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TRANSGRESSNGROOVE: AN EXPLORATION OF
BLACK GIRLHOOD, THE BODY, AND EDUCATION

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Blackgirls have recently begun to receive focused attention in the discipline of education. Usually, we are compared to our White female or Black male counterparts and/or located within frameworks designed without our bodies and realities considered. Failure to recognize the simultaneity of race and gender operating in the lives of Blackgirls results in a reduction of our livelihood into gender and/or race narratives void of our specific experiences. Alongside the diminution is the unfair reading of Black femininity through lenses of Whiteness, White femininity, and Black masculinity. Attune to how Blackness and femininity differentially mark Black female bodies and the scant documentation of how we make meaning of our experiences, this auto/ethnography interrogates the dialectical between culture, the Black female body, and Black girlhood. This study foregrounds Black female bodies; mine particularly, to illumine the schooling and educational experiences of Blackgirls. It names silence, stereotyping, and shame as trends of Black girlhood and documents how they play out in Blackgirls' and Black women's lives. In contrast, body-activation, voice-instigation, and imagining emerged as tools for resisting, healing, and counteracting the aforementioned trends. Venturing into three community spaces—academe, Blackgirls, and my family—that reveal a feminist, body-centered praxis, transgressngroove. As a process-oriented investigation this study's contributions highlight Black feminist (and Black girl) ways of knowing (in education), expands the budding area of Black Girlhood Studies and narratives, and introduces a praxis that mobilizes vulnerability to facilitate self-aware and body activated educational experiences.

Dedication

“Dancing Wind and Purple Skies”

Blackgirls
Beautiful, courageous, brave,
Blackgirls
Pasta
Christa
Deena
Danielle
Victory
Deborah
Mik
Unique
Sunshine
Phillipi
Liz
Nicole
Blackgirls everywhere,
are dancing wind and purple skies
Blackgirls,
keep the show movin’
Commit to Doing Dirty Work,
no matter how misunderstood,
lost and shy,
we *may* be.
We share ourselves
get naked in public,
breathe and be.
Dance and cry,
cry and write,
feel and express,
work from our bodies.
Use our wide nose,
broad shoulders and forehead,
lil butt, big butt, stomach, and guts
hearts, thoughts,
our body, our entire self,
making sure they get it,
need em’ to get it!
Loud and quiet,
Obnoxious, searching,
smart and “promiscuous”,
outgoing and not so much,

There's no bible for being a black girl!
It's stressful!
When lost and unsure,
We conjur and activate,
our Black girl magic.
Call on comforts,

Blackgirls and black women spirits,
dreams and ambitions,
mothers, grandmothers, sisters, friends, and sisterfriends.

We remember our power
Broken? Yearn for more,
remain open,
dance, connect, and express,
It is good to be a Black girl.
It is damn good to be a Black girl!

Blackgirls everywhere,
old and open,
young and tired,
brave and different,
Keep the show movin'.
Blackgirls everywhere,
are dancing wind and purple skies

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and wind to guide me

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Chapter One

Introduction

Where I am Coming From

Four days before my fourteenth birthday, I pleaded to the judge to release me from juvenile detention (juve'). There I stood, in court, expressing my desire to return home to my mother. Lies. I was going to live with my teacher of Buffalo Prep, an enrichment program for inner city youth in Buffalo, New York. I longed for escape. College would be my ticket. First, I needed to get into a prestigious high school. That meant I had to complete Buffalo Prep. More than anything though, I was ready to get back to my life where I was academically challenged and, for the most part, valued and supported. I missed being free, though I'd never call life (with my mother) by that name until that moment. Six weeks prior, I found myself before the same judge angry, done with my mother, and tired of pretending I was not hurt. Did I say angry? Mom said I'd run away. I called it temporary escape, from her and family hurts of abuse and silence. Emulating my family, I gathered so called friends, weed, and alcohol to accompany me. We sure know how to turn sadness into a party. After one week, the party ended with me standing before a judge and volunteering to go to juve', anywhere but home, til' they found me a placement.

In juve', I was persuaded (by family members) that my presence there affected them more than it did me. Lies. After all, my family had a name, a reputation to uphold. With a beautiful, bank managing, well known in the community, God-fearing grandmother, it is hard not to feel pressure to be perfect or die trying. The shame my actions attracted to our family carried more weight than my experience. During a visit she asked, "What will they think of my granddaughter being all locked up like this Dommi?" *Internalized Lesson: My body is not my own.* I remember being enraged while staring past her because she seemed disinterested in me and more invested in returning everything, me included, to its proper place. I did not care what *they* thought about my decisions and I certainly could care less about what *they* thought about

me. More than anything I yearned for someone in my family to inquire what was going on with me. But neither they nor Granny ever asked. She never asked if they were treating me right in there. Never asked if the staff were God-fearing and loving people like her. She never asked me how I was feeling. She never asked if anyone touched or tried to touch me in an unwanted way. Maybe, out of fear, she did not want to know. *Internalized Lesson: What happens to my body is mine to deal with.*

Ms. A, a big and tall Black woman, resembling a giant parrot, told me to strip. While naked, she handed me some special soap and instructed me to put it on my pubic hair. Apply. Massage. Rinse. Shower. Her eyes never left my skin. Yet, her judgmental eyes were gifts compared to the hungry ones of adult male staff. Foul play. No one asked if we were being mistreated in juve'. Almost daily, there was some assault, mostly mental to my self-concept. Ms. A insisted, "If you were so smart you wouldn't be here." She'd declare, every child in juve' deserved to be there. Then, during morning exercises he'd look at my breasts. "If you were just a little older," he'd suggest. The specifics of the "he" indicted was less important and besides, there was more than one. I'm thirteen years old! During a lecture on sex, where the girls and boys met separately, the nurse tells us girls we must all take pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease (STD) tests. Oh, and have a pap. What is that?! Sounds ugly and uncomfortable. Looking back, it makes sense, unfortunately. Being incarcerated, Black, female, and youthful are probable causes of STD's, pregnancy, and hypersexual activity. I state with much attitude, "I'm not pregnant!" Sureeeee. The sarcasm in her tone and slight grimace of disbelief turned my stomach. Lying there in cold. Cold room. Cold greeting. Cold table. Cold hands. Dreams turned cold. Everything cold. On the table lay three sizes of an awkward shaped something, one of which had to go inside me. I ask for the smallest. The nurse opts for the medium sized one. Cold gel.

Coldawkward shaped thing inside me. I scream. No pause. She continued without flinching.

Internalized Lesson: My body is worthy of no breaks.

In juve', I, like other youth, were disposable property. My status as a leader in school and youth church ministries meant nothing. Being on the honor roll and ranking in the top two percent of my eighth grade class, was of no merit. To the few staff who knew my family, I received disappointed looks and "get-it-together" lectures, cementing that my presence in juve' brought grave shame to my family's name. Most of the time my body and I were regarded as hot-in-the-pants, troublemaking, lost souls. Their diagnosis insisted I was damaged, in need of discipline, and broken in need of fixing. Neither my academic achievements nor my motives for running away—to escape abuse and gain visibility—were real or justified. Through mundane realities of juve'—A strict daily regiment; remedial coursework; blame and shame; sexual solicitations in exchange for food from the outside, and having my feelings disregarded almost daily—I internalized some vital and deleterious beliefs about my body's value.

Statement of the Problem

There is an under exploration of Blackgirls' experiences, particularly within the field of education. Furthermore, the literature within this field when talking *about* Blackgirls often implicates her body but does not afford space for us to tell our truths about how our lives our education, formally in schools and informally in our everyday, are informed by the reading and valuation of our bodies. Additionally, the framing of (Blackgirls') educational experiences are often limited to formal school spaces and disappeared into Black or White female student experiences (see AAUW, 1998, 2001, 2008; Lopez, 2003; Watkins, Lewis, & Chou, 2001).

In recognition of the interlocked nature of race and gender in the lives of Black females and to reject to tendency in education particularly to clump Blackgirls in with White girls or

Black boys, I leave no space between Black and girl. Moreover, as Blackgirl and feminist auto/ethnographer Robin Boylorn (2014) states, “It speaks to the twoness and oneness of my raced and gender identity. 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” (personal communication). In the midst of this talking *about* rather than *with* Blackgirls about their educational experiences (inside as well as outside of formal schools) the narratives of Blackgirls remain absent. Accordingly, the knowledge and solutions to enhancing Blackgirls’ livelihoods overall and educational experiences concomitantly, held by Blackgirls remains unknown. The above telling is but a snippet and example of how I, as a Blackgirl, came to understand the interlacing of race, gender, culture, education, and the body in my life.

Research Questions

My time spent in juve’ enlivened my awareness of the connection between Black femininity, the body, culture, and education. The shift in location of my body from a student to runaway to juvenile offender significantly diminished its external value. School was not always the easiest and while there I faced some injustices. However, the wounds I endured from the above experience were different. Through my body I learned that life experience and what would happen to me is tied to my body’s location, how it’s read, and the value assigned to it. I identified connections between education, culture, the body, and Black girlhood but, to take a more intentional look at their interrelationship, this study centers my Black female body to explore the following:

- 1) What does an arts-based practice using performance, dance, poetry, and creative writing to center the Black female body look like?
 - a) How does the context, in which I enact an arts-based practice, render varied representations and perceptions of my Black female body?
 - b) What pedagogical insights and implications arise from this process?

- 2) What happens when an arts-based practice informed by performance, dance, poetry, and creative writing is used to explore Black girlhood?
- a) What possibilities emerge regarding representations of Black girlhood and Blackgirls' lived and educational experiences?

Purpose of Study

This study utilizes the arts, specifically dance, poetry, and performance to engender an interrogation of the dialectics between culture, the body, education, and Black girlhood that foregrounds the experiences, voices, and bodies of actual Black females. The centering of the body in this exploration as well as the usage of artistic forms facilitates an alternative entry into Black girlhood and illuminates the socio-cultural realities informing Blackgirls' lived and educational journeys. Specifically, my body and girlhood function as stimuli in this project.

Significance of Study

By leading from and centering the body as an instrumental element to this project's implementation, this study offered an alternative approach to researching Blackgirls. Secondly, it responds to and takes up Black feminist educational researcher Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot's (1976) call for the need to document and understand the socio-cultural realities affecting Blackgirls. Deeming the body valuable to the examination of Blackgirls' lives revealed that Black girlhood is haunted by historical and cultural representations of Black femininity that inform the everyday living of Blackgirls. In addition, this project illustrates that representations of Black femininity also influence how they/we appraise their/our bodies, as well as how they/we relate to other Blackgirls and women. Ultimately, I then argue that these hauntings result in the constricting of Black girls and point to a need and utility in creating Black girl and Black women affirming spaces to facilitate the construction of expanded conceptions of Black femininity.

Moreover, this study also unearthed that silence, stereotyping, and shame shape the milieu of Blackgirls' in school and out of school educational experiences. These preceding trends

silence, stereotyping, and shame denote the body as inextricably linked to Black female's lived experiences. In contrast, body-activation, voice-instigation, and imagining emerged, to be later discussed as components of the developing praxis—transgressngroove—I designed, as tools for resisting, healing, and counteracting the aforementioned trends. Therefore, this project is about transmuting wounds into vision. To do so, I deploy the arts as a means to obliterate the break between being wounded and healing, girl and woman, and lived experience and education, to see what emerges from such an practice.

Originally conceptualized with specific and personal intentions, this project was not designed with a goal to develop specific alternative curriculum. Instead, the praxis, transgressngroove, emerged out of my generative process. Transgressngroove is a feminist praxis, which emanates out of Black female experience and centers Black female ways of knowing. Since transgressngroove spawns out of an examination of Black girlhood that privileges the Black female body specifically, it is Black girl praxis. The recognition of transgressngroove as a Black girl praxis connotes the people, mindsets, and knowledge that gave it shape. As such, the use of transgressngroove is not limited to Black females, which will be discussed later in the contributions section of this chapter and described gradually throughout this text.

Instead, I insist Blackgirls are also the miner's canary. The story of the miner's canary is that that the more sensitive and vulnerable canary is used as miner's an instrument to alert miners of danger and toxicity (Gunter & Torres, 2002). Lani Gunter and Gerald Torres (2002) liken the dynamics of race and racism to this metaphor where people of color face enmity more frequently than whites. Extending this metaphor, I posit that Blackgirls too are the miner's canary where the (mis)treatment we endure such as the policing of our bodies and disappearing of our particular

experiences and narratives are not isolated happenings. Rather this treatment, like the miner's canary, should be read as a symptom of a larger issue in society such as where the policing of youthful bodies, bodies of color, and the disappearing of particular stories and archives in educational spaces especially is commonplace and intentional. Thereby while transgressing groove emerged from the knowledge, bodies, and experiences of Black females, and is intended to transform the experiences of Black girls and females in particular its utility extends beyond the Black female body.

Framing the Body Using Black Feminist Theory & Black Girlhood Studies

The body is integral to how Black females, women and girls alike, experience life. As an indispensable entity shaping everyday living, the body cannot be ignored. Particularly, when it comes to Black females our body has justified our historical enslavement and exploitation (see Cox, 2009; McKittrick, 2006; Roberts, 1997). Present day, the body continues to be a barometer used by others to read and appraise our value. Society continues to reveal to Black females the significance of our bodies to our lived experience, educational pursuits, how Black females are valued within and across different communities and spaces, and our livelihoods.

Throughout time these tropic images and stereotypical valuations have been mapped onto and imposed upon Black females. Performance theorist Harvey Young (2005) declares, "When popular connotations of Blackness are mapped across or internalized within black people, the result is the creation of the black body. This second body, an abstracted and imagined figure, shadows or doubles the real one" (p. 7). The abstracted body then, becomes part of societal popular memory. As a result, individual Black (female) bodies are read against this mythic and constructed entity. However, these popular and abstract images, despite their widespread

acceptance and replication within society, continue to be contested, critiqued, and imagined by Black feminists.

When using the term Black feminists, I am referring to women who self-identify as Black; have pressed against popular constructions and conceptions of Black femininity; who have something to say, do, and be about social injustice, particularly around enmity and Blackgirls and women; who intentionally contest limitations imposed upon Black female bodies especially; and/or who have and continue to experience inequality and inequities. I recognize that such a conceptualization to the label; Black feminist may seem broad, offensive, and quite possibly sound like other labels used to name similar work. I admit I struggle with naming, as it seems to distract from what I see as more important—what laying to a name causes one to do and not do. Nonetheless, I chose Black feminist to denote the work—to enhance Black lives by enhancing Black females' lives and the laboring to put an end to all injustice and oppression, which is the work of feminism (see hooks, 1981). I recognize that whom I invoke within Black feminist action, may call themselves by another name or no name at all. Also, I acknowledge that their decision may be for political, personal, strategic, and possible unknown reasons. What is most important to me is the work of these individuals to bring the body into their knowing and theorizing in a way that is purposeful and necessary.

Since the history of slavery, Black bodies have been relegated disposable, abnormal, and in need of controlling (Collins, 2000; Davis, 1983; Roberts, 1997). When recounting these realities, the body is positioned as separate from the mind, what one knows and how she comes to know it. Yet, the monitoring of what slaves could read, whom they worshipped and prayed to for example, suggest the body is more than its skin and bones. Feminist philosopher Jacquelyn Zita (1998) situates the body as a dynamic, contextually located, and both an individual and

collective entity when she asserts, [the body is], “a materialization, a socially mediated formation, lived individually and in communities as *real effects*” (p. 4). The American history of slavery is where the valuation or better devaluation of the Black body began as well as where it became a collective object from which individual Black bodies could not escape (Davis, 1983; hooks, 1981; McKittrick, 2006; Young, 2005). The devaluation of the Black female body and clumping of experience is noted by feminist philosopher Katherine McKittrick (2006):

The “not-quite” spaces of black femininity are unacknowledged spaces of sexual violence, violence, stereotype, and sociospatial marginalization; erased, erasable, hidden, resistant geographies and women that are, due to persistent and public forms of objectification, not readily decipherable. (p. 61)

Black females and our bodies are bound by history. How we are read, evaluated, and utilized gets constituted through a historically configured Black female body (Collins, 2000; Roberts, 1997; Young, 2005). This is not implying that bodies do not enact agency or that this constructed image of the Black female body does not mutate instead; “an *idea* of the black body has been and continues to be projected across actual physical bodies” (Young, 2005, p. 4). In this case, single Black female bodies and individuals are mediated and forced to contest, concede, and/or negotiate with this idea.

Black feminist bell hooks (1990) recognized this battle and called for “radical black subjectivity” where narrow constructions of identity and Black femininity in particular are expanded to facilitate a deeper and more complex understanding of lived identity. Exemplifying hooks’ call for rbs, Hip Hop feminist Ruth Nicole Brown (2009) transcends and opens the range and possibility of the categories Black girl and Black girlhood locating Black girlhood as “the representations, memories, lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as

youthful, Black, and female [and] ...is not dependent then, on age, physical maturity, or any essential category of identity” (p. 1). Holding in tandem identities, positions, experiences, and stories often positioned as hierarchical and incompatible to reveal their simultaneity, Black Girlhood Studies then, as an area of study, expands the narratives and bodies representative of Black girl identity and recognizes the fluidity of and between girlhood and womanhood (see hooks, 1990; Sears, 2010; Walker, 1983).

To present robust representations of Black femininity, experience, and transcend limited definitions of the body, a discussion of the body rooted in Black feminism and performance is vital. Likewise, in order to transcend limited definitions of the body that focus on its physicality, a discussion of the body rooted in Black feminism and performance theory is advantageous, which will be discussed more in chapter two, *What’s the Body Gotta Do With Black Girlhood?: A Review of the Literature*. It is therefore both a foresight and deleterious misstep to minimize and/or leave the body out of any exploration or interrogation of Black femininity, Black girlhood, and the overall Black female experience. I am not suggesting that the sum total of Black female existence and experience can be reduced to the body. Our bodies, what we know, and the meaning of these must be understood within context, culture, and perspective. I am insisting however that the body must be front and center when exploring critiquing and/or imagining possibilities for Black femininity and black female experience.

By centering the body as a vessel for communicating with the world and for learning, the Black female body as the focus of this study is deemed a key tool for coming to know (Boylorn, 2013a; Collins, 2000; Johnson, 2014; McClaurin, 2001). Also, it acknowledges the power and value differentially assigned to bodies and the ways people intentionally subvert and contest these realities. In summary the body is a critical concept to which educators should attend. I

foreground my Black female body and my experiences as a Black girl to 1) engender a journey of becoming more embodied, aware, and effective celebrator of Blackgirls and 2) capture the lived experiences of Blackgirls using our bodies. This project joins Black feminism and auto/ethnography to travel into Black girlhood. Next I briefly describe the methodology used for this project and its connection to Black feminist laboring.

Methodology: What I Did and How I Did It

Autoethnography as a formalized research method arose during a time within qualitative research movement when researchers' desired to be more reflexive and incorporate issues of identity, particularly those of race, gender, and class (Alexander, 2005; Callier, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010; Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). Since its emergence different styles and approaches have developed (see Boylorn, 2013a; Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013; Denzin, 2003; Ellis, 2004; Jones, 1997; McClaurin, 2001; Spry, 2011; Weems, 2003). These approaches vary in how much emphasis is placed on other people, the political motivations informing the research, and the degree to which the autoethnographer incorporates and critiques hegemonic systems and sociocultural realities (Spry, 2011). Irrespective of the approach and type of autoethnography, it is, "a doubled storytelling form and moves from self to culture and back again" (Boylorn 2013a, p. 174). Therefore, autoethnographers engage in processes that illuminate stories, experiences, or issue through the foregrounding of our bodies or stories, which are discussed more in chapter three,

Autoethnography as Methodology.

The formality of autoethnography is noted to emerge during the crisis of representation in the 1980s when qualitative researchers were asking critical questions about who should represent who in research and how who we are as researchers affects our research (Denzin & Lincoln,

2008; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010; Muncey, 2010). However, Black women whose work in community and the arts and Black feminist researchers to depict alternative narratives of Black living and Black female representations can also be seen as autoethnography (see Hurston, 1925; Lorde, 1982; Oliver, 2010; Shange, 1975). Similarly, Black feminists who do auto/ethnography do so with vigor, intensity, and determination to bring to life untold and under told narratives of Black (female) life particularly. Auto/ethnography orchestrated by Black feminists is accompanied with the backlash between the auto and ethnography to connote a legacy and spiritual aspect of Black feminist auto/ethnography. The backlash then marks a different and collective I, one that brings into the fold ancestors and community (Mary Weems, personal communication, May 19, 2012)

Alongside the aforementioned reasons for becoming an autoethnographer, many Black feminists adopt auto/ethnography to challenge power relations and create self-affirming identities in the face of inequality. Black feminist Irma McClaurin (2001) explains:

While categories and rhetoric have shifted, power relations in everyday life remain enmeshed in identity politics as constituted within a modernist and essentialist cultural worldview...Identity remains a contested and negotiated arena in which we struggle to fashion transformative strategies...I nonetheless propose that autoethnography is a viable form through which Black feminist anthropologists may theorize and textualize our situated positions and elevate our subjugated discourses... (pp. 54-56).

Therefore, auto/ethnography serves as a means of re-writing history and doing so in a way that shifts the gaze, as Boylorn states earlier, and locates the researcher within and without a culture(s), issue, and experience she is exploring.

Just as there are varying styles of autoethnography, there are also different designs that can be enacted. For this project, like Boylorn (2013a), “I use autoethnography to see myself twice, talking back to myself and others at the same time” (Boylorn 2013a, p. 174). More specifically, this study has a three-part design. First, I employ a critical reflexivity journey where I review report cards, pictures, journals and other writings and events in my life. From these reflections, I create original performances taken into the four workshops enacted in three community spaces to which I am accountable: Blackgirls, my family, and higher education (my undergraduate alma mater). After each workshop, I conducted interviews with people who volunteered to talk with me. The deliberations made surrounding how I would do the work of exploring Black girlhood, especially my decision to foreground my body and experience, are intricately tied to my beliefs about research, Blackgirls, and my commitments as a Black girl feminist.

Guiding Assumptions of Study

As a project that transgresses disciplinary boundaries and seeks to trouble dichotomous and sometimes hierarchically placed categories, particularly those of woman/girl; researcher/participant; theory/practice; and schooling/education; it is important to lay bear assumptions guiding this study. The five below assumptions situate me as researcher and construct alternative perspectives and images of Blackgirls and what doing research looks like. These beliefs inform how I come to this work of exploring the body in Black girlhood, and their relationship to education and culture.

Black Girlhood Does Not Necessarily End When Womanhood Begins

Transcending and broadening the range and possibility of the experience Black girlhood and hence who can occupy the label Blackgirl, Hip Hop feminist Ruth Nicole Brown (2009)

locates Black girlhood as, “the representations, memories, lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful, Black, and female [and] ...is not dependent then, on age, physical maturity, or any essential category of identity” (p. 1). Black girlhood and what constitutes being a Black girl, therefore, holds in tandem identities, positions, experiences, and stories often positioned as hierarchical and incompatible to reveal their simultaneity. This conception recognizes the fluidity of girlhood and its overlap with womanhood (see hooks, 1990; Sears, 2010; Walker, 1983). Accordingly, Black girl participants in this project range from age 14-70.

The Term Black Girl Denotes an Ascribed and Self-identifying Dynamic Experience

Furthering Black Girlhood Studies’ aim of creating complex and holistic narratives of Black femininity (see Brown, 2009; Gaunt, 2006; Love, 2012; Winn, 2011), this study follows Brown’s (2013) articulation of Black girlhood and Black girl identity:

Black girlhood as a discursive category is boundless and should not be thought of in this book as a reductionist category or a fixed identity...Black girlhood does not mean that for those who show up, race and gender are the most important or only significant categories of identity and difference. (p. 9).

The preceding definition of Black girlhood and thusly what it means to be a Blackgirl, recognizes the temporal and fluid nature of the identity Black girl.

Aspiring to transcend connotations of Blackgirl as African American and urban girls (Fordham, 1993; Jones, 2010; Lei, 2003; Love, 2012; Sears, 2010) as well as the distinct demarcation of girlhood ending at 18, categorization that unintentionally limits who the Black girl is, a goal of this venture is to uncover how Black females make sense of Black girlhood. In the case of my family members, two of us—Sunshine and I—identified ourselves as still

Blackgirls. However my family, at different points, used the term girl to refer to each other but, did not use the term Blackgirl as their primary self-identification. As a result, locating them as Blackgirls speaks to their back-and-forth performance of taking on and off the identity and my understanding and belief of the elasticity between Black girlhood and womanhood.

Other girls in this study self-identified as Black, were located in Buffalo, NY, where I was born and raised, and Baltimore, MD, where I made another home, and come from a range of ethnic backgrounds including but not limited to Dominican, Nigerian, and African American. Each girl identified with the label ‘Black girl’ for different, similar, and complex reasons. Great variation existed in how each girl made sense of Black girlhood, being a Black girl, as well as how she claimed and rejected this location. Transgressngroove, this dissertation and the developing praxis that emerged from this project, accounts for and encourages a diasporic understanding of Blackness. It is important to me that what it means to be a Black girl expands ethnic, cultural, and location boundaries. However, for the girls in this study, being a Black girl had fewer ethnicity specifics and more to do with stereotypes of performing Black femininity, i.e., being loud, promiscuous or hypersexual, and enjoying dancing in the halls over school itself.

The Body is Integral to Experience in Schooling and Education

Schooling is a hierarchal system that through covert curriculum and conditioning maintains status quo in a given environment (Greene, 1995; Rury, 2005; Shujaa, 1998). As an under interrogated system operating within education and society, it aids in the stifling of imagination, the constricting of bodies and limited possibilities for identity representation. Schooling is built into the fabric of formal education, part of but not synonymous with education, is a process, and involves silencing and socialization. In contrast education, is a lifelong journey that takes place through lived experience and one’s analysis of and active transformation that

emerges from learning. Education ignites and demands that we, as humans, move and change in personal and social realms (hooks, 1994; Friere, 1968). Like schooling, education occurs inside as well as outside of schools and in the case of Blackgirls, the body is pivotal to both processes.

Focus on the experiences of Blackgirls in in school education is recent and these examinations frequently locate Blackgirls within frameworks that do not consider and/or or make our bodies and realities an afterthought (Grant, 1994; Henry, 1998; Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Lei, 2003; Morris, 2007; Rollock, 2007). Studies examining Blackgirls' formal educational experiences on the surface foreground academic achievement, test scores, and other measurable standards of education, implicating schooling and its detrimental effects on the Black female body. Wanda Pillow (2003) asserts, "At the same time and likely because 'bodies are dangerous' policies are all about bodies—controlling, regulating, shaping, and (re)producing bodies. Bodies, nevertheless, remain...receptive to and disruptive of power...Attention to bodies in educational policy research remains largely absent" (p. 146). Nevertheless, the body is central to lived experience and educational experience. When it comes to Blackgirls, the body—how it behaves, what it does or does not do, and how it thinks—has been used to measure and evaluate success and possible success (Grant, 1994; Fordham, 1993; Jones, 2010; Lei, 2003; Morris, 2007; Rollock, 2007; Stevens, 2002; Winn, 2011). This project recognizes the body as central to knowledge and experience. By centering the body as a vessel for communicating with the world and for learning, the Black female body as the focus this study is deemed a key tool for coming to know. Also, it acknowledges the power and value differentially assigned to bodies and the ways people intentionally subvert and contest these realities. In summary the body is a critical concept to which educators should attend.

Blackgirls Experience Injury During Education in Schools

Race and gender are two crucial factors, historically and currently, shaping U.S education and its social milieu (Dickar, 2008; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Lopez, 2003; Watkins, Lewis, & Chou, 2001). Blackgirls like Black women, therefore, experience double jeopardy (Beale, 2003) and usually marginally positioned within the categories of race and gender. Blackgirls are clumped in with their Black male or white female counterparts (AAUW, 2001; 2008). As a result, issues specific to Blackgirls have been underexplored and/or ignored. Such undermining or disregard to the ways race and gender specifically, combine and play out the educational process eventuates in the wounding of Blackgirls in particular and students in general. The Blackgirls in this study offer different accounts, experiences, and relationships with formal education. Within all of them are feelings of devaluation, discomfort, and/or tension. Yet, I am not assuming that all Blackgirls have been wounded by education received while attending school or that we are the only ones being wounded. I am, however, positing that this wounding is true for many and that pedagogy, curriculum, and modes of learning within education that foregrounds the body in a healthy way has a possibility for making education a more just and loving space.

Exploring Black Girlhood Necessitates a Transdisciplinarity Approach

Deeming the blurring of boundaries necessary but insufficient—a move often made in interdisciplinary work—“transdisciplinarity presupposes that contemporary social/human issues and problems can only be understood and solved if viewed holistically and not artificially broken down into narrow research purposes that suit different disciplinary lenses” (Leavy, 2010, p. 25). Five main principles ground transdisciplinary work: Problem-centered, holistic research approach, transcendence, emergence, innovation, and flexibility. Born out of micro and macro

experiences witnessing and enduring Black female devaluation, this project is issue-driven. Desiring to take a holistic approach to exploring and engendering redress of the Black female body, including my own, I locate education, Black girlhood, culture, and the body as interconnected concerns. When identifying these concerns as interrelated to exploring the body's presence in Blackgirls' lived and educational experiences, flexibility and innovation emerge as necessary codes for the research process as well as its representation.

As a problem-centered project this study transcends disciplinary guided research. The identity Black girl transgresses boundaries of age, location, and experience and corresponding so does Black girlhood as an experience. A transdisciplinary approach, therefore, supports the transgressions and border-crossings. I recognize fully that such overstepping of boundaries is necessary because boundaries, disciplinarily as well as how research is evaluated, are hinged on standards and limits. I acknowledge this admonishment. Simultaneously, I appreciate and honor Blackgirls' sense making of this self-ascribed identity marker, being a Black girl, and therefore place priority in our voice and experience—to transgress in spite of the potential consequences attached.

Project Contributions

My research contributes to the areas of Gender and Sexuality Studies, Education, and qualitative inquiry. It illuminates the experiences of Blackgirls in America with specific attention to the decision to self-identify as Black, stereotyping and the role of race and gender and cultural constructions in shaping Black femininity. The usage of auto/ethnography expands literature in the developing area of Black Girlhood Studies with personal accounts, autobiographic and biographical accounts of lived and educational experiences of self-identified Blackgirls. The work this study does of exploring Black girlhood, Black girl identity, and the

role of the body in Black girls' educational and lived experience sits within and contributes to a growing archive of scholarship termed Black Girlhood Studies. As a sub area of Gender and Women's Studies, Black Girlhood Studies aims to create complex and holistic narratives of Black femininity by expanding the stories and bodies represented within Black girl identity. This study collects Blackgirl narratives and introduces alternative constructions of Black femininity that posit the body as a cultural archive and site of cultural reproduction and imagining. Moreover, this project values Black feminist ways of knowing and highlights the utility of feminist theory in Education, a discipline that has been slow to incorporate intersectional feminist approaches.

There are two major contributions this study makes to Education, specifically the area of Social and Cultural Foundations. First as an autoethnographic project, this study illustrates the usefulness of autoethnography to capture the layered realities of the interplay of bodies and education. Second, as a project prompted by the dearth of studies about Black girls' educational experiences and a general undermining of the body's significance in educational research, transgressngroove, a praxis that spawned from this study remedies the absence and/or undervaluing of the body. As a body-centered feminist praxis driven by the sensibilities, bodies, and realities of Blackgirls particularly and Black females generally, it serves as an intentional intervention to the compartmentalization of students' identities as well as the body/mind split often privileged in formal educational spaces. Thereby, transgressngroove engenders imagining of the body's utility in educational processes and provides possibility for teachers and other educators to mobilize vulnerability, identity, and self-awareness to activate the body in educational spaces. This praxis will be discussed in more detail throughout this document, especially in chapter seven, *A provisional conclusion*.

Taking up the task of Black girl advocates and the developing area of Black Girlhood Studies to craft humanizing representations of Blackgirls and Black girlhood, this investigation privileges Black females especially Black girl renderings of what it means to be a Black girl. With a desire to deflate and expand constructions of Blackgirls beyond stereotypical and recurrent renderings—African-American, pathological, and deviant—this project elucidates who Blackgirls are, on our/their terms. Throughout the history of the United States and academic scholarship alike, Black females have been misrepresented and mistreated. With research in particular, Black females have been evaluated by researchers who did not establish intimate relationships with them/us alongside the privileging of others' voices and perspective of Blackgirls over their/our self-identifications and meaning they/we make of their/our lives. Black females, girls and women alike need space to constitute and give meaning to the category and experience of Black girlhood, which this study accomplishes.

Additionally, this project responds to the call of feminist and education scholar Sara Lawrence Lightfoot (1976) and Hip Hop feminist Bettina Love's (2012) call for the need for research that explores the contextual realities, culture, and role of self-concept in the lives of Blackgirls. In addition, it alerts and/or reminds educators, students, parents, and others invested in the lives of Blackgirls the significance of the body to livelihood and positions Black Girlhood Studies as an area to which educators should defer and consult for alternative, holistic, and just ways of seeing, reading, and engaging Blackgirls. By privileging the body this study situates the body as knowledge, an archive of experience (George-Graves, 2010; Pineau, 2002; Zita, 1998) and birthed the pedagogy transgressngroove, which serves as a budding approach to education that provides possibility for teachers and other educators to mobilize vulnerability, emphasize and celebrate identity, and promotes self-awareness by activating the body in educational spaces.

How I am Asking You (as the reader) to Read This Dissertation

Since the reading of a body requires at least one body and one observer, making sense of bodily experience necessitates the presence of other bodies/Because this work asked that bodies be placed on the line/I am asking you, reader, to be a witness/More than a reader or spectator who is not expected to relate or connect to the person telling the story and the story/stories being told/I am asking you for active participation.

Drawing on the experiential and standards in Black church, there is someone who testifies or publicly reveals past or current struggles as well as the evolution and growth they are experiencing presently, and/or have experienced. This act is always done at the risk of people spreading gossip, new and negative perceptions, implicit marginalization, and more. More important than these potential liabilities of testifying are the vulnerability, courage, and release found in such divulging of self. Those observing these moments of disclosure are witnesses. These witnesses have authority to decide how active, i.e., in church setting waving hands, stomping, or dancing, they are in their witnessing. Witnesses' reactions to a testimony or shared information, is usually contingent upon their ability to relate to the experience. In other words, witnesses may wave, hum, and dance because they have been there, is currently there, know someone who is or was there, and has some stake in what the person testifying is sharing (Baldwin, 1968).

My request that you be a witness is important/It is about humanizing the Blackgirls and women whose stories are pressed into these pages/About seeing your access to these stories a privilege/It is in the end, your choice/It is a choice, a commitment you may or may not take on/Immediately or at all/

To be clear, adopting the position witness expands your ownership and requires your participation in and engagement with the testimonies here. This shift also acknowledges you, like I, have a stake in the lives of Blackgirls and women. Witness, you are a living component in this journey. Your experience, subjectivities, and meaning made of the aforementioned color the narratives offered here. If trepidation remains about shifting your position in relationship to this project, I respect it. Take your time. Regardless of the role you choose to assume, this project, in practice and on paper, involves a constant shifting between autobiographical experiences, other's stories, my analyses of these accounts, and insights gained. In addition, it involves discomfort, love, and vulnerability. What follows is an overview of my dissertation.

Dissertation Overview

Throughout this document are *sites of memory* or poignant memories that surfaced mainly during the critical reflexivity portion of this study. Following Katherine McKittrick (2006), these sites are re-presentations of me going back into my body and experiences to recall, understand, and sharing them. These memories come in the form of vignettes, lists, and poems and include accounts of my Black girlhood as well as my evolving thoughts about Black femininity, family, and my life. These sites of memory are pivotal because they maintain the flow of the narrative told here and interlace culture, the body, Black girlhood, and my narrative; and speak to my personal story and convictions for doing this work. Another interspersed set of writings are *grooves* or directives displayed in the form of prompts and/or questions. During the data collection and analysis processes, these grooves helped guide my work, served as prompts for critical self-reflection, and/or continued were continued lingerings. Within this document, their job is to bring you, the reader or witness, deeper into this text and ideally compel you to

embark on your own exploration of Black girlhood, girlhood, boyhood, or queerhood.¹ While this text can be read without engaging the grooves, choosing to forego engaging with them will likely affect your understanding of the process I underwent. These elements are present throughout this text and help give it shape.

Chapter two, *What's the Body Gotta Do With Black Girlhood: A Review of the Literature* uses media sources, poetry, and educational research to showcase the pertinence of the body in shaping Blackgirls' everyday lives and formal educational settings. Also, it posits the developing area of Black Girlhood Studies as an alternative and useful lens, especially to educational researchers, for re-imagining Blackgirls outside of historical and contemporary representations that limit and pathologize Black female bodies. Chapter three, *Autoethnography as Methodology* affords an overview of autoethnography including the history, main concepts, and ways of assessing autoethnography. It outlines the specific research design for this auto/ethnography. To illustrate the interplay of Black girlhood, the body, and education, chapters four through six illumine different perspectives of and theorize Black girlhood.

