015) shared that even Street's (1984) conceptualizations of sociocultural approaches to literacy are "located within a structure of coloniality which naturalizes values and presuppositions of the dominant group and universalizes them as natural and applicable to the whole complex community of which the dominant group is a part" (de Souza, 2015, p. 163). According to de Souza, this is visible in conventional approaches to multimodality and multiliteracies, which, for example, are still informed by and center an alphabetic textual tradition in ways that do not account for or engage with indigenous literacy practices. It is important, then, to hold that as we consider Blackgirls' literacies, especially in their dynamicity, that we also challenge our understandings and framings of how they engage with various modalities and literacies.

Critical Literacies

In addition to overarching sociocultural theories of literacy, my theoretical framing and methodologies engage with critical literacies.[12] Critical literacies offer possibilities for "generat[ing] alternatives to dominant and taken-for-granted social imaginaries", social imaginaries to be revisited in the field of education (Naqvi, 2015, p. 50). In the tradition of scholars and thinkers calling for critical pedagogies (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994), culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining, and justice-centered praxis in the lives of young people (Gay, 2002, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2016, 2018), and more specifically in English Education (Baker-Bell et al., 2017; Johnson, 2018), I seek to build with those who engage with critical literacies as modes through which to envision and render socially just futurities and imaginaries.

The genealogy of critical literacy as most often cited in popular literacy research has been widely written about (Comber, 2012, 2016; Luke, 2012, 2014; Morrell, 2008; Vasquez, 2014). There is no singular definition or approach, and many scholars contend that critical literacy is context-dependent, in-flux, and "informed by our personal and professional histories" (Comber, 2006, p. 53). Most often, researchers build with Freire's approach toward critical pedagogy and his definition of literacy as reading both the *word* and the *world* (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987). According to McLaren (2015), critical pedagogy offers teachers and researchers (and I argue youth) "a better way to understand the role that schools play within a

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[12] I move between "critical literacy" and "critical literacies" in an attempt to attend to the differences between the two, as well as in acknowledgement that there is still some reluctance in the field to wholly adopt "literacies". In a conversation concerning critical literacies, Ávila (2014) noted that the continued use of the two terms, as if they are interchangeable, is interesting given the that the field of literacy studies has "shifted to a recognition that literacy is no longer a singular, agreed-upon entity, easily taught in linear and measurable ways" (p. 2). The tension that Ávila raised is still present, even seven years since the publication of the volume *Moving Critical Literacies Forward*. As Ávila argued, the differences do still matter, because it highlights "the ways we're caught between one context, where mainstream education still treats literacy as singular in many ways (e.g., assessments) and the contexts we are working hard to create and share..." instances of messiness, multiplicity, and pluralism (p. 2).

race-, class-, and gender-divided society" through "generated categories or concepts for questioning student experiences, texts, teacher ideologies, and aspects of school policy that conservative and liberal analyses too often leave unexplored" (p. 126-127). Critical pedagogy is embedded within critical literacy, which calls for moving beyond studying toward questioning and acting to change existing power structures and relations.

Critical literacy engagements also have histories in roots within Black and Indigenous communities, though these tracings are often disregarded in scholarship. For example, scholars have researched the history of Black community education throughout slavery, after slavery, during Reconstruction, into contemporary spatiotemporal contexts, to explore Black communities' literacy practices (Fisher, 2009; Shannon, 1989; McHenry, 2002; McHenry & Heath, 1989).

For example, in *Black Literate Lives*, Fisher (2009) traced the historical and contemporary literacies of Black communities in the U.S. to show how Black people's literacy practices both built and sustained their various ways of knowing and being. Such engagements centered self-determination, self-reliance, and collectivity among Black youth and their communities. Fisher's analysis speaks to what, in part, cradles this project: a desire to understand and critically sustain the lives and literacies of Black New Orleanian girls and young women. I am compelled by the literacy lives and everyday literacy practices of Black communities and how they intersect with place and space. This dissertation concerns "what people do with literacy to manage and enjoy their lives, what opportunities, demands and constraints they face in relation to their literacy practices" (Barton, Ivanic, Appleby, Hodge, and Tusting, 2012, p. 53) in considering everyday literacy practices.

Scholars have used critical literacy to take up inquiries relating to identity and power in their literacy studies, engaging with the "possibilit[ies] of using new literacies to change relations of power, both people's everyday social relations and larger geopolitical economic relations" (Luke, 2012, p. 28). In consideration of how new literacies may disrupt existing power relations alongside identity, sociocultural literacies builds with scholars of criticality in holding that identities both mediate and are mediated by the texts they engage with (Moje and Luke, 2009). And whereas many earlier scholars of critical literacy focused primarily on interactions with written, alphabetic texts, researchers such as Johnson and Vasudevan (2012) continue to expand the many ways we conceive of critical literacies engagements:

> What counts as critical literacy might be speaking, dressing, or gesturing to express a particular way of being that belies, subverts, and exposes social norms and power imbalances. Such performances are critical because they allow youth to explore and expose ways power circulates. (pp. 35-36)

Through their words, Johnson and Vasudevan (2012) demonstrated that as engagements with critical literacy and literacies continue to forefront exploring and questioning power relations, the definition of texts have broadened to include, for example, the body. I find this particularly important as often across social contexts, Black girls' embodiment of joy is often expressed alongside the body. Further, Black girls' lives and bodies are heavily surveilled across space and place. As collective members, myself included, read, write, and share their experiences with Black girlhood, anti-Blackness, home, community, and schooling, we engage with our various selves and communities as fluid, embodied texts.

The Lives and Literacies of Blackgirls

As many scholars note, Blackgirls are rarely centered in education spaces in ways that don't position them as a problem. Often, they are altogether erased, as their gendered experiences are flattened and overshadowed by those of White girls, and their racial experiences are overwritten by those of Black boys. And when by their mere existence, Black girls defy these attempts at containment, they are situated as deviant and deficient. In meaning-making with and writing of Black girls and young women, I strive to call upon and call in Black girls and women, and others who write at the intersections of criticality, race, and gender, through my citational practices. I see this as an act of centering, of place-making, especially as citation practices are a "rather successful reproductive technology, a way of reproducing the world around certain bodies" (Ahmed, 2013). While actionary engagements to call upon and call in are still being realized, efforts such as the Cite a Black Women campaign (Smith, 2017) and #CiteASista (Williams & Collier, 2016) continues to make inroads to increase the visibility of transnational Black women in scholarship.[13]

In their discussion of Black Girlhood Studies, Owens et al. (2017) also offered a response through praxis by naming those who have and continue to work "on behalf of the liberation of Black girls" long before the field of Black Girlhood Studies was made possible. In many ways,

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[13] I recently read Katherine McKittrick's (2021) most recent monograph, *Dear Science and Other Stories*. She used a lot of footnotes, as many do outside of much of education research. What I find warming and curious about McKittrick's footnotes are the stories she shared. They remind me of my eldest aunt, and her stories within stories. I name McKittrick here because her work, as it often does, pushed me to think further with the politics of citations—something I have been doing, but I haven't paused to reassess for a while. McKittrick raised several points to consider concerning who you call, or don't, into your work. In referencing Sara Ahmed's writing around citations as a political project, especially with attention to how they're raced and gendered, McKittrick raised questions about excluding White men from references as a feminist project that potentially dismantles (parts of?) patriarchy. Thus, as McKittrick put forth questions such as, "What does it mean to read Jacques Derrida and abandon Derrida and retain Derrida's spirit (or specter!)? Do we unlearn whom we do not cite?", she also draws attention to how such actions are often linked to racial privilege (p. 22). For example, in refusing to cite white men, what other building blocks may be put up in their place—building blocks from, for example, "those purveyors of dreadful feminism" (p. 22). McKittrick also asked, "Where and when do we stop citing the nonwhite, including black, patriarchal scholars who, heckle, cut down, plagiarize, kick about, ignore, talk over, interrupt, demote, demean black women" (p. 22).

the authors call attention to and trace the genealogy of Black Girlhood Studies, not to make such work canonical but to combat "institutions that require us to jettison our politics of solidarity in order to become an expert in a field of study…" (p. 5). As Owens et al. made evident, though still burgeoning, the field of Black Girlhood Studies has a long history of scholarship committed to locating the already present voices of Black girls. A broad and interdisciplinary field, Black Girlhood Studies is a site of intervention and invention. Scholar Ruth Nicole Brown's Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT) is an example of this engagement, as she described "SOLHOT as a space to envision Black girlhood critically among and with Black girls, who … 'are often the people least guaranteed to be centered as valuable in collective work and social movements" (Kwakye et al., 2017). In naming Black Girlhood Studies, the field is a "scholarly home for Black girls' perspectives, sensibilities and experiences in the US and abroad" (Halliday, 2016, p. 66); and emerges as connected to and informed by Black feminist studies, but also one which unapologetically, though still critically, centers Black girls' agency, ways of knowing, and ways of being.

Historicizing studies of Black Girlhood, Space, and Place

Black Girlhood Studies is often described as inter- and transdisciplinary (Owens et al., 2017), and scholars move in many directions while still centering the lives and stories of Black girls. Because my study considers intersections of Black girlhood alongside space and place, I synthesize two texts that disrupt the erasure of Black girls' lives and place-making practices through archival work.

Marcia Chatelain's (2015) historical text, *South Side Girls*, centers African American girls alongside the Great Migration. Specifically looking at Chicago between 1910-1940, Chatelain used various sources, including Black newspapers, alongside the Burgess Papers and

Frazier Papers to trace the nuance and complexity within the lives of Black girls and young women who traveled to and made a home in Chicago's South Side. Chatelain highlights the many ways Black girlhood was defined and wielded by African American parents and communities to address concerns of urbanization and race progress. Forefronting Black girls' stories, concerns, and pleasures, the author wrote, "[m]any girls' footprints are subsumed within the giant steps of adults; yet, their interactions with institutions, social science research, media, and educational bodies have created an alternative archive that provides a steady backbone for research on black girls and girlhood" (2015, p. 6). Through explicitly challenging the absence of Black girls from historical research about the Great Migration, Chatelain also challenges still popularized notions of whose stories matter, as "[h]istorians of childhood and youth insist that children's dependency on adults does not necessarily preclude them from being historically significant actors" (p. 5).

In a similar vein, LaKisha Michelle Simmons's (2015) *Crescent City Girls* considers the ways adolescent Black and Black Creole girls and young women in New Orleans moved in their lives and throughout the city alongside Jim Crow segregation between 1930 and 1954. Focusing on African American girls (ages nine to 20), Simmons argued that "[w]hite supremacy and ideologies of respectability were strictures influencing young women's personhood and subjectivity. They were the two lenses through which girls came to understand themselves and their place in the world" (p. 5). In this "double bind of white supremacy and respectability", Simmons asserts an analytic framework that places affect and sexuality alongside geography. Simmons's work adds layers to historical and contemporary considerations of Black girls' interior lives, as this text offers insight on the ways Black girls and women enacted strategies of resistance as they moved throughout the city and their lives. Simmons simultaneously

acknowledged and explored Black girls' strategies of resistance that emanated from possibly contradicting projects or goals. Through bringing together intersectionality and geographies, Simmons's work challenged research and popular narratives that flattened Black girlhood, through her examination of how Black girls were framed, and framed themselves, alongside and against the "double bind", often with a class-specific analysis.

Through including maps, stories, but also reflecting upon "the physical placement of buildings revealed black youth's relationship to power in the city" (p. 11), Simmons speaks to the ways Jim Crow literally dictated when, where, and how Black girls were allowed to be. She notes both the consequences and the possibilities. For example, readers are reminded of the 1930 murder of 14-year-old Hattie McCray by a White police officer, Charles Guerand. Hattie McCray was a restaurant worker who was harassed by Guerand, and was shot when resisting Guerand's attempts to rape her. Presenting these instances alongside Black girls' creations of and interactions with liberatory spaces, readers are presented with the ways Black girls emotionally, physically, and rhetorically resisted the "double bind" through "niceness" and "make-believe". In striving to "push past silence", Simmons articulates Black girls' respatialization of their worlds "provided spaces for rethinking the self and for constituting subjectivities momentarily free from the racism of Jim Crow" (p. 199). Though Simmons's work is historical, the author's arguments and objectives indeed offer a guide for this project. Her rejection of static and flattening mappings and narratives of Black girls, their relationship to New Orleans, and their communities, grapples with these various intersections at which New Orleanian Black girls live and write.

Black Girls' Literacies & Storying Across Sociocultural Contexts

According to Collins (2009), "…Black feminist practice requires Black feminist thought, and vice versa" (p. 31). Thus, in this section, I reflect upon research on the literacies of Black

girls and women as sites and engagements of liberation, resistance, healing, joy, and knowledge. Within this work, theory and practice inform and reify other, as evident in an editorial for a themed issue of *English Education* dedicated to Black girls' literacies compiled five years ago. Here, Sealey-Ruiz (2016) pushed educators and researchers to ask, "What does it mean to be teachers and educators in the reawakening of racial violence against Black people, and in particular, Black women and girls" (p. 294). As racial violence against Black people is ongoing, and Black girls and Black people not benefitting from cisheteropatriarchy are dehumanized across spaces and places, urgent attention to the needs and desires of Black girls, as shared by Black girls, remains. Much of this work has occurred and continues to do so in education, literacy, and literary research, where of Black Girlhood Studies and scholarship focusing on Black girls discusses how Black girls navigate various worlds despite and despite oppressive systems, and how they represent themselves outside of the white gaze. These are worlds that Black girls move through, within, and outside of, and those they embody. Such research particularly challenges sites of traditional schooling that have long been locations of violence for Black girls. For numerous reasons (for wearing their natural hair, for "acting out", for their dis/abilities and chronic illnesses, for writing on walls, to name a few), Black girls have been punished academically, emotionally, and physically for being Black girls (Crenshaw et al., 2015; M. W. Morris, 2015; Sealey-Ruiz, 2016). Attending to Black girls' literacies and narratives challenges the endemic myths and incomplete stories that do us harm (Muhammad, 2015; Muhammad & McArthur, 2015; Simmons, 2015).

Black women's literacies have been long documented, particularly alongside literary societies where they "embodied the contradictory demands that they faced to be simultaneously meek and vocal, submissive and assertive" McHenry, 2002, p. 63). Price-Dennis et al. (2017)

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define Black girl literacies as "specific acts in which Black girls read, write, speak, move, and create in order to affirm themselves, the(ir) world, and the multidimensionality of young Black womanhood and/or Black girlhood" (p. 5). Black girl literacies are as dynamic and varied as the Black girls and young women who engage them. In their review of scholarship about Black girls' literacies, Muhammad and Haddix (2017) reviewed several decades of research to synthesize and present the various sites within which scholars discuss Black girls' literacy practices. This ranges from the more traditional site of reading and reading development -- wherein Black girls are often absent or misrepresented -- to that of digital literacies, languaging, collaboratives, performative literacies, writing, and more. What the authors also share is a Black girls' literacies framework that recognizes Black girls' literacies as "(1) multiple, (2) tied to identities, (3) historical, (4) collaborative, (5) intellectual, and (6) political/critical" (p. 325).

Thinking with Black Storytellers

Attending to Blackgirls' literacies highlight the modalities Blackgirls and young women call upon to make legible representations of themselves and their communities on their own terms. One manner through which Black girls and young women engage in these various components is through narratives, storytelling, and cartography (Boutte & Johnson, 2013; Butler, 2018; Cox, 2015; Hall, 2011; Smitherman, 2006). World-building literacy practices such as these provide "a framework for privileging and positioning Black women as knowledge producers—in essence, our words and our stories matter and are deemed sources of legitimate knowledge" (Haddix, 2015, p. 22). In attending to Black girls and young women, as well as our many communities, I forefront storytelling alongside storytellers from these communities, and I am additionally informed by de/coloniality, and Indigenous methodologies.

Storytelling is widely practiced by many people and in many places. Sylvia Wynter names humans as *homo narrans*, "a hybrid-auto-instituting-languaging-storytelling species" (as cited in a chapter presenting a conversation between Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, p. 25). McKittrick (2021) draws upon Wynter, Carol Boyce Davies, Elaine Savory Fido, Aimé Césaire, and others, to theorize from humans as bios and mythoi as, "physiological-story-makers" (p. 2). We use stories to render worlds.[14]

My own conceptualizing of storying, which I detail further in the next two chapters, is informed by Jo-Ann Archibald's (2008) *Indigenous Storywork* and scholarship concerning African American and Black diasporic storytelling traditions.[15] In her time with Stó:lō¯and Coast Salish Elders, Archibald learned seven principles concerning understandings of Indigenous stories, storytelling, and story listening—particularly for pedagogical, methodological, and theoretical framings: "respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy" (p. ix). These seven principles form a framework which Archibald named "storywork" as a way to signify that Indigenous stories—particularly those she shares of the Stó:lō¯and Coast Salish— "were to be taken seriously" (p. 3). This statement is, in part, a response and challenge to the ways canonical Western literary theory has long positioned Indigenous perspectives and

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[14] Here, I consider "stories" sans value judgement. I do not attach this to Indigenous storywork or Black storytelling traditions. Rather, I think about how growing up I contextually knew—whereas now I struggle somewhat with the phrasing—what my people meant when they said, "you're telling a story." I can hear one of my cousins now. Whenever she got in trouble, she'd look over to our other cousin and say, "why you telling a story" / "why you storying on me" "why you lying on me."

For many years growing up, I was the only self-identified Black girl my year at school. Once, in first grade, my teacher (Ms. S) told my momma that she thought I was incapable of keeping up with the rest of the students with reading. At this point my mom was almost done. So much so that she even let my aunt Valencia come to school in her place. "I came to ask you why you telling stories on my niece," my T'Val said. I don't know what Ms. S said in response, only that I stood by my T'Val's side, holding her hand. Moments like these taught me that stories build worlds outside of my imagination. Specifically, I think of the myths and truths and lies and incomplete stories wielded by those in power as warrants for anti-Blackness and settler colonialism and cisheterosexism and capitalism and death. Stories are many things and have the potential to build many worlds.

[15] I came to Archibald's (2008) *Indigenous Storywork* by the recommendation of Dr. Estrella Torrez. And within the last two months, I've read widely about Indigenous storwork as methodology. These readings have greatly informed my own thinking of and engagement with not only storying, but of reciprocity.

stories and the power paradigms between Indigenous methodologies and Western methodologies (Archibald, 2008; Kimberly Blaeser, 1993; Kovach, 2009).

Additionally, throughout this study I draw upon storytelling (through oral narratives, written, digital, and visual) as an African American and Black diasporic tradition and practice wherein theorizing and casual conversations are rendered through storying (Christian, 1998; Smitherman, 1977). Barbara Christian (1998) wrote,

> I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity. (p. 68)

Christian's words highlight not only the layeredness and fluidity of storytelling within Black communities, but also how such approaches are intertwined with Black onto-epistemologies. Narratives, particularly in the tradition of oral narratives, are engagements with survivance.

As this seeks to challenges the ways the stories of Black girls and young women and storytelling in Black communities have long been misrepresented, overlooked, and disregarded in U.S. society and within research (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Cox, 2015; Smitherman, 2005). This is large part stems from deficit notions of Black people and their communities alongside the value of intellectual endeavors.[16] Smitherman (2005) challenged this, writing, "Black folk applaud skillful linguistic inventiveness … We likes folk who can play with and on the Word, who can talk and testify, preach and prophesy, lie and signify" wrote Smitherman (p. 65). In presenting storytelling as not only having deep roots in Black culture across the African

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[16] No one told me that Phillis Wheatley had to prove that she wrote her own poems before White publishers would credit her and publish her work (Wright, 2016).

diaspora, but also as an linguistic and intellectual endeavor, Smitherman much of what subsequent scholars would come to build on: that the literacies of Black communities, and in this moment I speak specifically about Black girls and young women, are indeed "(1) multiple, (2) tied to identities, (3) historical, (4) collaborative, (5) intellectual, and (6) political/critical" (Muhammad & Haddix, 2017, p. 325). This is the dynamicity Christian (1998) names.

Throughout the history of our time in the U.S., Black girls and women, and their communities, have been continually silenced by anti-Blackness and cisheteropatriarchal systems. One manner through which this occurs is through the flattening and denial of Black girls and women's literacies. Given this inquiry and existing research literature, dissertation inquiry seeks to build theory and practice to better understand the complexities of Black girls' literacies in their own words and across sociocultural contexts. Next, I share the methodologies I enact in this project with intention to be in conversation with the foundational literature I share above.

CHAPTER THREE: COMING TO STORYING AS METHODOLOGY

Growing up, I didn't talk much. I listened and read a lot. I was fascinated by stories and worldmaking through storytelling, even the worlds I didn't much like. I brought books everywhere, just in case it was the day I learned how to read words on a page. And eventually, just in case I had time. My momma said her trick to get me to fall asleep was to ask for a story. She knew that it was easier for me to fall asleep if I were already dreaming. So, we'd crawl into bed together. I'd story from a book, reading the pictures. Other times, I would retell favorite stories, like Stellaluna*, adding in new things but always making sure the momma bat and the baby bat found each other in the end. Then, there were the stories that my momma shared with me, and we'd go back and forth, retelling parts to each other. Filling in where the other stopped. If I had added something new or had asked a question, she'd say, "I'll have to ask them if that's how it went." Occasionally, my momma would say to me, "not that one" if it wasn't a story to be repeated or played with. She and my aunts would often look over to whichever one of us kids they were talking to--or talking around--and say, "and don't go repeating that." Not every story you heard was to be shared with others.*

Introduction

Alongside my own experiential knowledge—such as the learning I offer above, I build with the previous foundational literature to I engage in qualitative methodologies. I see this layering as having potential to offer opportunities to engage in research that honors the lives, stories, and experiences of the Black girls and young women from Greater New Orleans who make up our literacies collective. According to Merriam (2002) "all qualitative research is interested in how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives and their worlds. The primary goal of a basic qualitative study is to uncover and interpret these meanings" (p. 39). As my work is centered in uplifting collective members' perspectives and interpreting their meaning making, qualitative methodologies are fitting for this study, as they are designed to hone in on participants' perspectives (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

There are vast approaches to qualitative inquiry, some being and/or positioned as incommensurable. Early on, I sought to challenge qualitative education research situated within anti-Blackness, white supremacy, and coloniality (Patel, 2016; Paris & Winn, 2014; Smith, 2021; Tuck, 2009; Tuck & Yang, 2014). Such research serves as geopolitical, social, and theoretical locations of violent containment. And so, in seeking to understand Black New Orleanian girls' and young women's literacies, meaning making, and place-making, I committed to enact a study informed by intersectional Black feminism (Butler, 2018; Collins, 2009; Dillard, 2018), humanizing research (Paris & Winn, 2014), desire-based research (Tuck, 2009), and ethical stances toward research (Campano, Ghiso, & Welch, 2015). As a Black woman of New Orleans learning alongside Black girls and young women of New Orleans, I felt an urgency to locate methodologies accountable to co-participants, the collective members. I am all too aware that Black academics "are often disciplined into thinking through and along lines that resinscribe our

own annihilation, reinforcing and reproducing what Sylvia Wynter (1994, p. 70) has called our 'narratively condemned status'" (Sharpe, 2016, p. 13). To engage in epistemic violence through my research is also, then, to engage in inflicting harm upon my communities and myself. In working toward research framings that seek liberatory possibilities, I strive to mitigate my complicit moments in which co-participants and I may see ourselves.

Like Paris and Winn (2014) and contributing scholars in their volume, *Humanizing Research*, I endeavor to join "a trajectory toward a stance and methodology of research that acts against histories and continuing practices, ideologies, and accompanying dehumanizing policies of discrimination and unequal treatment" (p. xvi). Numerous education studies concerning schooling, New Orleans, and Black youth, and Black girls and women, are "damage-centered," (Tuck, 2009) and serve to reify oppressive scripts and images of anti-Blackness and cisheteropatriarchy.

That is why, in part, I work to foster and attend to moments wherein Black girls may not only critically celebrate survival but also celebrate joy. I see these moments as responsive to New Orleanian Black girls' intersecting identities, as to celebrate Black girls in research is a multifaceted endeavor. Doing so can serve as a form of resistance and as an invitation to understand the ways Black girls enact joy and memory alongside self and community in ways not bound by dominant notions of girlhood, literacy, place, and time. In many ways, it is informed by New Orleanian Black girls' knowledges and ways of being. For example, celebration in many Black New Orleans cultures is dynamic, carrying with it situational darkness and mourning alongside hope (Regis, 2001; Turner, 2009). And so, I sought methodologies that rejected flattening, and supported my holding joy and struggle as something other than solely oppositional.

Layering Methodologies Towards Storying

In English education and literacies research, for example, case studies, ethnographies, and narrative inquiries are often used in attempt to view that which is unquantifiable and "provide detail and nuance, rather than to produce broad generalizations about performance or one-shot measures of achievement" (Smagorinsky et al., 2020, p. 62). In searching for ways to offer complex representations of Blackgirls that are ethically responsive to their realities, I blend together several methodologies. In this layering, I try to strategically take and bring together various theories and methodologies, in a way that I can only compare to my mother's attempts at parting and braiding my hair.[17]

Thus, I bring together Black feminist thought, methodology, and praxis, Black geographies, and sociocultural literacies alongside case study, critical ethnography, and narrative inquiry methodologies. This project is also informed by Indigenous and decolonizing research methodologies, particularly in design and practice. To demonstrate my reasoning for such a layering, I offer below brief descriptions of the various approaches and explanations as to why I plan to engage with them.

Case study research

Case study research methodology has been widely used in language, literacies, and English education research (Ballenger, 2009; Compton-Lilly, 2009; Genishi & Dyson, 2008). It is descriptive, nonexperimental, and demands boundedness (Merriam, 1988). In other words, it is

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[17] For now, I see this analogy as apt because it draws upon a collective session with the Blackgirls I storied with. We read and watched and listened to texts about hair, leading us to think about our own relationships with our hair, Blackness, and femininity. Often, the "finished product", does not show the hours of labor, of thoughtful planning, or the places of improvisation. It doesn't show how we used braids to hide sustenance. Or, it doesn't show the hours of rebraiding, of scratches at the scalp when you part with tools too sharp, the burnt tip of your ear, the spots your scalp hasn't recovered from since that one time your momma gave up and tried the lye relaxer or singed your hair. It doesn't always show how the braider—your momma, cousin, lady down the street, you—gave up on that one braid and used another braid to cover it. Or, how one braid coming from the front of your scalp is barely hanging on… both to you scalp and to the extensions you just had to have.

"an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit" (p. 16). The intent, in part, is for the scholar to "elucidate features of a larger class of similar phenomena" (Gerring, 2004, p. 341) while not departing from the study of the single case at hand (Stake, 2000). Fitting for inquiries often beginning with *how* and *why*, often researchers emerge with many questions that they narrow down into one or a few broader questions (Yin, 2009). Conducting a study during the COVID-19 pandemic and having to navigate unforeseen situations, aspects of case study research felt somewhat responsive to the moment. Foremost, in seeking to understand Black girls' and young women's literacies through conversations of how they story their lives and home, case study research was attractive in that it invites the use of multiple sources, including observations, interviews, and artifacts. In doing so, Yin (1994) argued that a researcher builds "a converging line of inquiry" within a study (p. 92). Such a coming-to of inquiry brought me to consider how Black feminist thought and practice could support complex understandings of the lives of Black New Orleanian girls and young women.

Ethnographic Inquiry

Informed by theories of culture, ethnographic research is often used by scholars of literacies who hold that literacies and language are sociocultural practices (Purcell-Gates, 2011). A nonexperimental methodology, ethnographic inquiry seeks to explain and describe people's behaviors in sociocultural contexts by situating the researcher in a specific cultural context (Heath, 1983; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Though there are many different approaches and definitions of ethnography, the majority of inquiries in ethnographic research use framings such as, *how*, *why*, *what does it look like*, and *how does it work* (Harrison, 2014; Purcell-Gates, 2011). Ethnography has developed to now accept that "ethnographers are positioned within the texts they produce" (Leavy, 2015, p. 36) as a methodological stance.

I particularly move with critical ethnography, because it can reflect many of my epistemological and pedagogical commitments. Scholars such as Calabrese Barton and Tan (2010) demonstrate that critical ethnography is "rooted in the belief that exposing, critiquing, and transforming inequalities associated with social structures and labeling devices (i.e., gender, race, and class) are consequential and fundamental dimensions of research and analysis" (p. 906). That said, I also note that scholars using critical approaches to ethnographic inquiry are not in agreement of a singular approach, and moreover, some approaches may be seen as contradictory. One way the underlying differences may be considered is by asking what embodies criticality in critical ethnography. Another is to look to ethical researchers' stance-taking, which is situated within "a belief and commitment to praxis—that upon encountering social conditions that are oppressive, it is the researchers' ethical and moral responsibility to transform contexts whenever possible to achieve or maximize greater equity and well-being among participants" (Madison, 2012, p. 443).

Originally conceptualized as an immersive ethnographic field study with consistent and numerous in-person interaction, my study has shifted. This brings into question my ability to perform several traditional characteristics of ethnographic research, including the ability to conduct my study in "a natural setting, not in a laboratory" and to engage in "intimate, face-to-face interactions with participants" (Purcell-Gates, 2011, p. 136). I do not wholly depart from ethnographic inquiry, however, as the approach offers a fluidity that the boundedness of case studies does not. Ó Rian, for example, argued that the heavily regulated boundaries within case studies may "rule in and out certain social processes," and suggested that ethnographic inquiry fosters researchers the opportunity to "question the boundaries of the case as the study proceeds," and thus, the "de- and re-construction of the case that . . . places ethnography at the

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centre of a resurgent contextualist paradigm of social inquiry . . . that is increasingly self-consciously exploring its own theoretical and methodological foundations" (p. 304). When our lives are already so bounded and policed as Black girls and women, and when uncertainty and loss seemed to "rule your life," as Kayla remarked about late spring and summer of 2020, I gravitated towards fluidity.

Narrative research

In the presentation of this project, I move with narrative research for many reasons. In asking how Black girls and young women from New Orleans story their lives and home, I used narrative research to attend to Christian's (1998) positioning as Black girls' and women's theorizing through narrative form. A narrative research approach does not mandate that I remove myself from my research, as the researcher is enmeshed with the data. According to Butler (2018), "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" (p. 33). In enacting this project, Black girls' stories (and mappings, which is another form of narrative research) alongside my own reveal intersections and possible spaces of theorizing. Such work demands critical reflexivity in ways other methodologies may not.

Narrative research is additionally often used in language and literacy scholarship, particularly with narrative inquiry methodology. Clandinin and Connelly (2006), two scholars of narrative inquiry often cited in literacy research, framed the methodology as "a way of understanding experience" (p. 20). Through narrative inquiry, scholars and practitioners collaborate with participants over time through engaging in the living and telling of stories. Many argue that the methodology is designed to investigate how "[p]eople can construct their life stories against the grain of accepted patterns to overcome oppression and to foreground

alternative directions for their own and other's lives" (Wortham, 2001, p. 6). Using this positioning, narrative inquiry may be a method steeped in advocacy and consciousness raising.

And while narrative inquiry may offer opportunities to attend to aspects of my project, such as engaging in the collaborative act of storying alongside participants, I see using it alone as insufficient at best responding to my research questions. Scholars of narrative inquiry (Creswell, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 2011) often remark that the methodology is intended "to describe the meaning of experience for those who frequently are socially marginalized" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 22). However, in writing the histories of and theories embedded in narrative inquiry, the names of scholars with "socially marginalized" identities are often missing from the theory building and the list of references.

McClish-Boyd and Bhattacharya (2021) address this by putting forth "endarkened narrative inquiry", which is informed by Cynthia B. Dillard's (2000) endarkened feminist epistemology. Dillard (2000) conceived of endarkened feminist epistemology as a manner of naming:

> how reality is known when based in the historical roots of Black feminist thought, embodying a distinguishable difference in cultural standpoint, located in the intersection/ overlap of the culturally constructed socializations of race, gender, and other identities and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance for African-American women. (p. 662)

In response to the research climate and the misguided use of metaphors in education research, Dillard positioned endarkened feminist epistemology as " research as a responsibility, answerable and obligated to the very persons and communities being engaged in the inquiry" (p. 663). McClish-Boyd and Bhattacharya (2021) build with Dillard's endarkened feminist

epistemology to demonstrate how traditional narrative inquiry "lacks the nuance and cultural responsiveness needed to highlight the storying structure of Black women's experiences" (p. 5). Deeply embedded in their conceptualization of endarkened narrative inquiry is the centering of Black women-centric onto-epistemologies and the acknowledgement that Black people and their communities have a long, documented history of storytelling using various modes. Though I do not take up endarkened narrative inquiry in my dissertation, I am informed by McClish-Boyd's and Bhattacharya's (2021) reconceptualizing narrative inquiry as a stance-taking which "disrupts the narratives created by the dominant group that have been used to justify the power differential among Black, Brown, and white people" (p. 12).

In addition to scholars of Black feminism and Black girlhood, many critical race theorists emphasize the potential of storytelling as enactments of celebration, liberation, resistance, and witnessing. In CRT scholarship, counterstorytelling is one way to engage with the experiential knowledge of Asian, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Pacific Islander people and their communities (Matsuda et al., 1993; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Like those in Black Girlhood Studies who call for research that forefronts Black girls speaking for themselves, many CRT scholars insist upon engagements wherein "those who have experienced discrimination speak with a special voice to which we should listen" (Matsuda, 1995, p. 63). Through centering the voices of Asian, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Pacific Islander people and their communities, counterstorytelling is a tool to call attention to and disrupt dominant narratives that portray Asian, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Pacific Islander people and their communities in deficit ways. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) demonstrate the actualization of storytelling as method in their response to Gloria Anzaldúa's claim that "'if we have been gagged and disempowered by theories, we can also be loosened and empowered by theories'" (Anzaldúa as cited by Solórzano

& Yosso, 2002, p. 37). The use of composite stories through, what they call a critical race methodology, then becomes a form of narrative research and a potential method of celebration and survival.

Storying

> Stories are important. They keep us alive. In the ships, in the camps, in the quarters, fields, prisons, on the road, on the run, underground, under siege, in the throes, on the verge – the storyteller snatches us back from the edge to hear the next chapter. In which we are the subjects. We, the hero of the tales. Our lives preserved. How it was; how it be. Passing it along in the relay. That is what I work to do: to produce stories that save our lives. (Bambara, 1985, p. 41)

Bambara's assertion that stories are important is still being realized in many spaces, including within the field of education. Bambara's words serve as a reminder of the emancipatory possibilities embedded within stories and the interpretation of them, as "they keep us alive" and carry our ways of knowing and being across notions of time and space. An active engagement of sustaining life, storying reflects Morrison's (1993) claim that, "[w]e die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives" (p. 22). Storying may also serve as an enactment of survival, for individuals, their ancestors, descendants, and communities. Though scholars such as Bruner (1991) argue that as humans, we "organize our experience and our memory of human happening through narrative--stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on" (p. 4), qualitative theory building often excludes thinkers such as Bambara.

Moreover, many of the methodology texts and handbooks I poured over rarely accounted for the documented history of storying in Black and Indigenous communities, wherein storying

continues to serve as modes and mediums of resistance and joy. My conceptualization of storying as a methodology is undoubtedly informed by case study research, critical ethnography, narrative inquiry and endarkened narrative inquiry, while striving to be responsive to Dillard's (2000) call for research that is "answerable and obligated to the very persons and communities being engaged in the inquiry" (p. 662). Storying is accountable to the lives and language of those involved in research studies.

In building with the work of Indigenous scholars and Bakhtin, Kinloch and San Pedro (2014) conceive of critical storying as "the convergence of theory and practice, theory and method, which allows us to be invited into relationships where we dialogically listen and give back to the stories shared and questions that arise with others" (p. 377-378). In their discussion of the possibilities of Projects in Humanization (PiH) as both theory and methodology within educational research, the authors argue that the act and presence of storying offers opportunities through which to engage with our histories, daily lived experiences, desires, and research in humanizing ways. Kinloch et al. (2020) further storying by defining it as,

> an active resistance to dominant discourses (e.g., DAE, whiteness, racist ideologies) through utilization of other discourses (e.g., African American Language, cultural definitions of self), is intertwined with the identities, cultures, and subjugated knowledges of those who have been historically excluded from *normalizing* spaces and practices. (p. 384-385)

Through engaging with narratives, Kinloch and San Pedro (2014) aimed to recognize conversations and communicators they build with, as well as to highlight that their "voices, words, and understandings are a collection of others' discourses" (p. 29). Narrative research is often recognized as a collective practice, though the extent to which collectivity, community, and

the relational are associated with validity and rigor highlights that there are indeed differences. It becomes a way to story as intervention.

How Collective Members Came Together

As this study changed several times, so did my ways of asking youth of their interest in and willingness to join our collective. Initially, I used what Maxwell (2013) called "purposeful selection," a strategy where "particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to [my] questions and goals, and that can't be gotten as well from other choices" (p. 97). I knew that I wanted to work with people who self-identified as Black girls and young women in a project informed by both Black feminist thought and practice, as together they can reflect a dialogic relationship (Collins, 2009). And so, considered the Black girls and young women I began building relationships with at my original research site. These were youth who intended to participate in my research prior to COVID-19. However, several voiced that they were struggling with various things (such as familial health concerns, additional personal, familial, and communal responsibilities at home, a lack of access to reliable internet, and more). Next, I shared flyers (see Appendix A) with educators and members of various New Orleans communities which I am a part of, writing to see if they were willing to share information about the collective with high school and college youth who self-identify as Black, New Orleanian, and as girls and/or young women.

Through digitally sharing flyers, I was able to better navigate my inability to be in contact with young people and in schools (although, many New Orleans schools reopened for in-person learning in August 2020). Moreover, I found it invaluable that I could ask individual educators and community partners to both share flyers with Black girls, young women, and families from Greater New Orleans who they believed might have a potential interest in this project. In a

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vignette below, I share a conversation with Christine, who invited a friend to join our collective. Christine's invitation was one built upon trust with both her friend and myself, which I found important not only because several participants have never met me in-person, but also because Black girls and young women are often treated as untrustworthy (Dillard, 2018; Gibbs Grey & Harrison, 2020), even when it comes to their perspectives about their own lives (Brown, 2013; Collins, 2000; Fisher, 2008; M. W. Morris, 2015). I am indebted to those who supported this stage of my dissertation, including collective members, as they leveraged their relationships and trust across people to support this project. I recognize that some perspectives may label this as convenience sampling; however, Maxwell (2013) argued that a possible goal of purposeful selection may be "to select groups or participants with whom you can establish the most productive relationships, ones that will best enable you to answer your research questions" (p. 101). In layering methodologies, especially those informed by Black feminist and Indigenous onto-epistemologies, I value productive relationships one that foreground trust more so than constructions of validity that always already position the communities I am a part of, care about, and learn with as invalid.

What and How We Storied

Throughout the scope of this dissertation project, I grappled with many questions I have yet to find answers to, and many stances that continue to vibrate and shift. One example of this is the concept of data as property. The concept of property rights holds that property is a medium through which whiteness, and its position in society's social structure, is maintained in the U.S. (Harris, 1993). Patel (2015) extends this alongside settler colonialism and the erasure of Indigenous knowledge, arguing that in the university "research has codified knowledge as ownable, but echoing Harris' central thesis, it is only property for some, namely those whose

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lineages are already readily visible within culture" (p. 35). The academy positions participants'

words, actions, and creations as "ownable" by myself and at times the university or another

institution.