Chapter four, *When Flesh Screams: Border Crossings, Healing, and Identity* re-presents the process of performing instances of my Black girlhood focused around in school experiences. This chapter unveils negotiations, my reflection process, and the early developments of my specific style of auto/ethnography. Finally, it brings to life the moment where the developing component body-activation, of transgressngroove, was born out of the act of being vulnerable. Chapter five, "Airing Out Family Laundry: A Black Girl Intergenerational Release" discloses silences held within my family; documents realities and hurts of Black girlhood and their overlap

¹ Name created to incorporate the experience of individuals who do not comfortably identify with being a boy or girl and therefore see these locations and their experiences as not representative of theirs.

into womanhood; and argues that through cracking silence within a familial setting the possibility of intergenerational healing and imagining of Black femininity becomes visible. Chapter six, *Ain't You a Black Girl?!: Celebrating, Questioning, and Imagining Black Girlhood* is a resistance text, comprises the voices, reflections, stories, and knowledge generated by six high school girls who dialogue with and against stereotypes, that have long haunted Black females. This chapter argues that being a Blackgirl is entrenched by hauntings of shame and stereotypes attached to a legacy of historical and contemporary constructions of Black femininity. Moreover, that these representations get mapped onto the reading and evaluation of Blackgirl bodies. The rhetorical question, “ain’t you a Black girl,” troubles the tendency of the girls to disassociate from constructions of Blackgirls they consider popular while probing for articulations of Black girlhood and images of Blackgirls that transcend oversimplified, one-dimensional, and dichotomous archetypes.

As a generative project, chapter seven, *A Provisional Conclusion* summarizes the main insights from this study, including the trends of silence, stereotyping, and shame, in the Blackgirl narratives captured throughout this study. In addition, this chapter outlines transgressngroove, the developing feminist praxis birthed out of this project along with its essential components and closes with implications for future directions of this work as suggested by project participants. I now invite you deeper into myself, this moment, and this contextually rooted journey of centering my Black female body to access Blackgirl narratives of Black girlhood, the body, and education.

Pause

Please write down and/or answer to yourself the following question: What does it mean to witness, and what type of witness do you presume you will be to this exploration of Black girlhood?

Chapter Two

What's the Body Gotta Do With Black Girlhood?: A Review of The Literature

Site of Memory # 1: Still, (A Person) In Need of Supervision

“Do you have any court documents from this experience? It would make the example more robust,”

was the question and suggestion made by my adviser to enhance and authenticate my narrative about juve.’ On a grind to oblige her and get the approval of my committee, I replied, “No, but I can get them,” and set out to retrieve the paper trail documenting the evidence already inscribed on my body. My first point of contact was my mother. After all, I was released to her and, like the many picture albums she kept of me, I figured she’d kept my release papers. Surprisingly, (she holds onto what seems like everything) she had no recollection of where the original copies they’d given her were; she assured me I could access them through City Hall records. That was my next thought. Determined to handle this immediately, I surfed the internet for the number for City Hall and the department I thought would most likely handle juvenile records. After placing a call, being placed on hold, disconnected, and transferred to different departments, I was told by an employee in the Records department that I would not be able to retrieve my records. She insisted that although I was over the age of 18 they could not release these documents to me. I would need my mother or the individual who filed the PINS (Person In Need of Supervision) warrant, if they were different, to request a copy.

16 years ago I spent almost two months in juve’. 16 years ago I was underage, a runaway, angry, a tad unruly, with a desire to be seen. With a desire to be considered important enough that I was asked about my life, my “go thru,” and how they [whoever asked] could help. I’m not convinced these desires warranted the label “person in need of supervision.” Perhaps, “in need of emotional attention” would have been a more accurate description. My stank attitude and rogue behavior should have been, as it was, read as problematic. The source of my shift in demeanor was underexplored, but what happened then is old news and immaterial to my point. I was denied access to paper recorded information about my life. To be exact, I was 29, beyond the point/age of “needing” supervision (read: policing) and surely capable of attaining and securing a report documenting an occurrence in my life’s archive. Again, lies. At the end of the day, I was still a girl in need of supervision, to be policed by the state (of New York to be exact). My age and the fact that I served time in juvenile detention were inconsequential.

Again, I was a Black girl scrambling for validation. Enraged, but too busy searching for paper to confirm my story (which in itself is a different type of policing) I picked up the phone to again to solicit my mother’s help. I also contacted my godmother, a former social worker, to see if she knew anyone “on the inside” to assist me in this scramble. I don’t recall how many offices my mother contacted nor do I know if she and my godmother worked together. What I do know is that at the age of 29 someone else still had access to my body, my experience, which I did not. And, when seeking to attain this access I was denied and therefore at the mercy of my mother’s hand (read: willingness) to put an end to this quest for approval. About two weeks later I received the documentation I needed. A part of my life came in the mail to me from my mother.

Introduction

This chapter surveys the work done on Blackgirls' lived and educational experiences in the United States, with specific attention on studies in formal education and the developing area of Black Girlhood Studies (BGS), to illustrate the centrality of the body to Blackgirls' material realities. The overview of literature in the fields of Education and BGS is intended to create a dialogue between the two. Two primary goals of this discourse are to highlight, for the field of Education and scholars within, the value in the approaches and theorization of Black Girlhood scholars; and to demonstrate for BGS scholars urgent need to take stake in the happenings within Education, and/or at least begin imagining the benefits of a BGS-Education collaboration. I begin this endeavor by making a case that the body, especially the Black female body, is integral to Blackgirls' quality of life and therefore should be understood as an archive of experience. To do so, I review instances which assert that bodies occupying the identities of Black and female are positioned on the margins of femininity and Blackness, highlighting the pertinence of the body to Black female lived experience. Next, I review studies on and about Blackgirls in formal education and highlight how the body is both hypervisible and yet undermined as a significant component to the experiences of Blackgirls.

Following these studies, I discuss the developing area of Black Girlhood Studies, focusing specifically on how Black female bodies are situated and theorized in this area. In this section I also highlight some of the studies put forth by scholars in BGS and conclude this section by outlining key assumptions of this area's approach to understanding, working with, and doing research with Blackgirls. Lastly, I discuss three metaphors—collective, outlaw, and possibility—of the Black female body that materialized from the aforementioned literature. To

close, this chapter situates my project within Black Girlhood Studies and bridges the field of Education and formal schooling to the area Black Girlhood Studies.

Making a Case for the Body

“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”

The above excerpt from the late Black feminist June Jordan’s (1980) “A poem about my rights” still reverberates with many Black females throughout the history of the United States. Likewise this framing of Black femininity as wrong and a contradiction, places Black females in an ironic position—policed and yet unsafe. As illustrated in the site of memory above, long after my time served in juve’ I was still being policed. Furthermore, to do what I wanted to do with my body and tell my story, I had to first verify my story through documentation. And when seeking to do so I realized yet another barrier to doing what I wanted to do: I had no authority over my body’s archive and needed my mother’s assistance. Similarly, Jordan (2000) expresses this “wrongness” from a woman’s standpoint; while also having queried over these same sentiments as a young girl, she expressed both in that poem and her book *Soldier: A poet’s childhood* when she discloses “I wasn’t too happy about maybe having to choose between having brains and being pretty. I wasn’t too happy that maybe somebody else had already made that choice for me” (p. 260). Like this reality of feeling wrong, the events in Jordan’s life which forged such sentiments, are unfortunately ordinary and to be expected in the lives of Black females.

One does not have to venture too far into the past to recount instances that confirm and/or infer this undue reality. Recently, in December 2013, seven year-old Lamya Cammon² was asked to the front of the classroom by her teacher and sent back to her desk crying, missing one braid that her teacher cut with a pair of classroom scissors. There is no justification for this teacher's decision to assault Lamya. Further, it is equally unfathomable that Lamya was removed to another class, the teacher continues to teach at the school with no suspension or punishment other than a police issued 175\$ fine for disorderly conduct. In this moment, Lamya's body was marked as wrong and not her own. The teacher's frustration with her playing in her hair absentmindedly while listening to class lecture, was not a justification to cut Lamya's hair. Moreover, the deliberate calling of Lamya to the front of the class, grabbing of scissors, cutting of her hair, and then asking her "Now what you gonna go home and say to your momma?" was an attack on her as well as her overall self-concept.

Similarly, in November 2013 in Orlando Florida 12-year-old Vanessa VanDyke³ endured the trauma of being told that if she did not cut her hair, a curly afro, that she would face expulsion. Although the school administrators immediately recanted, it does not take away the fact that Vanessa was affected by this incident. During an interview she shared the significance she attached to her hair stating, "It says that I'm unique...It's puffy and I like it that way. I know people will tease me about it because it's not straight. I don't fit in." The reasons surrounding the initial decision, "Hair must be a natural color and must not be a distraction," according to the school's student handbook, can be read as mere implementation of policy. Yet, it can be also be read as a failed attempt to minimize the bullying Vanessa endured. What is evidenced in her

² blackgirllonghair.com/2009/12/milwaukee-teacher-cuts-off-little-girls-natural-hair-as-punishment-throws-it-away-in-front-of-her/

³ hellebeautiful.com/2013/11/29/update-vanessa-vandyke-can-keep-her-natural-hair-but/

statements is that she felt singled out. It can be inferred from the ongoing politics of Black hair that Vanessa's hair was marked wrong, a "distraction."

Adding to the discourse of natural Black hair as a "distraction" is the story of seven-year-old Tiana Parker⁴ of Tulsa Oklahoma who was coerced to change schools because of her dreadlocks. In this particular case school administrators' rationale behind their actions included the possibility that Tiana's hair, "could distract from the respectful and serious atmosphere it strives for." This statement begs the question: are dreadlocks inherently disrespectful and detract from a rigorous learning atmosphere? This is another example of a Black girl being wounded in a formal education space and where once again, one can deduce that her Blackness and femininity accompanied by her age and location played a part in situating her hair and therefore her body as a distraction and thus "wrong." Of all things, why was her natural hair considered a distraction? Further, the school's assertion that her dreadlocks are 'distracting' and a potential threat to the school's perceived rigor and quality is othering.

I am not indicting Tiana's Black femininity as the sole root of the unwanted attention and maltreatment she received. I am, however, pointing toward its ramifications—a Black girl was likely read through narrow lenses of respectability, beauty, and hair normatives and therefore marked as aberrant. These instances shed light on the ways Black hair and self-expression are monitored and analyzed. These are not the only means by which Black females are patrolled and tagged as "wrong."

The preceding accounts reveal veracities of in school experiences of Blackgirls. They highlight the ways the body, for the Black girl, is a signification of her expression and yet to

⁴ hellobeautiful.com/2013/09/04/wtf-school-sends-7-year-old-girl-home-for-distracting-dreadlocks/

observers, in these cases teachers, it is a site to police. It is not only in schools that Blackgirls are read as wrong and policed. These aforementioned examples evidence the perils that beset Black female bodies in White educational spaces but Blackgirls' bodies are also attacked within their own communities. Below is a discussion of accounts that exhibit how the recurrence of being read as wrong and in need of policing connects to experiences of mistreatment and devaluation both in and outside of schools.

While the formerly described reports of Blackgirls in school locate schools and school administrators as culprits in demarcating the Black female body as wrong and policing it, the same processes occur even within Black spaces. Accordingly, even in Black spaces, or instances where culprits are Black, Black females have no respite from violence. Earlier in November 2013, an unknown Black male teenager in Baltimore, Maryland raped an 11-year-old girl.⁵ It is unclear where the rape occurred but from the description, "in the 1900 Block" there is possibility the rape occurred outside. What is clear, however, is that this girl was Black and her Black female body was seen as a body able to be possessed (McKittrick, 2006). Her body, in this case, was wronged because it was deemed accessible and disposable. Retreating into history a bit, in May 2003 in Newark, New Jersey, 15-year-old Sakia Gunn⁶, a self-identified lesbian, was stabbed in the chest by a Black male in his mid-twenties after experiencing street harassment (Fogg-Davis, 2006) and sexual terrorism (James, 2012) that resulted in Sakia defending herself and eventually being killed. Sakia, a masculine performing lesbian, wearing baggy jeans and sporting a low fade haircut at the time of the event, was waiting at the bus stop with her friends, when they received unwanted attention from Black males in a car. One could insist, and some

⁵ www.wbaltv.com/news/maryland/baltimore-city/city-police-need-help-identifying-suspect-in-sexual-assault/-/10131532/22977528/-/qs9otn/-/index.html

⁶ <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0306/13/se.09.html>

reporters did, that it was late at night and they should not have been on the streets at that time of night. It could also be advised that she should have acquiesced to his “cat calling” and even possibly his sexual advances. What is evident, however, is that her youthful, Blackness, femininity, and sexual orientation compounded on that night and cost Sakia her life (Isoke, 2013). Furthermore, these same identities waged a war within the Black community writ large where every effort was made to protect the Black community and Black male identity by directing attention toward her age, the time of the crime, and other factors that suppressed her appearance, the actions that led to Sakia’s death, and any other factors that would indict the Black man who preyed upon an underage girl.

In 2008, singer and artist R. Kelly⁷ was acquitted of a case of child pornography where he was accused of subjecting an underage girl to lewd sexual acts that were videotaped. Whether the girl “consented” and whether or not it was in fact them on the tape is immaterial here. What is pertinent is the way the young girl and other key Black female material witnesses were placed on trial for their behavior and character. Yet again, the bodies of these females were considered disbelieving and even evil, proposing that these Black females were less credible than R. Kelly whose history confirms his desire and pursuit of young girls.

Similarly, in 1991 prestigious professor and lawyer, Anita Hill, was slandered upon accusing Clarence Thomas, a Supreme Court nominee at the time, of sexual harassment. During this case Hill’s character was dragged through the mud. Her sexual history, motivations for staying in her position and agreeing to a second position under his supervision, and credibility was taken to term, to the extent that she was summoned to undergo a polygraph test. The rise of Clarence to the Supreme Court and the veracity of Hill’s testimony even after the case, signify

⁷ http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/14/arts/music/14kell.html?_r=2&

the devaluation of the Black female. Likewise, the scrutiny and policing Hill encountered during a court case, of which she was the victim, supports the notion that the Black female her body is relegated as insignificant and incredulous.

Furthermore, Crystal Mangum⁸ a 34-year-old Black woman was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced in November 2013 to 14 to 18 years in jail for standing her ground and stabbing her abusive boyfriend in self-defense. If this verdict was not shocking enough, this is the second time Mangum stood before a court and was scrutinized, probed, and convicted of being Black and female. In 2006, while an undergraduate at North Carolina Central University, Crystal accused three Duke lacrosse players of raping her, which turned into yet again, an attack on the Black female body. Newspapers smeared her name, emphasized her job as a stripper and overlooked she was a student, possibly trying to pay fees. Instead, they added “escort” or sex worker to her list of jobs, probed her sexual history to tarnish her character while toting the upstanding reputations, good academic standing, and prestige of the lacrosse players as well as the university they attended, Duke. Mangum’s story paints an all-too-familiar portrait of the politics of identity, location as well as historical tropes haunting contemporary society. Furthermore, it reinforces the position that the Black female body is a cultural archive that gets read through history and up against other bodies and their general history. Embedded within these readings are beliefs about the Black female, which justify the mistreatment, degradation, and overall devaluation of her body.

The previously described incidents, some more familiar than others, are meant to illumine different ways individual Black female bodies are wronged, demarcated as “wrong” and/or “not

⁸ <http://tracking.si.com/2013/11/22/duke-lacrosse-accuser-found-guilty-of-murder/>

good enough” to be protected from harm (Collins, 2000; Richardson, 2009). Patricia Collins (2000) asserts:

All women engage an ideology that deems middle-class, heterosexual, White femininity as normative. In this context, Black femininity as a subordinated gender identity becomes constructed not just in relation to White women, but also in relation to multiple others, namely, all men, sexual outlaws (prostitutes and lesbians), unmarried women, and girls. These benchmarks construct a discourse of a hegemonic (White) femininity that becomes a normative yardstick for all femininities in which Black women typically are relegated to the bottom of the gender hierarchy. (p. 193).

The aforementioned instances elucidate the interrelationship between individual Black female bodies and the Black female body as a collective as well as confirm Collins’ assertion that Black femininity is often forced to stand trial in ways that maleness and White femininity is not required. Moreover, these instances also demonstrate the relationship between Black femininity and enmity a reality theorized, discussed, and vehemently opposed and organized against by Black feminist theory and praxis. Black feminists and feminist of color have traced the genealogy associated with our bodies and mis/treatment (see Anzaldúa & Keating, 2000; Collins, 2000; Davis, 1983; Harris Perry, 2011; hooks, 1981; Roberts, 1997) throughout time. Part of this tracing has also been about bringing to light the spectrum of Black feminist sensibilities that were/are located within temporal realities.

During the period of chattel slavery in the United States Black bodies were relegated disposable, abnormal, and in need of controlling. Black bodies were denigrated and subjected to the auction block, breeding farms, hard labor with minimal feeding, and more (Mitchell & Asante Jr., 2005; McKittrick, 2006). A more apparent reality of these inhumane acts is the

devaluation of the physical bodies of Black individuals. Yet, from archived documentation we also know that slaves were forbidden to read, punished for celebrating and practicing their native religions, and forced to convert to Christianity, which was used to justify white supremacy and Black subordination (Douglass, 2001; Frederickson, 2003). Policing procedures initiated during slavery have been remade to fit the changing milieu of society and these same tactics inferred and still infer the body is more than its physicality or skin and bones.

Feminist philosopher Jacquelyn Zita (1998) suggests the body is, “a materialization, a socially mediated formation, lived individually and in communities as *real effects*” (p. 4). This definition foregrounds the manifestation of the body and situates it as a material and dynamic entity. It is always contextually understood and operates as an individual and group identity. Thus a Black female’s body functions as both hers and a smaller representation of the larger conglomerate that is the Black female body. While all Black females or their bodies are not the same, they are clumped together, which, whether we like it or not, places us in relationship. The American history of slavery is where the (de)valuation of the black body began as well as where it became a collective object from which individual Black bodies have grave difficulty escaping (Davis, 1983; hooks, 1981; McKittrick, 2006; Young, 2005). This devaluation and clumping of experience is noted by feminist philosopher Katherine McKittrick (2006):

The “not-quite” spaces of black femininity are unacknowledged spaces of sexual violence, violence, stereotype, and sociospatial marginalization; erased, erasable, hidden, resistant geographies and women that are, due to persistent and public forms of objectification, not readily decipherable. (p. 61).

Black female bodies are inextricably bound to history. I am not suggesting we cannot be different or attain success that was not accomplished in the past. I am, however recognizing that

how we are read, evaluated, and utilized is constituted through a historically configured Black female body (Boylorn, 2013b; Collins, 2000; Harris Perry, 2011; Roberts, 1997). Again, this assertion is not implying that bodies do not enact agency or that this constructed image of the Black female body is static. Instead, as Harvey Young (2005) articulates, “an *idea* of the black body has been and continues to be projected across actual physical bodies (p. 4) and thereby the everyday living, choices, style of dress, performance of femininity, etc. are mitigated through historical readings and appraisals of the Black female body. In this case, single Black female bodies and individuals are mediated and forced to contest, concede, and/or negotiate with this “idea.”

Black feminist bell hooks (1990) recognized this battle and called for ‘radical black subjectivity’ (rbs), where narrow constructions of Black identity, Black femininity in particular expand to accommodate deeper and layered understandings of Black experience. In doing so, hooks insist that Black females find power and possibility in the margins, in the wrongness of Black femininity. Continuing the connection of the body to identity is performance theorist and autoethnographer Tami Spry (2011) positions the body as a text to be read and understood within context (p. 28). As such, the body is acknowledged as a communicative text that is not only given meaning by the environment in which it’s located (Zita, 1998), but also by how it behaves within and without context. How a body moves and engages in everyday behavior, or performativity, is also inclusive of the body’s culture.

Taking guidance from feminist and cultural theorists who foreground the body to lived experience, I acknowledge the body as a malleable, discursive, and contextually produced creation that is both individual and collective. This formation of the body allows for micro and macro levels of understanding the body. Applying this definition to Black female body and

Black girlhood affirms these larger constructs as having physical materializations, possibly contradicting readings, as well as individual and collective archives that are connected to culture. Black feminists have taken up the call of crafting alternative renderings and images of the Black female and the Black female body generally (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1990, 1994; Jordan, 2000; Lorde, 1984; Morrison, 1970; Oliver, 2010; Shange, 1975).

Black and female bodies have been subjected to enormous undue harm; the rationalizations for this can also be traced back to historical tropes and pathologies created about us. It is also not news that in light of the conditions Black females faced and continue to face that we, like it or not, occupy shared space. A space that links our individual bodies to what Young (2005) calls the “abstract body” that is bound to history, which locates our bodies within a cultural archive of Black female body experience. The earlier dialogue makes a case for attending to the body, when seeking to analyze and understand Black females' lived experiences, in ways that consider historical categorizations and treatment but do not minimize representations of Black females to these. Further, it highlights historical modes of "attending" to the Black female body, which more times than not resulted in over policing, exploitation and debasement of Black femininity.

Consequently, the Black female body as a collective is steeped in pathology and “wrongness,” labels that Black feminists have both rejected and claimed as resistant and imagining spaces (Boylorn, 2013b; Brown, 2009; Weems, 2003; hooks, 1984, 1990; McKittrick, 2006). While it is important and necessary to recognize the work Black feminists have done to elucidate and critique the unfair casting of Black women at the bottom of the rung, it is equally essential to acknowledge these readings and counter narratives do not hone in on the specific realities of Blackgirls. As diva feminists Treva Lindsey (2013) implores, “Although similarities

exist between stereotypes of [B]lack children and adults, it is important to acknowledge differing stereotypes as well as age-inscribed responses to harmful representations” (p. 23). Although the social identity Black girl can be and is claimed by Black females across lines of age, class, sexuality, career, and ethnicity, it is pertinent to recognize that due to the privilege placed on adulthood as well as the assumed progression, maturity, and wisdom in womanhood versus girlhood, that Blackgirls, especially those young in age, are just as at risk of discrimination, mistreatment, and debasement if not possibly more than Black women.

With a foundation laid regarding how the Black female body has been and continues to be read in general with specific examples of that display and confirm the harm Black female bodies face, this next section provides an overview of Blackgirls' experiences in formal education. Here, I distinguish between schooling and education, discuss their connection, and place studies in education in conversation with Black feminist theory and historical readings of the Black female body to situate the body a critical role in shaping the educational as well as the everyday realities of Black females in general, and in this particular case, Blackgirls.

Blackgirls and Schooling

Education is a lifelong journey that takes place through lived experience and one's analysis of and active transformation that emerges from learning. Education ignites students and demands that we move and devise change in personal and social realms (hooks, 1994; Friere, 1968). While schooling and education are often utilized interchangeably, “Schooling is a process intended to perpetuate and maintain the society's existing power relations and the institutional structures that support these arrangements” (Shujaa, 1998, p. 15). It takes place inside as well as outside of formal school settings. Schooling is about socialization and entails indoctrination, production and reproduction of normatives, along with programming bodies to maintain the

status quo of the day (Rury, 2005; Shujaa, 1998). Contrary to igniting self-discovery and an investment personal and social change (hooks, 1994; Friere, 1968), schooling is beholden to the status quo.

What is most important about schooling is its intent and impact it has on bodies. To be clear, schooling is concerned with training; promoting uniformity around agreement with the leading standards; producing and reproducing social hierarchies (Rury, 2005). Therefore, schooling promotes sameness or homogeneity and sustains narrow constructions of students and our bodies. As a result, those whose representation does not meet the standard are schooled even more so and deemed in need of surveillance and “fixing.” And although there is always some degree of change, important here is union between schooling and oppression. The language of schooling signifies academic matriculation and traditional ways of framing education while also denoting training and socialization. To be clear, schooling is about day-to-day processes of attending school to learn as well as the subtle and not-so-subtle messages fed to people about who they are and where they supposedly fit. I offer an original poem to clarify distinctions between schooling and education followed by an overview of data showcasing the positioning of Blackgirls in statistical educational research.

“Education Versus Schooling”

Education is learning to love.
Schooling, limiting potential love partners based on societal imposed standards. Education is exploring sexuality to find what you enjoy most.
Schooling is fearing punishment and never attaining sexual pleasure
Schooling is acting like a girl
Education is self-defining girl
Education heals
Schooling wounds
Schooling takes place in supposed educational spaces
Education sometimes occurs in schools
Education is process
Schooling trains people how to be tools

Literature and scholarship in K-12 education often focuses on academic achievement and potential success that is aggregated by individual variants (AAUW, 1992, 1998, 2001, 2008; NELS, 1988). Accordingly, emphasis is placed on academic success and ambition, which tends to be aggregated by individual variants, i.e., race or gender (AAUW, 2001; NELS, 1988). It can be inferred from these choices surrounding education achievement that educational researchers, mirroring the United States' adoption of Cartesian duality, place stock in individual variants. Moreover, exploring, in this case, educational achievement along single identity associations discounts the experiences of students whose identities are more saliently compounded. Further, such aggregation displays different results when factors for aggregation are multifarious. For example, the American Association of University Women (AAUW), an organization committed to the development and support of female related research and scholarship, did not disaggregate data along racial and gender lines combined until 2008 (AAUW, 2008). With data taken from the National Assessment of Educational Process (NAEP), *Where the girls are: The facts about gender equity in education* discusses girls' educational achievement over the past 35 years. Data revealed that despite the prevailing discourse of 'gender wars' (AAUW, 2001) in education, academic achievement and testing outcomes were closer aligned based on race than gender, with the widest gender gap between white boys and girls. These data indicates a race-gender construction of academics makes for a different and multifaceted reality than one isolating race or gender individually.

Another large data set is the National Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988 designed to collect information from students regarding their ambitions, actual initiatives taken, and beliefs for the purpose of helping educators understand students' experiences in high school. Also interested in Blackgirls' lived experience with particular investment in the impact of self-

perception and educational expectation on Blackgirls' participation in college preparatory activities, Nina Marie Smith (2011) uses data from the NELS. Smith's investigation accomplishes her goals of expanding literature on Blackgirls in education that sheds light into additional resources, i.e., after school programs, early intervention programs, engaged school counselors, and research needed to enhance "life chances and life possibilities" (Hansberry, 1970) of Blackgirls. Smith's study, by nature of the survey data including the voices of students, adds to the research inclusive of Blackgirls' voices but it does not speak to the issues impacting these Blackgirls' self-assessments. Further, surveying students offers only cursory information about students' realities whereas as actual engagement with students proffers a more robust articulation of students, in this case Blackgirls', experiences and perceptions of education.

These data reveal compounding of race and gender create different achievement realities, implying that if the same approach were taken to examine narratives behind the numbers, stories differing those focused solely on race or gender would also emerge. While numbers reveal the realities of academic success for students and point at the insufficiency of aggregating data by only one factor i.e., race or gender, they do not contain complimentary narratives of these Blackgirls. Furthermore the contexts, social, cultural, academic, and familial, impacting these data and the students in it are not included or are only referenced. This data suggests a need for research that produce narratives that answers the call for Blackgirls' everyday experiences in and outside of formal educational spaces as well as the contexts influencing our lives (hooks, 1996; Love, 2012; Smith, 2011; Wahome, 2011). This next section engages studies about Blackgirls that add layers to the general portrait above.

Blackgirls in formal schooling spaces

In 1976 Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot called into question the “blank slate” associated with literature and scholarship on Blackgirls in education—a question that remains relevant.

Pioneering Blackgirls’ entry into educational literature, she was not able to recount previous studies on Blackgirls and instead she examined the historical representations of Black women and their connection to the Black girl, sexism and the role of gender in school, the cultural milieu of classrooms, and race in school. In light of the utter lack of concern with Blackgirls’ realities in educational spaces, Lightfoot satirically expresses, “they have not even been awarded the negative and pejorative stereotypes that correspond to their [B]lack brothers” (p. 239). The preceding statement foreshadows struggles that Blackgirls would come to feel in education around stereotyping, historical Black female tropes, and gender wars. Alongside her criticism was advice on how to capture Blackgirls’ experiences including the importance of moving outside of formal classroom settings to depict more holistic and multidimensional images and narratives.

Lightfoot speaks of the significance of teacher’s self awareness and anti-discriminatory practices, social and cultural realities faced by girls outside of school, as well as the presence of other minority women in the lives of Blackgirls as vital instruments to the collection, enhancement, and overall quality of Blackgirls’ lives. Included in this collection would also be work done by minority women researchers to free ourselves from belief systems, i.e., academic training, and any beliefs, e.g., deficit thinking, that may prevent us from doing humanizing and just work. Overall this article is a call to action to devise an archive of Black girlhood to enrich the lives of Blackgirls in and outside of formal education settings, an archive that has not yet been actualized. The work following Lightfoot responds to her request.

Diane Scott-Jones and Maxine L. Clark (1986) review data exploring, mostly comparatively, the presumed educational success, motivation, and goals of Blackgirls determining that socioeconomic status and race were just as-- if not *more*-- important than gender. Similarly, they insist on more research that explores teacher-student interactions and explicitly accounts for race, gender, and socioeconomic status, suggesting that different results are produced when examined simultaneously versus when they are additives of each other. Taking up the task put for by Lightfoot to unearth the cultural experiences of Blackgirls, Linda Grant's (1994) examines six first-grade classrooms and the roles assigned to Blackgirls in those settings. Grant finds that informal processes in the classroom introduce and/or encourage Blackgirls to assume specific roles of "helper, enforcer, or go-between" with these roles assisting in shaping and preparing Blackgirls for service-related work. To reinforce to these Blackgirls that their value resided in providing service or assistance to others, both Black and White teachers rewarded them for their behavior and less for academics. Demonstrated in the rewarding of those girls who help their peers or display a service-oriented demeanor is the presumption that those girls who do not follow the standards are deviant and thus outlaws of implicit accepted code for Black femininity. Their body, their skin and gender made them a perfect candidate for accommodation so much so that their service ability was foregrounded over their academic ability.

Similarly, almost twenty years later Samantha Wahome (2011), who also reports a lack of research on young Blackgirls' schooling experiences, investigates the perspectives of three second-grade girls. Interested also in the compounded narrative of race, gender, and class she finds that much of how these girls understood their in-school experiences, including their relationships with their peers, were informed by factors and context outside of the classroom.

Wahome's (2011) study expands the work of Grant by exploring how Blackgirls negotiate and understand their race, gender, and class identities and how they impact their classroom experiences. This study reveals that race, even when compared to gender, is a critical factor in peer relationships. Furthermore, it also demonstrates that Raell, Mariah, and Adrianne, the girls in Wahome's study, were cognizant and able to navigate the social milieu of their classroom. While each girl negotiated their positions differently, i.e., by turning to different social groups for belonging, each girl's articulation of self and the compound realities of race, gender, and class speak back to larger social discourses. The significance of self-concept in connection to Blackgirls' in school experiences also surfaced in reference to math and science education (Campbell, 2012; Fordham, 1993; Lim, 2008).

Jae Hoon Lim's (2008) study examining the experiences of two six-grade African American girls in different mathematics classes taught by the same teacher, Mrs. Oliver reveal that both girls will experience the same reality at the end of the school year—neither was enrolled in a higher level math class and both were marked by their teacher as more interested in being “comfortable” and therefore unable to rise to the rigors of honors math. Also unveiled in this study are the ways performances of femininity affect Blackgirls' school realities. For instance, Stella, in a higher but not honors math class, assumes a quiet and passive demeanor in school compared her actual “outgoing” and “loud” personality that she leaves at the door when she enters her school. In contrast, Rachel is outspoken and respected by many of her classmates. Paralleling Lim's study is Shanyce Campbell's (2012) project examining the role of teachers in the trajectory of Blackgirls through the mathematics classes using data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002, which identifies uncover, using logistic regression to estimate the probability, that students would be recommended for advanced courses on the basis of schools,

peers, the individual student, and family. Lim (2008), Campbell found the student's self-concept as well as teachers assessment of girls, both behaviorally and cognitively, were the primary indicators.

Accompanying this deterrence are the challenges Black students generally must surmount in these same areas, which thus make the attempts by Blackgirls to enter higher level math and science classes an exceptionally adversity. In a study exploring how school counselors position low-income African American girls as mathematics and science learners in predominantly minority schools organized by the American School Counseling Association, West-Olatunji et al. (2010) found that in the case of the three counselors examined, they had low expectations for their Black girl students. Also, that these lower expectations in comparison to the expectations of White students were justified by the need to frequently address "behavioral" issues, which were also attributed to lack of parental involvement, discipline at home, and other factors that situated the African American students and culture as deficient. West-Olatunji and associates (2010) state, "counselors who lack sufficient cultural competence may inadvertently assess culturally diverse students' behaviors from a deficit framework...Increasing their understanding of the cultural and home experiences of students, school counselors may be able to move...to a more strength-based, culturally responsive approach" (p. 191). Likewise, this study revealed the role of self-awareness and reflexivity in possibly shaping counselor's comfort with assisting in math and science learning.

Alongside the pertinence of advocacy in the area of academic achievement is the need for Blackgirls to be protected and backing from teachers and school administrators especially when it comes to "gender violence" (Tonnesen, 2013). In presenting her findings of her exploration of sexual harassment in a public school in Philadelphia, Sonja Tonnesen (2013) discusses the

benefits of white privilege and femininity in the school environment. As a law student interested in gender related policies and their impact on how girls in particular experience school, she finds that “implicit biases” or mental happenings that inform decision-making that function without the thinker being consciously aware of them, greatly affect school officials’ response and lack of response to African American girls being sexually harassed. These presumptions, Tonnesen express, are tied to historical evaluation of Black females and Blacks in general that date back to slavery. Moreover, as observed in the case of Crystal Mangum as well as Sakia Gunn, when Blackgirls and women stand up to their predators they are often deemed the aggressors. Tonnesen (2013) states, “Often misperceiving Blackgirls’ and young women’s self-defense as aggression, school officials frequently punish victimized Blackgirls and young women. Implicit biases that Blackgirls are more aggressive and thus less deserving of sympathy than girls of other races compound this problem” (p. 10). Overall, Tonnesen’s project underlines the ways Black femininity is marked wrong. Further, the penalty for Black femininity is undue sexual harassment, which goes unchecked and unmonitored—an imminent consequence of the negative and pathology attached to it.

Also, illustrating the significance of historical tropes and renderings of Black femininity is Signithia Fordham’s (1993) study exploring the impact of gender on academic achievement in Blackgirls in a magnet program within a large predominantly Black public high school. Fordham’s examination found that Blackgirls who faired best in school—good grades, test scores, and support from teachers—often took a more silent approach to their education. These girls did not disrupt the assumed social order between black boys and girls. In contrast, those “loud Blackgirls” tended to have good grades but lower test scores and teacher support. These findings revealed that assumed gender roles and conceptions of femininity affected the

perception of Blackgirls, which overlapped into their academic experience, demonstrating the strain black females feel while striving for academic success. Moreover, Fordham's study demonstrates Blackgirls' behavior is measured alongside a definition of white femininity where those girls who resisted behaviors deemed acceptable by teachers and other staff were marked not only as different but also inferior, indicated in the phrase "those loud Blackgirls." The conflation of personality/character with academic capability supports the assertion that the black female body, in this case its behavior, largely influences her life experiences, including those in education.

Joy Lei's (2003) two-year ethnographic study in a high school examining the role of stereotypes in framing Asian boys and Blackgirls disclose a parallel reality for Blackgirls. Lei found Blackgirls' behavior and "loudness" proved resistant and contradictory to gender expectations held by teachers with only one teacher, a black male, associating their loudness with resistance and contestation of the school's power structure. Critical to this study was the presumption by all teachers that Blackgirls' loud and unacceptable behavior would influence and even stifle their academic success. Shifting context and entering an elite private school Horvat & Antonio (1999) examined Blackgirls' experiences at this school finding that many girls faced undue symbolic violence⁹ such as self-isolation, concession to normatives, and rationalization of concession and sacrificed mental health and safety in the name of academic success. They suggest the struggles and adversities faced by these girls provided them skills of how to function in a white-dominated society and emphasized the need to fit in. These same girls who conceded, supposedly "willingly" and worked to fit in with the normative culture expressed feeling

⁹ As stated by Erin Horvat (2003), It is the habituated notions that lie beneath the consciousness of dominated individuals and groups of individuals that allow them to accept without question the "natural order" (p. 4).

invisible unless they broke code (i.e. shoes out of uniform) or culture of the school (e.g., driving to school, leaving for lunch). Yet, they fail to address systemic realities that influence agency and opportunity—pointing to a need to gather information on the concessions made and self-concepts developed by Blackgirls while in pursuit of educational achievement.

Paralleling the insufficient exploration of Blackgirls schooling experiences above, Annette Henry (1998) conducts an ethnographic study on Blackgirls in an African-centered school where she examined the teaching practices of black women this African-centered school and how their black female students experience learning in the classroom. From classroom observations and teachers' assessments, these Blackgirls were deemed passive and disengaged from their learning. However, when Henry interacted with the girls and asked about their experiences a robust and alternative narrative presented, indicating a need for investigating Blackgirls' journeys within constructs designed for and/or out of Blackgirls' bodies. Aware of the unique results of the compounding of race and gender to Blackgirls' educational pursuit, Venus Evan-Winters (2005) re-conceptualizes educational resiliency to speak to the distinctive circumstances of Blackgirls.

While Evans-Winters' study centers the girls' formal education experiences, she also offers a story educational resiliency focusing on the impact of their out-of-school lives on their education. Imbued in this study are the taxing struggles and adversities some Blackgirls in working class urban neighborhoods face while also capturing biases and difficulties surrounding the defining of resiliency. Specifically, her study implicitly questions the usefulness of studying and evaluating students based on general standards and/or standards created without placing particular dynamics, the intersection of race and gender, at the forefront. As a result, she calls for a rearticulating of resiliency.