Even in gravitating towards using "generate data" instead of "collecting data" for this

reason and more, it doesn't seem to move me close enough to what I am looking for. In a search

for rethinking research expressions, often reflective of dehumanizing paradigms, I came across

Thomson's (2013) blog post, in which the author asked, "Do we 'collect' data? Or - beware the

ontological slip". Similarly, Charmaz (2000; 2006) constructed grounded theory as a

methodology that "assumes that neither data nor theories are discovered, but researchers

construct them as a result of their interactions with their participants and emerging analyses"

(Thornberg & Charmaz, 2015; p. 154). Alongside other scholars who argue that depending upon

one's ontological and epistemological perspective(s), data does not simply emerge, these

perspectives push me to return to the relationship between semantics, ontology, and

epistemology. But even then, I keep flipping back to Tuck and Yang's (2014) assertion that

"Indigenous and Native researchers, researchers of color, and/or queer researchers in academe

are frequently pressured to mine their families, communities, and personal stories to become

recast as academic data" (p. 813). Even after doing this work, I am still searching for ways to

discuss storying with Black girls and women that do not liken collection to ownership and

consumption.

Virtual Sessions

For the portion of this study present in the dissertation, the collective met once a week for

at least an hour across twelve weeks. At times, we met longer or twice a week depending upon

members' requests or if a conversation continued past our scheduled end time. Due to the

coronavirus pandemic and necessity of forefronting youth safety, the sessions occurred virtually via Zoom. At the beginning of each session, prior to recording, I asked youth if they were willing and comfortable with our audio and video being recorded. I also asked again when someone came after we had already started recording. Because many communities are all too accustomed to surveillance by institutions such as schools, the police, and the academy (Browne, 2015), it was important to me to engage with a praxis of consent as ongoing and negotiable (Pidgeon, 2019; Potts & Brown, 2005). Even after collective members (and for some, their guardians) signed documents acknowledging informed consent and permission to record our meetings, I viewed it as my responsibility to remind them that at any point, and for any reason, should they not feel comfortable, they could reject my requests. Though this never occurred for recording, there were several times with youth asked if they could turn their videos off.

"Can y'all remind your people that we might be able to hear them…?"

While this study explores notions of space and place, the portion of this study which makes up this dissertation project is bounded by digital engagements, such as Zoom. There is a "placeness of ethnography" which is traditionally thought of as a physical and geographically bound site(s) (Haverinen, 2015, p. 82) that I did not engage with.

Though nowhere near as abundant as qualitative research reflecting upon face-to-face interactions, scholarship concerning digital and virtual qualitative research methods is not new (Greenhow, 2011; Hine, 2000, 2015, 2019; Lester, 2020; Roberts et al., 2021). There continue to be questions raised as to if audiovisual data may be used to arrive at "thick" descriptions with validity and reliability. However, I am disinterested in traditional notions of validity and reliability, as often anti-Blackness positions Black girls and young women as neither valid nor reliable (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1998; McKittrick, 2006), I also do not perceive digital

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engagements as invalid and unreliable. Rather, there are different things to consider. Many of doubts of virtual qualitative research are rooted in the question of if a researcher not physically present in the community can "truly understand, analyze, and interpret the sociocultural (or even temporal) context of phenomena under study using video" (Rowan, Maher, & White, 2020, p. 457). This is argued as difficult, if not impossible, due to the inability to observe participants' body language, technical issues which may serve as impediments, as well as a lack of rich immersive experience at a physical site, the current climate mandates a shift online to continue this work (Howlett, 2021).

While inquiries as to how audiovisual data may serve as a hindrance, in large part because recordings do not capture spatiotemporal and sociocultural contexts in the same manner as face-to-face interactions offer many compelling considerations, they also overlook other aspects: the affordances of synchronous digital engagements and the ethical implications. For example, where are the boundaries in traditional ethnographic research in regard to perceived access to and the legibility of one's embodied language?

Questions such as these invite me to consider the ethical implications of research via Zoom. Some researchers, even alongside the COVID-19 pandemic, argue that there are few differences in ethical considerations when comparing virtual qualitative research to face-to-face qualitative studies (Dodds & Hess, 2020; Lobe et al., 2020); however, it is my stance-taking that to engage critically in virtual qualitative research is to also engage in an inquiry of ethics (Greenhow, 2011; Roberts et al., 2021; Willis, 2012). In their continued involvement with the collective, collective members are effectively inviting all of us (collective members) into spaces and places we may not otherwise know. When youth and I have our "video on", even with applied virtual backgrounds, we are privy to the spaces they inhabit, as they move from couch to

kitchen table to the front porch, or when they get up to grab a plate or pick up their sister's bottle. Mothers and siblings and cousins can be heard in the background as audible conversations between household members and neighbors join (perhaps unknowingly) our Zoom session. I have not received their explicit consent for this. This is not inconsequential, as Black families and girls are disproportionately surveilled by systems, institutions, and various individuals. And in so many moments we laughed when mothers and family members overheard their daughter lamenting about hot combs or straight parts, we've also had to be aware of personal conversations may be occurring in the background. And perhaps more concerning to me, was that we were often having personal conversations in the collective. What one member shared to the group may have not been something she wanted someone else's family to know.

Field Notes and Memos

For this study, I made use of descriptive observational field notes across sessions, interviews, and other conversations when collective members consented. Descriptive field notes "involve *inscriptions* of social life and social discourse. Such inscriptions inevitably *reduce* the welter and confusion of the social world to written words that can be reviewed, studied, and thought about time and time again" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 12). And though I made use of written, alphabetic field notes, there were several times I used other visual mediums, such as sketching. I saw this as an opportunity to move away from the discomfort I experienced with "reducing… the social world to written words." Additionally, field notes are often written, at least in part, during the event; however, as the researcher, facilitator, and a participant during our meetings, I often wrote jottings that served as a "record of events and impressions captured in key words and phrases" (p. 29). I used jottings to not only write quotes from participants, but to

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also map ideas and to record my own reactions that arose. Within a day's time after each meeting, I wrote analytic memos based upon sessions and interviews.

"An Invitation to Narrate": Collective Sessions and Interviews

All sessions and interviews were recorded and transcribed by me. Initially, I considered using a transcription service; however, I realized that as in centering Black feminist thought and Black girlhood studies, it was important to me to attend to methodologically attend to and center the "voices, experiences, and lives" of Black girls (Patterson et al., 2016, p. 56) through transcribing their words myself. I found that was both an enactment of trust and the reciprocity we had collectively agreed upon.

This project propelled me from positioning interviewees as "hav[ing] all the answers to researchers' questions" to asking what could happen when "interviewees are [positioned as] narrators with stories to tell and voices of their own" (Chase, 2005, p. 660). Interviews were both semi-structured and open-ended in hopes of understanding collective members on their own terms, and in ways that disrupt "sterile and exploitative research practices and instead begin to call into question [my] research motives and how they may or may not align with the girls' practices, ways of knowing, and being" (Butler, 2018, p. 32). Interviews offered opportunities for collective members to not only narrate their lives, but for us to also check-in with each other about topics we discussed in our whole collective sessions, or for conversation that might be positioned as irrelevant to a bounded study. In centering trust and reciprocity in this study, rather than validity and rigor, discussions--no matter how tangential they may appear--were relevant.

Collective members and I engaged in at least one (up to three depending upon interest and availability) individual interviews. I prepared a group of open-ended questions, though not all were raised. Humanizing engagements with youth foster relationships and a sense of

responsibility which ask researchers to listen carefully to what youth participants say, how they say it, and for what reasons (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014). In striving first and foremost for humanizing and responsive engagements with youth, I valued relational, dialogic, and co-constructed interviews. Kinloch and San Pedro (2014) term the process of storying through co-construction as "dialogic spiral", describing it as:

> the construction of a conversation between two or more people whereby the dialogic process of listening and speaking co-creates an area of trust between speakers--the space between. In this between space, the speakers' discourse reveals vulnerabilities and feelings. The conversation moves back and forth when the speaker becomes the listener and the listener becomes the speaker. In order for the conversation to continue, we must see or hear that the other is listening to what we are saying... If constructive, this dialogical spiral moves back and forth, while it also advances forward and upward by expanding prior understanding of listening and storying. (p. 30).

Kinloch and San Pedro's (2014) "dialogic spiral" is a culturally responsive-sustaining and humanizing engagement. It is an element of storying with Black girls and young women that deprioritize the audience (the presentation of the study) over the space and moments that were co-created.

Vossoughi and Zavala (2020) argue that when researchers position interviews as "pedagogical, relational and ethical encounters", we acknowledge and attend to the interview as co-constructed and mediated (p. 151). In building with Packer's (2017) framing of interviews as "joint productions", Vossoughi and Zavala (2020) explore the possibilities of critical and decolonial approaches toward interviews through situating these encounters as collective, dialogic, and flexible. Rather than conceiving interviews as products for a third party wherein I,

the interviewer, might mark myself absent, interviews designed as pedagogical encounters foregrounds youth's sense-making and our fluid and collaborative learning. As a Black woman who has lived, and in many ways, continues to live, life as a Black girl and young woman in many of the communities which collective members are a part of, to be responsive was to affectively lean into interviews as co-productions, where I navigated the roles of listener, speaker, and storyteller.

Artifacts

Additionally, collective members produced a series of artifacts reflecting their meaning-making of our interactions, their experiences, and their relationality to space and place. This included poems, notes and thinking about poetry, and visual art (of themselves, their neighborhood, etc.), and reflections about intergenerational storytelling with their family members and community. In part, the artifacts we produced were put Black feminist thought into practice, recognizing how "African-American women use music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday behavior as important locations for constructing a Black feminist consciousness" (p. 252). The more I got to know collective members, the more purposefully and intentionally these were designed.

For example, Kayla and Anaïs both identified as people who "do art" and "play music". Kayla shared that crafting helped her work through various anxieties, sharing that she had "friends and stuff" but "enjoy[ed] being in [her] room with [her] cat, some music, and just collaging". Although Anaïs joined debate and is now more comfortable speaking to "people who don't *know, know* [her]" than she used to be, she said she in an interview that she "still prefer[s] to draw and paint and compose music and stuff" as ways to think about things. She then got up from in front of her computer to grab some of her visual art and subsequently played a

"Janelle Monáe inspired" song on her electric keyboard. After a few minutes and her obvious annoyance and disappointment that I was unable to name the classical influences in her work ("did you hear Chopin?"), Anaïs shared, "For me, stuff like this…lets me be serious and funny. And I can put little meanings in it, you know?" For her, storying was also about what she knew and held onto, which in part informed my decision about which artifacts to currently include in this dissertation.

Our projects, particularly conversations about and practices of storying, were also opportunities for collective members to be in conversation with their elders and community. New Orleans Black communities have and continue to face oppressive policies alongside many social and political issues. This includes police brutality, gentrification, inequitable treatment throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, segregation, and more. Rosario-Ramos and Johnson (2013) highlight that collective and intergenerational critical literacy engagements offer young people chances, and elders, opportunities to learn alongside each other, as "histories of struggle interact as multiple generations come together to derive meaning" and participate in action (p. 121). It was my hope that a project engaging intergenerational elders and community members during a time of social distance may offer collective members insight into familial and community literacies and place-making practices, as well as opportunities for thinking deeply with relational engagements.

Though previously planned, some projects such as the "familial storying" project developed beyond what I had conceived, in large part thanks to what some may name tangential conversations. Others forgotten or intentionally skipped depending upon interests. And though I sent supplies and fostered ways to ensure that we all had the same physical resources for the projects, all artifacts produced were invitations rather than requirements for the study.

Member Reflections

I regularly shared my thinking and questioning with members of the collective, revisiting our individual and collective meaning-making. At times this was planned by me prior to the meeting, though we did not always take it up. I refer to these as member reflections (Tracy, 2010), rather than the more common member checks, as reflections may offer moments "for sharing and dialoguing with participants about the study's findings, and providing opportunities for questions, critique, feedback, affirmation, and even collaboration" (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017, p. 7). When sitting with our individual and collective thinking, as well as my findings, I found myself far more interested in what collective members took up, challenged, questioned, and approached with silence. Other times, this activity emerged somewhat organically. I took visual and alphabetic notes throughout my conversations with members as we reflected upon our thinking and the preliminary findings with the goal not of finding a singular truth, but rather seeking more insight.

In this way, member reflections were less about checking if the data and stories were "right" and more about which *tellings* sat with us and how. In some instances, members would share that their feelings on a topic or issue had shifted since meetings passed. This is evident in a discussion in which Anaïs remarked that after doing her "own research on Tumblr, Reddit, Twitter, you know, etc.," she learned a lot more about the natural hair movement alongside Black people and communities, and wanted to more explicitly support another collective member's choice to straighten her hair.

Coding

Throughout this project, I gathered and analyzed the collective's artifacts and my own thinking simultaneously (Charmaz, 2000; 2006). When using a constructivist approach to

grounded theory, coding consists of at least an initial coding phase (also referred to as "open coding") and the focused coding phase (also referred to as "selective coding"); however, the flexibility of grounded theory allows for an interplay not only among data and analysis, but also among the different phases of coding (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2015). Alongside using a constant comparative method, I used theoretical codes which allowed me to "specify possible relationships between categories [I] have developed in [my] focused coding… [to] tell an analytic story that has coherence" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 63). As I worked through my analysis, I wrote memos, which are theoretical, conceptual, or analytic notes written to engage with codes in flexible ways (Charmaz, 2006; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2015). In methods books, I've come across different approaches concerning the temporal or procedural boundedness of studies. Many GT researchers hold that a researcher (or team) stops collecting and analyzing data when there is "theoretical saturation, meaning that gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of the generated GT and its categories or concepts" (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2015, p. 167). While many theorists note that a constructed GT is never complete, I am unsure as of now whether I am compelled by notions of theoretical saturation.

For this study, I used a combination of codes, including *in vivo* codes, which "derive from the vocabulary and concepts invoked by respondents in research encounters" (Barbour, 2015, p. 499). As Black girls are often marked as hyper(in)visible, *in vivo* codes offered an opportunity to engage more explicitly with the words and ideas of the Black girls in the collective. Due to time, as well as the different mediums, I also used descriptive codes and affective codes. Descriptive codes are useful for a wide variety of data sources, as basic labels are assigned based upon the topics present within the data (Saldaña, 2012). My choice to use affective coding was informed by my commitment to position "research and education as

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affective encounter[s]" (Bucholtz et. al, 2020, p. 28). Attending to embodied experiences is a way to attend to place. Thus, I chose to also code using an affective method: emotion coding, as "affective methods investigate participant emotions, values, and other subjective qualities of human experience" (Saldaña, 2012, p. 67).

Last, I would like to address that the process above is only one way to approach qualitative research. There are many critiques concerning coding, including that researchers often present coding as an objective engagement. Another critique is that coding can be a violent and harmful engagement as well as a flattening one. As to the former critique, I do not hold that my involvement in this work stems at any point from an objective standpoint. That would be antithetical to Black feminist thought. It is my standpoint, the standpoint of the girls, and the standpoints of collective members, that compel me. As to the latter argument, I proceeded in this study while holding that research, as it is often conceptualized and enacted, is informed by violent systems, institutions, and modes. Tuck and Yang (2014) argued that many communities "are over-coded, that is, simultaneously hyper-surveilled and invisibilized/made invisible by the state, by police, and by social science research" (p. 811). Black girls and communities have long acknowledged such issues (Browne, 2015; Hill, 2018). This dissertation project is in attempt to consider possibilities of codes that are nuanced, the "yes, and", messy, and most importantly, codes from stories—and thinking of stories—that Black girls tell themselves.

Reciprocity

In my findings, I further expand on my understanding of reciprocity as a critical aspect of storying and the collective. Here, I address how I have come to approach and engage with reciprocity beyond what I was taught in the academy.

As the collective was slowly coming together, Christine sent me a voice recording via text, asking if one of her friends could join the collective.

"I told her we're reading but also, like, laughing and talking and stuff. And that you're getting a Ph.D. and that you could help her out. You're about to be a professor. This could be good for her."

I cringed. While thankful and excited about the opportunity to learn with another Black girl in the collective, I couldn't help but wonder how much capitalistic ideals of success factored into Christine's view of reciprocity. When I asked her individually in a Zoom session, what she meant by her text, she explained a bit more,

"Bet. You know, she's working and going to school just like you did. And I know you don't think you've done it, but sis you're doing it. Plus, you help us out with stuff that I don't know who else to go to about. Like our teachers and professors don't be answering they emails right now."

I have become jaded by rhetoric and engagement that position the lives of "those who made it" as #goals. Though it is still ongoing, my own path to "making it" was a very violent one. I never want to suggest the notion that my path should be another's path, simply because educational attainment is often equated with (financial) success despite so many of us knowing otherwise. Additionally, I have been a part of some projects in which relational reciprocity was considered as participants having the opportunity to learn of college-going practices, simply by being in the presence of those with college experience. My exchange with Christine reminded me that there is no singular way to enact reciprocity, though as a Black queer woman I can name many experiences which shape my understanding of what reciprocity is not.[18] In high school and

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[18] I can also name instances wherein I made excuses not to critically think with and practice reciprocity.

college, I knew only a few Black women in their 20s and 30s who went to college. Mentorship, especially by others sharing my various identities and values, while indispensable, was not something I readily had. Throughout our project, Christine and other collective members would ask me questions that drew upon my experiences as a Black woman from a working-poor neighborhood who was also a teacher and a college-goer. Reciprocity began to undergird my study in ways I did not initially envision. And so, although reciprocity is not only an engagement between humans (Winona LaDuke as cited by Smith et al., 2019), it has at times the potential to be a humanizing endeavor. Charmaz (2006) suggest that researchers,

> Remember that human beings are unlikely to relish being treated as objects from which you extract data. Reciprocities are important, and listening and being there are among them. Some researchers may command access on the basis of their authority and the prestige of their projects. Many other researchers cannot. Instead we gain access through the trust that emerges through establishing on-going relationships and reciprocities. Ignoring such reciprocities not only weakens your chances of obtaining telling data but, moreover, dehumanizes your research participants—and yourself. (p. 110)

However, I have had few instances during my graduate school career where we sat with reciprocity. Now, in reading and writing grant proposals, I see reciprocity only named alongside the opportunities participants will experience by way of the study, as well as the incentives of gift cards. I will not deny that money can be extremely impactful in someone's day to day life. For me, it has alleviated stress about grocery bills and school books. It has allowed me access to art supplies I knew not to ask for; however, for this study I wanted to consider what it meant to embrace reciprocity alongside relationality.

How had I already engaged with reciprocity? How would I continue to do so?

In thinking with Black feminist and decolonizing methodologies, I have come to be compelled by reciprocity as an epistemological and methodological stance. One that has the potential to be abolitionist, decolonizing, emancipatory, and healing (Archibald, 2008; Burkhard, 2018; Dillard, 2008; Kovach, 2005; Minh-ha, 1991; Smith, 2012). Smith (2012) shares that protocols of respect and practices of reciprocity in Indigenous communities deeply inform Indigenous and decolonizing research methodologies. Here, principles of reciprocity and care are uplifted rather than institutionalized notions of validity or rigor. And while member reflections and offering copies and presentations of our collective and individual storying (as told by me) may be ways to engage with reciprocity, "reporting back to the people is never ever a one-off exercise or a task that can be signed off on completion of the written report" (Smith, 2012, p. 16). Reciprocity as an epistemological and methodological stance is ongoing.

Ariana Mangual Figueroa (2015) brings attention to the complexities of reciprocity through recounting her research with Marta and Carlos Utuado-Alvarez, undocumented parents from Mexico, and their mixed-status family. Discussing a letter the parents planned to write/enact in the event they were detained or deported by the U.S. government, Mangual Figueroa reveals that she was asked to consider the possibilities of both temporary and permanent legal custody of Marta's and Carlos's sons, José and Igor, in such an event. Originally conceiving of translating endeavors as one way she would engage with reciprocity, Mangual Figueroa's sense-making of being asked, her answer, and the research process, highlight the complexities embedded within ethnography, responsibility, and reciprocity.

In this study, reciprocity appears in many ways. Once in a meeting, I asked collective members how they think of reciprocity. We didn't get far before we traveled down a tangent having to do with church. And so, I sought to enact reciprocity through storying alongside the

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collective and offering monetary reciprocity. We collectively asked for and offered assistance with academic endeavors and emotional support, especially as several members continue to live with loss. We sat together, not recording, and worked on homework or had brief check-ins. However, I approach reciprocity as an unknowable, long-term commitment. A year from now, when I ask the Black girls and young women I research with how they experience(d) reciprocity as part of this project, what will they say? Will the answers change?

Conclusion

Throughout this layering of methodologies and pedagogies, I strive to enact ways of being that are first and foremost responsive to collective members. In drawing upon multiple frameworks and genealogies, I worked to inform ways of encouraging, engaging with, and sustaining Black girls' and young women's storying of their lives and dreams. In the following chapters I explore how our collective took up storying as a pedagogy and what we individually and collectively learned from our lives and stories. Through storying and the various stance taking our understanding of it puts forth, we as a collective traveled beyond erasure, beyond singular readings of Black girls' and women's collective talk being read as "talking mess" or "gossip", beyond deficit and flattening depictions of Black onto-epistemologies, we came to read our discursive engagements as dynamic.

CHAPTER FOUR: TOWARDS BLACK GIRL STORYING

"To be without documentation is too unsustaining, too spontaneously ahistorical, too dangerously malleable in the hands of those who would rewrite not merely the past but my future as well. So I have been picking through the ruins for my roots" (Williams, 1998, p. 5)

"Is she your favorite?" Kayla asked, referring to the links to Toni Cade Bambara's work that I had just placed in the chat.

"I'm not sure yet," I replied. "I read a bit of her work in college, I think, but I'm just getting back to it. And she wrote short stories."

"That's all you had to say," laughed Christine.

We decided early on as a collective that we wouldn't read "long books." During the coronavirus pandemic, ongoing state-sanctioned brutality, the audacity of capitalism, and prior to and even after vaccinations, collective members often remarked how exhausting the uncertainty of life was in these moments. All members, excluding myself, were either attending school in-person full-time or involved in hybrid-learning with a mix of in-person and virtual classes. Additionally, several had younger siblings who were not attending school in-person as consistently, or even at all. Some were experiencing economic hardship, and though it was not necessarily new to them, what was new was hardship coupled with not knowing when a city greatly dependent upon the oil, restaurant, and tourism industry would start hiring again.[19] Further, many collective members had recently and would go on to experience familial loss.

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[19] Asian, Black, Indigenous, and Latinx New Orleanians, and especially those in communities of low-income, were disproportionately impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, similar to many communities across the country (Godoy & Wood, 2020). Even early in the pandemic, it was evident that those who became infected by the virus and those who had died were disproportionately from these communities. The impact on New Orleans's and Louisiana's Black communities has been heavily documented.

The reality of the pandemic's impact on New Orleans becomes even more legible when considering the racial disparities in income. In 2018, the median income for White households in New Orleans was $68,000, slightly above the $62,000 median income for White households in the U.S. Comparatively, the 2018 median income for Black households in New Orleans as $25,000, and very much below the $42,000 median income for Black households in the U.S. (Benoit, 2020). In available cash and liquid assets, Black families in New Orleans were reported in a recent study to have only a median of 27 cents for every $1 that White families have (Benoit, 2020).

And so, we didn't read "long books," but short stories and poetry were given (some)

passes. That's how we came to Bambara's work. Unbeknownst to me at the time, many of

Bambara's short stories were crafted to offer lessons. In an interview with Claudia Tate,

Bambara reflected upon her choice for crafting sort stories, stating,

> I prefer the short story genre because it's quick, it makes a modest appeal for attention, it
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> can creep up on your blind side. The reader comes to the short story with a different
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> mindset than that which he approaches the big book, and a different set of controls
>
> operating, which is why I think the short story lesson is far more effective in terms of
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> teaching us lessons. (Tate, 1983, p. 34)

It is Bambara's plain as day naming of stories as lessons, that shifted me from a project that

concerned itself primarily with collective members' responses to the stories we read, to a project

centering how Blackgirls and Black women story their own lives, as well as the discussions, art,

and spaces emerging from our individual and collective storying. What were we teaching

ourselves and each other in sharing our stories? Texts, such as Bambara's, were transformative

sites from which we storied in ways, as they became only a part of our learning together.

In this chapter, I present *Blackgirl storying*, an engagement with theoretical,

methodological, and pedagogical practices that call-and-respond to collective members'

multiplicity, narratives, their reflections, as well as to literature informing our lives. I endeavor to

show how *Blackgirl storying* works towards hooks's (1996) still urgent call "to understand the

complexity of black girlhood [with] more work that documents that reality in all its variations

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And so, when Black people make up 44%-68% of housekeepers, hotel janitors, hotel desk clerks, casino gaming dealers, hotel cooks, bussers and barbackers – but only 19% of bartenders (Larino, 2019) it becomes evident that the Black New Orleans communities are deeply impacted by a lack of tourism and restaurant business.

I share this information in hopes of writing into this project what several collective members named as their reality. "It's one thing when you can't find work, but you have someone else or something else to fall back on. It's another when working in housekeeping or as the drive-thru attendee is your livelihood" (Kayla, Zoom Meeting, 04/18/21).

and diversity" (p. xii). Central to this call is the stance-taking that these documents should reflect Blackgirls' realities in their own words and creations. To both foster and discuss a space wherein Blackgirls may name their shared, varied, and complex realities, I build with Black girls', Black feminist, and humanizing literacies. First, I offer insight into how we came to storying, primarily through the life and work of Toni Cade Bambara. Next, I describe how Bambara's work and our collective meetings moved us toward a Black feminist space where we conceptualized and engaged *Blackgirl storying*. Here, I share several facets that have come to make up how we as a collective story, exploring several with deeper analyses. I see this as opportunity to show what *Blackgirl storying* offered us.

"She was about the people": Storying with Toni Cade Bambara

Because *Blackgirl storying* is deeply informed by Bambara's (1996) "The Education of a Storyteller", I name several aspects of Bambara's life that are relevant to this project, including what she shared about her childhood, her art, her teaching, and her various dispositions in the world. While I do not locate Bambara's work and thinking as the sole site for how I conceptualize *Blackgirl storying*, I think it helpful to consider how she traversed theory, pedagogy, and practice, especially with her deep commitments to community and activism. By doing so, I seek to show how her work informed a framework that supported Blackgirls as dynamic storytellers. I place her work alongside Black feminist theories and practices, sociocultural theories of literacies, place, home, and ourselves.

Toni Cade Bambara

As a collective, we came to see Toni Cade Bambara as a multifaceted writer, and in her own words: A Black woman, artist, and "cultural worker" ("Deep Sight and Rescue Missions", 1996; "The Education of a Storyteller"; 1996).

"So… what do we think she means with calling herself a "cultural worker"?" I asked after we finished reading through some of a portion of Deep Sightings.

"Doing it for the culture…?" Amber responded with what sounded like a cautious laugh coming from behind.

I nodded. "Okay, yeah. Which is what?"

After some time had passed, several girls said, "I'm thinking." I had a lot planned and had rather spend time on things the collective wanted to dig into.

"Y'all wanna think about that some more or keep it movin?" I asked.

"Bet," Christine said. "Like, she was about the people. That was her business."

Bambara "was about the people." Growing up in Harlem with parents from the South, values of home and community and community as home is very evident in Bambara's writing. Throughout her work, she mapped her neighborhood. Her stories name where streets meet, taking you through decades of Harlem. Her stories introduce you to some of the thousands of people living on her block of 151st Street between Broadway and Amsterdam, in Jamaica, Queens, in Atlanta (T. Lewis, 1996). In describing Bambara's writing, Amiri Baraka (2008) said,

> She wrote of Black people, women, men, children, as children, as workers, mothers, wives, husbands, sons and daughters, revolutionaries, militants, community organizers, nationalists, their families, the participants, the onlookers, bystanders…innocent or otherwise. She created a cast of the real people of our world. (p. 109)

Baraka's description captures what is so central to Bambara's writing: the interplay of individual and community. Looking back on her childhood, Bambara often referenced events that she felt heavily influenced her life trajectory: seeing Langston Hughes giving presentations and reading at the library, her work as a "community scribe" and message deliverer, and her time at the

Speaker's Corner (Bambara, 1996, p. 218). For Bambara, it was here that she engaged with those "who demonstrated that their real work was creating value in the neighborhoods" (p. 174). In her written portrayals of community, she most frequently featured complex Black girls and women: dynamic, witty, divergent, and ordinary. In doing so, Bambara brought the inner lives of Black girls and women to the center.

When I began searching for scholarship about Bambara, I was shocked at the little research I came across concerning her life and work. Though there are several edited anthologies, biographies, and articles of literary criticism focusing on her work and life, references through quotes, far more discussed is the work of her contemporaries: Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, Cherríe Moraga, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker. I found this strange, as Bambara was deeply entrenched in Blackness, Black feminisms, women of color feminisms, and global politics. This is evident in her collaborative publications, including the anthology *The Black Woman* (1970), which she edited, and her writing of the forward for *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981).

Thabiti Lewis (2020) argued that this was, in part, due to Bambara's gravitation towards short stories, critics' labeling of her work as children's fiction, and because "her two novels are daunting narrative constructions that many critics find too difficult to engage" (p. 204). This dismissal of children's fiction, which I return to, speaks to what Bambara—and I would argue what Black Girlhood Studies works to do—often challenged: the denial of children's agency and intellectualism, particularly in the lives of Black girls. Nevertheless, in recent years there has been an urgent, renewed interest in her work (Halliday, 2020; Holmes, 2014; Holmes & Wall, 2008; T. Lewis, 2012, 2020). These works have taken me into not only the life of Toni Cade

Bambara, but have also led me to consider more deeply the intersections of theory, practice, and pedagogy within the literary and our lives as Black girls and women.

Bambara is also well-known for her teaching and multimodal artistic engagements, especially as informed by her negotiations with Black feminisms, Black aesthetics, and Black nationalism (T. Lewis, 2012). From 1965-1969, Bambara worked in her first teaching position at City College of New York in the SEEK program (Boulden, 2019; Reed, 2016).[20] During her time with SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge), a program predominantly serving Black and Puerto Rican students, Bambara taught English, directed the *Theater of Black Experience*, and sat as an advisor to several student groups. Bambara's deep dedication to her students was evident in her teaching and reflective writing. Of her teaching, Bambara remarked,

> These were students painfully aware of the gaps in their education, frantically alert to their need to establish a viable position, a stance in what is for them a daily toe to toe battle with the uglier elements of this country. It was, then, a course with few limits, no specific end, personal, often agonizing—without a doubt the most difficult kind of course to "teach" for there can be no "control" in the usual pedagogic sense, and without a doubt the most worthwhile kind of educational adventure for it lends itself so easily to two-way learning. (Bambara as cited by Lavan & Reed, 2018)

The "two-way" learning Bambara referenced, which I draw upon to discuss *Blackgirl storying* as a dialogic engagement, is one example of her pedagogical commitments. Her writing of self-reflexivity in relation to her time with the SEEK program provides further examples, including in a report wherein Bambara shared a surprising lesson from a student. After weeks of assigned reading and class discussions centering students learning, a student told Bambara in-class, "'I'm

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[20] At City College, Bambara joined writers and scholars such as Aijaz Ahmad, Barbara Christian, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich, Bambara deeply supported student activism (Reed, 2016).

tired of living through fiction'" (as cited by Savonick, 2018, p. 154). This, followed by other

reactions, prompted Bambara to engage in what Savonick (2018) names as Bambara's

engagement with "radical listening" (p. 155). Through radical listening, Bambara "recognized

that this moment demanded creative ways to use the art of storytelling to help these students

materialize the changes they wanted to see in the world" (p. 155). It is this art of storytelling that

we were inspired by as a collective.

At this point, I want to pause, as this is not a biography of Bambara; however, it is a

calling to her work and an attempt, even in brevity, to demonstrate what I see as an example of

Lynn Fendler's naming of "methodology as a lifestyle choice" (as cited by Vellanki, 2020, p.

65). Through Lynn, I learned the rhetorical and pedagogical affordances of defining through

examples. I believe that Bambara's lifestyle, sans romanticization, is reflective of her

methodology, pedagogy, and praxis. She did not distinguish her practice from her scholarship

from her activism. Indeed, in many ways this led Bambara to lead a life where she eventually left

a tenured position in the academy, where she storied from her various dispositions—including

both joy and depression, where she made shifts to filmmaking because writing is but one mode

of storytelling, where she moved to engage with women's and people's local and global

struggles. Bambara's refusal to, at least in the ways I can name, flatten herself, have others name

her,[21] and live towards wholeness is an example of the possibilities that emerge when we invite

Blackgirls to storying their lives in all their wholeness. I see this within her storying of "The

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[21] Toni Cade Bambara was named Miltona Mirkin Cade by her parents (Bambara, 1996). Her father wanted "Walter Mae or Walterina", but at her mother's refusal, he instead "named [her] after his employer in that great plantation tradition" (p. 202). In kindergarten, she told her mother her name was Toni, which was not a nickname, and worked to have Toni on all her records. She eventually came to the name Toni Cade Bambara—there are several stories as to how. She remarked that it is not uncommon for artists and writers, and particularly Black women writers to name themselves, naming Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Audre Lorde as examples.

Education of a Storyteller," which I share an analysis of below, interweaving it with the words of Blackgirls in our collective.

"The Education of a Storyteller"

In our first few meetings as a collective, we worked our way to reading "The Education of a Storyteller". It is a short story tucked away in *Deep Sightings & Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays & Conversations* (1996), a posthumously published collection of Bambara's work and words, edited by Toni Morrison.

In "The Education of a Storyteller," we meet a twelve-year-old Toni Cade, who shares, "Back in the days when I wore braids and just knew I knew or would soon come to know *everything* onna counna I had this grandmother who was in fact no kin to me, but we liked each other" (p. 246).

> *"Bet," Christine quipped right after I finished reading the sentence aloud.*
>
> *"Huh?" I asked.*
>
> *"Nothing, keep goin."*

In this autobiography of her childhood, we are introduced to Grandma Dorothy, also known as Miz D, Miss Dorothy, and M'Dear. In the tale, we come to learn the critical role Grandma Dorothy played in Bambara's life and art and praxis. At the start of the tale, Bambara enters Grandma Dorothy's kitchen, "all puff-proud straight from the library" (p. 246). She's excited to tell Grandma Dorothy about her new learning: Albert Einstein's theory of relativity. Grandma Dorothy, who is prepping food, then sits down and encourages Bambara to share this theory with her.

Grandma Dorothy tells Bambara that she was ready to join in call-and-response in this story when invited. But before young Bambara continues, she feels it necessary to explain that Einstein's theory was not "a call-and-response deal but a theory" (p. 248). Grandma Dorothy

then requests that story to be a "lively" one, so she has something to move to. Through this prompting, Grandma Dorothy models storytelling as praxis. Nevertheless, a young Bambara continues to challenge these efforts, such as when Grandma Dorothy asks for young Bambara to "'repeat the 'freedom part' two times like in the blues so [she'll] get it" (p. 248). This way, Grandma Dorothy will be able to share the lesson with her friends, saying: "uneducated and old-timey women tho' we may be, we still soldiers in the cause of freedom…" (p. 248).

Throughout the story, a young Bambara grows increasingly frustrated and discouraged as Grandma Dorothy continues to suggest modes of storytelling: "Grandma Dorothy that Einstein's theory is not a fable…" and "Mr. Einstein, one of those white guys from Europe, I don't think he know from Bre'er Rabbit" (p. 248). And so, when Grandma Dorothy says she'll "hush" and instructs Bambara to "tell it however Cynthia would tell it or one of [her] other scatter-tooth girlfriends--" (p. 249).

> *"Not her 'scatter-tooth girlfriends'! Ahhh!" Kayla busted out laughing, sending us into genuine cackles.*
>
> *"My momma says that. 'Ya lil scatta-tooth-girlfriends!' Imma have to show her this one," Christine added.*
>
> *"Um, some of us have braces and retainers," Anaïs announced, pretending to be annoyed despite the smirk broadening on her face.*
>
> *"Some of us didn't need or couldn't afford braces," Christine replied, singing it all together and drawing out "some" and "need" and "afford" with a tilt of her head. "Besides, Anaïs, you know I'm not gon use it on you."*
>
> *Anaïs laughed.*

A young Bambara has had it at this point, and goes down a list, naming her girlfriends that don't know Einstein's theory. Only she knows it. Grandma Dorothy responds, "'Madame, if your friends don't know it, then you don't know it, and if you don't know that, then you don't know nothing. Now, what else are you pretending not to know today, Colored Gal?'" (p. 249).

Here, Grandma Dorothy does not denounce the value in knowing the theory of relativity. She encourages it, sitting down to learn with a young Bambara. Rather, Grandma Dorothy redirects a young Bambara's pedagogy, which I read as steeped in individualism and exclusivity. A young Bambara has pride in being the only one to know Einstein's theory, reinforcing hierarchies that place self-knowledge at the top. This is reflective of the many ways of knowing and being in U.S. schooling, where access to and demonstrations of knowing can be competitive.

It is through this story that we can see how a young Bambara's every day engagements with Grandma Dorothy are immersed in teachings, such as those that inform where Black onto-epistemological theories and practices touch. A young Bambara realizes as much, saying,

> she is just rattling on, encouraging me about the many ways I can tell this theory—in terms of air, earth, fire, and water, for example—or in terms of the saints, or the animals of the zodiac, or the orishas of the vodou pantheon, or as a parable…blah blah blah. (p. 249)

And even still, it is only when Grandma Dorothy reminds her of the place collective knowledge has in African and Black Diasporic axiology, young Bambara stops fighting Grandma Dorothy's refusal to separate theory from pedagogy. Even knowledge by "one of those white guys from Europe" can be shared with attention to Black feminist onto-epistemologies. In fact, the modes

of storying that Grandma Dorothy suggests have the potential to render and make legible new understandings of the world. These lessons were deeply valued by Bambara, who wrote that

> It was Grandma Dorothy who taught me critical theory, who steeped me in the tradition of Afrocentric aesthetic regulations, who trained me to understand that a story should be informed by the emancipatory impulse that characterizes our storytelling trade in these territories as exemplified by those freedom narratives which we've been trained to call slave narratives for reasons too obscene to mention, as if the 'slave' were an identity and not a status interrupted by the very act of fleeing, speaking, writing, and countering the happy-darky propaganda. She taught that a story should contain mimetic devices so that the tale is memorable, shareable, that a story should be grounded in cultural specificity and shaped by the modes of Black art practice—call-and-response but one modality that bespeaks a communal ethos. (p. 250)

The first time we, as a collective, read "The Education of a Storyteller," the room was silent at the end. Kayla must have seen my reaction, saying, "Okay, I need to reread this." A chorus of several affirming responses: "mhmm", "yeah", and Christine's "bet", led to us putting the book to the side. I looked at the clock and noted we had gone over time at that point, and we ended with sharing what we were going to do for the rest of the day and/or week. It wasn't until the following week when we picked Bambara up again that we unpacked Bambara and Grandma Dorothy's conversation in ways I had not anticipated.

Conceptualizing *Blackgirl storying*

As I move to share what the collective's unpacking led to—our storying, conversations about our stories, and thinking with how and why we story, I want to reiterate that Bambara's storying of her childhood taught us that stories *do*. They are active and negotiable and in-flux.

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And though we often discuss how stories create and sustain whole systems that work to render us invisible, to kills us (such as anti-Blackness, capitalism, and patriarchy), I found that our discussions embraced the "yes, and", indicating the ways storytelling may serve as a medium for nurturing and sustaining the dynamicity that is Blackgirl-ness.