Her work also calls attention to the need for blurring boundaries between family-community relations and factors, i.e., Black female mentorships, family, she posits greatly influence Blackgirls' educational pursuits. Evans-Winters also examines their lives outside of school unveiling the struggles and adversities some Blackgirls in working class urban neighborhoods face. Despite this study's intent to observe resiliency in Blackgirls the need for the author to redefine resiliency as well as the relationship between school, community, and authority desired by the girls, indicate a power differential aligning the life experiences, needs, and strengths of Blackgirls with deficiency. Marking Blackgirls educational experiences as marginal and inferior to standards cloaked in whiteness, white femininity and middle class principles permits the strengths and perseverance of Blackgirls and education to be left out of resiliency literature, as the outcomes of such resiliency does not always end and therefore cannot be accurately measured in high school graduation or college—traditional measures of academic success.

Captured above are studies about Blackgirls' within school experiences. These are inundated with expectations of behavior, success, and academic achievement mitigated by popular constructions of Blackness and femininity. Also, these expectations when imposed on Blackgirls tend to unjustly connect her behavior, e.g., being loud, being passive, sitting in the back of the class, helping peers, to academic potential and success. The preceding studies point to the lack of space allotted to Blackgirls in educational research and calls for research that crosses the school threshold to "understand the social meaning of their [Blackgirls'] cultural perspective" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1976, p. 260). Further, while the term Black is often used, more times than not it is conflated with African American, which indicates that education

research narrowly defines Blackness to being African American and/or has not expanded its vision enough to consider a diasporic view of Blackness.

Taking direction from those educational researchers who recognize that knowledge of Blackgirls' identity constructions and livelihoods outside of school are instrumental to creating quality in school, this next section, discusses work that speaks to the happenings within the lives of Blackgirls outside of the context for the purpose of displaying a dialectical relationship between educational studies about Blackgirls and studies that highlight Black girlhood as an area of importance. Unlike the former studies that expose in school realities of Blackgirls, those that follow consider the interplay of Black girlhood, education, and culture while presenting multiple dimensions of Black girlhood. These exposes' reveal triumphs, ambiguities, difficulties, and imaginings of Blackgirls and Black girlhood.

Blackgirls, Education, and Culture

In seeking to assess and enhance the livelihoods of Blackgirls, even if only in school settings, one must go beyond the realm of intended change, educational spaces, to gather a holistic perspective of the issues and conditions affecting it. Taking up Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1976) call for "crossing the threshold of school" to garner comprehension of the complexities shaping Blackgirls' lived experiences generally, and in school occurrences particularly, I provide a review of studies that demo the interrelationship between Black girlhood, education, and culture. These examples can be situated in the developing areas of Black Girlhood Studies, which is discussed following these studies. This section concludes with key assumptions of this area's approach to understanding, working with, and doing research with Blackgirls.

Analogous to Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1976) work on Blackgirls in the field of Education, sociologist Joyce Ladner (1971) contested popular pathologizing and deficit views of black folks

and black females in particular (Moynihan, 1965) and explored the interplay of race, class, and gender in the lives of Blackgirls. In *Tomorrow's tomorrow*, she shares insights from a four-year study revealing coping strategies generated and enacted by black females as well as replicated tropes of Blackness and Black femininity in Blackgirls' development. Ladner's approach to Blackgirls proved different from those of the time as it posits Blackgirls as knowledge creators and strategists. She does not shy away from the harsh realities of being in a Black female working class and the material realities of such interlocking identities. Instead, she paints a holistic picture with social-cultural U.S hierarchies as background and urban life as her specific context.

In acknowledgement and in resistance to dichotomous relations that often pose Black females as deficient and their negative impact on social workers' ability to sufficiently help Blackgirls, Joyce West Stevens (2002) creates a textbook intended to help students in Social Work consider issues of race, class, and gender in their analysis. Simultaneously, she hopes that through her counter narrative and development models, these students come to perceive Black girl identity and lives as multi-layered and full with resilient. Stevens provided an overview of the current theory and literature shaping the field of social work and how reframing Blackgirls through the lens of resiliency creates a counter narrative to popular interpretation of Blackgirls' experiences.

By insisting that social work students see Blackgirls in a new light, Stevens enforces a revision project where the social and cultural and material illustrations of black girlhood are considered and used to contextualize how Blackgirls think, behave, and represented. Similarly, Rozie-Battle (2002) provides an overview of the topics greatly affecting the lives of African American girls and positions the Black church as a strong advocate of African American girl

empowerment. Like Stevens Rozie-Battle, located in the area of social work, emphasizes the strength and resiliency of Blackgirls, specifically African American girls and discusses the external factors that give rise to such strength and endurance. Accordingly, she recognizes and discusses the compounded effects of being Black and female. Though she acknowledges the near inexistence of psychosocial research on Blackgirls, she still does not consort with them to address the shortcomings of social work. Stevens (2002) and Rozie-Battle (2002) attempt to lay bare narrow representations and misreading of Blackgirls, but their articulations are void of Blackgirls' voices, expressed needs and desires.

Like the Black body, individual Black female bodies generally, and Black girl bodies particularly, are constituted through a larger abstract and popularly constructed Black female body (Young, 2010). Bound to this conceptual body are tropes, stereotypes, and myths that are juxtaposed with actual Black female bodies (Collins, 2000; Harris Perry, 2011; Lindsey, 2013; Mowatt & French, 2013; White, 2001). Congruently, Deborah Tolman takes on the challenges of debunking myths surrounding sexuality of the 'Urban' or non-white and almost always Black girl. Tolman (1996) retorts, "It is not hard to flesh out a single face, a single body, for The Urban Girl. This stereotype is not a real person but a unidimensional stick figure who lives in the public imagination rather than on the streets of urban America" (p. 255). Through her interrogation of language assigned to the urban girls, Tolman illustrates the pertinent role language and labeling has in the reification of dichotomous framings of girls along racial and class lines. In her study of interviewing suburban and urban girls, she found that in the case of girls living in urban settings that more times than not they would forego acting on their desires, "silencing" their bodies (minimizing activities like dancing that would induce desire) to concede to safety.

“Urban” girls were conscious of the ghost of bad reputation and other dangers that might surface when choosing sexual desire over protection. The mythical publicly imagined urban girl existed only in the minds of these girls lodged within secret desires and curiosities. On the other hand, suburban girls, none of whom were Black, made no explicit claims about reputation or potential danger. Essential within this study is the burden urban girls carry surrounding the baggage of the location and label “urban” as well as the historical stereotypes of the Black woman it is interlocked with. Furthermore, it parallels the realities Black women encounter with respect to appraisal of Black women bodies and exhibit the resemblance between Blackgirls’ and women’s valuation and treatment.

Presenting an actual depiction of stories and encounters of urban girls in New York City that portrays the compounded realities of race, gender, sexuality, class, and age is the novel *Push*. During a talk in 2007, on her novel author Sapphire described *Push* as a compilation of Black girl narratives to which she was exposed as a social worker. During her talk she described the book’s title as the courage to tell, to push beyond “inconvenient truths” in the name of healing. During her career as a social worker she was expected to keep records and bury them with the individuals marked as bodies entering and exiting the office, but instead, she was compelled to do something more—to share with others the unspoken and taboo happenings in Blackgirls’ lives. She disclosed the pushback she received from Black individuals who seemed to prefer, rather than bringing to light material truths in the lives of Blackgirls with whom she worked and therefore in need of address, that these painful narratives and their outcomes be buried in a graveyard owned and utilized for the Black community only, i.e., familial molestation, HIV/AIDS, child abuse. Violent attempts, physical and psychological, to suppress

these painful truths create an illusion that the battle is only against *them* or those so called isolated accounts. Disclosure makes everyone accountable (hooks, 2005).

Exposing the naked, raw, and gritty truths of growing up Black, Jamaican American to be specific, female, and working class in the city part of Cleveland, Ohio is Black feminist Elaine Richardson (2013) in her memoir *PHD to phd: How education saved my life*. In this telling, Richardson walks through the socio-temporal contextualities shaping her life and perceived choices. Marked by race, gender, class, shadism (preference for lighter skin within Black beauty), and other physical aesthetics lauded by the Black community generally, Richardson places stock in education, formal and informal, as a tool for survival. Her story reveals the complexities of Black girlhood and evidences a need to do away with dichotomous analyses of Blackgirls and the treatment that it ensues. Illustrated in her narrative, being smart and capable of thriving in academics does not preclude Blackgirls, or any youth for that matter (particularly those growing up in the inner city) from sexual curiosity, pregnancy, drugs, poor choices, and hardship. In this acknowledgement I am not insisting these indulgences are only had and acted upon by Blackgirls or inner city youth. I am, however, urging that dichotomous assessments and renderings of Blackgirls (and other youth of color), which direct attention toward those youth who do not explicitly resist and reject standards of normalcy, forward the incorrect belief that certain Black female bodies need policing while others need no support. This fallacy creates tension between Blackgirls, reifies good vs. bad girl dichotomy, and boxes in the possibilities for Black girl being.

Supportive evidence of the need for more literature that engages Blackgirls and Black girlhood from a holistic perspective is Amy Masko's (2005) study examining the experiences of multiethnic students. This study revealed that race and racism proved more prevalent and part of

the daily lives of one particular 12 year old Black girl, Keandra, where she identifies themes of anger and sadness associated with Keandra's race and experiences of racism. Masko also finds that dialogue across generations, specifically between Keandra her mom and were key to her meaning making and responses to race and racism. While Masko expressed investment in attaining youth's stories and used Critical Race Theory to make sense of these experiences, her analysis does not connect systemic racism to Keandra's story. Moreover, she implies a need for educators, parents and others in the lives of multiethnic youth to be available and competent in order to assist these youth with navigating and sense making around issues of racism and racism. Yet as a White woman with African American daughters and a Director of a program serving mostly non-White children, she made no mention of responsibilities or an awareness of competencies necessary to advocate for and be of use in the lives multiethnic youth and African American girls in particular.

Answering Masko's suggestion that parents are available to help students in general and Blackgirls in particular analyze and understand race, Janie Ward (1996) conducts and discusses a cross-generational study examining the transmission of race-related strategies passed to children from their parents. During this study Ward sought to uncover how Black parents educate their children about racism finding that Black parents share knowledge around race in many ways and *how* this information is delivered differentially impacted children's reception to the messages. While this study appears in an anthology on urban girls and its title indicates a discussion on how to raise African American girl resisters, Ward does not specifically address the dynamics of a race-gendered lived experience. She emphasizes the truth telling involved in sharing with children *realities* about race, but what about race? And how, if at all, does gender enter the conversation? Could these raw truths be saturated with subtle sexism and heteropatriarchy?

Ward's study presents an important idea enacted by Black girlhood—resistance. Simultaneously, she implicitly raises the question, resistance *to what*. As well, Ward's study implies that Black girlhood entails an undermining or lack of attention, by girls and/or others in their lives, to gendered realities at the pressing need to tend to race and racism.

Invested in the interaction of race, gender, and class, Rebecca Carroll (1997) collects the stories and experiences of Blackgirls throughout the United States that raise issues of identity and various forces that influence and mold Blackgirls' self-understandings and articulations of race and gender. Within characters' stories, the complexity of having one's body read and assigned value is discussed. In reference to her body and different types of dance, Lanika of Birmingham Alabama states the following:

I admit that it can be difficult as a black student of ballet. See, although African dance has changed over the centuries, one component of African dance that has always been the same is free movement. African tribal dances were all very contracted and released—a lot of bending down, jerking, and flowing motions—while European dance has always been very stuff and straight postured. That's why I take an African dance class twice a week, because when I first started to study ballet seriously and was doing it three and four hours a day, my knees starting giving me trouble. African dance allows my body to work out its kinks.
(p. 33)

Lanika contends that African dance fixes or deconstructs what "European dance" and specifically ballet does to her body, and that this 'doing' enacted by ballet is not necessarily positive or beneficial to her body. Her assessment of her body is that it should be free flowing and fluid and that ballet stifles this flexible movement. Represented in this passage and others

like Lanika's in Carroll's (1997) study is the power of the body in designating belonging—a story familiar to Black female bodies and impactful to Black girlhood.

Correspondingly, Aliona Gibson's (1995) memoir *Nappy* affords a telling of Black girlhood with focus on the production and meaning assigned to the body with respect to different settings, in particular social institutions and locations. For instance, after cutting her hair into a low fade Aliona asserts, "I decided that being able to wash my hair whenever I wanted, and finally being able to learn to swim were more important to me than others people's hangups [sic]" (p.5). Evident in her statement are the imposed standards of Black beauty along with the expected concessions of Black females that are to follow. Corresponding with Gibson's articulation of her hair and identity journey as a Black female growing up in the 1980s in California, is June Jordan's (2000) telling of her childhood experiences as a Caribbean-American with immigrant parents growing up in New York City in the mid 1930s. When given the opportunity to choose what to share with the world about her life, Jordan offers a complex, candid, and inspiring portrait of her childhood, revealing a struggle with identity, familial relationships, and the ongoing fight of being a soldier versus a self-actualized and self-defined person. Societal institutions forced constrictions revealed in her story that were concurrently enforced verbatim and contested by her parents. Jordan's disconcertion with the narrowly imposed images and possibilities for her life exemplifies the prevalence of stereotypes and limitations imposed upon Blackgirls' lives.

Paralleling Gibson and Jordan's insights on the hierarchical value of bodies based on identity markers, Aimee Cox (2009) explores how young females at a shelter in Detroit rework, negotiate, and interject identity categories that illustrate a savvy intentionality to subvert race and gender power relations that potentially limit and/or threaten life possibilities. Refusing to critique

or fix their self-representation choices, and instead recognize and celebrate the intellect, sophistication, and strategies needed to deploy these complex performances of identity; she identifies “thugs,” “black divas,” and “wannabees as three salient identity performances embodied by participants. Contrary to shelter staff’s viewing some identities as more problematic and in need of correction, Cox finds the preceding performances as a means to attain resources, power, and trump externally imposed constraints. She cautions against people working with Blackgirls undermining the intentionality of adopted scripts. In addition, her work implies that in the case of Black females, identity negotiation is conducted against the backdrop of historical representations femininity. This is not to suggest that these negotiations are unique to Black girlhood, but does illuminate the unique positioning of Blackgirls, “posing a threat to racial and gender oppression as Black women’s [and Blackgirls’] very beings stand in opposition to White patriarchy and female dependency on men for material and emotional support” (p. 119).

Although gratuitous devaluations have been and continue to be made upon Black females, those scholars interested in depicting a robust narrative do not shy away from unwarranted accusations, labeling, and/or problematic readings. For instance, Black sexuality generally and Black female sexuality in particular is often considered a taboo topic and/or one that more times than not assigns demeaning scripts to Black female bodies. Fittingly, attempts have been made to cover up, sanitize, and clean up the images and persona of Black female sexuality with the hope of bringing more so called respect and dignity to the Black female collective (White, 2001; Lei, 2003; Morris, 2007). However, Black girlhood scholars, like Cox, embrace these tensions, conflicted categorizations and works within as well as against them.

Carla Stokes (2007) explored sexual scripts, self-definition, and hip hop culture embedded in the internet profile pages of Blackgirls living in the southern region of the United

States ranging 14-17 years of age. Through this project the dominant scripts “Freaks,” “Virgins,” “Down-Ass Chicks/Bitches,” “Pimpettes,” and “Resisters” emerged. And while there is a concern that media disallows and/or rarely depicts Blackgirls especially Blackgirls in empowering ways (Lindsey, 2013), Stokes (2007), “argues this new medium [home pages on a youth-oriented website] provides unparalleled insight into how Blackgirls use media, create cultural productions, construct sexual definitions (Collins, 2000), and negotiate patriarchal cultural scenarios in a naturalistic setting” (p. 173). This study provides entrée into the ways Blackgirls utilize cyber space or digital media to construct self-definitions that both reinscribe and transgress historical renderings and tropes of Black females. Additionally, this project contest the position that girls passively consume messages due to an inability to understand, refute, and/or enter a dialogue with media.

On a similar note, self-defined diva feminist Treva Lindsey (2013) through visual media text analysis, hip hop feminist theory, and social and cultural theory to examine how popular culture depicts African American girlhood and adolescence. Through her exploration Lindsey purports the stake popular culture has in empowering Blackgirls simultaneously acknowledging the limitations and challenges in digital and social media. In particular she illuminates the context around three images released in popular culture—a sesame character celebrating Black girl hair, Willow Smith’s “whip my hair” music video, and a video of a Black teenage girl performing oral sex— to call attention to the influence of the public and media in constructions of the Black girl. In this piece self- empowerment is defined as, “being both knowledgeable of and able to act in healthful, safe and self-determined ways that affirm one’s humanity” (p. 23). Although this is a clear and functioning conceptualization, the determining of such a reality is

more dubious. In other words, who gets to deliberate what it means for a Black girl to be self-empowered and what, if any, sort of actions read as self-empowered?

Lindsey offers hip hop feminism as a potential framework for thinking through contemporary Black girlhood, while in the same breath passing judgment and evaluating the teenage girls' actions, giving oral sex on camera, as a disempowering act. This maneuver permits a shifting to hip hop feminist Ruth Nicole Brown's (2009) description of hip-hop feminist pedagogy when recounting a lap dance she witnessed given by a Black girl at a lounge:

Hip-hop feminist pedagogy is not about vilifying the girl who did the dance, or the recipient, or the audience for watching her performance, but about creating a space for her to be beautiful, and not just because of how she can dance for someone else. But the movement and gestures performed for self-fulfillment are also applauded and thought valuable. Hip-hop feminist pedagogy allows those expected to dance to put some words together to name what it means that strip club behavior, norms, and sensibilities extend beyond the strip club into our daily life as Black women and girls (p. 138)

There is great significance in Brown's assertion. First, while Brown is speaking specifically of dance in this moment, public pleasing/pleasure can be put in its place to express how Black female bodies are negatively read when performing in ways that appear to justify negative labeling. Second, it demands that we dissect these performances in order that a both/and story is created, where the Blackgirl can be read as performing (for others) and providing self-pleasure.

At the same time, while recorded oral sex is not to be conflated with providing a lap dance in public, it can be understood as a public performance (for others). I recognize that consent, child pornography, and possible coercion, as mentioned by Lindsey (2013) are real issues that must be considered. Concurrently, to foreclose on the potentiality that this girl

received any pleasure or was automatically disempowered in that moment also denies her agency and the right to self-define her behavior. In contrast, “Hip-hop feminist pedagogy recognizes and validates the everyday work many young women of color are doing to create social change that falls outside of mainstream hip-hop, commodified feminism, traditional organizing, and formal education” (Brown, 2009, p. 136).

Embodying this break from mainstream that locates Blackgirls within the fold of hip-hop is Kyra Gaunt’s (2006) counter narrative of hip hop declaring, “African American girls embody the ideals of black music-making in the games they play” (p. 2). Through her analysis and demonstration of the musical and performance intelligence of games played by Blackgirls, Gaunt offers an unconventional importance of Blackgirls in Hip Hop. Here Black girl bodies are explicitly used and celebrated as producers of knowledge and musical sensibility. Extending the conversation of the role of Hip Hop in the lives of Blackgirls is Bettina Love (2012) who examines six African American female teens’ sense making of rap music through videos, lyrics, and popular held beliefs and assumptions about Hip Hop where she offers Hip Hop feminism as a tool for assisting Blackgirls critique and still claim space in Hip Hop. Emanating from this study is need for spaces that invite Blackgirls to share their lived experiences, desires, and interests and also help them develop tools for critiquing, imagining, and re-configuring them.

Emphasized in Love’s findings was the lack of systematic analysis in terms of the girls’ analysis of Black female images in media, prompting her to demand a “need [for] teachers who expose popular culture for its contrived messages built on stereotypes but do not demoralize youth choices...” (p. 95). Acknowledging that her study focused on Blackgirls’ voices and readings of Hip Hop as related to their identity, Love also distinguishes her project from celebratory Black girl work. She claims, “...It is not a celebration, though I still wish it were.

Instead, this book is a snapshot of how six Blackgirls understand rap music without intervention or pedagogy from school officials or myself...” (p. 31). The preceding statement and study express a need for Blackgirl celebratory work.

Instead Black girlhood is fraught with unfair judgments accompanied by popular and extreme tropes of Black femininity and disproportionate numbers of us entering the juvenile justice system (Morris, 2012; Winn, 2010, 2011). Despite popular constructions of Blackgirls as criminals, promiscuous, and therefore deserving to be punished, Monique Morris (2012) asserts, “For too many Blackgirls, schools are places...where they are judged and punished for who they are, not necessarily for what they have done” (<http://blackstarjournal.org/?p=1744>). Morris suggests that educators must scrutinize the experiences of Blackgirls in and outside of the school context to combat this increasing pathway from school-to-prison for all youth. Morris’ claim that Blackgirls wind up in the juvenile justice system more times than not for how others read and evaluate her body is supported in Maisha Winn’s (2010) study that examines the lives and incarceration narratives of Blackgirls who participated in performance program. Using literacy tools—writing, reading, performing—the girls in the program work to make new meaning from their incarceration, craft new identities, and imagining possibilities for their lives. One participant of her study, Nia, was arrested and sent to juve’ after being verbally assaulted by a male peer who presumed she had made his sister gay. In this dispute as well as a later event, Nia was not supported by school security and instead seemingly harassed by them as well. In this case, her breaking of feminine code, wearing beater t-shirts and baggy jeans, made her a target for mistreatment. With a slightly different circumstance that results in the same return to was Jada who lived in a rough environment and had two children by age seventeen. After consultation with teachers at the program and her probation officer she was asked to choose

between re-entering the system and relinquishing rights to her children or choosing to take her chances on the streets to create a home for her and her two children. Despite there being choice involved in the lives of both Jada and Nia, they were limited by their incarceration record as well as their identities and circumstances. A key finding of Winn's study is the significance of Black female bodies being marked as disposable and criminal. Through the performance program, the girls found ways to see value in their lives, their bodies and to share that self-celebration with others. Yet, there is no denying that these Blackgirls occupied a liminal space where they were simultaneously "celled" (Winn, 2010) by their past incarceration, their lived realities, valuations of their and other Black female bodies, yet also free by their analyses and imaginings outside of their reality.

Similarly, Jones (2010) offers a glimpse into the constrained choices made by inner city girls in Philadelphia in the name of survival. Interested in the voices of black inner city girls, illustrated in the title, *Between Good and Ghetto: African American Girls and Inner City Violence*, Jones reveals tensions associated with striving for a particular persona in the inner city. She observes that due to the violent nature of the urban environment and irrespective of their various self-identifications ("fighter," "good girl,") Blackgirls must develop coping strategies to successfully navigate urban terrain. Moreover, such self-identifications are usually rooted in physical attributes that mirror popular conceptions of beauty and the good girl. She (2010) states, "Inner-city girls who live in distressed urban neighborhoods face a gendered dilemma: they must learn how to effectively manage potential threats of interpersonal violence" (p. 9). No matter the goals, accomplishments, and character of a girl, she must always be prepared to protect herself in/from the violent manifestations of inner-city life. Since being Black and female carries such historical baggage and is positioned an antithesis of White femininity, being Black, female, and

good is deemed contradictory to larger social standards. Moreover, the body and its location of the Black girl greatly affects its valuation.

Extending the conversation of the “good girl” connected to politics of respectability and White middle class standards of femininity, Stephanie Sears (2010) explores the negotiation of power and identity within the Girls Empowerment Project (GEP) located in a low-income area in California. Though constructed as a space where knowledge can be passed and exchanged between different generations of Black females and Blackgirls receive tools for developing a healthy and positive sense of self, it became a site of struggle between generations with great strain displayed in areas related to self-expression through the body. Furthermore, there were divergent perspectives on how to instill a sense of pride and value in the girls with respect to their bodies as well as their existence as a collective. Sears’ exploration unveils communications to Blackgirls about “acceptable” ways of being are laden with contextual and historical constructions that create dynamic and sometimes conflicting messages girls receive around pride, self-definition, and the body; the pertinent role Black women play in shaping and assigning meaning to Black girl’s developmental; and the fluidity between Black girlhood and womanhood. As a result, Sears called for an imagining of Black womanhood where Blackgirls and women together imagine possibilities of Black femininity.

Scholars within the area of Black girlhood operate from an expansive conceptualization of who can lay claim to Black girlness (Brown, 2009). Therefore also included in this area are the works of Black female researchers who reflect upon, reclaim, and embrace their Black girlness. Presenting a complex and artistic expression of Black girlhood is Ntozake Shange’s (1975) *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*. This choreopoem offers a melded portrait of Black girlhood. Based on dialogue, collective creation,

and remembering, *For Colored Girls* sets the world straight by providing a personal-collective entryway into experiences, hurts, losses, joys, memories, and love of Blackgirls. Shange offers a thoughtful, truth-telling, and explicit account of Black girlhood and how everyday living sculpts Black female bodies and identities. With her unapologetic language, when *lady in yellow* in Shange's work asserts, "doin nasty ol tricks I'd been thinking since may/ cuz graduation nite had to be hot/ & i waz the only virgin/ so i hadda make like my hips waz into some business" (p. 9). In this passage Shange elaborates on virginity, body movement, and its connection to perception. She does not use language to blur the subject at hand; Shange was making a statement about the relationship between the physical body and sexual experience. Her work notably blurs the ending and beginning of girlhood and critiques of Black community as well as larger structures. Like Ladner, Shange took great risk in publicly displaying her and other's daily realities and faced great criticism for her decisions.

Shange's work, similar to the later *Push*, provides an uncensored glance into the experiences of Black girlhood. In addition, Shange demands that readers *feel* Black girlhood and refuses a distanced viewing. Therefore, her work both proffers Black girlhood up for viewing and screams aloud the secrets to be taken to the grave about the actors in the continued devaluation of Blackgirls. This piece serves a foundational piece in the study of Black girlhood for a number of reasons. First it is about Black girlhood, by Blackgirls. Second, it is reclamation of Black females bodies through a raw and candid sharing of what Blackgirls know about ourselves, the world around us, and how both are informed by the other.

Also calling on the arts, in particular performative writing (Alexander, 2010; Denzin, 2003; Muncey, 2010; Spry, 2011) feminist and Performance Studies scholar Amber Johnson (2014) in "Negotiating More, (Mis)labeling the Body: A Tale of Intersectionality" deploys

performative autoethnography to reveal personal complexities of home and identity Black girl. More specifically Johnson (2014), “summon[s] a creative yet critical articulation o my lived experiences in a textual performance where different perceptions and standpoints of the same experiences enter conversation” (p. 83). In doing so, she draws on her bodily experience, places it on the page, and interrogates for the purpose of developing new understanding of her self throughout time and to generate possibilities about the self, relationships with those incited, as well as with her own body. Through her candid narrative Johnson discusses the added complexities of her Black girlhood and their location to larger topics that haunt Black femininity in particular and Blackness in general, i.e., color/hue, sexuality, and class. Her performative narrative invites readers to consider the ways language and its evolution alters and assists in the altering of how we make sense of ourselves. It also prompts readers to scrutinize the labels we adopt while challenging us to probe our assumptions of who we readily associate with the term Blackgirl.

Blackgirl researcher Claudine Taaffe (2012) confesses her struggles as a qualitative researcher whose work involves capturing Blackgirls’ lives primarily through photography. Through writing as inquiry (Richardson, 2000) Taafe deploys poetic text to lay bare her hang-ups about research, claim her both/and positionality as a Black girl and woman within her research site, and write through and within these spaces to uncover something previously unknown about herself, Blackgirls, and/or her purpose for doing this research. Pertinent to this piece is how she locates herself as both a Black girl and woman. She teaches, "Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths is a verb, an adjective, a noun, a call to action, and an experience that surpasses every binary ever created about Blackgirls and women. In SOLHOT we are always negotiating back and forth between being Blackgirls and being Black women depending on the moment at

hand” (p. 253). Clearly stated, to be an effective and loving Black girl advocate and researcher, a Black girl doing research with Blackgirls, one must transcend man-made demarcations between these two labels girl and woman and decide when one should be more salient and for what purpose.

Resonating with Taaffe’s assertion that being a Black girl researcher involves transgressing the boundary between girl and woman and embracing a both/an identity is Robin Boylorn (2013a) who writes about her journey to feminism, auto/ethnography and their merging in the form of “Blackgirl Blogs.” Here Boylorn writes from multiple subjectivities including but not limited to, Black feminist, auto/ethnographer, Black woman, Black girl, member of a (crunk) feminist collective and a southerner. She talks about her usage of blogging as a platform to bring to light populations and issues that are disappeared by popular culture. Significant to this essay is the constant shifting between identities, signifying Taaffe’s (2012) assertion that Black girl researchers are “black woman researcher[s] and black girl participant[s]” (p. 252). A pivotal moment in Boylorn’s writing is when she includes a blog she wrote entitled “Overcoming a-stigma-tism: (An affirmation) for Blackgirls who have considered suicide when eyes are enuf.” Through this piece she affirms the beauty of Blackgirls, owns her collusion with misreadings and mistreatment of Blackgirls, while rejecting the undermining of the brilliance and gifts that is a Black girl and that we bring:

The world stops telling blackgirls they are beautiful after while,
if it ever tell us at all...
but I have a remedy
for astigmatism (not seeing yourself clearly)
for the stigma (of past choices of limitations)...

It's a perception problem

You need a new lens

so you can see yourself...

Show another *blackgirl*

how badass beautiful she is...

Tell her til' she throws up her hands, shakes her head, and smiles in sweet

surrender... (pp. 78-79).

The admittance of being wounded, complicity in the place putting, resistance, and self questioning and reflection blend to create an affirmation that Blackgirls are so much more than the stigmas and “astigmatism” that when continuously affirmed translates into a celebration.

Also engaged in this Black girl celebratory work is Brown (2009) who uses Hip Hop feminist pedagogy—an approach that foregrounds hip hop and Black girl bodies as a means to cultivate humanizing and elaborate depictions of Black girlhood—to build and strengthen a practice, Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT). As a place where new understandings, unlearning and relearning, as well as knowledge from the body is spawned, SOLHOT uses art, dialogue, and performance (on and off stage). Here, Blackgirls are encouraged to bring entire selves, talk and share, and move to ultimately be architects of our sexual, gender, race, student, and class identities. Rejecting a mentorship model where girls are controlled, helped, and saved by adults from their demise, Black women are obliged to get in touch with their inner girl. In contrast to Blackgirls' bodies frequently read as attitudinal, aggressive, hypersexual and overall inappropriate, hip-hop feminist pedagogy considers what Blackgirls teach the world about us, especially through movement.

SOLHOT is a space of Black girlhood appreciation where Blackgirls, our bodies, and lives are deemed important and precious. In this celebrating and desire not to manage Blackgirls, there is a great deal of humbling, self-critique, and collective recovery work. With societal structures resulting in Blackgirls being suspended, dying, sexually harassed, amongst other things SOLHOT becomes a place to air, address, and make meaning of those obstacles. SOLHOT is hard work, but a necessary valuable contribution to Black girlhood. Brown (2009) is explicit in defining Black girlhood and takes an alternative approach to working with Blackgirls. Using a hip-hop feminist eye, different assumptions are made about Blackgirls and Black girlhood including but not limited to: Blackgirls as knowledge producers; the centrality of the body to Black girlhood; Black girlhood and womanhood are overlapping and fluid spaces; Blackgirls matter. Brown's work is pivotal to Black Girlhood Studies as it confronts, sometimes painfully, issues of identity representation and demands that Blackgirls use their bodies to move, and talk, interrogate everything and own the spaces we occupy. The next section discusses Black Girlhood Studies as a developing sub-field of Gender and Women's Studies, names feminist theorists (some whose work was already discussed above) informing this work, and outlines its major assumptions about Blackgirls.

The above literature illustrates tensions, struggles, and triumphs associated with identity survived by Blackgirls. The preceding explorations are imbued with negotiations of identity, representation, and popular readings of the black female body and their imposition on Black girlhood. Indicated in these works is the significance the body plays in shaping Blackgirls' lives. Yet, in some instances the body—its physical and knowledge archive—was but mentioned or implicated. As recommended by Love (2012) “to conduct research with the very youth who are the subjects of our theories and incorporate their voices into the discussion” (p.2), what follows

is the articulation of a useful interpolation, Black Girlhood Studies, to the undermining of the Black female body in education. Here an introduction of this emergent area is offered as well as guiding assumptions about Blackgirls that create robust narratives of Blackgirls.

Black Girlhood Studies

While a first-year doctoral student I had the privilege of serving as a research assistant for Hip Hop feminist Ruth Nicole Brown, who introduced Black girlhood as a viable, necessary, and dynamic subject of study. In her book *A Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy* Brown (2009) describes Black girlhood as, “the representations, memories, lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful, Black, and female...is not dependent then, on age, physical maturity, or any essential category of identity” (p. 1). Black Girlhood Studies accounts for the historical devaluation and abuse of Black females and operates as a field of study and place embodied by us. It is a conversation and inquiry between lived experiences of Blackgirls and stories and ideas generated externally about Blackgirls. Cited in Stitzlein (2008) Dewey asserts, “Inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole” (p. 89). Dewey situates inquiry as an intentional altering of one’s understanding and responses to a given subject. Exploring Black girlhood here becomes a space for us and by us that rejects a talking at Blackgirls, in the hopes of “fixing” them, or a talking around Blackgirls, as done in the clumping of us into Blackness or girlhood studies as an afterthought.

As an emergent interdisciplinary subfield of Gender and Women’s Studies informed by Black feminism and Hip Hop culture, scholars located in this area of study are invested in the teachings and knowledge Blackgirls have to offer, if we (as seasoned Blackgirls, educators,

researchers, Black girl advocates) would listen (Brown, 2009). Unlike the aforementioned studies that situate Blackgirls as a problem (Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Lei, 2003; Morris, 2007) or that fail to solicit the Black girl for her knowledge of what may enhance her life (Fordham, 1993; Henry, 1998; Masko, 2005), Black Girlhood Studies as a field of study and its scholars take up the plea of Lawrence-Lightfoot (1976), “Our research agendas, therefore, must reflect their [Blackgirls’] prominence, their potential, and their strengths...[We] must not remain preoccupied with their deprivation, their deviance, and their strangeness, but rather seek to understand the social meaning of their cultural perspective” (p. 259). In taking up this substantial task, these scholars ground their Black girl imaginings in the voices and shared occurrences of Blackgirls and approach to working with Blackgirls in contextually specific, cultural, and artistic ways of knowing, learning and creating (Brown, 2009; Gaunt, 2006; Love, 2012; Winn, 2011). Based on the aforementioned studies on Blackgirls, education and culture that take stock in Black Girlhood Studies, I outline four key assumptions that appear to guide the work of those in this area of study.

Working with Blackgirls Requires Self-unpacking.

As scholars occupying multiple and likely competing spaces, e.g., academe and community organizations, motherhood and academe, naming who we are but more importantly sharing our evolution is key. We do not play our adult card, hide behind politics of respectability, or invoke traditional girl-woman relationships constructions. Instead, we remember, “Black girlhood does require Black women to forget themselves” (Brown, 2009, p. 19). In requiring Black women to “forget” ourselves, Brown demands that we, as Black girl women, release ourselves from the constraints of being a woman; give ourselves permission to act and be from what we feel; and surrender our woman authority to our Black girl beings.

Black girlhood transcends age and speaks to an experience.

Related to the act of vacating woman ways of inhabiting space, i.e., masking (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; hooks, 2005) is the recognition of black girlhood as fluid and experiential. Brown (2009) asserts, “Black girlhood is invisibility in the midst of hypervisibility. Black girlhood is secrets in the midst of all of this attention to girls’ voice. Black girlhood is hurt in the midst of playing” (p. 21). Being a black girl is both a self-identification and ascribed identity. Black female feminists, artists, and scholars, who based upon age, accomplishment, body and other popular factors used in society to distinguish between girls and women, identify as Blackgirls and supported in the below statements:

“The stories passed back and forth in my family were restricted to the household, but being a blackgirl blogger means that I take house business to the streets” (Boylorn, 2013, p. 80)

“However, this work does represent some of the many ways in which Blackgirls, including myself, see the world, as we learn from our multiple positionalities and environments while being directly and indirectly influenced by Black popular culture and the places we reside” (Love, 2012, p.31)

“I have long since felt a pride about being exactly as I am with a Black girl identity ranking high in my list of defining identifications” (Brown, 2009, p. 20).

Displayed in each of the statements is identification with being a Black. Concurrently, the stories behind this identification, a Black girl, vary but are all presently informed by the position of being in academe. Lodged within these claims is also meaning associated with being a Black girl, meanings that need to be unearthed to expand what we, as a society, as researchers, as educators, as people, know about Blackgirls and our needs.

Blackgirls are experts of their experiences and needs—consult them.

Unlike conventional mentorship programs and approaches by teachers and educational officials to educate Blackgirls on the so called proper ways to be a Black girl and develop into a

lady (Morris, 2007), Black Girlhood Studies scholars presume Blackgirls have insights and solutions to enriching their lives. This assumption can become tricky, given the fluidity of Black girlhood and womanhood. It could be said then that black women locating themselves as girls then have solutions to the so called problem of the Black girl. No. Instead, this presumption points to the need for Blackgirls to be conferred with and included in conversations and plans to make their/our lives better. Returning back to the need for Black women to defer authority to Blackgirls, we as seasoned Blackgirls must look to Blackgirls whose lives we wish to change for direction. They, more than we, know the pressing issues and concerns because they (irrespective of the Black girl context) are immersed in it.

Black Girlhood is Dynamic, Context Specific, and Body-centered.