The "yes, and" deeply informs *Blackgirl storying*, as it prompted not only the naming of this conceptualization, but a conversation with collective members about how we might name ourselves. In returning to Dillard's (2016) essay concerning Blackgirls, I want to briefly shed light on why, at least for now, I choose to use Blackgirl as one word. Though each collective member was asked individually about their perspective on identifying as Blackgirls, oneword, I want to share Anaïs thoughts, as I find them to be largely representative of what was shared:

> I am a Blackgirl. I'm also other things. I draw and I like to read and study different languages. I make music and design keyboards. I spend time just laying down, watching anime with my cat. And even then, I'm never *not* a Blackgirl. That said, I don't think by virtue of being born in this this body that we all know some of the same things or feel the same ways. I *do* think some of us are taught it and some of us have to learn it to survive. (Interview, May 4, 2021).

Anaïs names what will hopefully become evident, that in our collective using and my own writing of ourselves as Blackgirls, we reject situations where we must choose between which identities are most salient. Though I do not position this concept as without critique, nor do I think it is inherently better than other ways to name ourselves, it works here by specifically naming the ways Blackgirls hold multiple identities simultaneously even in all their variability. In seeking to be with that dynamicity, I make efforts against framing this conceptualization of *Blackgirl storying* as static and monolithic. In other words, I do not endeavor to create tenets,

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even in my drawing upon several themes which illuminate our *Blackgirl storying*. Additionally, this concept is informed by a myriad of theories and text that may not always fit together neatly. This, to me, is exciting, as Blackgirls are so often already placed in ideologies that serve as attempts at containment, such as the "good-bad" girl binary (Collins, 2000; M.W. Morris, 2016). Through thinking with collective members' stories, I move with stances that acknowledge simultaneity. In honoring Blackgirls' lives and literacies, *Blackgirl storying* is situated in African and Black Diasporic onto-epistemologies that embrace diunital and relational logic. Diunital logic in *Blackgirl storying*, alongside other theories and practices which hold that something can be and not be at the same time (Dixon as cited by Harper, 2008), rejects dichotomous impositions on Blackgirls, and instead recognizes how fluidity, improvisation, and recursion inform our individual and collective lives.

These complexities are evident in *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness*, wherein Kevin Young's (2012) used the essay genre to bring together a vast array of artists, text, moments, and memories—*Hurston, Dunbar, Jay-Z, Morrison, Walker, Hughes*—to reflect upon Black American art and Blackness. While there are many narratives and frameworks in this collection, I purposefully build with Young's engagement with the art of "storying". Young's framework of storying emerges from (and alongside) his own familial practices. Both sides of his family are from Louisiana, and there, he grew up saying—as I did—"you tellin a story" instead of "you tellin a lie" or "you're lying". Drawing upon Black artists and thinkers, Young (2012) layered notions of storytelling alongside storying-as-lying-as-storying to demonstrate that "[m]uch like *womanism*, coined by Alice Walker, storying also takes what once was a transgressive behavior--in Walker's case, acting 'womanish'; in this case, 'lying'--and redeems it

as a literary virtue" (p. 29). Here, storying is also explored to consider how fabrication remains a subversive act for Black onto-epistemologies.

Young's "storying tradition" is conceptualized as being a "crossroads" at which storying ("lies, folktales, second sight, remapping, renaming, the quilt of fiction, 'the exacting art of exactness'), fetish, improvisation, and the counterfeit, "lead to Elsewhere" (p. 53). From his entwining, I see Young's work as challenging the "good"-stories-"bad"-stories binary, as well the positioning of stories as "true" *or* "fictive". Can they not be both? *Blackgirl storying* builds with Young's storying, as it offers opportunities to challenge understandings of flattening depictions through and of narratives and to nuance readings of Blackgirls and their lives. In this way, *Blackgirl storying* is also a practice of "the exacting art of inexactness" (Young, 2012, p. 12). And though stories may never render exactness, the stories Blackgirls tell of themselves may reveal the infrapolitics of their lives, "the daily confrontations, evasive actions, and stifled thoughts that often inform organized political movements" (Kelly, 1994, p. 8). I include in the exacting art of inexactness, that it is also through *Blackgirl storying* that we may name for ourselves and each other moments of joy that are often misread or dismissed because of there inexactness.

Through our engagements with texts, each other, and our individual and collective narratives, I came to see the themes of *Blackgirl storying*. They are present in our stories as well as interactions with each other. These include:

- Through *Blackgirl storying*, Blackgirls drew upon the mode of call-and-response, highlighting the possibilities of dialogic, intertextual, and multimodal engagements.
- Through *Blackgirl storying*, Blackgirls constructed and worked to sustain individual and collective homeplace(s). In doing so, Blackgirl storying offered a place that served as both a site of resistance and a space of love and care.
- *Blackgirl storying* critically embraced Blackgirls' renderings of their home lives.

- *Blackgirl storying*, by drawing upon Black feminist praxis, engaged with individual and collective relationality and ethics of care.
- *Blackgirl storying* provided mediums for Blackgirls to consider self- and communal-actualization and love.
- *Blackgirl storying* is situated within individual, collective, ancestral, and intergenerational onto-epistemologies.
- *Blackgirl storying* helped us to construct places wherein we engaged with imagination, pleasure, and play.

In the remainder of this chapter, I do not discuss every theme or element of *Blackgirl storying* in-depth. While there is much left unsaid, I believe the narratives and discussions shared below highlight the various themes above. For example, intergenerational relationships between Blackgirls and Black women and Black people exist throughout these stories. Last, I want to name that I see a relationship between agency and intent, specifically in the naming of the themes above. For example, in describing how *Blackgirl storying* led us to constructing and sustaining a homeplace as a collective, it was important that I asked each collective member of their own feelings and perspectives. Because this work centers Blackgirls' literacies and the narrativizing of their own realities, I strive to ensure that there are named distinctions when Blackgirls did not agree with my analyses.

"Yeah, sis, I see you": The Call-and-Response Deal and the Dialogic

In "Education of a Storyteller," *listening*--even begrudgingly--is immensely valued. Grandma Dorothy and a young Bambara's willingness to listen to each other was an important aspect of storying. This is a theme across Bambara's works, as she often reflected how she viewed community, stories, and listening as intertwined. For example, she spoke often of the Speaker's Corner which was where many of Harlem's Black community would gather to discuss global and local events. Located at the intersection of 135th Street and Lenox Avenue (now Malcolm X Boulevard), the Speaker's Corner "grounded [Bambara] in orality" and it was there where she learned how to "speak and leave spaces to let people in so that you get a call-and

response" (Bambara, 1996, p. 215). The "call-and-response deal" that a young Bambara knows, but originally disregards, is a commonly referenced and practiced mode within Black Diasporic linguistics (Alim & Smitherman, 2012; Sale, 1992; Smitherman, 1977; Stepto, 1991). Ampadu (2004) defined call-and-response as a mode of communication wherein "the audience constantly participates by responding to the speaker, and in most cases, the audience members act as co-producers of the text or discourse" (p. 143). As Blackgirls, and Black communities broadly, are so often uncredited and discredited in their creations and productions, *Blackgirl storying* reorients our framings in ways that push us to think about collaboration, about the joint production that is call-and-response (who you with?). In our *Blackgirl storying*, we primarily engaged in call-and-response through orality through referencing and affirmations; however, …

In their discussion of Projects in Humanization, storying, and the dialogic spiral, Kinloch and San Pedro (2014) built with Bakhtin's dialogism, which they interpreted as: "whenever we speak, we are citing the words of others who have meaningfully impacted us" (p. 29). We can also think of call-and-response in relation to intertextuality. I see this as important or several reasons, but perhaps foremost because intertextuality is often used in Literacy and English Education with little consideration of what we mean by intertextuality. For example, the conceptualization of it often begins and ends with placing two or more written alphabetic texts in conversation with each other.[22] Robert Stepto (1970, 1991) theorized intertextuality within Black literary texts and oral narratives alongside the "call-and-response" tradition.[23] He wrote of an on-going recursiveness visible in Black literature, as writers called back to each other and other

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[22] Perhaps it is a given in Literacy and English education classrooms, but I rarely hear of intertextuality being discussed wherein texts include someone's experiential knowledge, someone's memories.

[23] In his analysis, Robert Stepto primarily engages with texts by Black men: Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison. As cited in Stepto, R. B. (1991). *From behind the veil: A study of Afro-American narrative*. University of Illinois Press.

storytellers, either explicitly by naming or through the themes themselves. In our meetings, collective members often embraced stories across time and modes through referencing, revising, and rewriting with a variety of modalities. In this way, collective members showed how *Blackgirl storying* not only eludes temporal containment—or rather, challenges how temporal singularity flattens our storying, but also how intertextuality becomes a vital element in fostering a dialogic wherein Black girls and young women not only called back and responded to each other's texts (words, images, feelings, reactions, etc.), but also to places and people in their lives, including both the places they had never physically been to and the people they lost too young, or may have never met, or rather, people they've met through storying and (re)memory.

When enacted critically, call-and-response has the potential for not only acknowledging power structures, but potentially shifting them, if only for a moment. For collective members, our storying often challenged how Black girls' and women's conversations are positioned as deviant and improper. For example, in Amber's sharing of why she doesn't talk much in group settings, she shared a story about her English teacher, Ms. H. Amber remarked that Ms. H often referred to "the way [she] and [her] friends talk, like Black folks from New Orleans … [as] 'messy talk.'" Amber shared that her teacher frequently referenced "interrupting" without raising your hand first and being called-upon or "mhmm-ing" too loud as examples of "messy talk". Ms. H preferred "polite and sophisticated talk" instead for classroom discussions.

> Amber: What gets on my nerves is that sometimes you don't even get to see who you're supposed to be talking to because you're just looking at the teacher. They say, "talk to [a classmate]," but I'm talking for the teacher. So, then it's like, um, isn't *that* "messy" and disrespectful if I'm not even looking at the girl I'm supposed to be talkin to?
>
> Like that's why you go "mhmm". Like she makes it seem like it's a swear word or something.

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Kayla:	I wonder why she's using the word "messy". That really does sound like she's calling you out.
Amber:	Yeah, that's what it felt like, but I don't even really talk that much in her class anyways.
Christine:	They really doing the most. You can't even be like, "Yeah, sis, I see you."

In this story, Ms. H can be read as associating Blackgirl-ness and Black woman-ness (Amber attends a "girls-only" Catholic school) with negative associations of "messiness", or "being messy". Here, messiness is positioned as the opposite of "neatness", or, organized;[24] however, in many Black communities, "messy" can mean many things. At times, it means creating dissonance, usually by saying something deemed inappropriate, possibly in front of an audience to bring more attention to your comments.[25] Even if a speaker did not have the intent of being messy through their comments and actions, messiness is often framed as an intentional act, and thus, being accused of being messy can have negative consequences. Both labels are ones that Blackgirls and women are often taught to avoid (Brown, 2009).

Amber's explanation for how she desires to engage in class is centered in wanting to affirm another, engaging in reciprocity by showing that she is listening, and potentially building with them (Archibald, 2008; Bambara, 1996; Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014). In reflecting upon this story, Amber challenged "polite and sophisticated talk", which is often reflective of whiteness (Baker-Bell, 2020), by suggesting that it is a mode of communicating which she finds "disrespectful". Johnson et al. (2017) argued that ELA teachers' disavowal of Black students'

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[24] Or even "clean".

[25] In this same conversation, Christine and I also discussed how messiness can also be a way to engage and both explicit and subversive actions. How you use it, and how you set yourself up to be read—while knowing that you cannot wholly control another's interpretation—is contextually dependent.

In "Deep Sight and Rescue Missions", Bambara hears her daughter chiding her for being nosey, a busybody, messy!: "My daughter voice chimes in my ear: 'Mother, mind your business.' I head for the curb, muttering my habitual retort: 'Black people are my business, sugar.'" (p. 149).

onto-epistemologies is a form of violence, specifically naming that "linguistic violence plays an essential role in the spirit murder of Black youth" (p. 62). And although we cannot know which "messy" Ms. H meant, interpreting call-and-response as "messy talk" sanctions Black languages (and the ways we do language) and Blackgirl-ness as problems and unbelonging. I want to be specific here about Blackgirl-ness, as Blackgirls' subjugation in relation to how they verbalize their agency is well documented (E. Morris, 2007). Amber's story and comment suggests that her teacher's enactment of a "messy-talk-polite-talk" binary was both dehumanizing and a denial of Amber's Blackgirl-ness. This binary works to deny, or at the very least, discourage Amber from of engaging with her classmates, as all exchanges needed to be mediated through the teacher. This could then be one of the reasons that Amber doesn't talk much in Ms. H's class despite it being a discussion-heavy English course.

Both Kayla and Christine affirmed Amber's feelings, with Kayla adding that "having to go through all that [raising your hand, having the teacher call on you, orienting your response first toward the teacher] slows things down and then I don't even wanna make my point anymore."

In these examples, I want to be careful not to flatten Blackgirls' languaging by suggesting that there is no traceable pattern or order, nor do I suggest that there is a singular pattern or system. As Grandma Dorothy instructed, there are indeed sustained practices that are taught. In our collective, we practiced listening alongside our ways of knowing, which later informed our own sense of when to shift our voices. In looking back to Bambara (1996), we worked to "speak and leave spaces to let people in so that you get a call-and response" (p. 215). This reflects ongoing engagements of trust, and even then, there were moments of "No, you go."

Amber's story is an example of how an absence of *Blackgirl storying* as a medium, and particularly the rejection of call-and-response as mode available to Blackgirls, polices how Blackgirls story. Her storying of her frustrations with group discussions led us to consider as a collective not only to when and why we use the mode of call-and-response, but to continue to think of times when this mode seems unavailable. After several stories were shared, I inquired as to why we kept returning to moments when we felt forbidden to engage in the dialogic in the ways we wanted. Casey shared, "I don't have to think as much about when I *am* using it. Most of the time it just happens. I do have to think about when not to 'one more time for the people in the back!'"

Anaïs added, "Yeah, plus it sucks when there's no one to look to."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Like, when you have someone else to look at and you just know that they know that you know what's going on—," Anaïs said, prompting a chorus of laughter and "true!"

When I asked Anaïs about this in a reflection, she shared: "Well those moments are like calls-and-responses kinda, right? Because… Okay, so me and my teacher do that sometimes. We look at each other, like, 'I see you and I see what's going on.' Or 'I caught that, too.' And sometimes I think you need that because otherwise you'll be wondering all day if you're actually being oversensitive like people are always telling Black people and girls and queer people."

Anaïs's words named how the collective was already using call-and-response as a critical element of *Blackgirl storying*. For Blackgirls in our collective, this mode was described as a way of storying or being in story with others through utterances of various modalities. For Anaïs this was frequently apparent in her life through shared looks, which she considered a nonverbal mode of affirmation and witnessing.

In the final example, I share an instance wherein Anaïs similarly used call-and-response

as an opportunity to write herself and another Blackgirl into a classroom event, as a way of

affirmation and deviance.

Anaïs: Yeah, sometimes my teachers will set the classroom up, like, what is it called? Socratic seminar? And that's cool and everything, but sometimes, I like that we're not in a circle because I'm not trying to talk to everyone else. It's not because I think they're dumb or anything, but--

Christine: Wow. [Christine laughs.] You know some of the stuff you be sayin--

Anaïs: "Anyways, sometimes I don't wanna see their faces when we talk about certain things. Like, let me tell you two stories. I don't talk in a ton of my classes, but there are certain conversations I get excited about. We had [author's name] zoom into our class because a lot of people had read [name of author's novel about a Black family]. So [they're] kinda a big deal, I think, especially in Black American literature my teacher said-- Lauren, have you read [their] book? It seems like your sort of thing. Anyways, it's the afternoon and I'm sitting, pretending to take notes, but I'm mostly doodling—because one, the lights are too bright, and two, I actually read the book and people are asking those questions you ask when you didn't read the book. And that's just really a waste of time for all of us.

Amber: I doodle too during stuff like that. [Written in the chat.]

Christine: Now how you know they didn't read the book?

Anaïs: Because! They were asking those questions that you come up with because your teacher made you write a few down and you just take a peek at the synopsis or whatever. So, this girl Merritt goes, "I was really inspired by your choice to tell this story" blah blah blah. And then she goes, "it made me wonder what made you decide to write about a Black family?" And I freeze.

Amber: Wait. I thought you said [the author] is Black.

Anaïs: Right. So, I'm like, what made her ask that? To a Black author? To a Black author who wrote about their Black family? And everyone around me seems quiet and probably not paying attention, but I'm pissed off. And even though I'm in the back, I could see from the side how smug Merritt looked. Like she had just asked something amazing. So then, I look at Tasha, she's the other Blackgirl in my class, and we just start raising our hand, asking question after question until time was up.

Casey: "OMG". Did you get in trouble?

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Anaïs: Nah. Maybe. I don't know. It's not like my homeroom teachers could say anything. We were talking about Black hair and then I asked about Afropessimism. I'm pretty sure at most they thought it was obnoxious.

Though I do not offer an in-depth analysis, I would be remiss if I did not also name how Christine positioned what we came to recognize as call-and-responses as crucial to Blackgirls' safety and survival.

Christine: You know, when Anaïs was talkin about givin looks, it made me think about how as a Blackgirl and woman, you really depend on each other sometimes when you're out and stuff.

Lauren: What do you mean? Like, for protection?

Christine: Yeah, like, you're always supposed to "read the room" and "act smart", but also sometimes you just don't know. Or you get tricked. And I've been in situations where you look at another girl, and you could just tell that she's like, "Sis, this ain't it. We gotta get outta here before something go down". And sometimes I can look at my boyfriend and he can see I'm uncomfortable, but half the time I gotta try way too hard for him to get it.

Christine's naming of "givin looks" as mode she relies upon when living her everyday shows us how Blackgirls use call-and-response as a way to check in with and on each other. Often, Blackgirls are subjugated to violence across the various realms they live within without ever finding spaces that name and acknowledge these moments without simultaneously blaming Blackgirls for their realities. Christine's remarks that she is supposed to be hyperaware by "actin smart" and work hard to seek help and protection, are reflective of how Blackgirls and women are habitually forced to engage in constantly contested terrain. Enduring stereotypes and controlling images—the very stories that our collective in part worked to reject, but not center—position Blackgirls as needing less protection due them being labeled as aggressive, domineering, as well as hypersexualized (Collins, 2000; Epstein et al., 2017).

When I asked Christine what she does after moments such as those, she shrugged and said that they happen. She shared another story of a time in middle-school when she was

suspended for fighting a boy who grabbed at parts of her body and told her to perform sexual acts on him. She related this to being "stuck" by the way she looks, naming her physical attributes as both a reason people think she's "game" but also a reason no one listens to her. As a darker Blackgirl from a family of low-income, and who is self-described as "curvy and athletic", Christine named that she navigates this by "dressing down" most days, wearing oversized sweatshirts, leggings, and a hat. In this way, Christine contends with the objectification Blackgirls and Black women experience through changing parts of herself as she sees society as unwilling to change. Nevertheless, she shared once in a collective meeting: "being a lady-like and prissy doesn't work and dimming your light don't work either. They got sick people out there."

Christine's story, and several others that emerged during our collective, brought attention to the lack of protection Black girls experience across spaces—including school and home, as well as the lack of justice they experience when punished for defending themselves (Tonnesen, 2013; Wun, 2016). Amber responded that these stories were important because "adults don't tell us anything. They leave us out of the stories. Even when grow up, they still don't tell us, and that's when somebody finds out the wrong way what they could have been known." Prompted by Christine, Amber, and other collective members, we took a moment to look at Anita Hill's story. Though nearly thirty years old, our brief interaction with her story and life led to further conversations of storying can be acts of resistance and survival. Storying, especially intergenerationally—as we call-and-respond with those who were also ignored or asked to sacrifice self for systems that didn't love them back, can be a medium for "identity work", which Collins (2000) names as a process Black women take up to affirm each other through acknowledging their social locations while also critically analyzing and working to resist the

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systems of oppression that work to deny them agency. It is because of our creation of homeplace,

which I discuss next, that we were able to take risks to engage in such identity work through

storying.