Make no mistake that even with the intentional creation of spaces that do not impose what it means to be a Black girl onto us, stereotypes, tropes and images that simultaneously contradict and coincide with girls in the space are present. Black Girlhood Studies rejects a utopian collective rooted in homogeneity. At the same time, it recognizes and considers the ways in which Blackgirls are bodied or grouped together as if a homogenous group. We are and are not the same. In this holding together clumping, historical and contemporary, with a desire to imagine the possibilities for Black girlhood this area of study undoubtedly becomes a site for potential misunderstanding. Yet, it also becomes a place where Blackgirls observe different depictions of black femininity and therefore also able to envision innumerable representations of Blackgirls and Black women (Sears, 2010; Scott, 1995). Historical framings and appraisals around race and gender place Black females in a unique position of constantly feeling and knowing what it means to be Black and female by how our bodies are treated, mistreated or evaluated in various context. As a result, being a Black girl is an embodied state of being. This is

not to say that other identities are not embodied, but Black Girlhood Studies asserts the body as vehicle through which Blackgirls make sense of, learn to celebrate, and if necessary re-appraise and reclaim our bodies.

Black Girlhood Studies offers facilitates healthy relationship amongst Blackgirls, Blackgirls and our bodies, Blackgirls and society, and Blackgirls and women. This area of study changes up the game and places ownership of who we are, as Blackgirls, into our hands. In the discussion that follows I describe three significant metaphors that emerged from the literature review above.

Metaphors of the Black Female Body

The preceding review of studies about Blackgirls reveals the complications and negotiations involved in the everyday living of Blackgirls. Equally, it illuminates some of the stakeholders, e.g., other Blackgirls and teachers/educators, that impact Blackgirls' constructions of self as well as how she enacts being Black and female. Emanating from this body of information are three metaphors of the Black female body—Collective; Outlaw; and Possibility. These metaphors are outlined below with an articulation of my study's relationship to these as well as what holes it begins to seal in the archive of research with and on Blackgirls.

Body as Collective

As a figurative and literal collection, the black female body functions individually and collectively. In both instances, it is read in relation to larger tropes as well as popular and historical representations of the Black female body. Performance theorist Harvey Young (2010) declares, "When popular connotations of blackness are mapped across or internalized within Black people, the result is the creation of the Black body. This second body, an abstracted and imagined figure, shadows or doubles the real one" (p. 7). A result of this abstracted body is that

individual Black bodies, in this case Black girl bodies, are read against this conceptual but materially significant body. This metaphor is illustrated in the studies on Blackgirls in education where certain Blackgirls are punished or shunned for not acquiescing to the normative image of femininity (Fordham, 1993; Lei, 2003; Morris, 2007).

Black Girlhood Studies acknowledges this very real yet contrived Black female body and pushes against it by promoting the process of Black girl self-actualization. At the same time, it uses the assets of this Black female body construct to draw upon those things that work for imagining and discard those things that do not. Acknowledgement of the preceding framing of body as collective archive is necessary to conjure a transformative body collective. In *Haunting Capital: Memory, Text and the Black Diasporic Body Reencounters with Colonialism: New Perspectives on the Americas* Hershini Bana Young (2005) declares, “Racial injury is also difficult to locate if we redefine the Black body and move the brunt of history, a body in need of redress” (p. 2). Simple yet poignant is Young’s centering of history and in this case, the Black body. Her concern is with injury erasure through the disregard and minimization of history. Young continues by framing her project as one of recovery and recognition—recognition of the Black body as a maimed geography and recovery, personal and collective to urge social change.

Similarly, Ann Cooper Albright (1997) discusses the importance of the body to contemporary dance. She outlines various forms of contemporary dance and details the usage of the body in particular forms. In articulating the significance of the new epic dance she argues:

These contemporary African-American epics celebrate and honor the legacy of a people who have survived conquest; heroism is located not in the defeater, but rather in the spirit of those who have refused to be defeated. In order to be effectively and potently

embodied in performance, history has to be recast, so to speak—situated in different light and taken up by different bodies. (p. 151).

Pivotal to Cooper's framing of the Black body here is that in the case of dance the physical body can be utilized as a means of disrupting history—a collective body of memories and people framed in particular ways to maintain the order of the day. Exemplifying Cooper's assertion is Performance Studies theorist and artist Cynthia Oliver in her piece "SHEMAD," which she describes as "a spirited resolve, a set of strategies through which we [Black women] make it possible to survive" (personal communication, 2013).

Premiering in 2000 at Performance Space 122 in New York City, through dance, song, and dance theatrics, "SHEMAD" told an interwoven story of the ways Black females become and get categorized as "mad." Weaving spiritual deities, personal narrative, and Caribbean culture, Oliver crafts a piece that is culturally specific and yet applicable to the Black diaspora. While watching a recorder version of it, I found my grandmother's story there; my mother's story was there; my story was there in the dance. This performance piece told an individual and yet collective story about the Black femininity, the Black female body, and Black female living. Connected to and created within and without tropes, stereotypes, (mis)readings, and the like, "SHEMAD" becomes a diagnosis and protective covering. By being "mad" one is left alone and yet being "mad" also unfairly justifies a policing of the "mad" woman. In this piece though the madness and the negotiation and making sense of the madness does not end. Thereby, like performance, the madness, the reconceptualizing of madness, and the questioning of the nature of madness is never ending. Young (2005), Oliver (2000), and Cooper (1997) all provide compelling articulations of the body as a collective as well as the potential of the body interrupt

static notions of the body and in particular the Black female body that preserve narrow and often denigrating characterizations.

Body as Outlaw

Recognizing the body as interchangeable with the self as well as the reality that the environment in which it is situated mediates meaning and value, the Black female body is outlaw. Purported as the antithesis of white femininity, a striving ideal in United States society, the Black female body, regardless of its behavior, is marked as a transgression. Demonstrated in Black girl memoirs (Gibson, 1995; Jordan, 2000; Richardson, 2013) as well as educational studies about Blackgirls, we are deemed other. This othering (hooks, 1990, 1995), however, allows for an undermining of conventional notions of femininity. Subverting traditional notions of outlaw, cultural theorist Cathy Cohen (2004) offers outlaw/deviance as a political act. Cohen puts forth a call for a shift in how Black bodies are interpreted and understood. Operating out Black Queer Studies Cohen locates power within difference, in the margins. She declares, “It just might be that after devoting so much of our energy to the unfulfilled promise of access through respectability, a politics of deviance...might be a more viable strategy for radically improving the lives and possibilities of those most vulnerable in Black communities. (p. 30).

Acknowledging and yet dismissing the tendency of marginal groups to be included often at the cost of fighting for respectability, Cohen recognizes this process encourages division and intragroup hierarchies. Instead Cohen offers an alternative conception of outlaw, one that denotes the outlaw as trendsetter and possibility in the face of valuation and forced homogeneity.

Likewise, Cynthia Oliver’s (2009) *Rigidigidim de Bamba de: Ruptured Calypso* complicates the framing of an outlaw in her discussion of the multiple usages of Calypso music and dancing. Debuting in Philadelphia Pennsylvania at the Painted Bride Art Center,

“Rigidigidim de Bamba de: Ruptured Calypso” presents the paradoxes and contradictions of whining, a sensual and seductive style of dance native to Caribbean culture, and the judgment associated with it. Oliver called upon Black Caribbean women, who *knew* viscerally the contextual and cultural complexities of whining to create this work with her (personal communication). By recalling multiple and conflicting memories of Calypso music and using the Black female body as the instrument to showcase these contentions, these particular bodies become archives of culture and history. Also, it situates Black female body, already marked outlaw, as a vehicle with agency to access untold stories, unveiling the outlaw as a site of imagining.

Body as Possibility

The body is a powerful communicator of experience. As witnessed in the above literature it is a cultural archive that houses narratives, salient moments, struggle, celebration and more. Despite the significance of the body, especially the attention paid of female bodies of color, there is a strong legacy of denigration and base devaluation (Davis, 1983; hooks, 1981; McKittrick, 2006). Rather than continuing the implicit and explicit degradation of Black female bodies, offering it as a place of possibility affirms its power and importance. bell hooks (1990) states, “spaces can be real and imagined. Spaces can tell stories and unfold histories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practice” (p. 152). In other words, the body as a place, which has been raced, gendered, classed, sexualized, and marked in other ways, is capable of re-situating, reconfiguring, and imagining itself (hooks, 1990; McKittrick, 2006).

Scholars in Black Girlhood Studies have taken this task on of casting the Black girl and the Black female body as an extension as sites of possibility (Boylorn, 2013c; Brown, 2009;

Love, 2012; Winn, 2011). Connecting imagining to hooks' above articulation of spaces, the Black female body becomes a liminal and renewing space. Here, the historical constructions, the abstract "black female body" and its characterizations can be acknowledged and deconstructed. As a place marked deviant, outlaw, erasable, expendable, and void of knowledge, Black females bodies must go to our bodies and re-design, imagine, and re-tool ourselves. In engaging in this process, individual Black female bodies are able to reject and reinvent the larger "black female body" concept.

Discussion

This literature review sought to capture recorded information about Blackgirls. Those studies located specifically within formal schooling spaces, point to the ways societal beliefs on race, gender, class, and sexuality shape Blackgirls' in school experiences. Equally, they illumine the lack of space allotted to exploring the lives Blackgirls and indicate that Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1976) insistence that "Social-scientists interested in documenting the educational experiences of Blackgirls, therefore, must move beyond the boundaries of formalized schooling and observe their behaviors in a variety of settings" (p. 260). These "beyond the boundaries of formalized schooling" research has been taken up by Black Girlhood Studies that builds and extends Lawrence-Lightfoot's recommendation to craft spaces and approaches to working with girls that reveal pressing issues and concerns in the lives of Blackgirls; how Blackgirls makes sense of their lives; as well as illuminate the assets and knowledge produced when Blackgirls are given space (Brown, 2009; Love, 2012; Winn, 2011).

Educational researchers, or those examining Blackgirls in formal school environments, tend to focus on what happens in schools and use limiting theories for making sense of Blackgirls' educational experiences. In these studies the body is implicated as a cultural text, a

signification and indicator of girls' and girls' goodness, intelligence, and femininity. Additionally, these projects illumine the visibility and simultaneous invisibility of Blackgirls. In the minimal space assigned to studies about Blackgirls in education, our beings and identity performances prove to be confined and appropriate only if it goes along with feminine normatives grounded in whiteness. Otherwise, Black girl bodies are marked sites of deviance in need of correction to increase the probability of "success." These occurrences within in education in particular and in the lives of Black females in general coincide with United States' social hierarchies that deem Black females illegitimate, in need of regulation, and afterthoughts. McKittrick (2006) suggests, "stories of black women contain in them meaningful geographic tenets, but these are often reduced to the seeable flesh and unseeable geographic knowledges" (p. 45). Recognition of such undermining that has and continues to occur confirms the importance of speech, writing as resistance, and the many ways being a Black female necessitates daily boundary-crossing and spatial disruptions. As hooks (2005) claims, "Dissimulation may make one more successful, but it also creates life-threatening stress" (p. 17), denoting a value in and need for Blackgirls resisting and creating identities anew.

The preceding documentation reveals politics of identity, especially as related to race and gender, that Blackgirls and our bodies work against. Yet, studies in education frequently fail to attend to the body explicitly. Moreover, in those same studies Blackgirls are rarely regarded as knowledgeable sources and therefore solicited for their stories and/or to help troubleshoot issues interrogated. In contrast, Black Girlhood Studies presents itself as an intervention to these educational studies where the voices, concerns, and theories Blackgirls have about ourselves, education, and how to enhance our lives are largely absent. Also this area of study hears and responds to the call of Lawrence-Lightfoot (1976) who pioneered the need for Blackgirls to be

included in educational research by foregrounding Blackgirls' voices, bodies and allowing them to determine, on their terms, what they wish to disclose about black girlhood, their individual experiences, and their sense-making of the world. In both education and Black Girlhood Studies educators and those working with Blackgirls have been implicated in determining how Blackgirls are read, treated, and situated. Aware of the responsibility of these stakeholders in the lives of Blackgirls Janie Ward (2000) cautions:

But ensuring our [black] daughters know they are beautiful isn't enough. We must also teach them to understand the roles that racism and sexism play in shaping attitudes about skin color and hair; we must teach them to be "socially smart." They must know when survival dictates a trade-off ... At the same time, we must teach them to avoid allowing their identities to be compromised. The first step is to create powerful and positive identities for ourselves. (pp. 114-115).

At the crux of Ward's warning is the need for adult black individuals and women in particular to ensure we have an affirmed sense of self that girls can observe. This project contributes to educational research on Blackgirls and expands the work of Black Girlhood Studies by taking up the call-to-action in 1976 for attending to Blackgirls in education with the equally important necessity of "minority women researchers, who are closest to the experience of young Blackgirls...rid[ding] ourselves of some of the preconceptions and biases of our academic training in order to do an authentic piece of work" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1976, p. 259).

Conclusion

All of the aforementioned pieces express and merge from within a set of tensions designed by societal architects and reaffirmed and reconfigured onto Blackgirls' bodies, experiences, and Black girlhood. Black Girlhood is a place of strength, reclamation of the body,

and constant dialogue with and between the self, society, and each other. In addition, Black girlhood recognizes Blackgirls as a collective, a body, a culture, and knowledge base—requiring celebration as imperative to Black Girlhood Studies. Similarly all of the aforementioned studies display variance in the livelihoods of Blackgirls and potentially and bring to bare realities of Black girlhood. However, most of the studies in education more so speak about the Black girl, placing her behavior, appearance, how well she acquiesces to imposed standards of femininity or reifies tropic images of Black females.

In contrast, Black Girlhood Studies intentionally interrogates traditional renderings of Black females as pathological and negative; creates alternative scripts of Blackgirls; and aims to design portraits of Blackgirls with more breadth. These illustrations are intended to be humanizing, intentional incongruous, and colorful. In this study I foreground my Black female body and experiences as a Black girl researcher to 1) engender a journey of becoming a more embodied, aware, and an effective celebrator of Blackgirls, and 2) capture the lived experiences of Blackgirls using our bodies. The next chapter communicates my research process and situates it within the field of qualitative research. This study adds to the literature within educational studies, making a case for the utility of tending to the Black female body in education by documenting the lived and formal education experiences, memories of girlhood, and conceptions of Black females by Black females, including my own. Alongside this argument, is Black Girlhood Studies, a potential compliment to education that poses different questions and crafts a portrait of Blackgirls that is complex, layered, and therefore can potentially enhance the relationship between Blackgirls, our bodies, and education. As a bridge between these two areas this exploration offers preliminary insights into how an intentional relationship can be fostered between them; adds to education literature by capturing and interjecting Blackgirls' voices,

experiences, memories, and knowledge related to formal education and their bodies; and expands Black Girlhood Studies literature by interrogating how Blackgirls relate to the label 'Black girl' and affirms the position that being a Black girl transcends age by expanding the voices and narratives that elucidate Black girlhood realities.

Chapter Three

Methodology: An Autoethnographic Approach

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the methods used for this project. First, I define autoethnography including its history, main concepts, and assessment. Next, I outline the design of this autoethnographic study. Following the research design, I discuss critiques of autoethnography and the limitations of this particular study. Lastly, I discuss vulnerability as a practice and conclude with an overview of the shift from personal accounts of schooling and Black girlhood to a cultural analysis of popular and cultural constructions of Black femininity and Blackgirls, their predominance in educational spaces in particular as well as society in general, and their imprint onto the bodies of Black females.

Define Autoethnography

Autoethnography rises out of the concern in 1980s with relationships between researchers and the researched, identity, and interest in narratives that include emotion and the body (Holman-Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013; Leavy, 2010). Also known as the crisis of representation (Denzin, 2008), this period in qualitative research history urged a “space for a turn, a change, a reconsideration of how we think, how we do research and relationships, and how we live” (Holman-Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013, p. 21). Locating a researcher’s identity and experience vital to the research process, presented a paradigmatic shift into research (Holman-Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013; Hayano, 1979). Alongside this new perspective on the researcher arose the belief that research alters the everyday living of scholars. Originally, named “insider research,” (Hayano, 1979) where the researcher was either a native or pseudo honorary member of a particular group or culture studied, autoethnography over time expanded to include a range of approaches. Some of these forms include emotive self reflection (Ellis, 1999; 2004); analytic autoethnography, which skirts the scientific line (Anderson, 2006); performative or performance

(auto)ethnography, where reflexive research is represented in narrative and artistic formats and where the physical body is placed on display to conduct and represent research (Denzin, 2003; Jones, 1997; Spry, 2001, 2011); as well as collaborative autoethnography, bringing multiple researchers together to explore a topic of interest for the purpose of enriching analysis and highlighting researcher subjectivity in conducting and understanding research (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013). This list is not meant to be an exhaustive list but rather illustrative of autoethnography's evolution.

Despite its range of approaches, intentionality, and representational style, all autoethnography places high value on personal experience in exploring and critiquing culture and cultural experiences. Having emerged at a time when identity and representation appeared as significant considerations in research and society at-large, because of its intentional focus on the self/researcher, autoethnography became a type of revolutionary act (Bambara, 1969; Holman-Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). Researchers adopting this methodology recognize the power and potential self-aggrandizement involved in autoethnographic research. Ruth Behar (1996) states, "I have no idea what the long-term effects of discussing such issues so openly will be on my personal and professional life but, what-ever the consequences, they are bound to be better than continuing to be silent." (Behar, 1996, p.10) Expressed by Behar and echoed by other scholars adopting this methodology, the orchestration and representation of research is personal and tied to experience (Chang, 2008; Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2010; Holman-Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013; Muncey, 2010; Spry, 2001). Moreover, the difference between autoethnography and other forms of research is the attention given to the self and lived experience as an intentional practice in this method. Due to this self-centeredness, autoethnography has received great criticism.

Thereby asserting the self as a viable topic of and tool for conducting research is a political and risky undertaking. Adding to this reality are the political motivations driving Black feminist auto/ethnography. First, the backlash between the auto and ethnography denotes that for Black feminists the self, auto, already encompasses the individual and the larger community to which she belongs (Weems et al., personal communication). Also, auto/ethnography functions as a form of empowerment “to write in our own voices and tell the story of Black women’s lives globally” (McClaurin, 2012). Thereby, auto/ethnography becomes *more* (Johnson, 2014).

More than an approach to research and more than a political response to academic standards of scholarship, auto/ethnography becomes an act of healing and resistance. Black feminist enacting this methodological approach acknowledge the clumping of Black female experience as well as the backlash and/or scrutiny we at times receive for doing work on/with other Blackgirls and women (Boylorn, 2013a; McClaurin, 2001, 2012) situates auto/ethnography as a form of intentional resistance that when enacted incites healing. In speaking of her reasons for turning to auto/ethnography Black feminist Robin Boylorn (2012) during a panel on Black feminist auto/ethnography unveils how she came to it: “to save my name,” not only my name, and my personal identity but those who I also share a collective experience with to make our lived experiences visible (personal communication, May 9, 2012). Boylorn’s statement speaks to the enmity caused from others’ attempts to tell our stories and asserts Black feminist conducting auto/ethnography as a means of bringing to light narratives and perspectives that remain untold and/or misread. When referring to my specific research project I will use the written form auto/ethnography while I maintain autoethnography when denoting the general field and when referencing other autoethnographers who do not self-identify as a Black feminist. This is the

healing of which I am speaking, which when done through scholarship makes this form of research cultural analysis, critique, and reclamation.

Whether auto/ethnography or autoethnography, culture is positioned as ubiquitous with the self as a vehicle through which culture is understood in micro and macro ways. In particular, it focuses on the self as and within culture, placing individual experience and larger cultural realities in dialogue (Boylorn, 2013; Chang, 2008; Jones, 1997; Lichtman, 2012; Muncey, 2010; Spry, 2011; Weems, 2003). Therefore autoethnography elucidates the meaning-making process and connects meaning to culture and society at large. Furthermore, since identity and how one understands herself is through culture and society, which manufactures meaning and paradigms for how we understand identities, crafting an ongoing dialogue between culture, identity, and society. Furthermore, this ongoing dialogue gets acted on bodies. Autoethnography, therefore, demonstrates how value gets assigned to bodies based on the choices, conscious and unconsciously made, of how to express identity, or the performative (Boylorn, 2014, 2013b; Callier, 2012; Hill, 2013; Warren, 2001). The performative then is “a type of utterance that does something; its effect coincides with its use (Hamera & Conquergood, 2006, p. 422). Stated differently, the performative deals with how we choose to illustrate and enact our identities. In autoethnography the body, meaning, and self-understanding are ever evolving, creating fluid and partial experiential stories.

With the self is comprised of various identities, or the performative-I, and a solo person is afforded creative licensure to determine how she wishes to do and/or show her performative, this self is not void of collective baggage. Spry (2011) declares, “...[U]sing autoethnography as a method of inquiry inherently sets the subject in the context of her own multiple, heterogeneous, unstable identities where “I” is always and already constituted through a variety of “we”” (p. 53).

Moreover, a performative-I disposition accounts for the constant making and remaking of self, allowing for the self to be in flux depending on the context, demanding an ongoing negotiation between the presentation of the self and the reading of that self by oneself and others (Pineau, 2002; Spry, 2001).

In autoethnography, the analysis of self, culture and their relationship are explored through critical reflexive writing (Ellis, 1999, 2004; Muncey, 2010; Spry, 2011). Similarly, the instability of identity alongside its larger cultural conversations maintains itself as written text. Taking autoethnography and marrying it to performance, helps it disrupt binaries, especially between the mind and body, the personal and scholarship. It illumines interactions across bodies and spaces and makes room for imagining anew (Holman-Jones, 2008; Jones, 1997; Spry 2004, 2011). Performance informed auto and ethnographic work draws on the work of Performance Studies, which “participates in an ongoing redefinition of cultural, social, and educational practices” (Stucky & Wimmer, 2002, pp. 1-2). Those in and/or borrowing from this discipline redefine and imagine through exploring mundane occurrences as well as crafting staged representations of experience (Spry, 2011; Stucky & Wimmer, 2002). In this case, performance can manifest in written and more ephemeral forms such as live performance (Conquergood, 1985; Denzin, 2003; Spry, 2009). As a full scope discipline, Performance Studies concerns itself with experience and embodiment. It is interested in the dialectical relationship between bodies’ experiences and meaning attached to these experiences (Conquergood, 1985; Denzin, 2003; Spry, 2011). Before providing some examples of autoethnography that fuses performance, it is first important to explicate some key terms associated with and shaping scholarship that draws on the work of performance.

Embodiment is integral to performance informed research as it refers to the experiential, and denotes understanding in and through the body. Spry (2011) elucidates embodiment when connecting it to the performative:

Embodied knowledge is knowledge that is gained by paying close somatic attention to how and what our body feels when interacting with others in contexts. The knowledge is articulated through a performative-I disposition where the researcher critically reflects upon what and where the body *knows*. (p. 64).

Connecting and making the body a necessary component in the research process facilitates the creation of embodied knowledge. Transferring this understanding and perspective into autoethnographic research processes, performative and performance autoethnography then involves the critical examination of relationships between self, society, and culture. Spry (2001) asserts performance autoethnography as, “‘autobiographic impulse’ and the ‘ethnographic moment’ represented through movement and critical self-reflexive discourse in performance, articulating the intersections of peoples and culture through the inner sanctions of the always migratory identity” (p. 706). Pivotal to this form of autoethnography is its communal exchange and social redress emerging from the process and product of research. Beyond a consideration of culture, the fluidity of identity, and the interrelationship between self, culture, and society; performance autoethnography is concerned with how politics of identity and location as well as social milieus such as racism, sexism, and heteropatriarchy inform how one performs her identity.

In “From goldilocks to dreadlocks: Racializing bodies, the green window”, Spry (2001) narrates her journey through making the decision to adopt dreadlocks as her hairstyle. She provides the reader with a cultural understanding of dreadlocks, the heightened racial context

associated with them, as well as her agency and resistance to the cultural assumptions connected to decisions around hair. In this autoethnography she grapples with larger cultural implications tied to dreadlocks, changing relationships between herself and colleagues, as well as the personal significance she attached to her decision. Together, these various perspectives offer a wider window to examine, reflect, and relate on the politics of hair. Furthermore, when extending such performative writing onto the stage, a heightened understanding surrounding the implications of her decisions emerged. The act, then, of performing one's research and using performance to conduct research facilitates educative moments that position the body indispensable to learning and investigative processes.

Affirming the preceding assertion is Omi Osun Joni Jones' (1997) "Sista Docta" that illustrates the power of performance and the use of the body to performance research in. This piece offers a micro and macro illustration and critique of academe, specifically interrogating materialities associated with being Black and female. Jones floats between larger issues within the academy and personal accounts of being Black and female in academe. This constant shifting from the personal to cultural deepens her analysis as well as the audience's understanding of her experience. It is not only her writing that gives depth and breadth to her story but the re-enactment of this story, and performing her research before an audience. Her study of self in culture was publicly enacted and re-enacted as she offered her analysis to the audience providing a dialogue between her sense-making, audience members, and her in the moment (improvisational) epiphanies. Emerging out of this piece is the possibility of performance as an alternative form of scholarship—one that aims to marry body and mind, artistry and scholarship, and performer and witness. Jones (1997) declares, "performance work in the academy subverts the mind/body split even while it appears to exist on the physical end of that inappropriate

binary, because performance is at once physical and intellectual, visceral and cerebral” (p. 60). As a dancer and theatrically trained scholar, Jones emphasizes the ephemeral and live form of performance that requires a stage of some sort along with an audience.

Taking a slightly different approach to performance and performative autoethnography is Johnson’s (2014) “Negotiating More, (Mis)labeling the Body: A Tale of Intersectionality” that details the complexities of home and identity. Through her candid recounting of childhood and her voyage to Ghana she uncovers the layers surrounding Black girlhood and Black femininity, color/hue (within race), and sexuality. Her performative narrative, on paper, illustrated the importance of context in understanding identity and culture. In particular, it invited me to consider the ways language and its evolution alters and assists in the altering of how we make sense of ourselves. Johnson’s performative autoethnography offers a fluid journey through her body and experiences being a lighter skinned Black girl woman. More specifically, she provides a vivid charting of the inextricable link between the body, culture, and self-awareness. The work of performance and performative autoethnography is to, highlight...how cultural practices shape identity, how identity shapes cultural performance (Alexander, 2005), and how publicly responsible autoethnography addresses central issues of self, gender, race, society, and democracy. Accordingly autoethnography that attaches itself to performance and the performative is just as concerned with how we, as autoethnographers, make sense of identity and identity performance as it is with using individual stories to bring to light particularities tied to cultural and social ails and phenomena.

The goal of autoethnography, generally, is to use the personal story to investigate and clarify dynamics of a larger cultural or issue and/or phenomenon (Boylorn, 2013c; Chang, 2008; Holman-Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013; Johnson, 2014; McClaurin, 2001; Spry, 2011; Weems,

2003). However, how autoethnographers go about accomplishing the preceding goal is up to them/us. Appropriately then, autoethnography is orchestrated and written in a variety of ways, foregrounded by an individual researcher's body, subjectivities, and experience. The individual researcher is never the only person implicated in autoethnographic work. The former examples affirm performative and performance autoethnography positions the self as catalyst to address and transform social and cultural inequities publicly and in dialogue with other persons.

As inferred in the overview of the array of types of autoethnography and illustrated in the above examples, there is also great freedom and fluidity afforded to autoethnographers. How autoethnographers decide to deploy autoethnography is therefore informed by their/our goals, voice, and beliefs about the body and how it should be centered in autoethnography. Since the Black female body is contested terrain, as discussed in the previous chapter, and often tagged as wrong, inadequate, and therefore in need of monitoring, centering it in this study is both an alignment with autoethnography and deliberate defiance. Paralleling Johnson's performative writing style that uses poetry and creative narrative to display the ebb and flow of identity through words on page, I too employ poetry and other forms of creative writing to tell my tales of Black girlhood as well as to re-present the narratives of others' Black girl realities. Also, like the aforementioned work of Jones and Spry, this auto/ethnography calls on performance, especially the act of performing before a live audience to foreground the Black female body in a way that forces observers to see a/my literal body. Equivalently, it is my intent that the Black female body is held as a site of possibility. I now turn from the roots and intention of autoethnography, to provide a layout of my particular autoethnographic design.

Research Design

Methodological tools

Offering a different entry into Blackgirls' experiences this project utilized poetry, dance, and performance to collect and represent data with a goal of holding together the emotional, cerebral as well as a rejection of the compartmentalization of mind/body insights in research. More than tools in my personal arsenal deployed in my teaching, artistry, and personal life, these methods are fitting for identity and cultural work (Brown, 2013; Jones, 1997, 2002; Leavy, 2010). These methods are also culturally located and therefore align the cultural experience, Black girlhood, with representational form.

Poetry

Poetry serves as a disruption to language normatives (Jordan, 1995). Within marginalized communities it functions as a tool for telling alternative, disappeared, under told, and even (mis)told narratives (see Jordan, 1995; Lorde, 1984). As a creative form, the poetry throughout these pages includes poems, written by others and myself, that capture the experience of being Black and female in America as well as poems I crafted during the data analysis process to make sense of data and my feelings throughout this journey.

Dance

Similar to poetry, dance becomes an intentional usurping and interjecting of Black femininity into space. For Black (female) bodies in particular, it becomes a means of telling and disrupting history, of carrying memories and experience, and a way to imagine beyond what was and is (Cooper Albright, 1997; George-Graves, 2010; Gottschild, 2003). This project adopted dance as a way to ensure that Black girl narratives are seen and felt. By using dance in my original performances (described below), those observing were forced to confront my physical

body. Furthermore, my choice to dance gave visibility to Black femininity and wounds and joys attached to it. As a type of performance, dance served as a way to move back and forth through the personal and collective. Through a collective dialogue about my body, it also allowed the generation of new meanings about my body and experience.

Performance

Drawing from Performance Studies, performance can be thought of as “(1) as a work of *imagination*, as an object of study (2) as a pragmatics of *inquiry* (both as model and method), as an optic and operation of research; (3) as a tactics of *intervention*, an alternative space of struggle. (Conquergood, 2002, p. 152).” In each of these forms, it operates as a space for articulating and recasting meaning. As a physical form of conducting research, performance disturbs conventional research standards, subverts the mythical mind/body split promoted in intellectual understanding and articulation, and situates research as a dialectical and relational enterprise (see Brown, Carducci & Kuby, 2014; Jones, 1997; Spry, 2011). As part of this project’s methods, dance, poetry, and narrative are combined to implement original performances that re-present my Black girlhood. In addition, these performances, as performance should, articulates layered understandings of my experiences. At the same time, performance is also enacted on the page as an attempt at remedying the same split dance and poetry rectifies.

Performance as a mode of inquiry, intervention, and form of imagining, functions as a healing tool that thrives in the presence of liminality, willing bodies, and spaces that privilege process. Brown (2013) advises, “Dwell unapologetically in uncertainty so that it becomes productive, question even as it claims to know, and move people to act, inspired by a feeling, or lack of options, or to invite a Black-feminist poetic and communitarian politic centered in Black women’s and girls; creativity” (p. 11). When entering the community spaces, discussed below, I

brought with me these tools and my commitment to be present to and work through each moment, no matter how challenging.

Community spaces/sites

In this study I identified four sites to which my scholarship is, and I am, responsible—academe, my family, Blackgirls, and my body. The first three, academe, my family, and Blackgirls are also what I consider community spaces. However, the naming of these three spaces along with my body as a site draws from the work of feminist Katherine McKittrick (2006), previously mentioned in chapter two, who provides the advice of Black females in particular to go back to sites of injury to attain sight or vision. As an auto/ethnography my body is at the forefront of this study. Similarly then, these spaces/sites have been and remain significant to and influence my girlhood and approach to research and scholarship. Each of these in parallel and differing ways inform my experience as a Black female, have imprinted themselves onto my body, and bear weight on how I work with Blackgirls and enact being a Black girl and Black girl advocate. Given their value to my personhood and identities as a Black female and researcher, these community spaces/sites are central to this auto/ethnography as they are sites of injury and contest. Thus, in taking McKittrick's guidance, they are also sites of vision.

Academe

I was invited to do a Brown Bag session in May 2012 at my undergraduate alma mater, Colgate University, in Hamilton, NY. I used this academic space to conduct a workshop, which took place in a multipurpose room of the university's Cultural Center. The Brown Bag was open to the campus community, with 20 people in attendance, with 12 staying for the entire duration. Brown Bags run during lunchtime and lapse over into the afternoon class schedule. Before my

presentation, three individuals mentioned they would have to leave early. Some reasons for others' early departure can be attributed to classes, meetings, and disinterest in topic. Workshop attendees included students, staff, and faculty members; four of whom were former professors, one who was my former Women's Studies adviser, and another was my honors thesis adviser. All attendees were part of the Colgate campus community and over 18.

My family

As a product of a family that is predominantly female, I asked my immediate family members to be part of my project and implemented a workshop in October 2012. The workshop happened in the living room of my mother's home in Buffalo, NY. All six immediate family members who were asked agreed to participate. Workshop attendees included my mother, three aunts, my grandmother and a younger cousin. All family members were people I grew up knowing and ranged in age from 22-70.

Blackgirls

Two workshops were arranged and occurred in September 2012 in Baltimore, MD and October 2012 in Buffalo, NY. Each of these workshops took place with Blackgirls in afterschool enrichment programs. The workshop in Baltimore, MD took place with five self-identified Blackgirls in a college classroom on the University of Maryland Baltimore County's (UMBC) campus, also the location of their enrichment program, Upward Bound. The second workshop happened with one Black girl in a multipurpose room of a community center, Gateway-Longview's Family Resource Center where the enrichment program, Kaleidoscope Competitions is housed. Girls in the two workshops were all in high school and ranged ages 14-17.

My Black female body

Auto/ethnography centers the researcher's body and narrative to shed light on a particular topic, ail, phenomenon, or experience. In this case, my exploration of Black girlhood began with mine. Concurrently, when entering academe, my family, and Black girl spaces my experiences of Black girlhood were unveiled to engender dialogue and exploration of materialities and trends of Black girl realities. In addition, my body and its archive were placed up for critique and analysis. Further, the intentional placing of my queer, Black, female, 29-year-old (at the time) body was done with the hopes of engendering a discussion and an opening about the ills and hurts of schooling and girlhood in particular and to publicly work through some of my own wounds. While my body and experiences were put up for conversation and in conversation with the bodies and experiences of those present, my analysis focused on what I wound up sharing and how who was there affected that telling, people's reactions to my autoethnographic performance, and how my body felt, responded, and behaved in each of the sites. Since my body as a site was centered in this study and remained present throughout every dimension of the process, collecting and analyzing data was continuous.

The Workshops

All workshops began with a *warm up* and lasted 90-120 minutes in length. In the academic workshop this warming up came in the form of one-word responses to the question how are people feeling about the workshop that is to happen. My family site warm up consisted of everyone catching up over dinner with alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, and reminiscing about my late great grandmother, BJ. During both of the workshops with Blackgirls, this time was designated as naming "Black girl comforts," words, pictures and statements that made them feel comfortable and/or at home. Once each site completed this section, the rest of the

workshop included an original performance, interactive exercises, and discussion. The order and flow of these workshops were dictated by workshop attendee's reactions throughout and the culture of the space in which the workshop occurred.

Original performances

Each workshop opens with an original performance that was 12-15 minutes in length. These performances comprised a blend of poetry, music, dance, and monologue, and improvisation to make legible my Black girlhood. These performances were created from an archive I created that included report cards, papers, and other documents of my life; memories; impromptu feelings and reflections; and writings created during my period of critical reflexivity and archival collection, in the form of poems and monologues as analysis of my experience. Due to the ephemerality of performance (Jones, 1997; Spry, 2011) and my use of improvisation, none of these pieces were identical in nature. Rather, the cultural context including the location and attendees, gave shape to the performance.

For example, the original performance workshop with my family revealed primarily silences from my childhood as well as experiences in school experiences where I was mistreated and/or discriminated against. It was important to me that in doing this project I was vulnerable, which in that case meant laying bare things I once hid from and/or simply remained silent about amongst family members. Vulnerability was a particular practice of importance for two key reasons. It facilitated a process that incited me to assert my voice, my story, and my body in places that once swallowed me, at times. Therefore being vulnerable in these sites meant coming to terms with my past, and yet, having an opportunity to be different in these moments. Also, through experiences in the classroom alongside those with loved ones, I learned that vulnerability forges connection and relatability.

Correspondingly, during the workshops with Blackgirls, I was compelled to use my performance to share struggles in school and the tension between my love for learning and teacher's assumptions of me (I assumed because of my race and possible perceived class). As a Black girl who also attended enrichment programs throughout junior high and high school, I assumed these girls withstood similar injury. I shared these particular memories with the hopes that at the very least they would know, even if they did not want to or feel comfortable offering up their stories, they were not alone.

Each time I entered a community space/site to facilitate a workshop, I entered with an arsenal of exercises we would potentially use. And each time I entered with uncertainty. Aligning with principles qualitative research, I came with a set of assumptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Lichtman, 2012). For instance, I assumed that because of the tension between some of my family members that this tension might surface in subtle and possibly more prominent ways during the family workshop. Also, due to the fact that I had some familiarity with some of the girls who signed up for the workshop, I presumed some of them might be more comfortable with me than others. Moreover, because some of the girls who signed up for the workshop knew of me as an instructor for their enrichment program, Upward Bound, that they still might be leery of interactions with me in a less formal setting. As a result, these assumptions were noted but did not dictate workshop dynamics. Instead, I entered open, with great uncertainty, and ready to shift and be guided by the participants and the context.

During workshop facilitation, I imagined that although I requested participants to be present that we were all coming to the space with something to give and something. In addition, I assumed we each wished to receive something. These original performances were ephemeral and transient. I always allowed my sharing to flow from within. Taking a jazz aesthetic approach (see

Jones, 2013; Jones, Bridgforth, & Moore, 2010), I allowed the people present, my mood, the energy in the room, and what I felt I needed to say to the particular group to direct my dance, poetry, and memories I decided to narrate. With jazz there is simultaneity of time, contradiction, and improvisation (Jones, Bridgforth, & Moore, 2010; Rinzler, 2008). Furthermore, jazz aesthetic, as enacted by Jones (1997), Jones, Bridgforth, & Moore (2010), and Oliver (2010) is about intentionally centering female of color bodies and using the arts, specifically theatrical performance, to cast new visions of femininity, of ways of being in the world, and of relationships. Thus, I permitted my performance to be shaped by the moment and the people with whom it was shared. Regardless of the stories, tears, movement, poetry, and hurt that came up and out during these, each original performance ended with dance and music signifying reconciliation, self-affirmation, a beginning again. Below I provide descriptions of the interactive exercises that help make up my arsenal of activities previously mentioned.

Interactive exercises

Throughout the workshop were interactive exercises designed to activate the body, get attendees interacting with one another, and welcoming people into some of my process enacted to interrogate Black girlhood, education, the body, and their interrelationship. These activities involved both writing and movement with discussion that followed and were a combination of activities I created and borrowed from other arts and Black girl spaces of which I am part. Privileging improvisation and wishing to capitalize on the opportunities within each workshop, some of these exercises formed in—the—moment. There were six different exercises orchestrated during these workshops. All six were not implemented in every workshop. However, the exercise “Feels like...” was enacted in all sites.

Noted above, these exercises began as activities to awaken the body and elicit a visceral experience of my Black girlhood. I aimed that the participants/observers used their senses to make meaning of my narrative. As this project continued to unfold and its contributions appeared, these interactive exercises that I brought with me as my arsenal for spotlighting and arousing the body, they emerged into what I term *grooves*. Grooves are tools to foster sensation reflection. More than simply reflecting upon identity, experience, and in this particular study Blackgirls and the body; grooves incite exploration of a topic through the senses. They should align with the topic and parallel the goals of an exploration. Therefore in another project there may be different grooves. Regardless of the project, grooves come in the form of open-ended statements, questions, and prompts that cultivate a personal interrogation of a subject within a larger examination of the same topic. Within this text, they are also used to invite readers or witnesses entree' into the progression of this particular project. To be clear, grooves operate as moments of pause, to check in with yourself and/or others on the journey, reflect upon the practice and whether or not changes need to take place, and to do so while remaining invested in the project.

“Feels like...”

This activity had three components to it. First, music was turned on and attendees were given two minutes to write from the prompts, I am ...and it feels like... or for my family and the Blackgirls, I know what it feels like... After the two minutes were up, everyone reread their pieces and identified three words or phrases within their writing that to them captured the meaning of the piece. The final part was to create movements and/or expressions for these words or phrases. Once everyone had practiced their moves, they presented them to a partner who

observed and appreciated. Only after the entire activity was over did we talk about decisions we made, what we saw in others, and what meaning we attached to it.

“Being me”

Workshop attendees were to think about what it feels to walk through life being themselves. The first part of this exercise is for them to move, stand in a position, or make constant movements that encapsulate what it feels like for them to walk through life. After this, they are to do the same but to consider what it feels like to be them when they are most comfortable or most themselves. For this exercise, we were expected to use our body, the room and any items in the room, such as chairs, tables, for props. If people were comfortable and/or daring enough, they could even use other people in the room. For example, when doing this exercise with Blackgirls in Baltimore, Christa stood up out of a chair and abruptly shoved Nicole into her seat. We were all surprised, but before I could speak, Nicole expressed that it was understandable, because Christa was simply sharing with us what she felt. The goal of this activity was to get people’s body moving, feeling, and observing the other bodies in the room.

“Body affirmations”

During this activity we stood in a circle and participated in a call and response where participants were to call attention to a body part that they pay a lot of attention to and publicly claim and celebrate it through words and physical appreciation toward the body part. Adapted from an activity I participated in at a summer arts institute for community artists and activists interested in arts for social change and hosted by the Urban Bush Women, the call and response goes:

Call: This [insert body part]
Response: This [insert body part]
Call: It’s not yours
Response: It’s not yours

Call: It's mine
Response: It's mine
Call: All mine!
Response: All mine!

As each girl stepped into the circle she called to her body part and touched, rubbed, acknowledged that body part—appreciating it. Sometimes, there was ad-lib to the call. For example, “This little but cute butt, it’s not yours.” We went around until everyone had gone and closed it out with everyone speaking in both the call and response: This body, it’s not yours. It’s mine! All mine!

“When I think of Blackgirls”

In the early stages of the workshop, attendees responded to the questions, through writing and/or discussion, what immediately comes to mind when you think of Blackgirls and what immediately comes to mind when you see me? This activity was done in both writing and discussion with my family and workshops done with Blackgirls because the goal of this exercise was to gauge how different Black females related to the term Black girl. It was also intended to spark a conversation later about our immediate framing of the connections and disconnections between our individual expressions of Black femininity.

“Know and remember”

A ritual implemented in the Black girl celebratory space Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT), “I want you to know and remember,” is part of the incense circle that provides a moment for all in attendance to name someone significant who we wish for us present to know and remember. During these sessions, when the space permits, incense are burned we stand in a circle and each person names a person or people they wish to offer in the space. In this incense circle, we are given the space to reflect, claim, and call out those people, those realities that impact our everyday lives (See Brown, 2009). This activity was implemented at the close of

the family workshop and served as a culmination to the release and sharing that occurred. In this particular space, no instructions were given as to who or what was to be remembered. Instead, everyone was given the space to share what were on their hearts, which included mostly memories of hurt inflicted by those in the circle, reflections on personal growth, progress, the importance of family, and affirmations of beginning again as individuals and a collective family unit.

“We are connected”

Done in the two workshops with Blackgirls, I gave instructions to identify at least one thing in the room of mine that they related to during this activity. In the room and as part of my opening performance were archival documents such as journals, report cards, headphones, a picture of my father, and balled up pieces of paper with words that have been used to describe me. After the girls identified the item/s, they were free to look through and at them; I was open for their exploration. Afterwards, the girls could share what they chose and how they related to that item. Some girls picked up more than one thing and decided to only explain one.

Discussion

In each workshop, dialogue was used to process an activity, attain attendees reactions to my performances, and to ask each other questions. Sometimes discussion was planned, like after my performances, I wanted to learn people’s reactions, the thoughts it raised to fold them into the workshop and direct our activities. For example, when the girls in both workshops focused in on stereotypes and began telling stories about their bodies, I knew I wanted to do at least one activity that enforced the beauty and strength of their bodies. I did not feel comfortable just knowing this was their reality and not doing some intervention work, even if it was small. At

other points, attendees interjected and posed a question about the process I went through, to share a story of their own, and/or to share the value they saw in the work.

Data

In this project, data consists of a personal archive, workshops, and interviews. Data specifically the personal archive, helped construct the workshops. Likewise, data also comprised information gained in and from the workshops. Data collection for this process occurred from November 2011 to November 2012. Data for this study included a personal archive, workshops, and one-on-one interviews. In acknowledgment of the many types of autoethnography with varied points of entry, such as performance, personal writing, initial ethnography prompted more self-reflexivity, data of an autoethnographic study mirrors its form and intent. In Spry's (2011) discussion of performative autoethnography she insisted that her shifting from self-understandings of the body, its translation on paper, to then be placed on stage for larger dialogue and sense-making kept her performative I in flux, constantly altering in meaning and significance.

Placing her body on the line, textually on paper and literally on the stage, was both part of her approach to autoethnography and to analyzing it. Autoethnographic research declares writing and self-reflexivity key tools for collecting and representing in this method (Ellis, 2004; Goodall, 2000; Holman-Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013; Muncey, 2010; Pelias, 2013; Spry, 2011). Concurrently, this writing enacted to collect and display autoethnography is more often the literary and performative kind. Researchers located here believe, "the literary, they trust, has the potential for putting flesh on the skeleton of abstraction, for bringing the affective into shared space with the cognitive, for revealing the human heart" (Pelias, 2013, p.385). With its emphasis on exploring the self in and through cultural practices (Goodall, 2000), performance all presents

itself as a viable method of gathering and interpreting autoethnographic work (Spry, 2001, 2011). Pivotal to enacting and representing an autoethnographic account is the voice of the autoethnographer (Muncey, 2010). What follows is a discussion of data, collecting and analysis processes, as well as choices around representation for this study.

Data collection

Personal archive

The first six-months of this study involved a critical self-reflexive process where I collected documents and items related to my girlhood and educational experience. This archive includes report cards, pictures, journals, and papers written in graduate classes that comprised reflections on my lived experience in educational settings and life in general. These documents were attained from my grandmother, mother, Buffalo City Hall department of school records, and papers written in graduate school that recount and critically reflect girlhood and education.

Workshops

As previously mentioned, all workshops involved a *warm up*, original performance, interactive exercises, and discussion. Outside of the warming up and me performing occurring at the start of the workshop, these workshops were fluid and dictated by workshop attendee's reactions throughout and the culture framing and taking shape during the workshop. Each workshop was video-recorded and attention was paid to its overall flow, responses to my original performance, the information attained during the interactive exercises and my responses and negotiations throughout.

Interviews

All workshop attendees were invited to participate in a follow-up interview to ascertain more specifics on their reactions to the workshop. These interviews were completely voluntary

and were to occur within a week of the workshop. Those interested and willing had the option of interviewing directly following the workshop or over the phone. Each volunteer provided their name and contact information on an interview signup sheet and I either interviewed them immediately following the session or emailed them within 48 hours to set a time. I estimated the interviews to last 15-20 but they lasted 15-40 minutes in length.

Content data analysis

Personal archive

After compiling the artifacts that would go into my archive, I viewed each of them and noted visceral reaction and emotions that arose. I also sat and reflected upon my life and wrote down any memories, people, and/or occurrences that immediately came to mind. Like reviewing fieldnotes, I documented reactions to archival material (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995; Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2007). To register my reactions, I sometimes wrote poems, monologues, and/or free writing. Other times, I also danced to make sense of the emotions evoked by different things. Archival items were coded for themes (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995; Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2007). The three primary themes that emerged from Black girlhood and education collection were: Silence and shame, schooling wounds, and constructing and envisioning identity. Conscious of these themes, I entered workshop spaces with an interest to share stories and experiences that brought these overarching topics to the fore. These themes coupled with literature on Blackgirls in education, guidance from Black Girlhood Studies scholars and practitioners, and sensibilities developed while working with Blackgirls and students in general assisted my initial skeletal construction of the workshop.

Workshops

During each workshop, interactive exercises, and dialogue were embedded within the workshop. These workshops were video-recorded. When reviewing them I focused on my original performances, negotiations and improvisation made during the workshop as well as reactions to the exercises. While all sessions were recorded, due to ethics and guidelines for underage research participants per the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the academic and family community spaces/sites were the only approved and publicly disseminated. These videos are embedded within chapters four through six to offer live footage of these transitory encounters. My decision to embed video is to require that readers, this project's audience, come in contact with actual Black female bodies. However, since I did not receive the approval to publicly share video of Blackgirls under 18 and none of the girls' parents consented to the girls' still photos being shared, the videos and pictures taken during the two workshops with Blackgirls were used for data analysis and documentation of what we shared.

Original performances

Immediately following my performances in workshops, I made mental notes and jottings (Sunstein & Chiseri, 2007) to keep documentation. Allowing for fluidity and the flexibility of performance (Jones, Moore, & Bridgforth, 2010; Jones, 2013, 1997), these performances were not rote and memorized. Instead, they were improvisational, incorporating memories, stories and feelings identified in the first component of this project. People present, our relationships with each other, and the context in which the workshop occurred, shaped my performances' content and emotion. When arriving in Buffalo, NY prepared to do a workshop with 15 Blackgirls and being met by Pasta and her mother, I was surprised, disappointed, confused, and worried. The worry and disappointment quickly dissipated when I decided to practice what I preached—one

Black girl matters—and give my best performance and workshop possible. While I was disappointed, I was also excited to see what would come from concentrated time with one Black girl.

Following each performance, during discussion, I asked for one-word reactions to the performance to begin dialogue, quickly gauge attendees to determine where to move next in the workshop, and had to make as many notes about my performance and the emotions it invoked.

Interactive exercises

The six exercises aforementioned were both written and enacted. Therefore what occurred during each was recorded by the camera and/or through attendees' actual writing. Workshop participants were informed I intended to keep all materials used and created but that they reserved the right to take with them anything they created. Most of attendees willingly left material they wrote, but some did not. During the interactive exercises, I had time to make quick jottings and log reactions, questions, and thoughts that emerged. These were later expounded upon when I reviewed the video recordings. Once each workshop was implemented, I reviewed the recordings, and transcribed the exercises. I isolated each exercise, grouping the written materials and reviewing the recordings. Taking an in-depth look at each interactive exercise, I examined each response and coded each. I reviewed the data of each exercise three times, each time dissecting and narrowing in on the larger narrative being told (Lichtman, 2012; Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2007). I then reviewed the full recordings of each session and took notes on the flow, contents, exercises enacted, and discussion trends of the workshop. At the time of watching these recordings, I also took note of my reactions, points of inquiry, and discomfort that arose during analysis.

Interviews

Following each of the workshops, I conducted 15 voluntary interviews from workshop attendees. A total of 22 people signed up for interviews, but of those, 15 responded to my email and set up an interview time. Interviews were conducted within 10 days of the workshop over the phone or immediately following the workshop in person. This timing was chosen to be mindful of people's schedule but to also avoid too much time passing and attendees forgetting reactions and/or the visceral emotions to have waned. Once all interviews for a workshop session were conducted, I transcribed them. Two different types of interviews were utilized during the study. Due to the rules and regulations of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), structured interviews were conducted with participants under age 18. Structured interviews do not deviate from the list of questions drafted and included on the consent form, and were asked verbatim and in the order listed. These questions were broken down into demographic information, workshop reactions, thoughts about girlhood and schooling.

In comparison, the interviews conducted with participants over 18 were guided interviews (Lichtman, 2012), which entails a general set of questions that are meant to direct the conversation. While the structure is the same, generally, the interview can flow as more of a conversation, allowing interviewee's responses and experiences to direct dialogue. Both sets of questions are located in the appendices. Finally, during these interviews, interviewees were asked for a pseudonym, or alternative name that would be used in place of their actual name. The use of pseudonym allowed for anonymity in the case of the girls. Following this review, I open coded the interviews (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995; Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2007) searching for recurring themes in witnesses reactions to the process, especially the arts-informed parts; what they got out of the workshop experience; and their reactions to me. After initial open

coding of interviews a second round of coding was implemented. Upon transcription and coding of interviews, I moved toward data representation.

Interpretation and Representation

Like autoethnographic research, representing autoethnography also takes on different forms, which all involve crafting a story embedded with the personal, cultural, and their connections (Denzin, 2010; Muncey, 2010; Pelias, 2013; Spry, 2011). Mary Weems (2003) deploys poetry, playwriting, narrative, and paintings to devise an autoethnographic text that illuminates the relationship between education, imagination, and social inequity. In particular her chapter, *utopia* is an autoethnographic play shedding light on her ideas and convictions about what education could be. Placed against these possibilities are illustrations of what is, offering a dialogical conversation between reality and imagination proffering her idea, the imagination-intellect as an educational intervention and frame for cultivating this utopian spaced of learning.

Similarly, Callier (2012) constructs a performative text interweaving reflection, critique, and query into his personal relationship with religion and its connection to his sexual orientation. In this text he takes the reader on a fluid journey into his battle with and contestation of organized religion. Disclosure of his fight with religion and sexuality serves as an entryway into larger discussions—the ritual of “coming out” and its impact in different racial communities and the intersection of race, sexuality, and religion. In this autoethnographic text poetry and script are used to illumine the emotions and decisions made while working through his relationship with the church. The utilization of literature and art exposed his renderings as a compelling storyteller, alluring and enticing its listeners into the work and urging them to consider how cultural and societal constructions of race, sexuality, and religion, in particular, get acted out on bodies.

Correspondingly, Boylorn (2014) charts the trope of the “angry Black woman,” offering a split screen between the historical tale of this archetype and this stereotypes specific influence in her conception and performance of Black femininity. In this auto/ethnography, she deploys performative writing, specifically narratives that map her encounter with different dynamics of this archetype, her personal challenges to the myth and how she imagines herself around and out of them. Boylorn offers her particular story to illuminate how stereotypes, especially those connected to the Black female get imprinted onto bodies and the popular story of Black females generally.

In a similar way, Jones (1997) invites readers/viewers into work by enacting performance ethnography. In “Sista docta,” she blends her particular story as a Black female scholar in academe with statistical realities of women of color in the academe. By merging the micro and macro realities of being Black female in higher education, Jones painted a portrait of the cultural landscape of higher education in general and Black women in higher education in particular. By using her body, rather than the page alone, to share this story of academe, it becomes the site of knowledge production and analysis. Jones (1997) asserts, “performance work in the academy subverts the mind/body split even while it appears to exist on the physical end of that inappropriate binary, because performance is at once physical and intellectual, visceral and cerebral” (p.60). The divulging of such a story through her body in an academic setting, rub against the terrain of academe and serves as a metaphor for the struggle of Black women to maintain presence within higher education.

Paralleling Jones’ foregrounding of the body in research Spry (2011) writes a text mapping the journey from body to stage in performative autoethnography, illustrating multiple dimensions of the body and inciting the body as a site of possibility. Moreover, Spry invites

readers to consider the power of performance in writing and on the stage, as a means of providing social redress to inequities, specifically those tied to identities appraised within larger society. She contends that performative autoethnography mandates that its practitioners explore how identity or the performative-I is constituted to various groups, identities, and relationships that play out on individual bodies.

Aware of the many communities that shape individuals, Boylorn (2013c) crafts an autoethnography revealing stories from the underbelly of being Black and female in the rural South. Her text is comprised of narrative and poetry that situates the reader in her eyesight of a small town in Alabama. Through her perspective, narrative, poetry, and the poetry of Black feminist poet and autoethnographer Mary Weems, Boylorn maps out the interrelationship between herself and a community, between her story and other Black women, and between leaving home and coming to know home again. The preceding are descriptions of the options available to autoethnographers. Evident within these is the connection between intent and representation. All of them used literature and/or literary tools to show and transgress borders between the individual and cultural. What follows is an overview of the particular decisions I made when crafting a re-presentation of data in this study.

Crafting the re-presentation

After sitting with data and the tentative analyses I made of them, I went back through the interviews and video, listening especially for advice from attendees on what worked for them within the workshops. Their discussion of the flow, style, and contents of the workshop provided insight into how I might construct the experiences I shared with them. Individuals from the academic and family sessions specifically, people commented on the utility of the multiple levels

of engagement, insisting that the usage of talking, performing, and interactive exercises proved valuable for their understanding of my dissertation and personal narrative:

Sunshine: Uh, it was a great benefit because again you know just seeing some of the things that I could never imagine even trying to do but in your dance and everything you could actually feel and see you know like the pain, or the frustration, you can actually see it. And then the words used at the same time it just made the case even stronger and everybody around can perceive something differently. So putting it altogether, we could all get the same message but from different things that was done.

Drea: The thing is, you could've had the same workshop without the aspects of dance and people sitting around talking and you would've never gotten the same result. You would've never gotten or been able to create the space such as what you did and what was cultivate there...Um, and you were able to move that mantle, if I could put it in that sense, to move that mantle outside of yourself and into us, as being the viewer the watcher, which again forced us to deal with us. It was deep!

Pleased and aware that the combination of these styles increased the depth of the work and informed how the workshop was connected to my larger work on Black girlhood, education, and the body, I sought to devise data representation that would do the same. I wanted participants to grasp, but not necessarily completely agree with, how I made sense of and told the story of our time together as well as their individual stories shared during that time. Instead, I aimed that they be able to see themselves in the representation. That they were not dressed up, fixed up, and embellished to tell some over-the-top story. I wanted to avoid a stripping away illustration where the experience and their words were reduced to isolated statements supporting a theme I identified. I asked for their participation on this journey with me and therefore had a responsibility to them, which included accomplishing a goal that started me on this path in the first place—to uncover and share stories imbued with inconvenient truths and experiences in the name of release and healing.

Muncey (2010) reminds that representation in this form is inextricably linked to the voice and intent of the researcher. She states, “Finding a style and a voice of your own, which silences

the critics in your head...might metamorphose into a poem or a picture, a story or a drama or a film, but it should allow...access to the inner story that cannot be told by other more conventional means” (p. 56). Situating my research in the wisdom of the preceding autoethnographers in particular and preparing to re-present the research and represent the people who took part, I crafted my re-presentation with the following guidelines: Be a layered account of the research that is simultaneously vulnerable and sacred.

To create a layered account of the research, I created what I termed *transgressn* texts. These texts are not verbatim transcripts and instead a combination of analysis, what happened during, and the possibility that emerges from the research. Also, the dialogue that occurs within these texts comes from the interviews and workshop sessions. Again, I aimed to construct a representation that was fluid and placed the experience and its fruits at the fore. Thereby my re-presentations of data blend multiple forms—poetry, performance, narrative, and visual—to showcase an amalgamation including workshop context, events, my reactions, negotiations, and feelings throughout, and attendees’ responses, feelings and stories. The crafting of a *transgressn* text is fluid, context and aim specific, and a sacred venture. It is fluid because there is no linear or chronological order. It is not a direct transcript of what happened during the process. Instead *transgressn* texts are arts-infused pieces that synthesize what happened and/or data, analysis of the process, and the possibility that emerges from the overall journey. The creation of a *transgress* text is context and aim specific because its structure and form(s) it takes depends on the context, in which this pedagogy was facilitated as well as the desired aims of its enactment. Therefore it can be a written text, performance, recording, dance, and/or a revised course syllabus. In other words, the manifested form of this text is inextricably linked to the context in

which this pedagogy is enacted, voicing elements, what is to be presented, i.e., a dissertation, and for what purpose.

Having decided to engender an autoethnographic project that placed great weight on my body's interaction with others, also made it necessary that within the re-presentations of this project were raw contributions of those other bodies. Sometimes these original entries were in the form of snapshots of pieces of paper on which the girls wrote, workshop video footage, and direct statements taken from participants. The following convictions directed my deliberations on the form my data representation would take: Accessibility, commitment to rendering a public and sacred experience, and valuing voice within community.

With an objective that the girls and my family, especially in the project to be able to read, disagree with, and discuss my work. I remember my mother reading one of my term papers in graduate school, and saying she was lost from the very beginning. She commented on the words being foreign but her belief that I had to be saying something important. At the time, I took her criticism to mean my language was complex, which translated in my head as greater intelligence. Today, I acknowledge and am grateful for that language and my ability to utilize it when necessary. However, my aim is that those I work with write, my communities of affinity in particular, comprehend my depictions. Through the data collection phase, as part of follow-up interviews and conversation during the actual workshops, I asked and/or people commented on the usefulness of movement, poetry as well as the power of layering my project with different techniques to show, tell, and listen. Taking guidance from their evaluation of the workshop, I thought mirroring the re-presentations on the workshops would induce similar reactions relatability, visceral and gut responses, and an impetus to also be vulnerable.

I entered this project aware of the many risks associated with autoethnographic work—accusations of narcissism and self-aggrandizement and vulnerability taken as clearance to collect “dirt” on me, to name a few. Despite these potential liabilities of autoethnography, I sought to concoct an experience that allowed for a spectrum of unveiling where each body determined how vulnerable they wished to be. To devise a public and sacred process meant that not all things shared got reproduced in the re-presentation of it. Another strategy used to maintain the sacred within the public was the use of poetry to abbreviate while still telling someone’s story. One final strategy was the use of blending voices and stories.

In acknowledging the historical and cultural tendency to clump Black, Black female, and Black female bodies together, it was important that the texts I created value individual voices and experiences while connecting them to a larger cultural conversation. By valuing individual stories though, multiple voices sometimes carried the responsibility of sharing one narrative. Other times, one character’s words encompassed multiple stories with both having a goal of sharing in the load and emotion of life experiences carried by black females. This goal of valuing voice was, at times, difficult because witnesses could choose how much they wished to disclose and how. Thus, there were times when Blackgirls opted to minimize their speech, but them doing so spoke volumes. In other instances, there was a great deal of telling through movement, which could not always be effectively translated into words. Nonetheless, I diligently worked to execute these commitments throughout the analyzing and re-presentation phase.

Finally, these representations are located in and therefore laden with culture and context. These workshops occur with different groups of people in varied context. Correspondingly, these people are groups that connect to larger communities and relationships that are also mitigated in the workshop space. Due to my relationship to the people and sites included in this study, some

of which were closer than others, it was imperative that the manifestations of this project be vulnerable and yet sacred. To do so, I included my struggles as a Black girl wanting to do the work of Black girl celebration and figuring out what that means exactly, for how I work with Blackgirls in particular and females in general. Accordingly, various constructions of Black girlhood, education, and myself were offered. These constructions were placed in dialogue not to compete but to display the interconnections between these spaces and to show how the body, in particular, my body serves as both a border and possibility to forging new relationships across these spaces. It was also important that while disclosure was exercised so too was the sacred. In this case, scared means that the rendering of this research journey was transparent but that there were some ephemeral moments that when leaving the room, left in our hearts to never touch the page in an explicit manner.

Although I set out with the aim of sharing experiences and memories of Black girlhood and education in hopes that it would encourage others to share, they reserved the right to determine how they shared, how much they shared, and how far they were comfortable with the sharing going. This made the workshop space powerful, intimate, and transient. Illustrated in the autoethnographic work aforementioned, writing and demonstrating autoethnographic data is informed by the context in which it occurred, the voice of the creator, its intent, and where the work is to be showcased. In this case, my usage of the arts and the literary to craft a representation of the data, aligns with my investment in offering a vulnerable text, one that embodies the voices, people, and experiences divulged as well as the struggles, queries and imagining that followed. Denzin (2010) declares:

The poetic, narrative text makes public what many sociologist and anthropologists have kept hidden: the private feelings, doubts, and dilemmas, uncertainties that confront the

fieldworker. These doubts reveal that the field lies within us, not outside in some external sit. In emphasizing the personal, the emotional, the new writers engage in a new kind of theorizing. (p. 89).

Utilizing emotions and feelings as writing devices places the body of the researcher at the fore, again purporting it as a site of inquiry. This section articulated of what constituted data, its analysis and interpretation and their connection to my body. Next I offer a discussion of the limitations of this study and critiques of autoethnography.

Limitations of the Study

Autoethnographic research places value on memory and lived experience (Ellis, 2004; Muncey, 2010; Spry, 2011). Memories like perspective are partial and can be time-sensitive. To account for this limitation workshops were video-recorded and interviews recorded and transcribed. However, at different times technical problems presented themselves and I was forced to decide between maintaining the flow and working with what I had, my memory, pen and paper, or stopping and interrupting the moment. For example, at one point in the family workshop the music I queued skipped and went to another song. Rather than stopping the music and starting over, I trusted myself and improvised. Another instance of technological faulting occurred during the same workshop, when I forgot to press play on the camera to record my opening performance, but caught the mishap, quickly wrote down the order of performance and ensured the camera was recording thereafter. In these situations I made mental notes and paper jottings (Emerson, Fretz& Shaw, 1995; Lichtman, 2012) to recover what would potential be lost in that transient moment.

An extension of my embrace of improvisation and the transient is allowing participants to decide what they willingly gave to and left in the space versus what they took with them when

they left these community spaces/sites. For instance, some people left with writings they created during the workshops that they wished to keep. This meant I did not have at my disposal all things crafted during the workshop. It was more important to me, however, that all workshop attendees have a choice of what they disclose and on what level, and if they wish to leave with what they shared, they reserved the right to do so. I did not ask people to place their names on responses and written exercises, as the data were more important than whom it came from. As a result, when people did take materials with them, there was no track of who did versus who did not.

Finally, while there is a wealth of data collected from this project, the implementation of more workshops would increase the amount of participants of the study and potentially expand reactions to and experiences of girlhood and education. Similarly, the incorporation of more voices of Blackgirls in particular would increase the number of girls represented and possibly reveal more emergent themes or confirm the themes unveiled within this study. The structure of the workshops allowed participants to participate in ways they were willing and still accomplished the goal of exploring the value of arts based and embodied approach to interrogating Black girlhood, education, the body and their relationship. However, in hindsight, conducting more than one workshop with the same group of people could facilitate more in-depth conversation about participants' experiences.

Critiques of autoethnography

Embracing subjectivity and insisting that the self is always central to what we, as researchers and people, see and fail to see, positions autoethnographers on the outskirts of qualitative research. Transgressing positivist constructions of generalizability ours is assessed by our abilities to depict dialogue between culture, society, and the self that moves the reader to

compare their lives to ours; to consider what makes our stories different; and the degree to which we expose them to unfamiliar concepts and people (Ellis, 1999; Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013; Spry, 2011). Due to the claim that autoethnography is solipsistic, there is trepidation at best and disavowal at worst of so-called self-centered research (Olesen, 2008; Patai, 1994). To this claim I urge the value of distinguishing between situating the self as the only and most important level of existence and deeming the self as a viable level of analysis to critique itself and larger cultural dynamics. Autoethnography does the latter. As an autoethnographer I am insisting that personal stories and experience have the power to illumine how culture, social normatives and ails get acted out on the body. Concurrently, autoethnography deems that through individual bodies, we (autoethnographers) can provide entrée into larger cultural and social occurrences.

Connected to this claim of autoethnography as narcissistic is the questioning of autoethnographer's ethics for displaying narratives and representations in this form of research (Ellis, 1996; Roth, 2009). Embarking upon research that places self, society, and culture in conversation requires the discussion of bodies, cultures and individuals interacting (Chang, 2008; Spry, 2011). All autoethnographers do not take measures to protect those individuals brought into their research and this is a decision that each of us has creative licensure over. Some researchers consider their primary responsibility to release and using her/his story to highlight a particular issue and/or experience. Ellis, Adams & Bochner (2010) assert, "autoethnographers must stay aware of how these protective devices can influence the integrity of their research as well as how their work is interpreted and understood" (p. 31).

I agree with Ellis et al. (2010) that focusing on what others' responses will be to my writing can result in a safe, flat, and unmoving story. In this project, I identified the potential

reactions people, especially family members, could have to my airing of family truths. Yet, these plausible reactions did not stop me from telling my story. Instead, it compelled me to initiate conversations with the different family members indicted. As an example, throughout the dissertation are narrative excerpts of my experience in juvenile detention. Within these particular tales my grandmother is accused of placing her reputation and rapport in the community before my struggles that led to me running away and consequently spending time in juvenile detention. While this story may seem harsh to observers, my grandmother and I had a conversation about the incident and she read my account. This sharing forged a deeper understanding of how each of us saw the incident and cleared the air between us.

Related, autoethnographers adopt a set of ethics regarding how and for what purpose others appear in our research (Boylorn, 2013c; Ellis, 2007; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010; Trahar, 2009) especially since many of the individuals in our work are in intimate relationship with us. Simultaneously, because autoethnographic work embraces vulnerability with purpose as a principle characteristic (Holman-Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013, p. 24), our representational decisions consider the “outing” of others. We are willing to be vulnerable and take risks, in what we share and how, with the intent of unveiling issues and sensitizing people to human experience and its connection to culture and society (Boylorn, 2013b; Callier, 2012; Ellis, 1996; Jones, 1997; Spry, 2001). As indicated in the preceding discussion, autoethnographic work and its values, like other research forms, are always placed in relationship to pre-existing standards. Fittingly then, this style is evaluated by externally based measures, which sometimes impose judgments and measures counterintuitive to autoethnography. To offer more detail into the way vulnerability was enacted in this study as well as the dangers in being vulnerable, this next

section reflects upon the process of conducting an autoethnographic study for a dissertation project.

On vulnerability

Vulnerability is dangerous. It is embracing uncertainties and making amends with the potential cost to risky undertakings. Vulnerability is also assuming responsibility for my decision to be vulnerable. These are the lessons learned and the stance I take around living and enacting vulnerability in research.

When I initially started this project, I was afraid, excited, unnerved, and moved. I sensed this project would be more than I bargained for, but it was not yet clear to me in what way. I realize now, that churning in my gut when I declared auto/ethnography as my method of choice was connected to the danger I was entering. I could reduce this danger to my knowledge of theoretical and experiential assaults endured by autoethnographers particularly (see Behar, 1996; Frank, 1995) and autoethnography generally (see Patai, 1994). A reduction that was real but not entirely accurate.

Truth is, telling my story resulted in the inevitable disclosure of others' stories, stories I was not sure these others (my family) wished to be aired. Truths I was ambivalent about telling out of concern about who owned the rights and therefore permission to disclose. In Boylorn's (2013) autoethnography on growing up in the rural south as a Blackgirl she acknowledges the bind between her story and those of her community and family as well as the impact of her choice to tell:

My story is hers/hers is mine/what does it mean for me to tell our story?/ my secrets are someone else's secrets/ my pain unlocks someone else's pain/ my memory is not the

same as someone else's memory/ i leave room for discrepancy/it is my sorrow/ my family's embarrassment. (p. xx).

There was no way to share my Black girlhood without the inclusion (and sometimes indictment) of my family. And yet this did not stop me. Why? Because there was an even larger cost to me not incorporating my story, a cost I was not willing to pay.

Standing in my power by asking (and expecting) other Blackgirls to be vulnerable while I watched would make no different than the parents who say do as I say not as I do, no different than the teachers and other adults who watch and judge, no different than those policing Blackgirls. Agreeing with Behar (1996) that "... it was incumbent that I include my narrative my body. By refusing to divulge my subjectivities and experiences, my Black girlness, realities driving my interest in Black girlhood, and commitment to contributing to the livelihood of Blackgirls could be disappeared. The responsibility I felt to be the researcher, advocate, educator, and overall person I aspired to be, one who led by example, superseded my concern about airing my/our family's laundry.

As an autoethnographic project my experiences and body became the instrument for collecting data and functioned as data itself (see Boylorn, 2014; Johnson, 2014; Jones, 1997; Spry, 2011). Yet my use of dance and performance added another layer of vulnerability. My body was literally and figuratively on display. This choice was important as it signified personal ownership of my body—the right to have it be seen as a site of culture an archive of experience. I was keenly aware, in these moments of dancing and performing, that my body could be misread at any point. For throughout history the Black (female) body has been misread, hypersexualized, and mistreated (see McKittrick, 2006; Moynihan, 1965; Roberts, 1997; Rose, 2008; Sears, 2010). Yet, it was this historical knowledge and the potentiality of it happening (again) to my body that

urged me to be even more vulnerable. So in a room with former professors, White, Brown, and Black folk, and White males (whom, I for a long time avoided their eyes for feeling dirty when they looked at me), it became incumbent upon me to dance, to move my body as if I were in a space I envisioned as safer. This choice to move, anyway, forced me to name my avoidance and work through it. The vulnerability enacted within the workshop space was but another instance of vulnerability's presence in my research.

To add, this study was also dangerous. My work could be (and was) misunderstood, potentially it could be commodified and/or have repercussions for my academic livelihood, making my decision to conduct my dissertation study in this way a risky and vulnerable act. However, the responses to and therefore value of my project to academe will continue to unfurl. In spite of the plausible rejection, unfair critique, and minimization of arts-based work, especially work with and on behalf of enhancing the lives of Black girls and women, I felt and still feel compelled to 'create dangerously' (Danticat, 2010). Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat (2010) shares a useful reason for consciously deciding, in the face of risk, to create: "Create dangerously, for people who read dangerously...Writing, knowing in part that no matter how trivial your words may seem, someday, somewhere, someone may risk his or her life to read them" (10). Despite the worry that I might be misunderstood, the reality that there was a value to risky creating, and the understanding that to "create dangerously" I had to place my body on the line, I chose vulnerability.

Affirmed in very salient ways throughout this project is the interconnectedness of vulnerability, silence, and the body. In the community space of my family, I assumed that when I voiced my silences in the presence of my family, that my mother might grow angry at my disclosure. I chose to be vulnerable anyhow. I contemplated avoiding experiences from my

girlhood of which they were not aware, but this did not sit well with me because vulnerability is about authenticity in the face of danger or risks. As Danticat (2010) and Lorde (1984), there is, perhaps, more at stake for conceding to silence. I hoped my choice to be vulnerable could serve as a catalyst that when set in motion compelled others to embrace vulnerability by naming and feeling their silences and stories, especially those within my family and shared by other Black girl participants. So I chose to be vulnerable anyhow. Choosing to be vulnerable and speak my truth meant I was no longer bound by the silence and more importantly that my speaking might urge the women in my family to speak as well.

When playing out the range of possibilities of the workshop at my undergraduate alma mater, I was uncertain of what would happen while there but, thought I was still mad about racism, classism, and sexism that flooded my time there. I imagined the room filled with students and faculty who possibly knew of me, but with whom I shared no intimate connection. To my disbelief I was greeted by professors who taught me, staff whom while a student there I had little respect for, and students who were expecting me to deliver a message that would help them cope while there. To give them something that before facilitating the workshop I knew not—vulnerable disclosure. In this moment of coming to terms with the emotion and memories that made me swear I would not return to Colgate for a long while, I felt a rush of appreciation to have spent time in and now a permanent member of that community. Also, I was reminded that stories and experiences are full, round, and paradoxical, but we as humans often choose to tell flattened ones. These revelations surprised me and added a value to my work I did not expect. Instead, I presumed I would be met in these particular sites with resistance and skepticism.