On Storying Homeplace(s)

I do not think it merely coincidental that Bambara's "The Education of a Storyteller" is

primarily set in Grandma Dorothy's home, at her kitchen table no less. The writer's choice for

young Bambara to come bounding in from the library—a common symbol for where knowledge

is held—to an elder Black woman's kitchen—a space that is deeply symbolic in Black cultures

despite being so is often disregarded in White American culture—speaks to where Blackgirls and

Black women create and sustain knowledge. The kitchen is historically a racialized, gendered,

and classed space in geographies of domesticity (Collins, 2009; McKittrick, 2006; Weems,

1990). For many working-class women of color and poor White women, as well as others, it

represents a complicated site at which the everyday touches labor, creativity, and healing, and

resistance. Though the kitchen may have historically operated as a site of containment for

middle-class White women, for Black women it existed as a more complex location (Collins,

2009; Davis, 1999; Smith, 1989; Williams-Forson, 2006).

Kitchens were and still are spaces of employment for many Black women,[26] as Davis

(1999) wrote that "slavery's system of subjugation and oppression further relegated Black

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[26] Throughout college, I worked as a part-time nanny of three children under five-years-old for a White family in the Twin Cities. The father was a businessman and the mother was a stay-at-home parent. Several times a week, I worked the period of mid-morning to mid-afternoon, making sure to prepare the children's dinner before then riding my bike or taking a bus across town. At the next house, I would let myself in, bring in delivered groceries, prepare several meals to hold the family over until I could return, wash dishes, and leave without ever seeing the family I worked for. The family "appreciated" that I was "a Black woman from the South", and frequently asked me to fry chicken, smother pork chops, and grill ribs. It didn't matter that I grew up on the Gulf primarily eating fish and vegetables, that I couldn't really cook, or that I was terrified of being in the kitchen if, and when, my mom fried chicken. The smell cooks into your clothes and them poppin grease burns were never worth the risk to me. This was all in addition to my work-study and college course load. It took me a while to reorient myself in relationship to kitchens and cooking.

women to kitchen spaces, sites of domesticity and silence" (p. 366). Simultaneously, they can exist as spheres of resistance, homeplaces (hooks, 1992) wherein Blackgirls' and women's work can be "symbol[s] of self determination and survival" (hooks, 2009, p. 43). Black women were written off in relation to their kitchen work and their actual homes, flattened using the stereotypical "mammy" trope (Collins, 2000; Harris-Perry 2011). They also wittingly manipulated this when able, along with using their, their ingenuity in domestic affairs to make critical in roads in their lives (Williams-Forson, 2006). In this way, Grandma Dorothy's kitchen table was similar to other socially constructed and intentionally sustained spaces where Black girls and women engage with a "realm of relatively safe discourse, however narrow, [which is] a necessary condition for Black women's resistance" (Collins, 2000, p. 102). As Kayla remarked, "My grandma stays going between the kitchen and the front porch…she minds her business cooking and then goes outside to see what's up." For those of us in the collective, the kitchen and the front porch are where we live our everyday, moving between private and semi-public spaces (as always this depends upon one's home and neighborhood).

At the beginning of our study, I did not presuppose that a homeplace would ever be constructed, as I call back to Cohen (2004) who highlighted the relationship between agency and intentionality; in other words, I never envisioned this project one in where collective members would suggest that it both recognized and provided a homeplace. In her theorization of "homeplace", bell hooks (1992) conceptualized homeplace as such:

> This task of making homeplace was not simply a matter of black women providing service; it was about the construction of a safe place where black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination. We could not learn to love or respect ourselves in the culture of white supremacy, on the

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outside; it was there on the inside, in that "homeplace," most often created and kept by

black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits.

This task of making a homeplace, of making home a community of resistance, has been

shared by black women globally, especially black women in white supremacist societies.

(p. 384)

Here, I quote hooks at length to engage with her theorizing of homeplace as a site that is actively

being made and sustained. As Morrison names that "we do language", languaging across modes,

such as *Blackgirl storying*, can play an instrumental role in the construction of sites where

Blackgirls have "opportunities to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits." In building with the

homeplace that Grandma Dorothy and a young Bambara co-constructed, I use this section (1) to

demonstrate how *Blackgirl storying* led to the construction and sustainment of homeplace(s) for

Blackgirls, and (2) to describe how *Blackgirl storying* offered Blackgirls individual and

collective opportunities to (re)story their homes and neighborhoods.

"I Can Be at Home and Relax with Y'all": On Making Homeplace

In our collective, we individually and collectively worked to foster and sustain individual

and collective homeplace(s). As "acts of expressing and saying place are central to understanding

what kind of geographies are available to black women" (McKittrick, 2006, p. xxiii), it is

through storying—through naming our social and geographic locations—that we came to

understand and imagine our realities and futures.

Before I share how *Blackgirl storying* made space for collective members to share their

readings of homes, I want to consider how led to the construction and sustaining of a collective

homeplace. I call back to Kinloch and San Pedro (2014), drawing upon their definition of the

dialogic spiral: "the construction between two or more people whereby the dialogic process of

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listening and speaking co-creates an area of trust between speakers--the space between" (p. 30).

Though I do not hold that dialogism necessitates two or more people, I wish to consider the ways *Blackgirl storying* led us to the co-creation(s) of a collective homeplace.[27] This co-constructed "space between" is situated alongside our lives on the margins (hooks…). It is through this moving—from the kitchen to the front porch, and back, and between, and beyond—that we begin to also consider how *Blackgirl storying* situates the margin as always in flux, while also naming that it "is part of the story, not the end of the story" (McKittrick, 2006, p. 134). collective members to render legible the favorite possibilities wherein trust was a foundational engagement. Below, I quote at length an excerpt from a conversation between Anaïs, Christine, and myself.

Anaïs:	I mean, it's so annoying. [Anaïs laughs.] I wasn't expecting to like this that much.
Christine:	And you be the one talkin the most.
Anaïs:	And Lauren!
Christine:	Bet, but she stay being loud and wrong.
Anais:	No, but really, like… [Anaïs gestures to me.] Don't get mad. I don't see myself, like, talking to everyone, all the girls, outside of this. But, I met some really cool people and that surprised me…. Well you said we were going to be reading and stuff, and I can do that by myself, so I wasn't exactly planning to—
Christine:	Actually participate. Sis, tell the truth.
Anaïs:	Shut up. [Both Anaïs and Christine laugh.] I wasn't planning to share stuff and laugh and do our homework together. Blah, blah, blah.
Christine:	It's weird because I actually got to talk about stuff that wasn't as intense as school, but also, I got to talk about it with Black girls and women that seemed to care about talkin bout it all... And I think that was really beautiful, because as the oldest— [Christine laughs.] But no, really, like, me and my friends talk about serious stuff but… I only do that with a close few. Girls I been knowin for years. But even then we never even talk about how we do what do—like what storytelling does for us.

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[27] This also calls upon Young's *Elsewhere*.

Anaïs:	Yeah, I don't have that. But, for me it was nice to be with other Black girls because there are only a few in my class, you know, and to just, like, talk and joke around but also have serious conversations that didn't feel so…
Lauren:	High-stakes?
Anaïs:	Yeah. I think I wasn't expecting to look forward to our meetings because I had other stuff, but I could be at home and relax with y'all and I never really get that with my other friends, except [Anaïs named one of closest friends she attends school with who is also a Black girl]. And I guess now Christine when she comes over.

Anaïs and Christine, two cousins who are most featured in this presentation of the study, come to name our project as a homeplace in different ways. Though they have a rapport of familiarity that will become more evident throughout this chapter, they both shared that prior to the pandemic they had few interactions where they discussed their shared identities and experiences, as well as those that varied greatly. Nevertheless, both collective members point out that our collective space differs from the other spaces they move within and through. This homeplace that we built offered us the opportunity to discuss our own lives in ways that we most likely would not have, had we not foregrounded relationality centered in Black feminist praxis.

(Re)storying Home

Over several meetings, we read poems and lyrics, listened to music, and occasionally wrote about Blackgirl-ness and family. In reading several poems about Blackgirls, mothers, and families, several collective members shared that they would feel uncomfortable reading these at school because of the potential disrespect to non-nuclear Black families. Christine was confused by this, saying:

Christine:	Them your people. You just don't be including them in stuff?
Anaïs:	It's just a lot to explain and then all the questions.
Kayla:	Right. There's no bad blood [with my mom]. I just like being with my grandmother right now. We're a lot alike. But that's never enough of an

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answer. People automatically assume something bad about me or my family because of it.

Kayla's comments highlight how hegemonic narratives of family position her family, and specifically her grandmother, mother, and her very self, as deviant. For several Blackgirls in the collective, they see their familial cultural wealth (Yosso, 2002) rendered illegible by institutions that devalue communal kinship, parenting, and mothering. Several collective members named, often with discomfort, that even though they *knew* the images of their families were "not right", problematic images of their families made them work harder than they would have liked to reject those representations.

Amber:	You know, I didn't realize that, but I think the last show we had was "Everybody Hates Chris."
Kayla:	No, there's "Black-ish"…
Samira:	Didn't they had just come out with a show or two on Netflix?
Lauren:	I gotta check. Amber, what do you mean by "last show we had"? There've been shows since then.
Amber:	Yeah, but it's always a mom and a dad and at least one kid and their kids get allowances. And don't get me wrong, those shows are good. My mom said we need those shows and I agree. But I also wonder about all the Black families that don't get airtime and nobody ever talks about that.

Amber's comment highlighted that the quantity of representations may contribute to a greater representation of Black families in the media, but that within those representations there was a lack of diversity. And so even in seeing Black families on television, the message that was still being delivered was that families that deviated from the quintessential cisheteronormative, nuclear, and middle-class family were not desirable. This influenced their own struggles with resisting hegemonic scripts about family. Because collective members held on tightly to damage-centered (Tuck, 2009) representations of Black cultures being sustained by White people and

white industries enacting cultural racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), our conversation led collective members began to question if Black people were also forgetting about their families.

After I shared my screen and did a series of searches to come up with a list of current shows, it became apparent that while there were several newer shows featuring a predominantly Black cast, the majority of families were middle-class, or, the shows were audienced primarily towards adults and were beyond subscription paywalls. This prompted Christine to point out that "it's not just around White people though. There are Black folks who be thinkin the same things. Who always wanna point out 'my baby got two parents. A momma and a daddy.' And like, baby my momma and daddy raised me together, too, but—" she said before another voice joined in.

"But that doesn't make you or them *better*," Anaïs replied. "But then I also understand maybe where they're coming from even if I don't agree. Like maybe they're so caught up in not wanting stereotypes that they think it'd be bad to show people like us. I don't know."

Christine and Anaïs began to discuss their shared similarities in addition to being cousins: They are both the second and last of their mother's biological children, but they are not the youngest in their homes. Both Christine and Anaïs's mothers raise their grand-nephews, Christine and Anaïs's "first cousins once removed." While Christine remarked that she had no problem naming her "first cousin once removed" as "just [her] cousin, [her] bother", in fact it came almost second-nature to her, Anaïs and Kayla both shared that their families felt too untraditional to talk about in spaces with White people, such as at school.

As we revisited the poems we read that day, many which were from Jasmine Mans's *Black Girl, Call Home*, we returned to independently reading and writing. Below, I share Kayla's poem, which she described as "an unfinished loved letter to [her] grandmother". She wrote,

> You say your eyes are getting fuzzy
> And that you don't quilt and sew like you used to

But my bed is still warm
And my pants stay hemmed.
You say you got metal in your mouth
That you don't taste like you used to
But your roux still kick
And your greens still taste like your momma's momma's greens.
You say that your fingers are stiff
That you don't part like you used to
But my braids still looking like constellations
Like the ones we stare at together.
(Artifact, April 30, 2021)

Kayla's poem drew upon some of the themes we read as well as those we discussed during our session: family. Kayla often cited her grandmother and her grandmother's stories in our collective, particularly their discussions in the kitchen and during dinner. Here, she shared with us a conversation with her grandmother, addressing her grandmother's worries about getting older. Though we did not name it in our meetings or subsequent reflections and interviews, in my revisiting of Kayla's poem, I was struck by how this, too, reflects the call-and-response mode. Kayla's poem seems to work to acknowledge her grandmother's concerns, thus affirming her, while also naming engagements that are most often associated with femininity and domesticity, and are usually undervalued: quilting, tailoring, cooking, and doing hair. The historic undervaluing of Black women's domestic labor is not apparent here, as Kayla's poem shows that the ingenuity apparent in her grandmother's labor and creations have not disappeared. Even as her grandmother may struggle with blurry vision, metallic taste, and stiffing joints, Kayla feels appreciative and taken care of. This, of course, is a very literal interpretation of Kayla's poem.

Through these stories and conversations, Blackgirls in the collective supported each other in challenging hegemonic narratives of family and kinship. Additionally, collective members (re)storied narratives of Blackgirls and their families by critically engaging with flattening constructions of family. Because "those who dominate and oppress us benefit most when we

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have nothing to give our own, … no 'homeplace' where we can recover ourselves" (hooks, 1992,

p. 385), I see their intentional naming of what and who they have (grandmothers, mothers,

cousins, siblings, etc., chosen and biological family members) as a rejection of threats to their

various individual and collective homeplace(s).

Kayla's poem highlights ways that *Blackgirl storying*, in its celebration of

intergenerational collectivity and diverse narratives of home and familial, can offer Blackgirls

space to not only share their stories but to also restory (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016) their own

conceptions of family. Following Kayla's reading, Anaïs shared, "It's hard because when I was

little, I used to think that because I didn't see this at school, that there was something wrong with

us. And that's not to say that [the parents of my cousins that live with me] are perfect. Like, I

don't want to draw on any stereotypes, but there are issues. But that also doesn't mean those

individual issues are because of our culture, or that my family or that [my cousins] are a

problem…. My mom always says, 'I got you' or 'we got you' and I don't know… maybe I need

to talk about that more."

In her comments, Anaïs raised several issues, including her continued struggle to reject

pervasive cultural, racial, socioeconomic, and gender stereotypes while also desiring to hold

individuals accountable to what she sees as right. Popularized images of the places several

Blackgirls and their communities call home are often positioned as rife with crime,

unemployment, homelessness (McKittrick & Woods, 2007). Despite it being a city often revered

for its culture, the economic and housing displacement of New Orleanians as consequences of

gentrification and related policies is still ongoing. Discourse that labels homes and

neighborhoods as destitute is wielded as justifications for the disenfranchisement of Black

families. Gentrification, while not often discussed with youth, is a process with material

consequences of which youth are much aware (Kinloch, 2015; Kinloch et al., 2017).

In our collective, gentrification was a contentious topic. Anaïs and Christine frequently

named how their mothers were stressed because of rising property taxes and other housing

related issues. As they sat on the edge of two neighborhoods, they remarked how their house

demarcated the line of transition where a predominantly upper-middle and wealthier and White

neighborhood made up of many homeowners, touched a predominantly poorer and Black

neighborhood made up of renters.
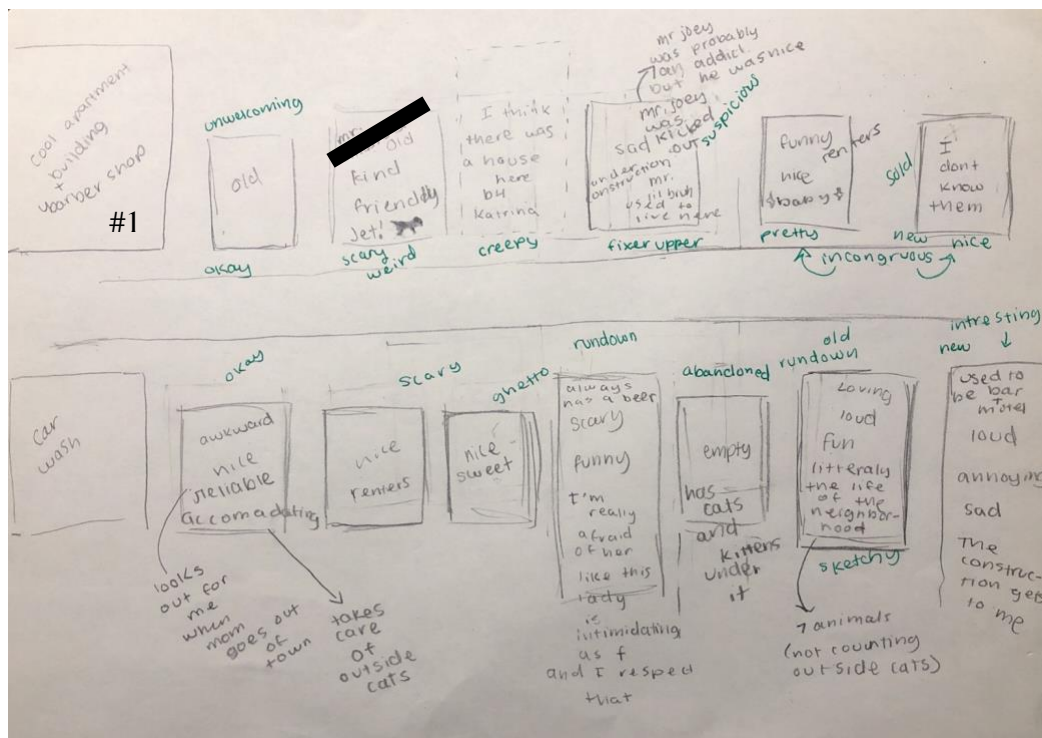
Figure 1. A map of Anaïs's neighborhood. By Anaïs.

In Anaïs's mapping of her neighborhood, she brings attention to the dissonance between how she

reads the people and structures (labeled in pencil), and how she feels "like people from school, or

rich or White people who bike and drive through… what they think" about her block (labeled in

green). The juxtaposition between her descriptors "old, rundown, sketchy" and "loving, loud,

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fun, litterally the life of the neighborhood… 7 animals (not counting outside cats). When I asked

Anaïs what she found to be one of the most upsetting representations about her neighborhood,

she shared:

Anaïs: …Once, in class, we were reading about that one Black football player who sponsored dog fights (Michael Vick). I don't remember why, but one kid talked about how his dad said [Michael Vick] was grew up in a violent neighborhood and so he was a "product of his environment" blah, blah, blah, and that's why he got into fighting with dogs. There was other more racist stuff said in small groups, but, yeah.

Lauren: So, that's a lot. I'm really sorry. That's not… that's not true, you know. I mean that story… it's old. I must've been 15 or 16 when that happened. It's interesting that y'all were talking about that.

Anaïs: I mean it's nothing new.

Lauren: Why did this map make you think of Michael Vick though?

Anaïs: Okay, so you know how people say Black people are… that we don't care? Like obviously that's not true, but, like, they say that we're poor because we don't care to work hard. That we're not doctors because we don't care about school. That we don't care about our neighborhood. It costs a lot of money to fix a house when water bills and taxes cost so much. So, people think we don't care, but we do! And you can tell by all the animals in our neighborhood. All the strays we get spayed and feed…. I dunno why it matters, but it matters. I think how you treat animals says a lot about your character.

Anaïs mapping was an attempt to name how she saw very little in common with common

depictions of her home. As people at times do with Venn Diagrams and the like, there were few

shared descriptors. She, as did Kayla, noted that the people and places they name as home were

not discussed in school, but felt welcome enough to share them with us. That they both felt

comfortable to reveal aspects of themselves naming of her inner lives in the space we co-

constructed. What Anaïs pushed back on was not so much the stereotypes of her home as "scary"

or "rundown", but the those that situated her and her neighbors as unloving and perhaps

incapable of love. The rhetoric of the story she referenced is layered with both with associations

between nonhuman animals and people who live their lives along the margins with attention to

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race and gender, and specifically in this case, anti-Blackness (Lloyd, 2016). Anaïs refutes this in her mapping the various animals in her neighborhood (*baby* in house the sixth house is a pitbull), including those that would otherwise be called strays. She names them "outside cats."