Given all the beautiful surprises I received during the workshops held in community spaces/sites, especially the one with my family and academe, I presumed perhaps that perhaps

potential risk was a better description to associate with autoethnography. These workshops were in no way cake, or easy going, but in no moment did I feel assaulted or evaluated by immaterial measures. In other words, I thought I dodged the bullet that would affirm autoethnography placed the body in danger. I was wrong. No one could have prepared me for the challenges I would have to surmount and the scrutiny my work would face. Still, I chose to be vulnerable.

To the graduate student.

Conducting auto/ethnography as a graduate student is no easy feat. Adding to the suspicion and debasement of this method of research in academe are the politics and unspoken criticism work of this kind often receives, particularly in areas, like Education, that have yet to adopt autoethnography as an acceptable and useful methodology. This does not mean abandon the idea of an autoethnographic dissertation project, however. What I am urging you to know is that autoethnography is brought to life through vulnerability and that practicing vulnerability is not for the faint at heart. It is dirty work. It is for people interested in growing and stretching as people first, researchers second.

Beyond the personal work and getting out of your own way is the work of opening your heart and a willingness to embrace what feels like a never-ending process of critique. With the degree of intimacy that usually arises in autoethnography, it has the potential of bringing to light not only the value of the particular dissertation project but also areas of needed improvement in your personal life, your triggers and/or physiologically responses to others, as well as what, if any, issues are still on the “need to address” list related to your relationships with others, including yourself. Consider the following: *Are you interested and willing to learn about yourself? Are you running from something, and if it comes up in the research process, will you*

let address it? How? What if at the end of the day, folks still don't get it? Are you willing to be vulnerable, no matter what?

In doing autoethnography in particular and embarking upon an uncharted path in your field and/or department it is imperative that you are aware that this is a risk. The act of being vulnerable should be an ongoing practice, rather than an isolated moment. The enactment of vulnerability as a practice means that it is adopted as a conscious and necessary tool for conducting autoethnography. It also requires that you embrace the rigorous and at times mentally debilitating process you will likely endure to meet multiple sets of standards. Your dissertation committee determines the first set of precedents. Then, there are the particulars connected to actual autoethnography. After these, there is your personal criterion that you aim to meet by nature of what you want your work to do and to whom you wish to remain accountable. In my case, these standards were often in competition, which required me to make some decisions.

What I need you to know is that *if* you wish to transcend disciplinary boundaries and popular constructions of research you must consent to paying a price. Denzin (2010) declares, “self-referential works must do more than put the self of the writer on the line...These narratives should be a stimulus for social criticism, and social action” (p. 88). When engendering this study I was aware that my body would be on the line in many ways and I was willing to have it there for my family and to enhance the lives of Blackgirls now and to come. What I did not cogitate, until deep within my writing, was the reality that my research journey would place me on a line where my body might serve to ignite critique and query into the disciplinary boundaries and strict (unspoken) standards imposed when a graduate student expresses a passion for creative and organic research.

Do not be scared. Be present to these realities. I am not sharing this information to frighten you out of your passion and into devising a safer, familiar, and conventional research project. Nor will I gain any accolades for telling a truth I know very intimately. I am not suggesting you or anyone else do autoethnography. It is not for everyone. What I am, however, asking you to discover is the following: What benefits do you see in adopting vulnerability as a practice? What communities and people do you want to help most? And how might you being vulnerable aid or limit your ability to assist these communities and people? Finally, in the name of what would you be vulnerable?

Throughout this project I kept coming back to the question: In whose name and in the name of what are you being vulnerable, Dominique? This question guided my path, kept me grounded, and reminded that no matter the discourse around body-centering and self-centering (pun intended), I was doing this vulnerable, dangerous, creative, organic work in the name of something larger. The poem “A labor of love” below embodies my convictions and names those people, hurts, visions, and spaces that come together as reason for my call to ‘create dangerously’ through vulnerability.

“A labor of love”

THIS

Is

This is

In the name of

In the name of

BEING

To embrace the moment

Live in my body

Use my body

Be present in this journey

This is

In the name of

In the name of

HEALING

Self
Collective
Investment in healing
that I teach
mother
That we Blackgirls
educators
Identify our wounds
First
to love and live fearlessly
Lead by example
A life of imagination
of possibility
Making manifest

In the name of

VULNERABILITY

That I deal with me and
My mess
First
have the audacity to Be
Unapologetic
before expecting others

This is
This is

In the name of

EDUCATION

That I learn in community
That we teach in and with community in mind
That I/we learn
From my/our mistakes
To better serve myself
Be a better lover
A better friend
To be more loving
To engender healing

For what reasons and communities would you willingly be vulnerable?

Conclusion

Beginning with the self, autoethnography as a method affords the researcher and her body as a small opening into a larger cultural dialogue. In this case, my experiences collapsed into performances at the start of the workshop and displayed as sites of memory, operate as stimuli for a larger conversation and exploration of Black girlhood, the body, and education. More specifically, the design of this project forges interactions with other Black female bodies and myself as well as with other bodies. These encounters allow for discussions about how my body is read in different cultural contexts as well as how my Black female body compares to tropes of Black femininity. Starting with my original performance and continuing throughout the workshops, this project generates dialogue about cultural constructions of Black femininity and Blackgirls, these conceptions' influence on Blackgirls' experiences in education, and their imprint onto the bodies and experiences of Black females generally.

Chapter Four

When Flesh Screams: Border Crossings, Healing, and Identity

Site of Memory # 2: 13 Re-memberings of Colgate

1. First semester of college I had my first real crush on a woman, Jennifer. Nia Long didn't count. She was a celebrity. Jennifer was accessible, at least in theory. She was Black and White but had no interest in the Black parts of her. She had been exiled by the Black student community where she never wished to make a home anyway. She laughed at my crush, said it was cute. She had a White girlfriend.
2. I was determined to get the women of color on campus to see that sexuality had every right to be part of women of color conversations. I reached out to the beautiful and amazing spoken word poet Staceyann Chin. She came in like a gust of fresh air and left minds, bodies, and the campus in disarray.
3. Spring Party Weekend 03'.
4. When walking home from the bars on a Saturday night, my god-brother and his friends, were followed back to campus by White men in a pick up truck, "Go home niggers, or we'll hang you."
5. I started working at the Women's Center second semester of my first year. I felt home, there. The gay spot, outsiders called it.
6. I think I was drugged. Things are a blur. I think I was raped. She said it wasn't possible and he can have any girl he wants. He's a basketball player. I was raped.
7. Junior year I apply to become a link orientation leader, get to training and during the diversity training section learn, "We may not be racially diverse but we have diverse experiences." A peer adds, "yeah and diverse shoes." I can tell where this is going.
8. My freshman seminar, "Ultimate things and the literary mind" opened my eyes to the power of poetry.
9. Sitting in a class on Chaucer, spring semester junior year, struggling to understand Middle English. I ask the professor if I could come to her for extra help. She retorts, "I'm sure someone like you would have trouble." Who needs Middle English anyway? Old White British men are not the only literature scholars in the world. Yet, my university would have you believe that at the very least they are the only that matter.
10. Dancefest gives life every semester. I perform at least four times every semester.
11. My first Women's Studies professor dismissed Alice Walker and womanism. I wrote my senior Women's Studies capstone research paper on Black feminism versus womanism.

12. SORT (Sisters of the Round Table), an awareness and support group for women of color had no business with a lesbian chairwoman—the rumblings of some of my sisters and others who did not understand. I did not step down but I did refrain from running the following year.
 13. I apply to Colgate early decision. I am accepted. When receiving my tuition and financial aid forms, it reads \$34.... More than my mother's yearly salary.
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Introduction

As a Blackgirl¹⁰ advocate and researcher engendering a study that explores Black girlhood, mine in particular, and learn more about how context and culture shapes my performativity (Butler, 1990; Spry, 2011), or the way I share myself as well as what I share of my identity. I decided I needed to return to my undergraduate alma mater, Colgate University. My intuition insisted there was something there I needed to receive and a spot there that I could fill. I obliged my senses and when traveling back to Colgate to give the keynote for the Lavender Graduation, a ceremony dedicated to acknowledging and honoring the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning and allies seniors, also facilitated my first workshop for dissertation data collection. This chapter, therefore, unveils the early developments of my dissertation project and my way of doing auto/ethnography and is an epiphany in my research process. Likewise it brings to life the moment where the practice body-activation was conceived out of act of being vulnerable. In addition, this chapter discloses my Black girl experiences and Black girlhood struggles, specifically those associated with schooling and identity. Finally, it articulates my convictions about being an autoethnographer and the utility of the arts to explore identity, in this specific instance, being a Black girl and autoethnographer.

¹⁰ From Robin Boylorn (2013a)

Though I maintain a relationship with my alma mater, it is contentious and complex one, illustrated in the site of memory, 13 Re-memberings of Colgate that opens this chapter. 13 is Colgate's number and I thought it appropriate to reflect on my time there and identify 13 defining moments and activities while there. As an undergraduate I experienced many adversities, some noted above, due to my race, sexuality, outspokenness, and not always fitting in with the cultural mores of the campus. I also had the opportunity of organizing initiatives that brought me great joy and education. Both the good and not so good moments ignited a fire within me to be more vocal, daring, and served as a catalyst for my social activism.

Yet, during my tenure there, I learned such courageous and outspoken behavior is not without consequence. Moreover, to intentionally defy standards is a vulnerable undertaking. A similar reality also presents itself in conducting research. Indigenous feminist scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) states, "Many indigenous researchers have struggled individually to engage with the disconnections that are apparent between the demands of research, on one side, and the realities they encounter amongst their own...communities" (p. 5). Smith's statement points to the friction and tension some indigenous individuals, face as researchers. Important to her statement is the question lodged within it: How might indigenous researchers reconcile tensions between research demands and community expectations. Prior to this workshop my hunch to this question was that we, as indigenous researchers, might have a difficult time rectifying this issue. However, this workshop revealed a different possibility—that vulnerability can help rectify this disconnect. Also, that vulnerability can be maximized when getting the body involved.

Autoethnographer and Performance Studies scholar Tami Spry (2011) configures the body a multi-level entity when posits the "body refers to 1) its material corporeal makeup

including size, sex, color, etc., and 2) the performativity of the body, how it is *read* and what it *does* in culture” (p. 28). Here, the body is acknowledged as a communicative text and mediated by the temporal environment in which it is situated. Operating from Spry’s conception of the body, my body was deployed as a tool in this workshop to illumine my journey through schooling, girlhood, and how my exploration of these topics turned into a dissertation project. Therefore, this chapter illuminates the value of vulnerability and introduces the practice I have named body-activation that also responds to Smith’s (1999) expressed concern. This chapter takes the following flow: First, I discuss the context in which I came to implement this workshop, followed by a transgressn text, blending what happened in the workshop, follow up interviews, along with my impromptu negotiations during and analyses afterwards. Next is analysis of this transgressn text with a discussion of Black feminists, Performance theorists, and Black girlhood literature sensibilities about vulnerability and the developing practice, body-activation. In this section, I expound upon the decisions I made in writing up the workshop such as what material to include and how, voices, and structure, identity negotiation. To connect back to the influence of context in exploring my Black girlhood, I discuss how the context, a workshop at my undergraduate alma mater, affected my decisions prior to and during the workshop.

Context

I am heading to my alma mater Colgate University to give the keynote address for the Lavender graduation. I have not been there since 2010 when I did a workshop with incoming first years during the OUS summer program. I am excited, nervous, and looking forward. I remember my time as a student wishing the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning) Center brought an alumna back who was a woman of color. I continue

driving. As I head to my alma mater to share with the gate' community, especially the graduating students, 13 things to consider as they move into the next phase of their lives, I wonder, "Will any of the students 'know' me? I drive on. What will the now student leaders think of me? Who do they think I am based on the documents, stories, and other sources outside of personal encounters they have about me? I press on down Interstate 83. I am equally nervous about this keynote I am to give the evening after my workshop. I query, "Will this workshop amount to anything?" Brown Bags are usually well attended, if for nothing but the food, but as the sun beats on my window, into my car, and warming my face, I am nervous about going home. Going home always brings emotion, memories, and anxiety and today heading down interstate 83 is no different. I remember:

First day of first-year orientation in 2001. I had been duped. When visiting in March, for "Multicultural Visit Days," the campus appeared pretty racially diverse. However, standing on the academic quad as a first-year I had to search for color in the sea of whiteness. And all the overnight stays in the Women's Center being, studying, and writing my senior honors education thesis.

Nostalgia, anger, and appreciation—I am conflicted. I am prepared. I am anxious. I am sleepy. I am excited. I am ready to open myself so that whatever happens in this workshop cannot be attributed to any foreclosure on my behalf. I am present.

Transgressn Text

Time: One year ago and present

Place: A workshop in an intimate setting

Voices

Me—Black female, alumna of Colgate University, researcher, age 29

Witness—A person present at the workshop¹¹

Setting:

Me stands in the middle of semi-circle. Familiar and unfamiliar faces have eyes on her, their bodies in chairs that form a semi-circle, waiting. Barefoot, with black undergarments under a bright lapa wrapped around her waist, she prepares to give herself to the space. Sprawled on the floor around Me are pieces of paper with individual words on them. These words stand in for popular culture framings of Black females, self-evaluations and analysis, as well as growth. The room is silent. Me scans the faces, the room, and internally acknowledges her feelings, and commits to using it all for this moment).

Me: “Greetings Everyone. Thank you for being here. Welcome to Border Crossings, Healing and the Process of Schooling, the workshop. There are some forms papers in your seats or on your laps that request permission for this session to be audio and video recorded because this is part of my dissertation. I decided rather than turning the lens onto other people and doing ethnographic work on what does it mean to understand this culture, I would work through the culture within my own body. Specifically, I am exploring and interrogating what has happened to this body through the process of schooling and the impact of schooling on my body.” This workshop has some built in moments for feedback but I have a sheet for people who are willing to do a more in depth 15-20 minute interview about the process. Otherwise I’m going to pass out some paper and ask that you respond to the phrase, “when you look at me what immediately comes to mind?”

(Witness look up at the sky, placing fingers on chin as in contemplating)

DO NOT think too hard. Look at me and write honestly and candidly. Before we get started can people offer into the space one word they are feeling right now? I’m all about space, what’s going on and what is happening with the room. And please don’t be fake like “Everything is great,” if it’s not.”

(Witnesses laugh)

“But really, one word, one feeling. A sound even, Ahhhhhh” *(Me releases a deep sigh)*

Witness: “I’m actually happy”

Me: “Yesss!” *(Me pumps a fist into the air)*

Witness: “Expecting”

¹¹ I wanted those in attendance to be more than conventional audience members—watching, being entertained, and clearly separate from the performance happening. Instead, resembling a Black church, I saw my telling as a sort of testimony, therefore making the audience witnesses (Baldwin, 1968). In Black church a witness embodies two important characteristics. First she is present to observe and hear the testimony. Second, she affirms the testimony and the one who testifies through an “amen” because she too has been there and/or can relate on some level.

Me: “Big word”

(Me smiles)

Witness: “Journey”

Witness: “Welcome”

Witness: “Happy”

Witness: “Grateful”

Me: This is a very humbling experience and I appreciate you all showing up willing to be present with this work. I am going to do some dancing, some talking, some exposing and today we, yes we, are going to dance and move a little, write, observe, feel, and engage in honest dialogue.

Witnesses start to write on the papers in their lap; Me scans the room gazing deeply into the eyes of people she individually selects various papers written on, walks up to the person, balls the paper up to make it edible and figuratively eats and digest the words on the paper. After feeling she has digested enough (improvisational feeling through the moment), she walks to the center of semi-circle and peers out looking each person in the eyes, she begins to speak

Me: Healing/Healing is a journey, NOT a destination/

<Music cues Erykah Badu’s “20 Feet Tall.” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qd9dACyMx9U>>
(Me dances, ends on her knees looking at the floor, raises her head and starts to speak)
<Music plays low in background>

Yall got some nerve/Wit’yo selective ass memory/
Don’t be so stupid, he said/You too much, she claimed/
African booty scratcher, they yelled/You ugly, he said/
Your hair is so short, you look like a lil boy, ma said/
You sposed to act like a little lady, auntie scolded/?
You yellow, she said/You too dark, she said/
Wait, you can’t be a lesbian, lesbians aren’t black, she asserted/
Butt?, more like an extended back, he said then smirked/

(Me rises to her knees)

Ugly, am I?/Smart, I am/
Too much, too little, too dark too light, am I?/
Broken/Healing, I am/

(Me slowly fights to stand, as if a force is trying to hold her down; she is standing down stage center and looking into the sky. Me starts talking to audience about above performance)

So, you all just witnessed, Reclamation, which is about my process of acknowledging that I have been schooled and it has manifested in a forgetting my power and succumbing to a victim

mentality. There are moments in the dance that represent resistance, awareness, and yet complicity, uncertainty, and self-doubt. Ever-present is a discomfort with position and the process of reconciliation—with my self; with the past; with perceptions of myself in particular and others like me in general; with my desire to move beyond this victimhood. Such a move requires a recognition and atonement with external perceptions, internalized oppressions, and an imagining of self, reclamation of I AM.

(Me turns to the semi-circle and asks)

Can you say it?/I AM/or i am/
Say it with me/

(Witnesses reluctantly and slowly chime in)

Witness: i (pause) am

Me: Is it I Am or i (pause) am? Say it with me, I AM

Witness: I am

Me: Yes! I AM! I AM

I AM/
I AM/
THAT girl/
DARKER than all the other/ women in my family/
AFRICAN BOOTY SCRATCHER/
Straight from the motherland/Using education/to escape/
Supposedly needed a perm at 10/danced before I could walk/
sat in the corner/tuition cost more than my mom's yearly salary/
Burning RAGE Inside/Keep it ALL to myself/
are there Black people in Buffalo/Best friend to my mother/
Emotional mother to my brother/Look like/ sound like/
NO ONE WANTS TO HEAR YOUR STORY
BLACK GIRL

(Me improvises a series of 'I AM' statements that reflect truth about herself)

I AM that girl/found her voice through writing/
Hid in/Been pushed into/Dark corners/
that girl fighting to find herself/
To lose herself in her beauty/You know that girl/
THAT girl wanting to be loved/Wanting to feel loved/
Be love/You know that girl/Once apologetic/Refusing to be sorry/
Will apologize for her wrongdoings/That girl/That healing Black girl/

(Witnesses stare, some write on paper, some lean forward in their chair)

Okay. I am all about listening to space and honoring process. So stand, listen, and then move.
Live in this moment/Listen and then Be/
I am... and it feels like.../
Feel your way through it/The phrase
Let your body feel/Direct you/

(Witnesses slowly start to move)

Now, when I hurt, it feels like/

(Witnesses slowly start to move)

Again,
Live in this moment/Listen and then Be/
I am... and it feels like.../
Feel your way through it/The phrase
Let your body feel/Direct you/
Show us what it, whatever it is, feels like/

(Witnesses continue to move, one is slouched over, another standing-hands in pockets-looking up, another crouched in a corner with face to the wall, another turning in circles. Me begins to speak)

Now that we have identified what we are in this moment and how it feels,
Take time/Two minutes/Write/
Let the pen take you/
I am...and it feels like/
Not too much thinkin’/
No pausin’/
Let the pen do the work

<Music cues Jill Scott "When I Wake Up"
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x6ofNozL1t8&feature=related>>

(Everyone writes for two minutes. When the two minutes are up, I begin to speak)

OKAY, time is up. I am sure many of you may wish to continue writing, want to read over what you wrote and we will do that. Just not yet *(She smiles)*.
For now, I want to check in really quickly with people. How are folks feeling? Again, one word, one sound, or a lil’ more.

Witness: “Anxious”

Witness: Intrigued

Witness: “Speechless”

Witness: “Surprised”

Witness: Grateful

Witness: Overwhelmed (*she pauses*), in a good way

Me: Okay. Okay. Thank you for sharing those words and feelings. Now that we have done a little dancing and writing, we are going to dig a little deeper to scratch the surface of the work I have been doing. You know a big part of my process is revisiting the site, where it all went down. A feminist who walks with me Katherine McKittrick (2006) discusses the possibility in revisiting where it all went down. So we are going to go there, where it all went down, and we are going to dance there and feel there and write there and be present there.

<Music cues Sade’s “Like a Tattoo” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mtK9bg1oCE>>

(Slow and sternly rubbing her arm as if to wash off a stain, Me begins to speak)

He entered me/Red Toupee wearing, Mr. Dodd/Entered me/
Fix me/Tried to/Be a lady/Why are you sitting like that?
Why you being so Black/ So stupid/
He entered me/Stabbing my thighs closed/
Felt like/Thought I heard/Don’t be so black/
Come here/ I’ll fix you/
Without my permission/He entered/
Exited/Entered/This time a woman/
No old white man/
Women who raised me/
Fix me/Tried to/Be more ladylike
Books on my head/My posture. fixed/Temporarily
She, they entered me/Exited/Entered/
Teacher/Another/Another/Then another
Fix me/Tried/Well meaning/
Good intentions/Fix me/
More like break me/My spirit/
Without permission/Enter me/
Try to/Fix me/
Succeed/It’s in my skin/
I cry/fix, you try/
Broken, I am/
It’s in my skin/
Without permission, entered/
Exited/Entered/They did/
But it/ never left/

(Me starts to dance, remove her shirt, and ends standing with her back to the audience with the phrase " I AM also Mr. Dodd" written on her back. Witnesses start to clap)

Thank you. Thank you/Now write down, keep head notes your gut reactions/
Save em for later/Right now offer one word, one sound/In the space, represent/
Represent, feeling/ Keep it visceral/Remember to feel/
To begin, ANXIOUS

Witness: "Wow"

Witness: "Appreciative"

Witness: *(Lets out a Deep sigh)*

Witness: Overwhelmed

Witness: Heavy

Witness: "Deep"

Me: Thank you for your honest responses, physical and verbal. The more honest and present we can be in our bodies, the more work we get done. That I am learning daily. As stated earlier on, we are not finished with those amazing pieces you wrote earlier. If you have put them under your seat, on the chair next to you, in your bag, I ask that you take them out and grab something to write with, listen to my instructions, and then act. This exercise is to be completed without talking.

Read it over/ Circle the power words/
Three words capture your writing/

(Witnesses scan their writings and begin to make decisions about which words most important and then circle them)

STAND/

Take a word/On three, move it out in your body
One, Two, Three/Hold it/Hold it/

(Witnessess look to their paper, identify their first word to move, and then begin to move)

Release/

Take another/On three/Move it out in your body

(Witnesses look to their paper, identify their first word to move, and then begin to move)

One, Two, Three/Hold it/Hold it/

Complete/
Let your body tell you when you are done/
Release/
Take the last/On three/Move it/

(Witness's look to their paper, identify their first word to move, and then begin to move)

One, Two, Three/Hold it/Hold it/
Complete/
Let your body tell you you're done/
Let your body tell you you're done/
Release/
Put them together/

(Witnesses begin to move)

One, two, three/Feel your way through/
When it feels right, stop/Not a moment before/
Until it feels right, Move/
Let yourself feel/Let your body guide/
Stop, when it feels complete/
Face her/Face her/Face him/

(Witnesses partner up with the person next to them, designate, with body language, who will begin and begin to move out their phrase)

Share your body/Your story/
Move until she/he feels you/
Until the story registers/
Move, until it feels right to stop/
Watch him show you/Watch her exposed/
Watch her teach you/
Celebrate being naked/Celebrate nudity/
When it feels right, stand firm in it/
When it feels right, become the observer/
When it feels right, become the exhibitionist/
Move/Watch/Appreciate/
When it feels right/ When you both are naked/
When you see the other as yourself/
When you feel, stop/Not a moment before

(When Witnesses finish their phrases they are looking at each other and I begin to speak)

Beautiful. That looked and felt amazing. Show yourselves some appreciation for remaining present. How did that feel?

Witness: Different

Witness: “Scary”

Witness: Intense and yet freeing.

Me: Say more about that

Witness: Like I was nervous at first because I am not a dancer but when I let go, it was like my body had something to say

Me: Hmmm, wow.

Witness: Vulnerable

(Other Witnesses nod their heads in agreement)

Wonderful. Wonderful. Take a moment and just sit with your feelings. Acknowledge that your body has just taken you on a journey. To honor that, just be for a moment and then we are going to process some more, as I would love to hear more from people and of course respond to your curiosities. *(She smiles).*

(Witnesses sit for 3 minutes, some write, some hold their heads in their lap, others look into the sky, one scans the faces of other Witnesses, and deep sighs, hmms are released, one stretches.)

<Music cues Ledisi’s “Take Time” and plays low in the background>

(Me pulls up a chair to sit amongst the other Witnesses and begins to speak)

Me: Now let’s talk. Before we dive into the material, how it felt, and so one lets maintain that same commitment to honesty and vulnerability.

(Witness jumps in almost interrupting)

Witness: Me, Thank you for this. Can you talk about what brought you to this work?

Me: Sure. First, let me say it’s taken a lot to get here—to be present in my body and work through the dirt and hidden realities. While going through graduate school and trying to figure out what my life’s work was going to be, my flesh started screaming. Though I had been a self-identified poet since age 10 and danced before I could walk, I started to parcel out where I could be creative. I separated my creative self from my academic self. You know, unconsciously disciplining my writing and myself.

(A witness says Ahhh)

Witness: That’s a powerful statement. Can you say more about this self-disciplining?

(Other Witnesses nod their heads in agreement)

Me: Absolutely. It was in a failed artistic moment where, for a departmental research requirement, I wrote a paper where I offered poetry as my method for unearthing the dialectic between bodies and oppression. There I was—Black, female, queer, frosting my poems, better yet, burying my poems/my theory under traditional academic jargon and critique.

(One witness nods, one sighs, and another leans forward in chair. Me seeing they were into her articulation continues)

My advisor's response "It'll suffice" crushed me. Tears and doubt temporarily clouded my vision. I tried to write the comments off and keep it pushin'. I did not come to graduate school for mediocrity. I invested too much time, money, effort, love, and self into this process to be merely *aight*. Definitely took it personal for a second. As time passed, I realized that this real talk tone of a grown Black girl adviser committed to celebrating Black girlhood and transformative work posed the critical question, "Where is your heart?"

(Witnesses nod. Simultaneously, witnesses respond)

Witness: Ahh

Witness: Ahah

Witness: Yes

Witness: Wow

Witness: Can you talk about the process of decision-making? Like, I'm not sure about everyone else, but I came to watch and see something. I wound up being part of it.

(Witnesses nod)

I'm just wondering if you could talk about those decisions.

Me: Absolutely. That is a perfect articulation. Unlike scholarship that seems uni-directional, I wanted to create a process where there was an exchange, a dialogue, between witnesses and myself. In Performance Studies scholarship Tami Spry (2011) refers to it as co-performance where what is happening and being created in the moment is a collective process between the performer and the observer. At the same time, because I consider this work spiritual and view vulnerability and healing an essential part, I wanted those in attendance to be more than conventional audience members—watching, being entertained, and clearly separate from the performance happening. Instead, resembling Black churches, I wanted to testify and for the audience to be witnesses (Baldwin, 196[8]). In Black church a witness embodies two characteristics. First she is present to view and hear the testimony. Second, she validates the testimony and the one who testifies through an "amen" because she too has been there and can relate on some level.

Witness: Ahh. I get it. So you wanted us to be part and not just watch. It makes sense because our participation seemed important to you. Intentional even.

(A witness laughs and begins to speak)

Witness: “I gotta admit when you said we are going to dance a little, I was thinking “I’m outta here,””(he laughs) but I was curious to see what you were going to do and I’m glad I stayed.

(I laugh and speak)

Me: I am glad you stayed also.

(A witness interrupts)

Witness: You mentioned spirit as related to your project. I am intrigued by this and first commend you for engaging the spirit in academic work but I’d love to hear more.

(I smile and pull out some papers and starts speaking)

Me: Yes. I said earlier, I would read a bit from my dissertation prelim. Going back to my previous discussion of my failed attempt at poetic analysis and my adviser’s response, “it’ll suffice,” and her challenging me to bring my heart, my deepest self to the work, Jacqui Alexander (2005) discusses the relationship between the body and spirit. She says, ““So much of how we remember is embodied: the scent of home; of fresh baked bread...but violence can also be embodied, that violation of sex and spirit, which is why body work is healing work is justice work” (p. 367). Taking direction from Alexander (2005), this project is spirit driven in that its intent and work is to heal wounds and spirit in this case refers to the sacred inner workings of the self that are intangible but impactful, able to be stolen, mutilated, and mended.”

Witness: Ahhh *(nods head up and down)*

(Another witness shakes head up and down)

Witness: And I am assuming this is a feminist project because it feels that way. If I am wrong please correct me but, the use of the body, the subjectivity of the self. Who are you drawing upon, feminist I mean, to help you through this process?

Me: Yes. You are on point. There are many amazing women guiding my way through this work but I will mention a few. First, let’s visit feeling. Can anyone tell me how you all felt being here? Taking part in this experience?

Witness: Connected. Connected with some of the words that were on the ground and some of the words that you were saying. As far as those experiences or feelings that I have felt in different capacities. Maybe not in the same capacity as you stated it but still feeling connected to this experience of being a black girl in a world that does not value being either of those things.

Witness: I think moved is one word to describe it and pressed, disturbed maybe—that might be strong but when you started to scratch your skin. Um, and you started that if I recall in the performance before you actually explained what you were doing. And it really made me think. It made me think about um, about pain and not only about pain that gets inflicted upon us, and also that we inflict upon ourselves.

Witness: Honored to be witnessing at like first hand, hearing, watching.

Me: Okay. Wow. Hmm. Thank you for your honesty. So I believe I was talking about feminism and those people I rely on in this work. Well first, Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown, also my adviser, is instrumental to this project in that she posed difficult questions to me about my work, questions that have granted me the courage to be here before you today. Also, her work on black girlhood, on celebrating black girlhood, the black female body, and us—as Blackgirls—claiming and reclaiming our magic, beauty, possibility is key to this work. It forces me to sit with me until the discomfort becomes comfortably unsettling. Make sense?

Witness: Yes.

(Other witnesses nod)

Me: Another key woman is philosopher and feminist “Katherine McKittrick (2006) who offers insight into re-situating, reconfiguring, and re-imagining the black female body (also see Hooks, 1990). She states, But this geographic work—acknowledging the real and the possible, mapping the deep poetics of Black landscapes—is also painful work. The site of memory is also the *sight* of memory—imagination requires a return to and engagement with painful places, worlds where Black people were and are denied humanity, belonging, and formal citizenship; this means a writing of where and how Black people occupy space through different forms of violence and disavowal. (p. 33).” McKittrick urges me, urges black females to confront these hurtful and painful sites. She is daring us to live in that pain in our bodies, embrace it, and make peace with it—therein is possibility, healing a rebirth.

Witness: Wow

Witness: That is painful and

Witness: Dangerous

Me: Yes. No one could have told me I would be here doing this a year ago but, then again, as Omi Osun Joni Jones says, “ When the ancestors call, it’s best to just sit and listen.” *(Me smiles)*

Witness: “This sounds very innovative for educational research and I think I know what you are doing but can you talk more about the methods? Like what exactly are you doing?

(laughs)

Me: Great question. Some days I am so wrapped in feeling it all and working through the moments creating from doing this work that I have to remind myself of what exactly it is that I am doing. But the more time goes by and the more I feel through, I think feeling, improvisation, discomfort, being present are essential to this process. I must be upfront and say there is much more improvisation and feeling my way through this process than can be captured in words or on paper. That is the beauty and difficulty in understanding performance work—it is transient and yet its impact is timeless. However, because I want to get at the depth of culture, the impact of schooling on the body, and value of blending methods to uncover experience, my methods center around three levels of analyzing and cleaning the house. First there is Individual layer where I go through poems, papers written, journals, report cards and comments, pictures, and other items available regarding my schooling experiences. I make these my archive. I review them on a personal basis and use them to begin the second layer, which is the dialogue.

(Witness interrupts)

Witness: Okay. So what is this part called? Collective? Or Group Synthesis?

Me: Close, because it describes a bit of what is done on this second level. I call it the dialogue level because it takes what I did in the individual level, places it in performance format, and serves as a dialogue between witnesses and myself, witness' experiences and my experiences, and between what is (performed) and what is possible (impact of dialogue). This level represents what we are doing now, which involves me going into various communities to which I am accountable. So academia, family, and Blackgirls and share with them my experiences and personal analyses from level 1.

Witness: Ahh. That is smart. And so though this is a project about you, autoethnography, it is about much more than just you.

Witness: Everything we do as individuals is about more than us as individuals.

Witness: I don't know about that. How is that possible?

Me: You are raising something that has and will likely continue to come up in my work, which is the work that be done by the telling, showing, and sharing of one story. If you woulda caught me four months ago, I would not have been where I am today. Through deep thinking about this topic my response is that the auto/ethnography I do and will do in the future has spiritual, political, and methodological roots. I have come to see that in the academy methodological decisions often go back to the questions and whether the methods best fit the questions being asked. I am not claiming I disagree. What I am saying is that the basis of that is not spiritual or political. Yet the auto/ethnography I am doing is spiritual because in doing this work I call upon the women of my family, black feminist who have gone from the world, women living now. They not only show up in my work as citations but they are with me, guiding me.

Witness: Okay. I get where you are coming from and I never thought of it that way but can you talk about how this is political? I never considered research political.

Me: I appreciate your honesty and curiosity and for a long time I did not use this language to talk about my work. In fact, four months ago, I was unknowingly apologizing for doing this work. So my work is political because a process was required to say I AM and I will not apologize for whom I AM in all its complexities. Extending that into scholarship, it takes audacity to say I AM in academia that like the world is generally immersed in race, gender, sexuality, and class realities that devalue me as an individual and therefore will likely disregard my story as void of larger lessons, messages, and telling. So this work never was just about me. It's about culture, how culture gets in the skin, how we make sense of culture, and how we can imagine or re-imagine it to enhance lives, which takes me to the third level, which is cultural and cultural imagining.

Witness: Based on what you have shared, can I tell you version of this level?

Me: Absolutely. I would love to hear it.

Witness: Well because your performances share real things that have happened, invite us to add to the story our own things, and then discuss the process and how it feels, I think this level is about putting it all together. And what I mean by that is taking what you have shared, learned from others, and how you felt in the space in the moment, and work through it. You know see if you find anything new, anything insightful about your life or about this process. I mean it seems like you are creating a process *(Interrupted by another witness)*

Witness: Yea a dangerous one

Witness: Okay a dangerously fruitful process that others may be able to use if they are willing.

Me: I could not have said it better myself. You are right on. The only thing I'll add is that I also do interviews with anyone willing to do a one-on-one, as I said earlier. But yea, so I go home and write as much as I can about what happened, review the video, transcribe the interviews, sit with it, and imagine from it. I hope that helps you all wrap yours heads around the general process.

(Witnesss shake head up and down)

Me: Great. So *(I am interrupted)*

Witness: At the end of the day what do you hope we walk away with?

Me: That is a great question. Tell me this, what you are leaving with? And if you are taking with you nothing that's good too. Leaving with no baggage, a great thing.

(Everyone pauses, hands go onto chins, eyes go into the sky as if searching, fingers tap the knees, and one witness begins to speak)

One word, one sound, or a long sentence. Just what are you taking with you?

Witness: "Courage"

Me Ahhh. That is wow. Thank you for that.

(Other witnesses nod; some still have hands on chins; one looking toward the ceiling; another walks out; one witness is writing)

Me: I recognize that many things may have come up for people. So lets just take a moment and sit with our feelings. Lets identify or try to identify what we are feeling.

(Everyone takes 1 minute to sit with the experience. When the minute is up, I begin to speak)

Me: As we come to the end of this moment, it is my hope that you take the process with you. That you continue think about schooling and its impact on the body. It is also my expectation that you remember what it felt like to engage in this process with people. What was uncomfortable? Explore it? What did you enjoy most? Why? That you forget the fine details of what happened in this room but carry with you the feelings, the impact. Remember the anxiety, courage, memories, process, and willing vulnerability to create and remain in this space. So you all should celebrate yourselves for that. Last but not least remember that intention does not excuse impact. This was, is a difficult necessary moment, an experience of being vulnerable and unapologetic

Espousing

Enacting

Surviving

Living

Fighting

Coping

Giving into

Barely Breathing

Back breakin'

pointed toe precision

Booty poppin'

Black Female

passin' under radar

War dancing

Blackqueerscholar

Guilty of

Being

Too much

Too little

Not enough

More than the role

Artist

Role-playing

Academy

Collusion

Illusion

The hood
Confusion
Resistance
Agency
agency
Complicity
Conscious
Celebration
Awakened

This is my continued /literal and figurative dance with schooling

<Music cues Nina Simone “Here Comes the Sun.”
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSVscnLdUxk>>

(I lift my hands to the sky and lowers them into prayer hands in the center of her chest, following she slowly lowers her head to face witnesses, gazing deep into their faces to connect, she begins to back up to center stage, and starts to dance, then pauses and scans the open circle of witnesses slowly backing away into the darkness. Song fades out and lights lower)

Analytical Reflection

The former transgressn text aims to showcase insights gained from the workshop, “When flesh screams: Border crossing, healing, and Identity,” which speak to the pervasive nature of vulnerability to my project and the role of the body in vulnerability. In this analytical reflection I walk through three important realizations about vulnerability: 1.) vulnerability creates openings 2.) vulnerability gives permission, and 3.) vulnerability grounds auto/ethnography. Built into each of these insights regarding vulnerability are reflections about the process along with articulations of how the body helped identify each and closes with an articulation of a concept I named body-activation.