Samira, on the other hand, had witnessed how the vacation rental economy in her neighborhood, which she referred to as a reason so many of her family members and friends had since left the city. In her own mapping, she decided to work with the collective members to collect reviews of houses in their neighborhood from vacation rental sites to expose what she felt people didn't know "what was being said about them." Simultaneously, in addition to their home, Casey's mom owned and operated a vacation rental in a gentrifying neighborhood of the city. Casey said, "I didn't realize my mom's was doing that. I also don't know what to do. That house gives us extra money that I'll need to go to college."

At times, these conversations erupted as each collective member held varying and even sometimes seemingly contradictory views. In moments such as these, Anaïs began to cite our need to study more about the connections between racism and capitalism, while Kayla reminded collective members that "no one really wins with this stuff." These were either followed up by "Yeah" or "True" or comments from Anaïs, who during this conversation responded with "Yeah, but like people lose, so…" Though we had began to foster a homeplace built upon understanding and trust, there were still tensions. Tensions that perhaps would not have been take up if our homeplace was not at the same time being constructed. These frictions often became evident in discussions about hair and respectability politics, or as they are seen here, when we discussed issues of class.

It is because of this that I want to be careful not to conflate the often-flattened concept of a "safe space", especially as it is often used in relation to diversity and inclusion trainings, with

the space and place we constructed and worked to sustain as a collective. As evident by Blackgirls' narratives and discussions, safety, whether it be at school, home, on the transition spaces between, or even with ourselves, is never promised. It is what causes us to question, "Safe for whom?" when we encounter these framings. What parts of ourselves are protected in this space? And further, what does protection look like?

Instead, I want to situate how *Blackgirl storying* made space for a "realm of relatively safe discourse... [which is] a necessary condition for Black women's resistance" (Collins, 2000, p. 102). I see this realm, this homeplace, as one that is "ethically and ethnically" accountable to Blackgirls in the collective (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p. 77). As hooks (1990) argued, "...[the] structure [of homeplace] was defined less by whether or not black women and men were conforming to sexist behavior norms and more by our struggle to uplift ourselves as a people, our struggle to resist racist domination and oppression" (p. 387). I read this as the recognition that because the construction of a homeplace is ongoing, so too is the resistance we enact. When tensions arise, we did not ignore them.

Collins (2000) wrote that narratives of Black women and their communities include the recognition that "at the same time that African-American women engage in cultural maintenance within Black civil society that, via its conservation of African-influenced ideas and practices, lays the foundation for political activism of diverse ideological persuasions, Black women's political struggles to transform racist and sexist institutions represent a more overtly radical political thrust" (p. 207). There were numerous discussions where collective members unpacked their own analyses, as well as each other's, to consider, for example, how respectability politics existed in our lives. And so, we worked to name and consider them. For our homeplace to provide opportunities for "renewal and self-recovery, where we can heal our wounds and become

whole" (hooks, 1996, p. 356), naming became a critical component because of its potential as a

form of recognition—something *Blackgirls* often referenced as something they wanted more of.

In this way, naming gave us opportunities to deconstruct the frictions, in the very least at naming

some of them. Although we did not always find solutions, I do not see that as dismantling the

possibilities that are constructed through naming. Naming, has, after all, been a historical

technology that Black people have used to actualize their realities.

Loving and Actualizing Self and Community

Off the track
They say I'm too quiet
They always tell me to fix my face.
I look angry.
But I'm not. I'm thinking.
On the track
They say I look like a gazelle.
Long legs,
Swift,
Quiet,
Unexpected.
But it's always planned.
Teetee takes me,
And I walk around and around.
Teetee was a track star like me.
She always reminds me when it's a circle
So you know where you coming back to.
It's always planned.
When I lace my shoes
I look at the other girls.
That one over there talking to her coach.
That one over there on her phone.
A lot of them look like me.
But they don't always look at me.
Sometimes they nod.
The other day
one girl from [name of school] commented on my shoes.
Her cousin was on my team
And she was cool so I knew she was cool.
But sometimes they walk past me,
Like I'm invisible.
So I study like my mom says.
I plan. I plot.

You gonna see me.
Imma make sure of it.
(Samira, Artifact, May 7, 2021)

Samira

I begin with Samira's poem to think about how Johnson et al. (2017) conceived of Black

literacies as "situated in a radical love for Blackness" (p. 63). I want to carry this specifically

over to think about Dillard's (2016) writing of love, wherein

> [l]ove is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's
>
> spiritual growth…Love is as love does. Love is an act of will—namely an intention and
>
> an action. Will implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose love. (Peck as cited by
>
> Dillard, 2016, p. 203)

Collective members often shared with each other their various perceptions of self, as well

as their dreams and how they were working towards those futures. I do not offer an in-analysis of

Samira's poem here, which she says she came up with while freestyling one day after reading

through our selected poems and listening to Megan and Cardi and Saweetie; however, I include it

because her writing depicts the love, appreciation, and belief she has for herself. Often,

Blackgirls' confidence is dismissed as unfounded arrogance, especially when they celebrate their

achievements. While prevailing stereotypes often describe Black people as inherently more

athletic (Collins, 2000), Samira's poem refutes both perceptions, as we learn that, *yes*, she is

swift, *and* she has been taught to study the track and take stock of what and who is around her,

repeating several times that her path is a planned one. Even when being bombarded with others'

ideas of how she looks or succeeds, she calls upon her Teetee (her aunt) and mother as supports

in how she stories herself. Though she never says that she's going to win her heat, she does write

that you're going to see her.

In this way, I see Samira's poem as being informed by what we practiced through *Blackgirl storying*, the naming of our multiplicity, and through it all, bringing with us the Blackgirls and women in our lives who came before and stand alongside us. Samira chose to build with the various texts we read, as well as her own, to story how she actualizes self. In doing so, she shows how Blackgirl storying can make legible, rather than hide or suppress, the ways we love and appreciate. In this case, Samira draws upon family, as well as her physical and intellectual labor as critical to her success on the track.

Christine

In this section, I want to share at length a series of conversations with Christine. The oldest member in the collective, aside from myself, Christine currently seeking an undergraduate degree in nursing with the intent of becoming a nurse practitioner. She spoke often of being financially self-sufficient, which she defined as, "not being financially dependent on no man, no family, no bank", while also desiring community-oriented ventures, such as a "Black-owned family-run wellness company that specializes in cannabis."

> Christine: I want people like my momma—Black people—to also get into wellness, but in a real way…. But, bein healthy cost money. My thyroid taught me that and my daddy bein sick taught me that. And people actin like it's so easy on social media, but bein in a crop top and legging doesn't mean you're healthy. Drinking tea and lookin out a window don't mean you healthy. Sometimes I think it's all bullshit.
>
> Lauren: Yeah, I can see that. Is there anything you've come across or that really bothers you?
>
> Christine: I don't know. I'm thinkin about how, like, money buys wellness, right? You can eat better and run your time better. Or, you can get all the surgeries the girls be gettin and then all of a sudden it looks like you takin care of yourself. But neither of those options really open to people where I'm from. I don't know. I been hanging out with Anaïs too much.
>
> Lauren: Is that one of the reasons you wanna be a nurse? Because of access?

Christine: Nurse *practitioner*. One of them, yeah. I mean I'm not sure if Imma do it anymore because this semester was bad—real bad. But, at first I wanted to learn more about medicine and supporting people when my daddy was sick. I don't remember his doctors, but the nurses were ones who… [Christine pauses.] They called us. They'd hand him his phone so he could hear us.

Above, Christine and I move through multiple topics: social media, her personal health and that of her father, the wellness industry, her desire to become a nurse practitioner, and her grades to name a few. Rather than asking Christine about each specific topic, I tried to step back and instead have her lead where she wanted to go. That is not included in this dissertation; however, in a series of subsequent conversations, Christine reflected on wellness, specifically through her experiential knowledge and stories that had been passed down to her. Though the included excerpt of Christine's storying is long, I am apprehensive to edit it beyond what I have already done. And so, to consider how Christine's *Blackgirl storying* shows an engagement of self- and communal-actualization, I use what Barone (2001) referred to as narrative construction, by placing several conversations together. I take this up throughout the dissertation, as demonstrated by call-and-response, storying does not have to be bound by strict demarcations of beginning, middle, and end.

"My momma's whole family is here [in New Orleans], but most of my daddy's family is from [a rural town in Mississippi]. His daddy, Grandpa James, was from right up on [intersecting streets in New Orleans], but he and his family moved to Mississippi. Why? I don't know. So, my daddy loved going home-home."

On Fridays, Christine's father would arrive at her school 30 minutes before dismissal to make sure he and his big grey truck had a spot on the busy New Orleans street. He'd sit back, windows down, country music blasting, with his hunting and fishing gear peeking out of the trunk's bed.

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"They used to be so mad!" she laughed. "And he would speak and everything, but my daddy is this big, tall Black man in a khaki Dickie suit!"

"Not the Dickie suit!" I holler.

"Always," she said. "Sometimes a button-down, but that didn't matte because what they was gonna say? 'Excuse me, Mr. [Last name], please stop taking up so much space?' He didn't care, and he especially didn't care on Fridays."

After Christine got in the car, they'd go to pick up her mom straight from work and hit the road. The country was two hours away... okay, three to four, but that depended on who was driving. Sometimes, Christine and her father would make stops, picking up and dropping off animals to be butchered or tools to be repaired so that they could grab it all on the way back.

"It didn't bother me," Christine shrugged. "I don't eat a lot of meat, but my daddy believed in eating all the animal parts, right? Even with fishin. He'd say, 'Don't be killin stuff just to waste its life,' whenever people brought up huntin and fishin for fun. He didn't trust the meat my momma would get from makin groceries unless it was a small place and he knew the people. Or he'd get it from one of his friends. They'd trade favors and goods and stuff. People think the country is ghetto, but I love it. We were always together.

...I also liked the freedom. My momma says even when I was little, she didn't see me after breakfast until it was time for dinner because we'd all be runnin and playin. People were talking once about how I needed to help out inside more. I asked my momma if me being outside bothered her, but she said no. She didn't mind being in the house so that I could be outside.

Sometimes, though, I'd go walk with my Aunt Jessie around my granny's farm. She'd tell me how before Granny died, she strapped me onto her back and we'd walk around while she told

me stories about the land and everything. And, she'd tell me stuff, like what to plant and how to plant it and which ones to use when you sick and stuff.

"She knew a lot about medicine?" I asked, jotting only occasionally.

"Herbs and roots. Medicinal stuff. Not that stuff! Actually, I don't know maybe. Anyways, But when my daddy got sick, I don't know how much of it he tried, he'd been sick off and on for over decade. My daddy was 59 when I was born, so I guess… I don't know. Hold up."

Christine turns her camera off, but not her mic. There's some shuffling around, but I'm not sure what she's doing.

"Do you wanna stop?" I ask. "We can talk about something else or check-in later if you need to go."

"Nah, I'm good. We can keep going," she says, coming back on camera with a pack of tissues and what looks to be a Friday supper plate: fried catfish, baked macaroni, some mirliton, and maybe some cornbread or pound cake. I can't tell.

"So, when he got sick this last time, we didn't have any money to do anything besides what the hospital gave us. And we could only try a few herbs because we didn't know how stuff would interact with his medicine and the doctors wouldn't tell us. Like obviously we took care of him… but then the pandemic happened and we couldn't visit him. And I wondered if we had more money… You know?

"You know, y'all did the best you could," I add.

Later, I asked Christine about her time on the farm in relation to her desires to have a Black-owned, family-run wellness business. Was it a sense of collective ownership that she desired to recreate with her family?

"I don't think it ever crossed my mind to ask how we got the farm. But when we were talking about stories, after my momma told me a few, I asked her to tell me some about my daddy. But it basically became about Black women on his side. She said his mother, Granny, well her father was adopted by a White couple who couldn't read or write. My momma said they didn't have anybody to help that with all that land and they didn't have no children.

"I thought it was weird though right, wait… I wrote it down," Christine said, grabbing the spiral notebook she uses for just about everything and starts to flip through it.

"So, she goes, 'Okay, what I think is that—this is what Granny said. Granny said that her daddy's parents were sharecroppers on the land. And when his parents died, the White couple adopted him to work the land…' And I thought it was weird because here I am listening to story from my momma about my daddy's momma."

"What's strange about that?" I ask. "You said your mom and your grandmother were close."

"Yeah, but I don't know if they were that close. But I think it's weird because at this point the only way I have this story is through my momma or some of my daddy's family, but I don't talk to them that much anymore. We fell out.

"So anyways, my momma said that Granny's sister was named Georgia but everybody called her Aunt Bill," Christine says, pausing to add "don't ask me why" before I could even ask her why.

"So, Aunt Bill was well-known even though she didn't have a ton of money. Her family had some land and she had everybody's favor because she would go around delivering babies because it was a small town and my momma said back then, Black women felt safer having their babies at home instead of in some White hospital. And it was cheaper. And because Granny's

family mostly farmed vegetables, like beans and okra, if Aunt Bill didn't get money, sometimes

she'd get a chicken. Sometimes she'd do it for free. The baby was gonna come even if she didn't

get paid.

> *"So, Granny had learned all this stuff about delivering babies, what roots to pull, what to*

do with moss…because Aunt Bill was the eldest and she had to take Granny and her siblings

with her places because they mom had died during childbirth when my Granny was still real

little."

> *Christine paused and looked at me between taking bites of food. I didn't know what to*

grab onto that would encourage her storying, or even where she wanted to take it, but she just

kept eating and waiting for me to say something.

> *"Girl, I'm sorry. I was in it. Okay," I said. "So, your Aunt Bill taught ya Granny and ya*

Granny taught you. Is that why you wanna be a nurse practitioner?" I ask.

> *"What you mean?"*

> *"Your Aunt Bill and Granny. They were midwives. Nurses," I pointed out.*

> *"Wow," Christine said quietly. "Sis, I didn't even think of that."*

During a member reflection, I checked in with Christine to see how she felt about her

own telling of these stories, if she had reached out to her father's family or had spoken further

with her mother. We had jumped around in several lives and generations, and despite my

curiosity, I didn't want to over insert myself in Christine's business. So instead, I just asked if

she thought anymore about the stories she shared.

> *"You know it's funny. My classes were really rough this year. And I don't think… I didn't*

know if I was gonna keep going or take a break. But then my momma told me about my Granny

and Aunt Bill. And then you pointed out the connections.

"They were already there," I jump in, projecting a fear of overcorrection that might lead Christine to think she wouldn't have seen these connections on her own.

"Bet.... But, like, you highlighted those connections by listening to my story. And if I had heard this story a few years ago or a few years later... I don't know. I didn't think a story could do this much."

"How much? Like what did it do?"

"Like, maybe Aunt Bill became a midwife because her momma died from childbirth [complications]? I think about my Aunt Bill and my Granny and—did you know people called Black midwives 'Granny'? It's been a lot this year with my daddy [passing] and graduating [high school], changing [colleges], to save money and be closer to help my momma, taking a full load but also having to be a work at [national fast food restaurant]. Then crabs be crabbin and tryna get you to give up. everywhere! Lauren, I was ready to say fuck it. And it's like this story was inside me this whole time, just waiting. Like, I come from generations of Black women who take care of other Black people."

Here, Christine used *Blackgirl storying* to engage in call-and-response, a collaging of sorts, that calls all the way back to Christine's ancestors, and then some. Upon doing so, Christine refigured her own outlook on herself and her future in a way she had not intended. In her own narrating of personal, familial, and collective love stories, Dillard (2015) shared several lessons as to how we as Black people are still here, how we are sustained. Alongside Black women's work to name and actualize the dynamicity within ourselves, for ourselves, "Black women and girl's definition of themselves arise from a personal and culturally defined set of beliefs that render them responsible to the members and the well-being of the community from which those very definitions arise" (p. 211). Our basis of love and actualization is critically and

simultaneously rooted in the self and the collective. *Blackgirl storying*, in both the homeplace

was created and the process through which we did so, fostered opportunities where Blackgirls

are invited not only to work to construct familial, racial, ethnic, and geographic (re)memory, but

to also consider how the process of (re)membering can(not) be a mode of self- and communal-

actualizing.

At one point, Christine said, "crabs be crabbin", in reference to the "crabs in a bucket"

mentality. I draw upon this, in part because it's not every day that someone uses this metaphor,

but primarily because it speaks to the dynamics of oppression that Christine encountered. The

phenomen of "crabs be crabbin" stems from how white supremacy and internalized anti-

Blackness, at times, materially reward Black folks by creating systems wherein we compete for

few resources. A potential consequence of this is that it may lead to people pulling down those

who appear to be making it towards the "top" and subsequently stepping over them (Santamaría,

2014; Williams & Packer-Williams, 2019). This mentality is one steeped in notions of hierarchy

and competition, despite teachings reminding us that "'if your friends don't know it, then you

don't know it, and if you don't know that, then you don't know nothing'" (Bambara, 2016, p.

249). Christine names but does not rest on others' crabbin, their dismissal of her dreams. Perhaps

she recognizes how common this occurrence is ("crabs be crabbin", the verb tense suggests no

end), especially of the instances in literature, popular culture, and our daily lives when some

Black people are looked down upon for trying, as it is assumed that dreams are always already

deferred.

Christine noted that this messaging coupled with her material reality were indeed

beginning to convince her to further defer her dream. However, as much of our work in the

collective concerned drawing upon individual, familial, and communal narratives as texts to

learn from, Christine's embrace of *Blackgirl storying* pushed her place stories of her

Blackgirlhood in rural Mississippi alongside contemporary and capitalistic narratives of

wellness. In this way, she drew upon Alice Walker's (2015) naming that "Being with your

people is like some kind of medicine. The tradition: It stirs in us such a love. Such a deep love

within us" (n.p.). Simultaneously, the traditions Christine calls upon didn't just appear, and

perhaps they may not stay without cultivation and intentionality. just happen. I think this is

important to highlight as often conversations about tradition, especially in communities that

engages within, alongside, and beyond the margins, do not extend to consider labor and

intentionality. Young (2012) suggested that "we might think of tradition not just as inheritance

but as devotion—one measured by fetish as well as by other religion—and invention. Tradition

is not what you inherit, but what you seek, and then seek to keep" (p. 51). Storying then can be a

medium to seek, actualize, and nurture tradition.

In calling upon her people—memories she named as her own and those she was given—

she exercises storying as integral to self-actualization. According to Young, dreaming "proves a

stand-in for the 'future,' the ultimate fictional place. For if we cannot imagine being here, free at

last, then how are we to actually get there? And how will we recognize it when we do?" (p. 62).

Christine's future is currently a "fictional" place. Through drawing upon stories across temporal

boundaries, she is storying the lives she wants for herself.

Imagination, Pleasure, and Play

In "Education of a Storyteller," Grandma Dorothy advises young Bambara and her

friends to story "in an effort to encourage [their] minds to leap" (p. 255). Storying is a medium to

resist "'...the terrible educations you liable to get is designed to make you destruct the journey

entire. So send your minds on home to the motherland and just tell the tale you little honeys'" (p.

255). Embedded within Grandma Dorothy's suggestion to locate, at least in part, storying alongside home and the motherland, is the notion that storying engages with physical, imagined, and embodied Black senses of place, of knowing, and of being. As stories can encourage Black girls' "minds to leap" they can also serve as mediums of imagination, pleasure, and play.

Through *Blackgirl storying*, our collective moved through various stories and stopped at others. The themes, lessons, and affective dispositions we explored and engaged were vast. And in this space, we worked hard to consider how *Blackgirl storying* might reject singular and prescriptive narratives that begin and end with solely death. At times, this was somewhat difficult to maneuver as some collective members desired to discuss the life and loss of Ma'Khia Bryant, while others remarked they didn't want to "go to that place." To negotiate this, for example, several collective members decided cited their desire to imagine and restory Bryant's life and the ongoing reporting of her life, at the time, by writing letters and watching her videos. I do not feature that work here.