Vulnerability creates openings

Shifting the traditional conversation within qualitative research, to connect vulnerability to particular subjects of studies (Booth & Booth, 1994; Brannen, 1988; Cotterill, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), this workshop affirmed that vulnerability enacted by the research creates openings. Some of the particular openings offered from being vulnerable in this sitting included:

An opening to talk and move and process in-the-moment my project and beliefs about auto/ethnography; opportunity for witnesses to engage in self-reflection (privately or publicly), and the opportunity to introduce ideas about the body and using it as a pedagogical tool for instruction in the presence of seasoned professors and students who potentially have information that can inform and enhance my work.

Presenting one's work is a necessary and expected part of being in academe. Prior to being immersed in the act of sharing one's ideas and scholarship, I assumed this process to be inviting and illuminating. However, as a less novel presenter and one who has been warned by mentors and senior faculty in academe, I am aware of the vulnerability involved in offering one's work up for viewing, especially when it's in embryonic stage. In these instances, I did not feel vulnerable because I was learning something new about myself (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, and Liamputtong, 2007) but because my scholarship involves vulnerability. Yet to have the opportunity to process how I was making sense of my project and ascertaining how others', faculty and students alike, understood and related or not to my work was crucial. A very important part of this processing took place around my attempt to create an opening to invite observers to be witnesses in my project and illustrated in the dialogue below:

Witness: Can you talk about the process of decision-making? Like, I'm not sure about everyone else, but I came to watch and see something. I wound up being part of it.

(Witnesses nod)

I'm just wondering if you could talk about those decisions.

Me: Absolutely. That is a perfect articulation. Unlike scholarship that seems uni-directional, I wanted to create a process where there was an exchange, a dialogue, between witnesses and myself. In performance studies scholarship Tami Spry (2011) refers to it as co-performance where what is happening and being created in the moment is a collective process between the performer and the observer. At the same time, because I consider this work spiritual and view vulnerability and healing an essential part, I

wanted those in attendance to be more than conventional audience members—watching, being entertained, and clearly separate from the performance happening...

By creating a space for talking through my work after partaking in a workshop, an embodiment, of my writing about my methods, an opening was created for me to clarify my rationale behind my research design. Alongside, this opening is the chance for those in attendance to initiate self-reflection, some of which happened during the session with others as well as reflection that took place after the workshop and referenced in the follow-up interviews. For example, Jaime, a workshop attendee explains:

I thought it was going to be more of a presentation and thought it was really participatory. Um, it really kind of hit me that day. I was in a spot that I wanted to be doing some self-reflection and like seeing you read your poetry, do your dance and express yourself that way made me more comfortable doing it in parts that you asked me to participate in...So it was much more interactive and I think effective than if it was just a presentation about you and about your work.

Within this workshop of people who showed up for various reasons, i.e., they knew me, were interested in the free food that accompanies Brown Bags, and interested in the topic, arose the challenge to connect with, enliven people to want to engage, and create a space for all of us to reflect on our experiences and how our body is intentional considered and/or ignored in different spaces.

Additionally, with most of the witnesses being professors and/or individuals working in social justice and inclusion spaces, this workshop provided us all an opportunity to reconsider our practice. During an interview with Kay a newly retired Education and moral development professor, she reflects upon vulnerability and her use of the arts in her classroom pedagogy:

Oh, I think it [artistic expression] offers quite a different entry. Um, the fact that everybody is not totally comfortable with it doesn't negate at all the fact that it's a very different way to enter the material. And um, in fact when I use poetry in my class or something like that, I might ask—after the students have read something—I might ask them to write a rhyming couple about it...So it's, talking to you makes me realize that I'm more comfortable asking others do stuff than I am doing it myself.

It was through our collaborative processing that she acknowledged her teaching pedagogy involved directing students to employ artistic expression as a means of learning. Again, an opening was created for her to acknowledge she was less willing to be vulnerable with her students, which would take the form of her also writing poems and sharing them with the class. Her comfort guiding students through their creation process yet reluctance to engender her own prompted me to think about my willingness to be an example in my teaching practices and in this very study.

In Carolyn Ellis' (2004) *The ethnographic I*, she recounts a classroom discussion with one of her students, Valerie, reflecting upon her autoethnographic work with breast cancer survivors and the need to be vocal about her own fight with breast cancer: "Valerie continues, "The turning point was in one of our meetings when Carolyn asked if I wanted vulnerable readers...I knew from reading other autoethnographies that I wasn't going to get them if I didn't let myself be vulnerable" (p. 138). Like Ellis' student Valerie, I knew before I could (comfortably) request others to be vulnerable, I needed to show my willingness to be vulnerable. The word "comfortably" is intentionally added because it is plausible that researchers expect those participating in their studies to divulge information about their histories, family, etc. without considering the power differential and in my opinion inequitable situation being set up in such a dynamic. Given the particular community spaces I would enter, my family and Blackgirls, following this initial data collection the idea of asking and expecting them to open and be vulnerable prior to me doing so felt unethical and foreclosing to the possibility I aim to craft. Further, it forced me to recount the discussion that followed my original performance where people expressed how important it was that I first placed myself in an exposed position,

cementing my hunch that doing so created intimacy where a sharing of personal and otherwise private things or behaviors is more likely to occur:

Drea: Your willingness to be as vulnerable as you were. To your crowd and audience. I know that that was not an easy crowd by any means because people come in to the workshop and it's not like it's for a specific group of people. It's more of a gathering, come and see what you get from it and within that you have a variety of people who are in very different places in their own spirituality in their own life. So that's a very difficult space to understand and maintain and I feel like you did that in a beautiful way by putting yourself on the forefront of that, you forced people into that space. And I say that in the best way possible. Not in a, "oh you have to be here" but it forces you to relate to someone so vulnerable and in this case, it was you, and it makes you just reflect about your life and where you're headed and your own qualms and things that have to be dealt with.

Displayed in the preceding dialogue is evidence that vulnerability has the potential to create openings. Drea's statement raises the issue of what it means to witness and the responsibility of the one testifying—in this case me. Here, it is presumed that through show and tell or testimony, in my original performance, an entryway is realized. Being vulnerable, therefore, creates an entryway, possibility, and intimacy and in the presence of vulnerability those present to it are provided many permissions.

Vulnerability gives permission

In auto/ethnography vulnerability affords many permissions to the researcher and participants. Three permissions that surfaced here is that vulnerability gives the researcher and participants to tell their stories, to be embodied when telling these stories, and to sense their way through the narratives and experiences. All three of these permissions eventuate in the body being engaged and at the fore of being vulnerability. Autoethnographer Tami Spry (2011) says, "being vulnerable in the process of performance, or privy to its transformative possibilities means full engagement of the body/and in theory" (pp. 165-166). Acquiescing to Spry's

assertion of the need for “full engagement of the body” in performance demanded that I, as the researcher, be aware of how the context and the history tied to it informed this actual moment.

For instance, prior to the workshop starting, I was flooded with emotions and memories of my time as a student and full time staff member at Colgate. Staff members, who I did not hold in high regard while I was a student and/or staff member, entered the room and I felt grateful and chose to use my performance to work through and reconcile those feelings. To do so, I made purposeful and prolonged eye contact with these two people. Within me, I was forcing myself to connect with them and to transmute my feelings of distrust and hurt to openness and forgiveness. It also occurred through increasing my proximity of closeness to them throughout the workshop. Related to my feelings of uncertainty and mistrust, I felt a knot form in the pit of my stomach when they entered but again, saw this as a moment to give myself permission to embrace what my body was feeling while challenging myself to transcend these emotions and reactions.

I confronted my trepidations of disclosure and left affirmed that the act of being vulnerable permits everyone to be present to their truths and viscerally experience how retelling these realities feel in their bodies while forging a possible bridge between community accountability and academic research expectations—a bridge fraught with adversity (Boylorn, 2013a; McClaurin, 2001; Smith, 1999; Ulysse, 2003; Weems, 2013). In discussing how Drea resonated with my story she states:

Drea: Uhhmmm. So I was a sea of emotions but I guess my top three would be: vulnerable right along with you and perhaps that's due to the fact that you know I feel like we've had so many similar experiences I but also from a racial standpoint as another black woman in academia, I know what that feels like. You know what that feels like too I mean you're still doing the work. Um, I felt captivated and I felt moved. Yea I felt vulnerable captivated and moved. And those are three things you were able to create in the space of an hour and ten minutes.

Drea and I did not have identical stories but she, nonetheless, felt connected to my story. Our shared racial, gender, and later learned sexuality, identities linked us. In addition, my disclosing of my struggles as a young Black girl along with some of the hardships endured while at Colgate made me relatable and through my sharing, Drea came to feel she was re-living some of her own story through me. Critical to her statement is that the use of my body to show and tell my experiences as a Black girl awakened her body enough that she too felt “vulnerable, captivated, and moved.” In the process of publicly working through my lived experiences of schooling and girlhood, I not only re-membered events and happenings but I got to work through in solitary as well as with/in the presence of others, some of whom I had indicted as culprits. In other words, “auto/ethnography as a method allows me to write (about/for) my life and to make sense of it” (Boylorn, 2013a, p. 80).

Similar to Drea's sensing of my experience, using my physical body placed in an extremely vulnerable and powerful place. I found that when I moved, using my hips, lips, butt, legs, and muscles—the body parts for which Black females receive accolades, harassment, and undue stigmas—I was comfortably uncomfortable. Lorde (1984) declares, “For to survive in the mouth of the dragon we call America, we have had to learn...that we were never meant to survive...And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength” (p. 42). As I moved in the middle of that semi circle, commanding those present to see me, hear me, sense, I felt surprisingly free. Being Black, female, queer, working

class, all those identities that framed my life at Colgate fell away. I am not saying they disappeared because I used them to tell my story. Yet, they define my story. Therefore, my choosing to dance, and move and flex my muscles to convey my Black girlhood realities became a simultaneous visceral recapitulation and casting of my Blackgirl, Black femininity, and overall Black female being.

When acknowledging that performance encompasses analysis of art and culture, accomplishment or the making of artistic creations and re-creation of culture, as well as the displaying and deployment of arts as intervention, scholarship outside the academy and/or community created knowledge (Conquergood, 2004), vulnerability becomes a way of deepening relationships between the performer (me) and the observers through complete involvement or embodiment. Moreover, it functions as a tool for inviting the observer and performer of a performance to become a witness. As a reminder, a witness is someone actively participating in the reading or understanding; at the level or levels they feel most comfortable, of this project. Drawing on the experiential and standards in Black church, witnesses are active observers to a testimony or sharing of one's story whose reactions to a testimony, are usually contingent upon how well they can relate to the person testifying and/or the content of the testimony (Baldwin, 1968).

In a similar fashion, Black feminist theatrical jazz practitioner Omi Osun Joni Jones (1997) states, "the audience has to integrate my dancing body into their notions of academic respectability, and they are invited to put their own bodies into the performance, not only as observers but as spect-actors" (p. 61). Supported in Jones statement is the power of performance to back and compel observers to transcend unspoken expectations of them, to watch, to adopt a position that affords them room and freedom to take part in the moment, the performance

through spect-acting. Paralleling Jones's assertion and what her performance, "Sista Docta," was about to accomplish, my initial performance inspired visceral responses, which had in turn incited other's bodies to take a stake, even if that merely meant truly observing to ascertain more of my experience, in my narrative. Some of these gut reactions included:

Kay: ...And I remember being very um, I think moved is one word to describe it and pressed, disturbed maybe—that might be strong but when you started to scratch your skin. Um, and you started that if I recall in the performance before you actually explained what you were doing. And it really made me think. It made me think about um, about pain and not only about pain that gets inflicted upon us and also that which we inflict upon ourselves.

Jaime: Um, I really enjoyed being a part of the workshop. Um, I guess I thought it was going to be more of a presentation and thought it was really participatory. Um, it really kind of hit me that day. I was in a spot that I wanted to be doing some self-reflection and like seeing you read your poetry, do your dance and express yourself that way made me more comfortable doing it in parts that you asked me to participate in. Um, asked everyone to. Um, I thought that because you had obviously been making yourself vulnerable that I felt more comfortable to do it and um, I really got more of the meaning behind the importance of your work, I think, by participating in it and thinking about myself and being able to apply that kind of pedagogy to reflections of identity, which we were talking about that day. So it was much more interactive and I think effective than if it was just a presentation about you and about your work.

Captured in Kay and Jaime's statements is the ability for my vulnerability to compel them to *feel* my story. Kay's discomfort with my skin scratching to slyly symbolize the act of screaming flesh and Jaime's willingness to be vulnerable denote that they took permission to be present to the workshop, to my story, and to therefore engage through their bodies rather than their heads. The two preceding particular reflections and the overall workshop led me to think about the connection between vulnerability and auto/ethnography and how the body supports their relationship.

Vulnerability grounds auto/ethnography

At the end of this workshop I saw auto/ethnography in a new light. Prior to the workshop I had not considered how my being Black, female, and queer, might make for some interesting

dynamics to my motivations for conducting auto/ethnography as well as what I might learn about my identities in doing this project. Forced to be truthful about my motivations, personal hang ups, and dilemmas surrounding relationship building especially with respect to academe, through my in-the-moment choices during my original performance, privately, and the dialogue that followed, publicly helped me get clear about my motivations for exploring Black girlhood and my reasons for selecting auto/ethnography as my method. There is insufficient information about the lives and journeys of Blackgirls and there is even less publicly available about how Blackgirls make sense of the identifier, “Blackgirl.”

The autoethnographic approach makes sense for many reasons that all connect to my ethics surrounding working with Blackgirls. I have never told my story and see it unethical to request other Blackgirls to tell their stories, communicate them to me, and permit me to share them with the world when I had the audacity to tell my own story nor taken the risks in putting them out for the world to see. Stated differently, Dickson-Swift et al. (2007) state, “Part of this vulnerability relates to an attempt by researchers to ‘even up’ the relationship between researcher and participant because if the participants are vulnerable then we too must be prepared to show our vulnerabilities” (p. 342). While it is important to “be prepared” as they suggest, to display vulnerability as researcher this is close to but not exactly what I am suggesting about vulnerability. Instead, I am insisting that if I was going to ask in particular Blackgirls and Black females in my family to name what ails and has wounded them, I was going to need to name these first. I needed the Blackgirls and women with whom I was working with and would work with in the future to know I was doing and had done what I would one day ask for, hope of, and/or encourage them to do. I, therefore, choose to be vulnerable, an entryway to potential. Placing my body on the line using movement and dance that was at times aggressive, angry,

sensual, sexual, and distraught forced those present, including myself, to reconcile constructions of the Black female body, culture of academe, and politics of the body and more.

Body-activation

In this workshop I used my body to illumine a narrative of my schooling and Black girlhood. Deliberately making my body the center of attention was a vulnerable undertaking that situated my body as a site of evidence, data, and cultural critique (Boylorn, 2013; Jones, 1997; Spry, 2011). Combining the enactment of vulnerability to the body brings us to a discussion of rousing the body through what I call body-activation. Since “we live in our bodies, learn about self, others, and culture, through analyzing the performances of our bodies in the world” (Spry, 2011, p. 165), it makes sense for the body be foregrounded both in understanding the experiential. Extending this reality into the field of research, it would also follow that the body be afforded the same privilege. Further as a person who occupies many identities dancer, queer, feminist, cis gendered female, and Black to name a few, my body is always on the line in a variety of ways. As a result, for educational, personal, and political reasons I consider the body indispensable to the explication and exploration of livelihood. This section then elucidates how centering my body, all of its many levels, to offer a narrative of my schooling, girlhood, and dissertation journey and enacting this workshop spawned the notion of body-activation.

Body-activation refers to a stirring up, invigorating, and engaging the body. When speaking of the body, as previously expressed, I am referring to its physicality, episteme, as well as its imagination or what it creates (Spry, 2011; Young, 2010). In this practice, the body is understood as an archive. To unlock or gain access to this archive it must be opened. In this workshop, I, and in particular my willingness to open and share my archive using dance, poetry, and storytelling, attracted others to do the same. Taking this conceptualization of the body into

the workshop prompted me to enact activities, some created impromptu, to engage its multiple dimensions. Thereby these activities incorporated personal reflection via writing, analysis, translation of reflection and analysis into movement, and collective processing. In considering the value of this practice, I offer comments made by people during their post-workshop interviews:

Drea: Um for those who may not have been “in-tune” if I can use that lightly for those who may not have been in touch with all that was being done there, again it was your ability to make us vulnerable through yourself that forced us to look inside and say, “man what is really going on with me.” And that doesn’t happen all the time in regular academia because again, it was like the dance for sure. The dance absolutely! The dance was so intimate but then even the storytelling work, your narrative, that was done after it, telling your own struggle and your own journey—there’s something powerful in narrative telling.

Drea’s comments point to the significance of blending these artistic mediums to stimulating the body and creating an intimate space where those who wish can be self reflective and vulnerable. While such an opportunity can be beneficial for some, for others it can be nerve wrecking and simultaneously informative. While interviewing a former professor about the workshop, she expressed clear discomfort with the physical movement parts but also offered insight into what might allow others who are uncomfortable to push through the vulnerability and uneasiness:

Kay: The writing part was just fine. Um, it was more the part where you were asking us to demonstrate things were interesting. And I thought the way you did it was really interesting. But I have to say, at first I was thinking “I’m outta here” (they laugh) I don’t wanna do this. Um, but didn’t make, I think the thing that kept me comfortable enough to even do it was that it was not done in front of everybody else but just where we were. I am not a very comfortable person um, in being the center of attention.

Me: Uh huh.

Kay: I don’t like that! And um so, I would not have been able to, if you had asked me for example rather than just stand at the chair and make those 3 um, you know make our bodies express those three ideas, um, if you had said come up in front and do it in front of everyone, I wouldn’t have done it.

Me: Ok. Ok.

Kay: So there’s a part of me thinks and I think it’s not for everyone perhaps but, there’s a part of me that um, is quite shy and quite private about those kinds of things.

Kay's candid remarks surrounding her reactions to the various exercises affirmed my belief that everyone would not take akin to physical movement. At the same time, her analysis supports the theory that applying different techniques for triggering and opening the body is efficient.

In this workshop, as well as the subsequent ones, body-activation begins first with me using my body during my original performance to create openings and give people permission to use their senses to witness my telling. By opening this workshop with an original performance comprised of dance, poetry, and personal narrative, I welcomed observers into my cultural archive, my body. Then the storytelling, movement and dance, and poetry, enlivened various dimensions of the body and introduced to them the various ways, if they choose to acquiesce, their bodies too could be activated. My particular use of dance and movement at the start of the original performance was an act of vulnerability where I placed my body on a line to be seen. Once I took this risk I could not control how my body was then seen. Within this workshop it was the first time in an academic setting I was consciously choosing to make my body the center of attention for an educational purpose. This decision was made as a result of my political convictions to reclaim my body and use it as a tool for resistance (Jordan, 1980) and to make the connection between my Black girlhood and schooling experiences more vivid and explicit.

Expanding upon this usage of arts were different activities that supported the practice of body-activation. The first body activation activity involved us warming up the physical body and simply being in the space, by creating poses that symbolized what we do when we are simply being us. The second exercise, "Feels like..." used a combination of awakening the mental and physical gears of the body. During that activity we did free-writing filling in and working from the statement, "I am...and it feels like," and created movement phrases from this writing that we

shared with a partner. These activities informed by the arts allowed for a range of movement, expression, and witnessing to occur.

When debriefing activities there were varying degrees of disclosure as to how people felt during the exercises as well as what they wrote about and conveyed in their movement. We also discussed, both collectively and during interviews, people's level of engagement and what informed it. Correspondingly, I asked interview participants their comfort with artistic expression and how they felt their relationship and comfortability with the arts informed their participation in the workshop. For example, when asked to move around and show through movement what it feels like to be them, I observed some people dove in and used the entire room while others observed more and moved in close proximity to their seat. However, of those interviewed from this workshop, every person expressed insecurity and/or discomfort with dance/movement.

The goal of these questions during the interview was to gain an understanding of what informed people's behaviors within the context of the workshop. Did external factors, who was present or absent, or a combination of these, that influenced people's action or lack of? In commenting on my use of the arts Jaime, the director of the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Queer/Questioning Office suggest:

First of all I think that (clears throat), I don't think that um, any academic theorizing or um, academic jargon could help me understand what you were saying about your work. It was like, in the letter to Mr. Dodd for example or in the poetry, I think it was just so much more raw! It was about your emotion. You weren't pretending like you use your identity and came at it with it a bunch of theory to make it okay to use your identity but, actually using the art and the expression in the room and knowing that it would potentially change between presentations that you gave or that in that moment you had specific choices about which pieces you were going to share, really put the focus on you and put the focus on your experience and your journey... I felt like you using the different artistic mediums with you writing on the paper, then being able to free write, and then dancing and the poetry and the music, all of those things together to me included us in what was for you a continuous journey. That made it different for me than other work.

Jaime's sentiments convey the value of emotion to identity work. Equally important to her experience in this workshop was the sincerity and genuineness of my performance. Furthermore, the fact that my workshop was multi-modal allowed for those watching to transgress the boundary of audience-performer and be included in/as the performance.

The practice of body-activation is inextricably linked to vulnerability and being vulnerable. Together the body takes front stage and makes the enactment of auto/ethnography both a private and public endeavor. Moreover, it permits individual bodies to determine how lively and invigorated they desire to be as well as how much outward expression of this activation they choose to show. In this workshop and the three preceding this one, my original performance served as a catalyst for body-activation. After seeing my performance it could function as a quid or completely ingested—thereby the observer becomes a witness (Baldwin, 1968). Most importantly, body-activation is a practice that endeavors to get the body, its physical, episteme, and imagination dimensions, engaged and invested in an experience.

Conclusion

As the first workshop facilitated in my data collection process and done in the presence of faculty, students and others within the space of academe, “When flesh screams: Border crossings, healing, and identity is unique to the workshops that followed. Accordingly, do not assume its structure, language style, and focus verbatim. This chapter is about me—my Black girlhood, journey to this dissertation project, and my beliefs about the value of auto/ethnography, research with Blackgirls, and the arts. It is therefore, intentionally more reflective and clarifying. Through this workshop, orchestrated in the format of a Brown Bag, I was able to work and think through my sensibilities about the use of the body and arts to garner and share different and important information about identity and experience.

Facilitated in the presence of students who knew of me as a student and former employee at the University as well as former professors, allowed this presentation to serve as a mirroring moment, a chance to tangibly engage an older self with a newer one and allow them to question and simultaneously encourage each other (Boylorn, 2013b; Spry, 2011). Affirmed through this experience was the utility of artistic expression as a means of exploring identity and the vitality of personal disclosure in crafting an intimate space that aims to operate as a site of transformation and self-reflection. Alongside the affirmed value of art as a useful tool in identity work and expression is the identification of vulnerability and body-activation as practices. As complimentary practices they unveiled the potential power of body-centered arts-based research.

Conducting data collection in this particular context provided space and the expectation to share and reflect upon my Black girlhood experience with people who are in indirect, future, and direct stakeholders in the lives of Blackgirls. Further, this presentation allotted me time to work through the ways my dissertation project—exploring Black girlhood through a body-centered and arts based practice—might contribute to issues and trending topics, e.g., teacher pedagogy, what does teacher identity have to do with instruction and student success, in academe. Finally, it allowed me to give back to a community space that both aided in my identity excavation and supported the compartmentalization in which I would partake. The next chapter, “Airing Out Family Laundry: A Black Girl Intergenerational Release,” builds upon the insights gained here around body-activation and the importance of vulnerability and uses them to facilitate a workshop in my family community space.

Pause

Based on the workshop above, how would you describe your involvement with the narrative unfurling? Do you see yourself as a reader, witness, or somewhere between?

Chapter Five

Airing Out Family Laundry: A Black Girl Intergenerational Release

Site of Memory # 3: Juvenile Detention Blues

0.5,325.3,360.3, 739 F.C.A:

PRESENT: Hon. MARJORIE C. MIX
Judge

At a term of the Family Court
of the State of New York,
held in and for the County
of Erie, at 25 Delaware
Avenue, Buffalo, New York, on
February 13, 1997.

In the Matter of *
DOMINIQUE C. HILL DOB: 04-01-83 *
A Person Alleged to be a *
Person in Need of Supervision *
Respondent. *

Docket No. S- 3537-97

ORDER DIRECTING DETENTION
(Post-Petition)
(NON-SECURE)
And Recall of Warrant

A petition under the Family Court Act, having been filed in this Court
alleging that the above-named Respondent is a Person in Need of Supervision; and

Respondent having been brought before this Court and a preliminary hearing
having been held;

NOW therefore, it is hereby

ORDERED that the Respondent be and hereby is remanded to the Erie County
Detention Home, to be detained pending further proceeding herein on March 5,
1997, at 9:00 a.m., Part 3, before Judge Marjorie C. Mix; and it is further

ORDERED that the custodial authority produce Respondent on that date subject
to further Order of this Court; and it is further

ORDERED that in the event the child absconds from the above-named facility,
written notice of that fact shall be given within 48 hours by an authorized
representative of the facility to the Clerk of the Court, stating the name of
the child, the docket number of this proceeding, the date on which the child
absconded and the efforts made to locate and secure the return of the child ;
and it is further

ORDERED that the respondent is hereby referred for the following services
during the period Respondent is detained : Probation Investigation, Clinic
Evaluation, Placement Investigation.

ORDERED that the Court, upon the Respondent's appearance to answer the
allegations of the petition, hereby directs the recall of the warrant of arrest
issued under the above-captioned docket number.

NO FOSTER CARE WHILE DETENTION.

Dated: February 13, 1997

ENTER
[Signature]
J.F.C.

ENTERED
February 13, 1997
FRANK J. BOCCIO
CLERK OF FAMILY COURT
BY: S. KOLASZ
CLERK

Figure 1. Order directing detention.

Eighth grade. 1997. Ready for the world of high school so I could graduate and get the hell outta Buffalo NY. Life was throwing me body shots, combination punches and a temporary knock out that landed me in the East Ferry Juvenile Detention Center. I had runaway from my mother, my family, my hurts of abuse—lack of love—familial inflictions—to break bread with friends including a crush, weed, and pseudo freedom. But why I was there is only contextual information. What I experienced while there is the subject of discussion. You see, while in juve' I was expected to believe that somehow my presence there affected my family more than me. I had a family with a name, a reputation to uphold. We didn't have money nor fame, in the Hollywood sense but, one of the rocks within our family, my grandmother, was a well connected, God-fearing, always at church, bank manager, and is known or known of by everybody. Looking back it comes as less of a surprise that my grandmother's head was lowered to the ground when I walked in handcuffed, shackled, as if ashamed and/or disappointed. Illustrated in her line of questioning when visiting me as well as her actions toward me in this moment was the sad reality, at least in that moment, my grandmother cared more about what others would think of her at court, then what I was experiencing in juve or even better what I had endured in life that prompted me to voluntarily go to a juvenile detention. She never even asked. During a visit shortly after that walk of clanking metal and coldness down that narrow corridor, she asked, "What will they think of my granddaughter being all locked up like this Dommi?" My response, silence and a side eye. I remember staring past her with burning rage because she knew nothing about my time in juve' and seemed disinterested in knowing more. Never asked if they were treating me right in there. She never asked if the staff were God-fearing and loving people like her. Never asked if anyone touched or tried to touch me in an unwanted way. She. Never. Even. Asked. As I stood bound to the person in front and behind me by chains with cuffs on my ankles and wrists as familiar and foreign onlookers observed us; my body was reminded it was not my own. No, my Black girl body by itself didn't matter enough for my family to even smile at me, to send some light my way. No, instead my body was punished through eyes glued to the floor and a quick glance to acknowledge I had shamed our family.¹²

¹²To craft this piece I requested that my mother retrieve the documents from City Hall because they would not release them to me. I informed my mother I would be writing about my experience in the juvenile justice system and needed documentation to validate my story. After writing this narrative, I read it to my grandmother and we had a discussion about it. She expressed that hearing my side of things gave her a different perspective and that she was saddened I did not feel supported. She also understood how I could read her actions the way I did but never confirmed or rejected its accuracy. She thanked me for sharing it with her.

Introduction

“and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid
So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive”
from the Black Unicorns

Silence haunted, still haunts, the daily decisions and livelihoods of Blackgirls and women. With respect to my family and the livelihoods of my family members, including my own, it built and maintains a wedge between our existing and potential selves. Additionally, it demands my family in particular and Black females in general to mask yearnings and struggles (see Beaubeuof-Lafontant, 2009; Boylorn, 2014). This chapter, “Airing Out Family Laundry: A Black Girl Intergenerational Release” is a transgressn text¹³ that captures the healing engendered when six of my closest Black female family members ranging in age between 22-70 convened for a workshop I lead to explore our multiple realities of Black girlhood.

In chapters two and three I returned to sites of wrong doing to begin a process of healing following McKittrick (2006). In this chapter I return to the site or location of hurt and hoarded silences to invite my mother, aunts, cousin, and grandmother into the conversation through movement, writing and dialogue; transforming their former meanings by cracking the silence

¹³ As articulated in chapter three, a transgressn text is a fruit or manifestation formed to represent lessons learned, events, and happenings from embarking upon a critical reflexive process. It is an arts-infused piece that is not a direct transcript but a blending of what happened and/or data, analysis of the process, and the possibility that emerges from an overall process. Its form is fluid as well as context and aim specific. This text can be a written text, performance, poem, recording, multi-media project, dance, and/or a revised course syllabus. In other words, the manifested form of this text is inextricably linked to the context in which this pedagogy is enacted, voicing elements, what is to be presented, i.e., a dissertation, and for what purpose.

(Ulysse, 2003). This chapter exemplifies what happens when silences are no longer hoarded, and instead released within a familial space. Airing out family laundry both literally and figuratively subverts the power attached to silence by allotting intentional space for experiences of Black girlhood to be explored and shared by us on our terms. In addition, it humanizes Black female bodies, breaks traditional data re-presentation format, narrates key themes, and brings Black female bodies into the room as evidence and knowledge. From the breaking of silence emerged rejuvenation and imagining of the self and familial relationships differently.

Having the opportunity to commune with my family brought about four important realizations/insights. First, this workshop forged a space where Black females of three different generations could come together to discuss, show, and tell about where they been, what they been through as well as where they are headed. Second, it displayed silence as intergenerational and unearthed the transformative potential of workshops of this nature to engender healing. My family's stories of girlhood are but tangible examples of induced silences in the lives of Blackgirls and women. Likewise, transgressn text in the earlier part of this chapter displays the potential benefits and liabilities of airing such information. Thirdly, it facilitated what bell hooks (1990) calls a "home place" where Black people, females in particular can come together to recall where they have been, dialogue about new ways of being and be rejuvenated to go back into a world that sneers at our audacity to be. Finally, it afforded a space where I could share experiences I kept hidden and in doing so engender a different relationship with individual family members as well as our collective family.

To capture what happened during this workshop, I first offer a text that blends what happened in this session along with my analyses and negotiations in the moment and afterwards. Next, is an analysis of the workshop with a discussion of Black feminist and Black girlhood

literature that talks about the issues of silence and imagining. Language and activities included are taken directly from the workshop as well as the interviews that occurred after the workshop. Take together the text offers a layered portrayal of Black girlhood, Blackgirls' bodies as well as the interrelationship between girlhood and womanhood.

Context

Clammy hands stuck to the steering wheel. Tightened stomach. Wet armpits. I am leaving my new home in Baltimore, Maryland and driving almost seven hours to Buffalo, New York. I think I'm nervous. All this time alone my car affords me time, perhaps too much, to reflect upon B-lo, Buffalo, my home. Home, at least this one I'm headed to, is a contested space of codes, memories, and a reminder of where I been. I am nervous. Dare I say terrified? I would not venture to that extreme, but there is a lot at stake. Just a few months ago I traveled to my undergraduate alma mater, Colgate University, to do a workshop. I felt nothing like this. My hands are clammy. I think my armpits are sweating. I keep thinking, there is no way to tell my story without implicating them. I hope they understand this. I need them to understand this is not about passing judgment on their actions or inaction. I have come to terms that they did the best they could or what they thought they should in those moments.

When I came to the decision to do my dissertation on Black girlhood, that centers my experiences, I knew I wanted my family to be part of the story. I come from a close-knit family of vibrant, sassy, opinionated, and strong females. There are few active (read: present) males in my family. These women whom I call a village of warrior women comprise of my grandmother, mother, three aunts, and my late great grandmother, BJ, who is always present. It is through their stories, advice, successes, mistakes, and wisdom that I was introduced to sisterhood and what it means to a Black woman; given my feminist sensibilities; schooled on 'making a way outta no

way,' learned how to please Black men, and many other important lessons. So, it was a no brainer that I would ask these individuals along with my younger cousin, Danielle, who I grew up with to participate in the project. Each individual eagerly agreed to take part.

Each of these individuals are integral to my understandings of femininity, Blackness, success, beauty, and much more.

After they agreed to participate in the study, I had to figure out a space where the workshop could be held. This was a challenge. To put it bluntly, we got issues that are not being addressed. Due to the tensions between family members, some will not go to the houses of others. I, therefore, questioned if there was a home within our family where everyone would be comfortable or if I needed to venture outside our family space for another location. Though I do not remember exactly how, everyone agreed to come to my mother's home. Once the place was confirmed, I had to figure out the food. This was my family and although food may not be part of typical data collection, I felt compelled to do things as my family does—over food and drinks. I could not and did not want to shift those dynamics just because research was involved.

Indeed, our gathering together at my mother's home on a Thursday evening was about doing a workshop to be used as data for my dissertation. Although research was the motivation for this union, it was important that my means of collecting data aligned with how our family interacted. Implementing the workshop in a place familiar to my family or a naturalistic setting (Lichtman, 2012) was significant but insufficient to this project. I needed them (and myself) to immerse ourselves in the moment so much so that we forgot about the camera. Yes, this particular moment happened because I asked my family to be participants in my dissertation and yet when the moment arrived, my family affinity proved most important. Certainly, I had on my participant-observer coat, taking mental jottings of the brilliant and simple yet poignant

happenings throughout the workshop but, being a researcher sat backseat to being a daughter, granddaughter, cousin, and niece who had something to share with and receive from her family. Autoethnographer Tami Spry (2001), in talking about the complexities and tensions of conducting research in marginalized communities she purports the body in physical and textual form (in writing) as germane to bridging academe and disregarded communities. Spry (2001) contends:

Coaxing the body from the shadows of academe and consciously integrating it into the process and production of knowledge requires that we view knowledge in the context of the body from which it is generated. I must be ready to walk the talk of my scholarship by putting my politically marked body on the lines of the printed text. This kind of embodied methodology is— and should feel—risky.

Illuminated in Spry's statement are the expectations she attaches to autoethnography; the integral nature of the body to autoethnography; and the contention between the framing and positioning of the body to academe generally and the methodology of autoethnography. Inferred by Spry is the need for autoethnography to work from the body, its physicality and textual dimensions. Through lying bear the body, autoethnographers disclose the process, decisions, and feelings behind research. Norman Denzin (2010) suggest, "The poetic, narrative text makes public what many sociologists and anthropologists have kept hidden: the private feelings, doubts, and dilemmas, uncertainties that confront the fieldworker. These doubts reveal that the field is within us, not outside in some external site" (p. 89). Here, Denzin presents an alternative perspective on "the field" alongside what it means to do fieldwork. Adopting the previous conceptualization of the field recognizes the self as a, if not the, research site. Thus, while I am with family to conduct a workshop, the workshop and my body are both sites of investigation.

My awareness is heightened. There is lasagna, beverages (alcoholic and non-alcoholic), salad, laughter and lots of catching up. My mind is racing. Forty minutes into warm up—eating, laughing, and talking—my grandmother has a question about the consent forms. I think, “now onto the hard stuff, talking about the research.” As I engage their questions and explain the purpose of consent forms and their meaning, I constantly switch subjectivities. I recognize this moment exist because I asked them to be part of my dissertation. Yet they keep calling me Dom or Dommi, reserved only for my grandmother. I want to abandon my researcher role. I want to let go of my intentional use of research language; snatch words like investigation, participant, and waiver of consent, from my tongue and replace them with communion, family, and willingness to engage. Instead, I hold in tandem Dom & Dommi with Dominique the doctoral student, hoping to have the courage, the sensibility, and vision to destroy the boundary between them. What I know for certain is my positions as a granddaughter, daughter, niece, and cousin are most important to me. I fear this workshop might have consequences for my family’s relationships, and/or bolster my conviction to be more open and honest with my family. But I remember being taught not to make family business public. I am supposed to be strong and independent. Doing this workshop, I will make it public. I feel weak and dependent. Filled with trepidation, anxiety, but also some excitement, because there is potential in this moment, I am ready to embrace the process.