Nevertheless, moments such as these bring attention to the diunital and simultaneity that Blackgirls embody: the "yes, and". Toni Morrison, in conversation with Robert Stepto, shared that what she often found missing "in most black writing by men that seems to be present in a lot of black women's writing is a sense of joy, in addition to oppression and being women or black or whatever," (Morrison & Stepto, 1977, p. 485). Before naming Gayl Jones as an exception, Morrison added, "In Toni Cade, there's that sense of high-spiritedness. I don't mean comedy, and I don't mean jokes or anything. But part of this business of living in the world and triumphing over it has to do with a sense that there's some pleasure" (p. 485-486).

For Blackgirls, storying from sites of pleasure often means finding and naming them. Where might we find senses of high-spiritedness? What makes us happy? What are we looking

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forward to? Where is the joy in our today in tomorrow? According to Bambara (1993), "the creative imagination has been colonized…" (n.p.). What does it look like for Blackgirls, who are written out of the imagination and play so often afforded to those privileged in childhood, to engage in creative imagination steeped in Blackgirl-ness and Black feminist praxis?

Some of the collective meetings I hold closest were the meetings where we did just that through talking and laughing. The meetings where Christine showed us videos of her marching in parades and then tried to teach us the choreography over Zoom. Or when Anaïs, unprompted, played her "works in progress" as the intros and outros to our meetings. Or, the ones when Casey questioned why there weren't more Black vampires, and if we would even want to see Black people engage with the vampire tropes we see today (Ibrahim, 2016). Why did so many Black horror films come out in the last five years? Why can't Black witches catch a break (Thomas, 2019)? We talked about how some of us missed jumping rope and how some of us can't jump rope, no matter how hard we try.

Another way we engaged with our imagination was through creating collages and presentations reflecting our desires for our today and tomorrow. This stemmed from a story several collective members' stories about their dislike of leadersip workshops and programs for girls and young women, including Kayla who shared that the most recent one she attended was through seveal churches in her neighborhood. There, the workshop focused of "empowerment" and being a "girlboss", she "ever get to actually talk to each other. People already decided what [girls] are going to be and do." Anaïs verbally shared her disdain with Kayla, though she said hers were more rooted in her dislike for "when somebody tries to teach you how to be a 'lady' or a 'boss'. It always looks the same. Even if they're not talking about 'makeup' they're talking about profssionalism and hetero relationships as if that's what we're all there to learn about."

Though brief, I found their comments to be reflective of Nyachae and Ohito's (2019) womanist critique of extracurricular programming for Blackgirls, which often teach into respectability politics rather than the variability in Blackgirlness. In response to this, we had a mix of brainstorming sessions and informal presentations, such as Anaïs's presentation on Afrofuturist music (featuring her own music, of course), Christine's presentation on how she came to have a lash business and what she's learned about entrepreneurship, and Amber's presentation on the benefits of sleep. Following suggestions from the collective members and group Google searches, she decided she wanted to cane this to a discussion about gender and racial disparities in sleep health. Though these were organically conceived as suggested by Kayla and Christine (though Kayla had to leave early), this activity offered us opportunities to reconfigure various preconceptions, including around each other.

Anaïs:	My mom keeps saying I need to let you do my lashes, but don't you think it's become sort of this beauty standard now?
Christine:	Lashes?
Anaïs:	Yeah. Like people just do it to look cute so now it's like you have to do it or you get teased for having baldheaded eyes. Like when people do stuff to their eyebrows.
Amber:	[Amber laughs.] Did you just say baldheaded eyebrows?
Christine:	[Christine laughs.] Yeah, I think it can be. But when I do my lashes I don't do them for anybody but me. Like for me, dressin myself up head to toe is empowering. People always tellin you to do this or do that with your eyes and if you stare too hard you tryna start something or something. And I think lashes are just like other stuff you wear… you can use em to bring attention to or hide something. I like lashes because they say "Hellooooo! I'm looking at you."

Christine's presentation of her lash business as well as her reason for using lashes challenged what Anaïs initially considered a preoccupation with living up to popular beauty standards. And while Christine did not wholly refute that for some people that may be why they get lash extensions, she did share that part of her reason was because they supported her in

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asserting herself. I include this example because our collective meetings frequently involved

conversations about beauty standards. It was usually through these topics that underlying

assumptions and ideologies were uncovered.

Additionally, these engaements offered opportunities for collective members to design

and story multiple and simultaneous rather than feeling pressured to adopt a sole path. For

example, Christine frequently discussed her working toward being a Nurse Practitioner as well as

her dream for a wellness company. Throughout this project, along with going to school and

working part-time jobs in the restaurant industry, Christine has also become certified as a lash

technician. She would often take breaks from studying or "doing lashes in the lab" to join our

meetings. I have no recollection or recording of any collective member asking Christine how

exactly she was going to do and be all that she desired. There was no pressure or even suggestion

that she choose between futures as Blackgirls so often are (Brown, 2013). Instead, our

homeplace was one where she could name all that she hoped for and be supported in that

actualization.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

At a symposium in honor of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, one of Bambara's two novels, Eleanor Traylor (2008) shared that, "According to Toni Cade Bambara, reality is an explosion, its fragments merged by the imaginative will grounded in the best traditions of a people able to reconstruct at any moment appropriate possibilities of survival and triumph" (p. 44). As of now, my own understandings of *Blackgirl storying* are still unfolding. Like any other mode or medium that honors Blackgirls, it too will shift. But I look to our collective to see how, in light of Traylor and Bambara, we storied from fragments, from each other, from (re)memory, from places unknown, and in doing *Blackgirl storying* served as intervention where we as Blackgirls could both render and remake our own complex realties and futures.

The moments and stories within this dissertation speak to the possibilities of attending to using storying as a medium to explore the interstices of Black girls and Black women, their communities, and Blackgirlness. And we, nor I, could have done them the same way without the work of Bambara. Alongside my desire to continue to read through her work, to see how she constructs Blackgirlness without demolishing Black girls, and to sit longer with how she conceptualizes radical love situated in both the self and the community, I name below several implications of this study.

My desire to render and share the possibilities of *Blackgirl storying*, particularly in attending to how it asks us to embrace simultaneity, was at times overwhelming. I am still unsure of my interpretation and representation of many shared moments and stories, including the ones not reflected here. Below, I offer several implications of this dissertation project, though I do not divide them by "research, teaching, and practice". If the work of Bambara and *Blackgirl storying* has reinforced anything for me, it is my momma's appreciation for stories that run everywhere

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and come back together, and Lynn Fendler's offering of methodology as a lifestyle choice. For me as a Blackgirl and a scholar, I know that to attend to other Blackgirls, more work is needed to that critically unearths where our research and lives touch and what gaps may exist. What would a project fully grounded in Blackgirlness be without the gaze of the academy? As I hope will be evident, the implications I suggest are considerations that can occur across the many different spaces Blackgirls engage with.

On Process and Product

Often, in research engaging young people, researchers may design projects where youth "produce" materials. Often evident in used in Literacy and English Education that focuses on multimodal literacies, these materials may then serve as record and proof of a study. Sometimes, having ample and diverse sources of data is positioned alongside a desire for rigor and validity, or as evidence that something was learned, extracted. I planned a range of activities for youth, some digital and others involving materials that I shipped to collective members, such as watercolor and collage kits I put together. A few of these artifacts are featured in this writing of the project, but many are not.

I made the choice to not include several artifacts for reasons that I consider responsive to collective members (I want more time to spend with the artifacts, some collective members asked for artifacts to *not* be included, I made the decision to exclude several artifacts that compromised youth's anonymity in ways a blurring of the work would not change, etc.) I also chose to move in this way because many times we did not engage with artifacts as planned. Sometimes, we didn't get to them. Other times, we did, but in ways I did not intend. There were moments such as when Kayla asked, "Do you have to do it like this?" Or, Amber remarked, "I'm

bad at poetry, but I'll try." And she wrote a poem. However, after sharing her poem with the group, Amber renamed her boundaries as to who could have access to this poem:

Amber: Lauren, I know we just talked about these, but can we not share this for your project?

Lauren: What do you mean? (I wanted to make sure I understood her request)

Amber: Like, I want to share the poem here [in our collective space], but not there. Not in your actual paper. Is that okay?

Lauren: Of course. Your poetry is your own. Thanks for feeling comfortable enough to let me know. And if any of y'all feel that way, just lemme tell me verbally or DM me.

Amber: Thanks. Maybe I'll keep working on it though.

Amber's question spurred me to ask after every session if participants were comfortable with me using their artifacts within my dissertation writing and analysis. And if I received consent, I made it a note to always return to ask if they were comfortable with their work included in this dissertation. There are also instances wherein I shared concerns about things youth had consented to, wanting to be accountable and honest by talking through with them that even though our project wasn't static, in some ways this dissertation would be.

Another example involves a meeting where we planned to write and collage. Then, Anaïs said, "Don't get me wrong, I like writing and I like what we did last week, but I'm not up for it today. My hands *actually* hurt." Anaïs's emphasis on "actually" caught me off-guard because I realized that it is something I do when I want to convince someone, somehow prove to them that my pain was real and valid. Although she did not explicitly ask for permission to refrain from writing, her work to convince can be read as a search for recognition and allowance. Anaïs frequently commented that during the pandemic, she struggled with increased soreness in her hands because of the many school assignments and activities she had to complete (including writing papers, mathematical graphing, practicing two instruments for Band, and practicing

calligraphy for her Chinese language course), in addition to her desire to work on her music or cook. Collective members' naming of their boundaries and desires in relation to what we discuss and the activities we engaged with did not begin into several weeks into our meeting, despite my offering various entry points for activities. Though perhaps there were no challenges to the activities, I read this as collective members trusting our collective enough to name what they wanted in our space. It is through their naming, rather than solely my own, that our homeplace began to emerge.

If we are indeed seeking to center the lives, experiences, and desire of Blackgirls, there is an urgency to explore how research design, even those situated in Black feminist and humanizing pedagogies, may very well reify the systems it seeks to challenge through an overvaluation of products and by not fostering spaces where Blackgirls may practice engagements of refusal. This is not to say we should abandon design and planning altogether, as it can be a very useful, particularly for revealing what and how researchers think. For example, because research design can elucidate "the researcher's assumptions about how knowledge is constructed, what major theories drive the study, and why a particular qualitative genre for the research design was selected" (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018, p. 184), I learned a lot about my own process and how I needed to revisit my own methods, pedagogy, and praxis. However, I am compelled to continue thinking about the ways even then we at times equate action with material creation. I place this not only in conversation with those who discuss how Blackgirls and Blackness are commodified and consumed (Cherid, 2021), but also specifically the labor of Black people.

On Collaborative Endeavors

Throughout the project at varying degrees, I worked co-create alongside collective members. To me, this is indicative of a call-and-response, whereby we communicated back-and-forth which led to a co-production of the curriculum in our space. Below, I share several ways we negotiated a co-produced space.

As we constructed *Blackgirl storying*, we began to explicitly acknowledge collaborative and communal engagements. This was evident by, for example, Christine and Anaïs's occasional requests to be interviewed together. This also emerged in the following ways.

In seeking to attend to Blackgirlness alongside curricular endeavors, dexterity became critical. Whenever the collective planned together, even through suggestions, we originally began days or weeks prior to the actual date of actualizing the plan. In a time of uncertainty, I quickly learned how plans might have provided me some comfort, but that for the most part it gave a lot of us anxiety. Sometimes plans can appear as rigid structures with little space for innovation and ingenuity. After reviewing my field notes, I realized that I never took time to explicitly name why I felt it important that if we were ever doing something, collective members had the choice to name their discomfort, disinterest, or desire to shift course and to act accordingly.

When Casey apologized to the group for not having the time or energy to plan what she wanted to share about her future, she coupled it with, "I know this is unprofessional…" When I asked her why she felt it was unprofessional, she explained how she was taught that as a Blackgirl, "you always have to be ready. Blackgirls and women … we don't get a lot of chances so when you get an opportunity you gotta be ready to jump." When I asked her, what does she do if she changed her mind, even after signing up for something, or if something came up (as it had

that week for Casey), she shrugged, "then I guess you live with the consequences." I paused for
a minute, as Christine began talking about her own experiences of "missing opportunities",
perhaps in an effort to comfort Casey. I was not sure how to engage Casey in a way that held
onto what she was taught while also … "You know, Casey, I get it. Like, I get a lot of anxiety
around not living up to something. But I have this one teacher who always reminds me that you
always have a choice, and it's okay to choose yourself and your energy. And you always have the
choice to cancel something, even if you feel guilty about doing it."

Casey's words, "you always have to be ready" and "you gotta be ready to jump" are
reminiscent of two things I was also told as a younger Blackgirl: "you gotta be the first one
there" and "when I say jump, you say 'how high.'" Though it may appear distanced from
considerations of curricular dexterity, I see her words as a reminder that too often, Blackgirls are
socially conditioned to sacrifice their ideas and desires, to sacrifice themselves, under the guise
of ideologies such as professionalism. What I needed to teach more into was the politics and
possibilities of refusal.

As a K-12 teacher, I rarely explicitly asked youth for feedback about my practice and
engagements. Whenever I did, it was usually done so through offering a set of prescriptive
options about classroom activities, or, if we should read the next passage of a text aloud or
independently. To create and sustain homeplace(s) through *Blackgirl storying*, it was necessary
that I extend the vulnerability I asked of the other collective members. Though I do not include it
here, I am interested in future research where I find a better way to negotiate my presence as a
collective member and to think more deeply about the ethics of relationality and care.

Digital Collaborative Engagements for Blackgirls

Originally, I envisioned in-person meetings for this dissertation. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, in-person meetings were not possible. I had many insecurities about how to pedagogically move forward in ways that recognized and were responsive to how affect shifts and is negotiated in virtual engagements. I layered this anxiety collective members, their families, and I already had about digital spaces and surveillance (Browne, 2015). While these were never perfectly resolved, several collective members noted the affordances of our virtual meetings.

During the pandemic, *Blackgirl storying* supported the collective members and me in fostering a space and potential homeplace at a stressful time. During this time, virtual meetings became sites of physical, mental, and emotional sites of stress as well. In large part, collective members named this being due to, (1) assumptions that they had nowhere else to go because they were already home, and (2) as Christine shared, "people in your face all day". One of the elements of this project that I expected to be one of the limitations—the distance and collective members turning their cameras off—was something that collective members appreciated.

Because this project served as an opportunity for a group of Blackgirls to come together that may have otherwise never met, our use of Zoom enabled collective members from a variety of schools and neighborhoods in Greater New Orleans to come together. Often, literacy engagements such as this one are associated with a school or camp at a physical site. Although Anaïs and Casey attend schools only half a mile apart, and both frequent the coffee shop between their schools, they both noted that they probably would never have met. They both attend schools that have predominantly White youth and teachers, although there is more racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity at Casey's school. Frequently naming the isolation they at times feel as

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Blackgirls, Anaïs and Casey highlighted that they were "happy to be included" in this project because it grew their support network.

As evident in my discussion of the potential of homeplace, our collective was made up of a diversity of Blackgirls. This offered an opportunity for collective members to learn with other Blackgirls, people who may have looked like them and shared similar experiences. In other words, people who may have be equipped through their own lives with experiential knowledge that shapes how other Blackgirls are affirmed and supported. Simultaneously, differences in class, sexuality, geographic, and personal interests helped to broaden collective members' own understandings of how dynamic Blackgirls and Blackgirlhood are. Through seemingly minute moments such as seeing inside each other's homes, hearing caregivers yell or laugh in the background, or "wearing a cap because it's washday", Black feminisms and humanizing approaches supported collective members in reading and building from shared, though not synonymous, knowledges. Thus, our work through *Blackgirl storying* challenged flattening representations collective members may have held about themselves and Blackgirls who lived in a particular neighborhood, attended a different school, or associated with a certain class background. At times, this highlighted moments of tension.

As I discuss in how our enactment of *Blackgirl storying* supported self- and communal-love and actualization, collective members noted that a space that supported them in "being off camera" whenever the felt compelled, was critical to their continued participation. In sites wherein Blackgirls are subjected to adultification and surveillance, being off camera is both a refusal to offer visual access to one's physical self and home, and it is also an engagement of wellness. In a several interviews, collective members shared that they preferred spaces when and where they could choose to be seen. For example, Christine remarked, "you know how I was

saying all that stuff about edges and our hair? I started thinking more about what if people look at me the way I talk about them. Sometimes you don't want people to even have that chance." Similarly, Kayla shared, "Sometimes, I wanna eat without feeling like I'm being watched. I have insecurities about eating and even if I know y'all love me, sometimes I just wanna stuff my face without being watched." When I asked Kayla what would be different if we met in-person, she responded. "I mean it'd be different now because we know each other, but… you ever fix your waistband when you're sitting and stuff? I do stuff like that. My grandma says I fidget. At home, it's not like that."

Other Blackgirls in the collective remarked that they were better able to relax if they could decide when their cameras were on or off without assumptions of their engagement or focus. Anaïs, for example, said "yeah, like I hope this is okay, but sometimes I'm just laying back. I'm still listening and talking and doing stuff when we're making stuff, but… I don't know. I can just relax and it's like we're hanging out without having to put on." Anaïs beginning with "I hope this is okay", shows that in most spaces she does not have that option. It is not a part of her every day to choose when and how she wants to show up. Though our meeting on Zoom was not so intentional as it was a requirement, I see my continued reminders that collective members could show up as they wanted as responsive to fostering spaces where Blackgirls can story themselves fully (Butler, 2018).

Additionally, I think with Casey, who shared that during her high school career, engagements such as this one "would have been nice because it doesn't ask too much of our time. Like, you can be anywhere and as long as you have a signal or internet, you can get on at five and be off at six and never even had left your house." Casey's words push us to think about the well-documented fact that many youth are stressed and overwhelmed with in- and out-of-

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school commitments (Lee, 2016), which was amplified for many throughout the pandemic (North, 2020). Casey's comments highlight that too often, after-school and extracurricular programs disregard the transition time, logistics, and when placed alongside Anaïs's statements, fatigue. Our collective meetings, even when they went past our scheduled meeting time, often required less logistical planning than needed when driving to a meeting place, having to find someone to pick you up, or using public transportation. Additionally, when young people's time is already heavily dictated by feel that they have little say in how they spend their time. For example, in an unrelated conversation, Amber shared that she thought teachers overestimated students' availability as if they did not have other roles and responsibilities outside of being a student and completing homework.

Final Thoughts and Future Research

Blackgirl storying offered us the opportunity to consider how our literacies as Blackgirls are "(1) multiple, (2) tied to identities, (3) historical, (4) collaborative, (5) intellectual, and (6) political/critical" (Muhammad & Haddix, 2017, p. 325). In thinking with these various elements, I realized that there is so much we only began to think about. While the implications above are all indactive of curiosities and future directions, as frameworks and projects oriented to the lives of Blackgirls often consider their racial and gender identities, as well as their age, what I am most compelled by is how we might work to continually build homeplace(s) designed to sustain the pluralities of Blackgirlhoods. For example, where can Blackgirls have critical and affirming conversations about other identities and experiences, such as sexuality, class, and safety that not only embrace plurality, but move us toward emancipatory spaces that are designed to ensure that all us in all that we are can share the center?

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As I cannot find another way to name it, I am thinking of how we figure systems of oppression such as capitalism in our work? Despite many Black feminist scholars adamantly naming capitalism alongside patriarchy and anti-Blackness, at times it seems to be left too far in the background, as I myself have done here. This is to say that even in this storying, as I part with it, I am desperately seeking something I have not yet seen. I know that it is very likely not waiting to be seen in this way, in research. Tuck and Yang (2018) offered that

> For readers who have ever held a young one on their laps or on a hip, consider the weight of the baby, how the weight and pressure grows more intense with passing time. Then, consider the physical sensation of moving that young one to the other hip, or off the lap, or to another knee. New vantage points, new movements, new somatic possibilities are made through that small shift. This is the simple idea at the center of the metaphor of an inner angle. (p. 3)

What shifts do I and we need to continue to make? Are they, as Christine saw, already there? In our stories and storying?

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