Transgressn text:

Time: One year ago and present

Place: A workshop in an intimate setting

Characters:

Liz- spunky, regular churchgoer, grandmother, mother of Sunshine, Mik, Deena, and Victory, age 70

Sunshine- divorced, mother of two, age 50

Mik- involved, snazzy aunt, regular churchgoer, oldest daughter of four, age 54

Deena- engaged, mother of two, age 52

Victory- single, regular churchgoer, police officer, age 49

Danielle- involved, student, daughter of Deena, age 22

Dom- involved, spiritually connected, oldest child of Sunshine, age 29

Setting:

(Seven Black females, ages 22-70, sit around a table, adorned with bottles of water, plates of lasagna, salad, and adult beverages. Black angels and family pictures align the top of the curtain shades and strategically placed papers are sprawled all over the floor. Laughter, reminiscing, and questions about what is to come fills the kitchen)

Sunshine: She knew what she was getting when she brought her family together. Yall are the craziest bunch of women.

Deena: You got some lipstick. Imma need to put on some before we start
(hearty, bone deep laughter)

Dom: Y'all will have time to fix yourselves up.

(whispers)

Liz: What's that?

Dom: Shits and giggles.

(everyone looks up with mouths open, in disbelief and shock that Dom cursed. No one curses in front of Liz. Laughter ensues)

Sunshine: Whatchu say?!!

Me: Sorry. Granny didn't understand what you were spelling. Sense we are on the subject I will forewarn y'all, there are some curse words in there.

Deena: Okay.

Sunshine: Not that apologies is it?¹⁴ You showin' that?!

Me: There was no cursin' in "no apologies."

Sunshine: Yes it wasss!

Victory: It was beautiful.

¹⁴ "No Apology" is a spoken word piece that affirms of the self, other BlackBlackBlackgirls and women across the globe that we are power, magic, and solutions. It is also a public rejection of structural explicit and implicit myths about BlackBlackBlackgirls.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AmKC7vSEmJU>

(Freeze. Dom steps outside herself and comments on the proceedings thus far.)

Dom(*reflection*): How honest am I willing to be? Fully, I know. I have no choice. But how will they take it? Will it be received as part of my process or me being fas' tho I am grown now? How open are they going to be? What are they thinking? I am so nervous!

Deena: Uh huh.

Me: I did change some words like instead of MF I used the D word (*laughs*)

Victory (*laughing*): Not as harsh but...

Sunshine (*interrupting*): Cuz that one on youtube I was like whewwww

Victory (*interrupting*): But if it's how she feels and is expressing herself then?

Sunshine (*interrupting*): I wasn't offended, I was just like whew, "that's my baby."

Dom (*reflection*): My stomach is sooo tight and I have no idea what's about to go down. I am not afraid but extremely anxious and nervous. I mean this is a deep moment. When I was young I couldn't even tell my mom how I felt without being yelled at or having my letters ripped up. Now I'm here naked. Hell, I need a drink. Mik asked for one and Deena too. Aint nothin wrong with that. I want them to be themselves on camera, as if the camera were here. Here's to new beginnings, because there's no turning back from here.

(arms on table, fists under chins, eyes looking at me, looking up as if in thought)

Me: So this is a workshop. We are gonna be doing stuff together. Part of my work is seeing what insights can come from sharing myself with others and them sharing themselves as well. In regards to sharing, you can share on any level you feel comfortable. This is all about voluntary work, work that does something if you open yourself to it. So I'm not in teacher mode. How much you share and how much you receive is entirely up to you.

Sunshine: On one answer you might get Sasha's response. Another time you may get Natalie.
Another Sunshine. You just never know (*laughs*)

Deena: Who is gonna see this?

Sunshine: Everybody! The whole world!

Victory: You can do whatchu like wit it, long as I don't lose my job. Can't lose my job.

Me: You wont lose your job

Victory: I'm just jokin.

Deena: Hey we might be on a Tyler Perry movie when this is over wit. *(laughs)*

Me: I don't do Tyler Perry. We may be on Oprah but not Tyler Perry

(everyone laughs)

Mik: Why not?

Me: Because it's the same storyline over and over.

Victory: But that's the beauty of it. It works to help people remember

Sunshine: she said it may work but not for her

Me: I want more representations of Black women than those that got everything—the cars, the house, the job but aint got no man. Or being a doormat for a man. Or always lacking something. I want more for Black women.

Mik: But “For colored girls” was good.

Me: It was ok but the book is better.

Deena: Nah I aint read the book

Liz: So we have to sign this and give our permission?

Victory: You should have your glasses on instead of them on your neck

(laughter)

Me: You sign once you have read everything and all of your questions have been answered.

Danielle: Does this involve public speaking cuz I don't do that

(laughter)

Me: Nah, no speeches. I encourage you to speak freely but speak as little or as much as you want cuz

Danielle: Oh aight

Deena: I'm ready! Let's go!

Mik: I need my lipstick first. Can we finish our drinks?

Me: You can or bring em' with you into the session.

Dom (*reflection*): Okay so my stomach is still tight but I think this drink did me some good. This is my family (*pointing at the women at the table*). We spend all this time writing and creating these consent forms, that at least in this moment don't make sense to the people reading 'em. I mean, they read them yesterday and here we are again and they still don't think they know what's about to happen. What is about to happen? Maybe that's just it. What's more important is what's 'bout to happen and the papers, the consent, and the language is for those reading and evaluating this work my work as SCHOLARSHIP. But my family matters most to me. This work is for them, done in their name and in honor of all they taught me and have given me to be able to be working on this PhD thing. I gotta be plain. I gotta be straight up. What do you they need to know and how to keep it short so they can fix up their faces before getting on camera? What do you they need to know and better yet, how am I gonna tell em'?

Me: Do you consent?

Deena: Hey y'all, I plan on hitting the mega. Someone gonna see my face.

Sunshine: That's then, this is now.

Victory: I love this. I love this family.

(Heads nodding up and down, in agreement)

Victory: And you know what Madam (*looking at Dom*), thank you for wanting us to be part of your project and letting people see who helped you.

Sunshine: Yea! Who helped you grow. Who messed up your head (*laughs*)

(Everyone joins Sunshine in an agreeing with deep belly laughter)

Deena: But the beauty of it all is look what came out of all this mass confusion.

(laughter continues)

Deena: It's no wonder we didn't create a monster!

Me: This will be you in 10 yrs. *(pointing at her younger cousin)*

Liz: So the interviews, they can be at night?

(Dom nods head up and down)

Sunshine *(to Mik)*: You wanna put that drink down?

Liz: I been up since four.

Mik: I been up since five.

Victory: I been up since six.

Deena: If you call me Wednesday I'll be at bingo.

Danielle: Ma, that's why she said the days you are available.

Deena: Oh.

Victory *(to Sunshine)*: The tape is rolling. Show yourself *(laughs)*

(Liz exits to use restroom)

Liz *(while exiting to the restroom)*: Y'all crazy

Sunshine: This is a good time now because everyone's in a better place then before It's almost easier to deal with everything that's gonna be said instead of taking everything personal.

Victory: We shouldn't take it personal if that's how it happened to her.

Sunshine: No. I'm just saying the mindset of where we were before in our lives. We may not like things but we can accept them.

Deena: Don't be in denial!

Mik *(she nudges Deena)*: She in the bathroom. I need to puff a cigarette

Deena: I ain't thought about no cigarette. I need to quit!

Danielle: Peer pressure.

Victory: Just go.

Deena: She don't have none.

(laughter)

Sunshine: You betta not be in my bathroom puffin'! You know what grandma would say about that. What she tell you when you was out all night and came home with no money.

(everyone belly laughing)

Sunshine: You stay out all night wit a nigga and wanna come in and ask for twenty dollars. Yous a po' ass hoe.

(everyone continues to belly laugh)

Victory *(she lifts her right hand and flicks her wrist as to fan off the woman)*: But you know that's how I look at women today. When you don't have certain things.

Sunshine: What grandma said?

Victory: Yea cuz I'm like you doing all this for free. Aint nothing for free! Your body is a temple. So you betta get some change *(laughs)*.

Sunshine: Grandma aint said nothing about no change, she said money! That's why on Saturdays, she rented that room out to aunt Ruth and would say, c'mon yall lets go to the store.

(Belly laughter and tears flowing)

Me: Grandma was something else!

Dom *(reflection)*: I enjoy learning about my great grandma BJ and her philosophies about life and in particular women's lives. I grew up with her. Some people don't get to know their great grandma but, I knew BJ up close and personal. So much so that she stopped fighting on my birthday cuz she knew I was suited to carry her feisty spirit. BJ, can you hear us talking bout chu? Come join us! I can feel you so I know you're close by. I can smell your Blue Magic hair grease. Come curse us out! Tell em' how they got the story wrong Granny. I still got that tough skin Granny. Thank you.

(Witnesses turn their heads and adjust in their seats to read the papers on the floor. Dom sits on the ground with pieces of paper with words on them, "Bitch," "Ugly," "Black," "Journey," "Too much," "Not enough," "Smart," "African Booty Scratcher," "Misunderstood," and "Beautiful" and Jill Scott's "Hear my Call" begins to play. < <http://youtu.be/GjKf31z42ac> > Dom performs. Picking up, rubbing, and studying the pieces of paper around her. She throws some. Another she grabs and holds, "Beautiful" to her chest rocking back and forth. Using these papers, the words on them, her family, her memories, her body and the music to share with them, for 9 minutes she shares her in-the-moment understanding of Black girlhood and schooling experiences. Crying, coughing laughs, and laughter ensues. Video plays, <http://youtu.be/gVThBsUqaA0>

Sunshine: She said, be yourself!!

Victory: This is fun!

Mik: Here, I can be myself.

Mik & Dom: Show em what I'm made of.

Liz: I am Liz

Deena: I am Deena

Danielle: I am Danielle

Me: I am Dom

Mik: I am Mik

Victory: I am Victory

Everyone: We are here

(laughter, crying, crying laughter)

Mik: I need some more tissue

Victory: Yall always crying

Deena: *(in announcers voice)*: The names have been changed to protect, well aint nobody in here innocent *(laughs)*

Deena: We all

Everyone: Guilty as hell

(laughter)

Me: Now's the fun stuff

Danielle: I'm not a dancer!

Me: You don't have to be. Okay so pair up. Deena go with Granny. Ma, your with Mik. Victory you're with Danielle. I want you to listen to the phrase I say and then show your partner how you would share that phrase with them without talking. Use your physical body.

(video plays <http://youtu.be/paSYHLEJWFg>)

Deena(*laughing*): What just happened?

Dom(*reflection*): Do they know this is just the beginning of this activity? Do they know they were put together intentionally? Do they know there is more to come with this? Will they be open to it?

(*laughter*)

Me: You just shared with each other.

Sunshine: Hmmph (*places hands on hips*)

Victory: I'm still thinking about that song

Mik: What song?

Victory: Jill Scott's "Hear My Call"

Me: Perfect introduction. Everyone can sit now (*Mik and Sunshine sit next to each other on the love seat, while Victory sits in wooden chair taken from the kitchen table next to Sunshine. Dom sits on the floor facing everyone, and Liz closest to Dom sits with Deena and Danielle on the couch*). We are going to write through the phrase, "I am ...and it feels like"... So get comfortable. We are going to write for two minutes. Just let the phrase take you where it's going to take you. Begin.

(*Music plays*).

Me: Okay times up. Now that you have taken the time to write, look at what you wrote and identify three words on the page that capture what you just wrote.

Liz: Three words for "I am" and three for "It feels like?"

Sunshine: No ma, just three words all together.

Liz: Aww shucks

Deena: Okay

Me: When you have finished, just stand up.

(Video plays <http://youtu.be/paSYHLEJWFg>)

Danielle:

“I am and it feels like”

I am *me*, it feel like “freedom”

I am waiting

It feels like death. But then a birth

I am *strong-minded*, and it feels like sometimes I can be *stubborn*

I am happy, and it feels like I’m blessed

I am *free* and it feels like new

I am *diggin’* deep and it *feels* like I can do anything

I am at the end of my rope and it feels like my pain has been lifted

I am me

I am a *cycle*

I am happy

I am grateful

I am courageous

Everyone: I, I am a person

Sunshine: I’m tired. I need a drank (*laughs*)

Deena (*to Danielle*): How’s it going honey?

Danielle: It’s aight.

Sunshine: I just realized I never wanna learn sign language. It’s too much (*laughing*)

Victory: You’re using fingers for sign language silly, not your body.

Sunshine: Ma runnin’ round sprinkling holy water on everybody (*laughs*)

(*everyone belly laughs*)

Me: How’s everyone feeling?

Mik: Do we have to write much more?

Me: We are coming to the end. Just a bit more.

Mik: Okay good. Cuz I'm enjoying this but writing makes my head hurt. You do this with all of your work?

(everyone laughs)

Me: We are almost there. So now, I want you to think about your life as a Black girl. And I want you to identify the immediate memory that comes to mind. When you have finished, hand what you wrote to me.

Me: When you are ready, read the memory you have in your hand.

Mik: I remember never having the experience of being hungry, being disciplined by my mother, not having a father in the picture at a very young age. A father who promised and never came through but momma was there.

Me: I remember.

Deena: Living in the South. Having only three dresses and my grandmother always had them washed and ironed. I felt special. I learned from her the importance of being clean.

Danielle: I remember dancing in the living room. "Put yo damn tongue back in your mouth!"

Me: I remember

Liz: Overcoming my long-term illness to graduate from the police academy. I will always be Black.

Me: I remember.

Sunshine: Being a little girl and always sitting on the porch getting my hair braided every two weeks in the summer.

Me: I remember

Victory: Fun! Hanging out at the clubs. Being dressed to kill, dancing until I can't stop!

Me: I remember insecurity, loneliness, sadness, no love, unwanted. I remember being silent. Watching. Present. And silent.

Danielle: I kept silent.

Liz: Rape. Beat up. Hurting myself.

Danielle: I kept silent.

Deena: Being raped.

Danielle: I kept silent.

Victory: Being touched by cousins and threatened, so I stay silent as to not be punished by my mother.

Danielle: I kept silent.

Sunshine: Feeling like what I do isn't good enough for my family.

Danielle: I kept silent.

Mik: I really wanted to be me and she was different. So just keep moving and suck it up

Me: I kept silent. Two losses. No one to trust. I kept silent.

Everyone: We kept silent.

Liz: Bertha Jackson. Mary. Emily Boyland. BJ. Sue. Nat. Uncle Sunny. Family. Colleagues. Mommy. Lacey. Mary Vance.

Me: Stand firm in our memories of Black girlhood and will not be forgotten.

Mik (*slumping head in hands on lap*): This is like therapy

Sunshine: It is therapy!

Deena: Very much so!

Sunshine (*laughing*): If you just figuring that out, you need some more.

(everyone belly laughs)

Mik (*wiping tears from her eyes*): All of a sudden, I feel drained.

Me (*smiling*): I can assure you we are almost done. This last activity is great. It's a chance to say the names of the people and the things you wish to make sure that we always remember before ending this session.

Deena (*to Me*): Where do you get this stuff from?

Me: Well as part of a group for Blackgirls and designed to create a magical space, like this moment we are having, for Blackgirls to just be, we do a ritual about remembering and naming those people and things that keep us grounded, things that are important to us in the moment, and things we want to share with others in the space.

Mik: Got it.

Me: So everyone lets get into a circle and be sure we can see each other.

(video plays http://youtu.be/uIG7_gkcuYU)

Liz: Just because I am controlling doesn't mean I don't value others' opinions or ideas. My name is Liz and I am proud, special, God-fearing, and a gift to others.

Mik: Just because I'm beautiful doesn't mean I am approachable. My name is Mik and I am somebody! *(Hugs herself)*

Sunshine: Just because I accomplish what I set out to do doesn't mean I don't struggle. My name is Sunshine and I am a beautiful, free woman!

Victory: Just because I am not confrontational doesn't mean that I will not be confrontational. My name is Victory and I am victorious, strong, thankful, and grateful.

Deena: Just because I frown doesn't mean I am mad. My name is Deena and I am blessed.

Danielle: Just because I dress like a boy doesn't mean I'm not proud to be a female. My name is Danielle and I am comfortable in my own skin.

Me: Just because I live my life openly doesn't mean I want everyone in my business. My name is Dominique and I am choosing to share me with the world.

Liz: What was

Everyone: Is up and out

Danielle: What will be

Everyone: Is up to us

Sunshine: Anything

Everyone: Is possible

(There is dancing and laughing)

Me: Will you join us? Will you celebrate our healing? Will you care when you leave this room? When the lights are low and you are alone, will you still be compelled to feel me? Us? Feel us. I need you to feel. We need you to act. Will you join us? Will you celebrate Blackgirls near and far? Will you act with us not for us? Will you? Will you listen to us? We dare you to ignore our magic.

Extended Analysis

The transgressn text illustrated the intergenerational release of family tensions connected to silence that occurred when my family got together for a workshop about Black girlhood. In facilitating this workshop I am now painfully aware that the silences I hoarded are in fact “old news.” My hoarded silences of rape, desires to be different, feelings of inadequacy, and shame from yearnings to put myself first are cumulative baggage passed down through my family. These silences are intergenerational and begin in girlhood. Yet these silences and their wounds persist, implanting themselves within Black girl’s bodies and carried throughout and into Black girlhood and womanhood.

I offer an extended analysis of this silence, which surfaced in two pertinent ways: 1) Through reflection on life experiences, particularly those self-identified as during childhood, locked and tucked away and 2) Moments where silence around a particular issue or event was cracked (Ulysse, 2003). In the former description of silence, as tucked away occurrences and feelings, these happenings were associated with sexual terrorism (James, 2012), sexual acts, family hurts, lack of self-worth and self-inflicted pain. First I move back-and-forth between and across autobiographical accounts of silence, silences held by family members with biographical stories that provide insight into these, and Black feminist literature on silence. I then, illuminate the lessons learned as a young girl around the conflation of silence, which legitimize and sanction intergenerational silence. Following these lessons is a discussion and critique of the silences cracked during the workshop. Finally, I articulate what became possible as a result of the airing of hurts and memories of girlhood and beyond—healing.

Contrary to popular myths, silence has not and does not enhance the lives and relationships within and across people. It merely suppresses and attempts to bury feelings,

occurrences, and issues that if addressed could bring more depth, love, and wholeness to relationships. This reality is no different for my family. Hoarded silences cultivated within members of my family fear of being themselves, sanctioned my hiding from others and myself, and created rifts in my family. My family used to operate from the creed, “*what happened in this house, stays in this house.*” I would be lying if I said we completely abandoned it. Instead I’ll say, it is no longer our default. This living word, particular to my family and a shared specific, emerges from the mouths of my Black colleagues and the youth I work with. Boylorn (2013b) discusses this code in her auto/ethnography that charts the influence of family sayin’s in teaching her about beauty, femininity, class, family strength and more when she recounts a story of a young Black girl in her rural hometown who shamed her family by disobeying the creed:

But this daughter was a poor, desperate, misguided thing, taking her mama’s business [that they were poor] all around the neighborhood, telling it from door to door. She was too young to understand the embarrassment she was causing and too poor to be ashamed, even though begging carries both of those words with it wherever it goes. She hadn’t been to our house yet, but Granny had already heard. “Don’t let me hear of you going around beggin’ nobody for nothing... She was teaching me about having family pride and self-dignity. She was showing me how to avoid embarrassment and remember to only expect help and hand-outs from kinfolk. (p. 183)

While I agreed with and have taken a similar perspective to Boylorn about being prideful and not seeking help from strangers, I also surmise this steadfastness to under no circumstances reach out to individuals outside of the family and play family¹⁵ circle is tied to the importance of keeping

¹⁵ In Black communal spaces it is commonplace to hear individuals refer to people they have forged close bonds with as play cousins, play sisters, etc. The *play* in front of the relationship

the realities, in this case, about money or lack thereof within the confines of their house, their family.

Similarly and yet slightly different, in relationship to my family, this code was usually reinforced when something occurred that if divulged might disrupt the usual flow of our family. This creed was iterated when I mentioned that I might disclose an event that happened to me at the hands of another family member. More specifically this principle was imprinted onto my body when, after showing up to school with belt marks on one side of my face and covering my arms, my guidance counselor contacted Child Protective Services (CPS). I was physically punished a second time for my school counselor's decision, against my pleading otherwise, to do her job and contact CPS. I decided then, no matter the cost to myself, that it was better to keep quiet and deal with life happenings myself—that silence would build my strength and at the very least curb additional punishment as a result of divulging feelings of hurt and/or occurrences.

While the preceding story speaks specifically to my family's adoption of the creed, it functions and has been adopted by many individuals, families, and communities, especially when they are members of a grouping that is stereotyped and/or over policed and wish to minimize the amount of negative attention received (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; hooks, 1995; Wallace, 1978). As writer Sapphire (2007), feminist social worker and writer of *Push*, so eloquently expressed, during a campus talk at Miami University in 2007 about the importance of her book; this code functions as an illusion of strength and prevents the airing of dirty laundry and inconvenient truths (personal communication).

Within the context of the workshop I interpreted silence as a moment of processing and reflection, I have nothing to add, and/or I will speak when I'm ready or want to. One of these

denotes the individuals are not actually "blood" related but interact, love, and care for each other as someone with that title would.

moments occurred in the workshop around sexuality and gender expression. After engaging in the exercise “feels like,”¹⁶ dialogue commenced that included a number of assumptions around what people were expressing and judgments about the movements, which got me thinking about how Black females are (mis)read. In that moment I decided to call on tools from SOLHOT and have us write “just because”¹⁷ statements. This exercise, “intentionally provide[s] a complex self-definition of who we [Blackgirls] are in spite of people’s first [and overall] impression[s]” (Brown, 2009, p. 58). During this activity each of us named and expressed truths about ourselves followed by descriptions of what this truth means to us. Each of the statements made are important in their own right as they represent a “talking back” (hooks, 1988) to misrepresentations and those individuals and entities creating and furthering these perceptions.

However, Danielle’s just because statement was an explicit talking back to our family. She was ready and so she spoke, “Just because I dress like a boy doesn’t mean I’m not proud to be a female. My name is Danielle and I’m comfortable in my own skin.” Immediately following her candid truth telling were bursts of shouts and hi-fives illustrating pride and recognition that what she said was significant. I was surprised, proud, and eternally grateful for the opportunity to share in this moment. Through the complex simplicity of “Just because” my cousin spoke her reality—she is a self-identified lesbian and likes wearing men’s clothing. For a long time, this reality made her the site of unwarranted criticism, probing, and unsolicited commentary. Silent cries within the underbelly of this story reveal that until about the age of 19 or 20, Danielle was forced to dress in skirts, form-fitting pants, shoes with at least small heels, and other clothing

¹⁶ An activity where we write from the prompts, I am ...and it feels like... After two minutes each person identifies three words or phrases within their writing that to them captured the meaning of the piece. The final part was to create movements and/or expressions for these words or phrases and share them with another person.

¹⁷ Just because I ...Doesn’t mean I... My name is... And I am...

typically associated with femininity. When she chose otherwise, especially for fancy or formal occasions, she was judged by these same women, through disdainful facial expressions and interrogations on her decisions around style of dress and other expressions of her identity such as posture and tattoos. Danielle simultaneously was and was not silent because she was living a truth she already knew deep inside her. In this moment though, alignment occurred and prompted Danielle to speak this truth, cracking the silence. With alignment showing favor she was not only heard but also celebrated.

In contrast, Gina Ulysse (2003) asserts: “We must admit that such silences [held by people and women of color specifically] are not solely due to politically motivated “exclusionary practices,” but they are also the result of shame” (p. 288). While I agree that at least in my case, shame was tied to my silence, I am certain it did not operate alone in my family. Growing up, my sassy, candid great grandma, BJ, fussed, cussed, and “tore into” all of us about the importance of being independent, having our own money, strength, and “on yo’ shit” (to use her language). BJ loved pocketbooks, a purse you might call it, and kept money stashed in each of hers for rainy days. While lying in bed and watching the “soaps” with her she’d always drop a message, “Don’t you depend on nobody, especially not no nigga! Make sure you got yo’ own” and “Don’t take no wooden nickels!” When first hearing this warning, I was not sure what a wooden nickel was, but knew to keep my eye out for folks trying to hand or slide me one. BJ did not like to frighten us but pressed upon me (as well as Mik, Victory, Sunshine, Deena, Liz, and Danielle) the need to be self-reliant. Most importantly, granny abhorred leaning on a man.

In the same breadth BJ was neither anti-men nor receiving things, especially money from men. She also made it clear, “Don’t let no one be all up in your pocketbook and keep it clean.” While she could have been referencing the purse, my legs opened with the right one slightly

lifted while washin' between them at the bathroom sink, indicated I had access to yet another valuable pocketbook. Before the workshop started the older women of the family recount BJ's view on the value of this particular pocketbook. Sunshine retells the story of Deena coming home after being out all night and the following morning ask BJ for some money, only to be torn into when BJ declares, "You stayed out all night wit a nigga and wanna come in and ask me for twenty dollars. You's a po' ass hoe." Embedded in BJ's blunt statement is disapproval and possible disgust in Deena's actions. In other words, if she stayed out all night and opened her pocketbook, she should have come home with money (or something else of worth) in it.

Taking into account these few sermons, of the many, BJ preached, the choice to hoard silences was consistent with what we were told it meant to be "on yo shit." When remembering these few lessons taught to us by BJ, the silences we, as a family, held around our pocketbooks and self-worth made all too much sense. Returning to the education received within my family, in this particular instance about our pocketbooks and together brought insight into these self-identified hoarded silences of girlhood. In the workshop we wrote down a time we stayed silent during girlhood where five of the seven responses were sex-related. One person named having two abortions and each time being alone and with no one to talk to as the moment of silence in girlhood that immediately came to mind. Similarly, three of these seven instances involved rape. I do not know if the rest of the family knew the stories details of Sunshine or Mik's rapes but, I know that was the first day I admitted, in the presence of my family that I'd been raped. Other silences identified during this exercise included self-inflicted harm, wanting to be different than what was expected, with two of the seven articulating feelings of inadequacy tied to not meeting the expectations of what constitutes being *enough* in our family.

I do not deny there is likely some shame in the aforementioned incidents. However, also imbued within these moments is a reminder from BJ to “be on yo shit” a vital sign of being a strong woman and captured in Sunshine’s reactions to my original performance:

To know at this point at this age all that you’ve endured in silence. And then me or even the people, the women around you the family per se not understanding, because as you said, like, we just suck it up and keep it moving basically, I’m so extremely proud of you!,

confirm that in spite of it all, I was on my shit! Further, her reflections illumine a conundrum within my family—older females in my family carry silences and keep it moving yet do not assume we younger females’ movement and will come from the same source. Concomitantly, there this a desire to be on point and a shifting of what this now means, a shift that is releasing and helping to imagine new relationships with ourselves and each other.

While I was admittedly ashamed that my step cousins threatened to get me in trouble if I refused to provide them sexual favors I was even more ashamed that I came to enjoy some of these encounters. Attached to and yet distinct from this shame was the reality of fear lurking in the hallways of my decisions to acquiesce to their threats. Yet, more than shame I feared the beating I’d receive from my mother once she was told a lie about what I supposedly did. Terrified that if someone learned I was (physically) aroused during some of these inappropriate and forced situations, I’d be blamed for what happened, *repeatedly*, to me. Added to these reasons is the reality that BJ might accuse me of taking wooden nickels and therefore once again, not on my shit. It is true, as Ulysse contends that shame influenced my ultimate decision to keep silent around these events, but so did fear and quite possibly, pleasure. In reflecting upon the

aforementioned occurrences that induced shame and more, I am forced to reconsider the myriad reasons my family functioned and enforced the creed, what happened in this house, stays.

These women whom I greatly revere were ashamed of their sexual curiosity, self-imposed pain and hurt, and longings to be themselves. They also operated on the pretense that if they stayed silent they could maintain some form of respectability (Higginbotham, 1993; White, 2001). In other words being Black, female, and young, placed them in a position where these happenings in their lives would be frowned upon as inappropriate and/or disappointing. Likewise, given the age range of my family 21-71 and knowing the historical context in which they were raised, their decisions, especially related to silence around abortions and rape, were due to a fear of rejection from family and friends. Finally, due to our upbringing and the many times of being torn into by BJ, we felt in control (of the situation) and therefore, saw no need to speak upon what we already handled or were handling. Silence in the lives of Black female is not only tied to shame but also fear, a peculiar liking, pride, and misplaced strength.

As a child I came to understand silence as a threshold of womanhood; the better you were at “keeping things to yourself,” the stronger a woman you were. Throughout my life I observed the women of my family starring in the movie “life” as the character superwoman. While this role can be a stressful one, Black females often take it on as if it were in our DNA (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Boylorn, 2014). In speaking with Liz during the follow up interview, she mentioned her being reminded, by the workshop, of the need for her to live and place priority on herself:

...Letting people have their space. I have mine. And learning not to cross some lines you don't need to cross or feel that you need to be there when you don't. Um, live, let live, and let it be. And these things I been working on all before your seminar but the seminar

brought out so much stuff about mothers tending to be overprotective or grandmothers being overprotective and thinking that they can, aww god, save the world! And when they can't they just fall apart. So even over the years and even this session here is letting me say, "okay, you need to just start living your life for you for a change... You know what you need to do to satisfy you and be comfortable with it. And not feel bad about it because you're not putting someone else first.

Liz's learned lessons highlight the burden of being everything to everyone—the superwoman. Simultaneously, it reveals the tension, as described by Liz's statement, Black females experience when feeling a want to put us first. Connected to this taxing position is the silence around personal desires, interests, and quite possibly a suppression of yearnings to the wants of everyone else.

Posing as its accomplice, silence, reproduces and creates static realities, expectations, and representations of Black females. It no longer comes as a surprise that my girlhood is filled with silence because this silence and silencing, within my family, did not begin but, I hope it ends, with me. Audre Lorde (1978) urges, “but when we are silent, we are still afraid,” which in turn keeps us wounded. More profound than this recognition is the healing potential on its underside through the power of voice and the will to. As a confirmation and trusting of Lorde's recommendation, “So it is better to speak, remembering, we were never meant to survive” (this chapter illustrates what happened when my family came together and collectively engagement with these silences. Moreover, it illustrates the potentiality of healing when silence is cracked.

As a result of my family's insistence to keep on moving, I assumed strong women held onto their lover's (man's, husband's) secrets, showed modesty in their success or talents, and/or hoarded hurts or happenings for the sake of family and/or keeping things together. As a child I

watched my mother hide the physical abuse she experienced from my stepfather. I remember her telling me I was her best friend. Looking back, I think I received that title not only because I listened to her but also because she knew I feared her and therefore would abide by the code, *what happened in this house stays*. Thinking back, she recounted to me the story of telling my grandmother about her being abused and my grandmother rationalizing why she should stay. Although I believe my mother's love for my stepfather kept her committed to working through their problems, I also know it was in the name of giving my brother the opportunity to grow up in a house with his father and to keep my great grandmother's first purchase of land in the family. Sunshine wanted to keep the sun shining in the family, even if she did not get to feel its warmth.

Like Sunshine, Liz is the glue of our family and similar to her daughter Sunshine kept quiet and focused on making sure everyone around her was okay and satisfied. By the time I was five, my grandmother had remarried and was living a life much different than the one I heard about with her first husband, my mother and aunt's father. Growing up I knew my grandfather as the high yellow tall man with an amazing smile, charismatic personality, extreme migraines and a drug problem. Whenever we spent time, he always wanted to teach me something like how to season a steak and cut onions without crying (I think he was a chef at some point in his life). Yet the grandfather I heard about was largely absent from his children's lives, a ladies man, and abusive toward my grandmother. To this day, I cannot see her taking physical abuse but I know that she did and she did it silently. As a young person, my mother talked about the strength of my grandmother Liz and her mother BJ and how they worked two full time jobs to make ends meet. I did not bear witness to this part of BJ's or Liz's life. By the time I was born, BJ was retired and Liz had picked up other tasks in life that kept her busy. Now instead of working two traditional

full time jobs and being a wife and mother, she worked a full time job at a bank, where she moved up from teller to district manager, attended night school to attain her bachelors, worked on her church's financial team, took care of BJ who was diagnosed with diabetes and somehow made time to be a wife and grandmother.

Liz and Sunshine (as well as Deena, Mik, and Danielle) are warriors full of gifts and talents. Yet, they like other Black females who are mothers and the dependable ones of our family offer and exercise these gifts as mundane tasks. Watching Sunshine and hearing the stories about Liz and other females in my family, I thought being a strong Black woman, of course following their model of strong, would make them proud of and respect me. My great grandma BJ was not big on showing what she considered signs of weakness—tears, whining, or self-pity—and my grandmother and aunts followed suit. It was only logical that I would take up the baton of the strong Black woman. What other kind of woman was there to be? In my family's construction of the strong Black woman, there was (emphasis on was because it is changing) there was no room for letting on that you needed or wanted help. As I got older, this ideal of the strong Black woman proved to be just that, an ideal. I quickly grew stressed and weary of the expectations accompanied by this mythical figure.

Affirming or in fact describing the reasons for my aforementioned anxiety to meet an ideal, Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) states, "In the process of keeping up the appearance of strength, Black women's bodies become repositories for the thoughts, feelings, and realities that contradict the one-dimensional view of them as unflaggingly capable and ever resilient" (p. 7). Standing now as a Black girl advocate and adult who felt and still sometimes feel the brunt of this myth, I am cognizant that this stress and sense of obligation to carry on this taxing archetype of the Black female was passed down to me. I am equally aware that the pressure of this

mythical super strong woman for the females in my family and Black females generally can be traced throughout history (Boylorn, 2014; Harris-Perry, 2011). To put it plainly, “In this country, Black woman traditionally have had compassion for everybody else except ourselves. We have cared for whites because we had to for pay or survival; we have cared for our children and our fathers and our brothers and our lovers” (Lorde, 1984, p. 62). Beginning with slavery, Black females in America were expected to give birth, nurture (including breast feed) their owner’s children, work the fields and homes of slave owners, please slave masters with sexual intimacy (see Mitchell & Asante, 2005; Collins, 1990; Kincaid, 1996; McKittrick, 2006).

Despite the long hours and physical and mental labor, some of us dared to be audacious, teaching our children and/or ourselves to read (Douglass, 2001), daring to be writers (Kincaid, 1996; Wheatley, 1988), and other actions that can be categorized as resistance and rebel like, even now (see Frederickson, Walters, & Hine, 2013). After slavery, slaving continued in the life of Black females (see Stockett, 2009) and so did being brave, which we sometimes write off as surviving. For Black women, then, being everything to everybody as best we could became second nature. While Black women toiled, daughters, nieces, little cousins watched and even sometimes joined in to this work. As a product of, witness to, and tutor of these lessons on laboring and strength, it is also plausible to see how silence is also a vital message to learn. As Black females accept, by doing, laborious and strenuous roles in our worlds, this doing comes to overshadow the feelings about it. This perhaps is silence’s entryway. Evident in my family’s silence, which might also speak to the livelihoods of Black females generally, is that hoarding silences and silencing, oneself and others, is habitual and introduced in girlhood by other females who have taken life classes on silence.

In this workshop, however, silence stepped beyond its routinized function in our family—to silence and to keep dirty laundry tucked away—and showed up to be broken. One instance of cracking silence happened during the pre-workshop discussion:

Victory: And you know what Madam (looking at Dom), thank you for wanting us to be part of your project and letting people see who helped you.

Sunshine: Yea! Who helped you grow. Who messed up your head.

Deena: But the beauty of it all is look what came out of all this mass confusion. It's no wonder we didn't create a monster!

Victory was right; I needed people to see the strong, brilliant, and feisty women who molded me into the person I am and am continually becoming. In this same moment, Sunshine adds an addendum, inferring that enmity had been done. I am unsure of what prompted my mother to add such an admission, in that particular moment, of foul play or why my aunt chose to join in, especially since this was stated before the workshop. Later, after my original performance, Sunshine brought some light on her possible reasons for her earlier statement, “Lord you gave me that child. You helped me nurture her good, bad, or when I didn’t even know what I was doing.” Deena never elucidated what she or anyone else did that could have made me into “a monster.” What I am clear of is, as Deena asserts, “ain’t nobody in here innocent.” All of us played a part in our each other’s as well as our own life situations and therefore contributed to the potential making of monsters. Besides, as I now believe, “mess[ing] up [my] head” spurred my development.

Seeing some of their struggles with alcohol, drugs, self-worth, and relationships inspired and challenged me to live a life I had yet to see them live. Also an observer of their resilience and ability to constantly bounce back from disappointments of men, each other, and life overall

revealed the multiple dimensions of strength. Sunshine's add-on to Victory's statement and Deena's cosigning, point to our growth of us as individuals and as a result our family's strength. As a woman not famous for apologizing, Sunshine's statement, "Who helped you grow. Who messed up your head," surprised me. More importantly, her statement serves as recognition that in the past we, as individuals, hurt each other, made decisions and behaved in ways that potentially placed each of us individually, each other, and the family in harms way. In that moment, we laughed and rejoiced because as Sunshine expressed, "This is a good time now because everyone's in a better place then before...Instead of taking everything personal." Although she could only imagine what I might share with the family, my mother's statement highlights the evolution of our dialogue, specifically. Also, this moment along with Sunshine's statement is a testament to how we have changed as individuals. Additionally, they illustrate the significance of the interrelationship between who and where we are in life as individuals and how we listen and relate to, disassociate from and disregard, and/or reject or appreciate the experiences of others.

When reviewing the recording of this moment in the workshop, I went back to my childhood where it was nearly impossible to express my feelings in the presence of my mother, let alone directly to her. During the workshop my mother, Sunshine, expresses this same reality, which she not only felt about her mother, Liz, but also her sisters, Deena and Mik in particular. Echoing Sunshine's sentiments, were Mik, Deena, and Victory who accused their mother, my grandmother of being over-controlling. Yet, I watched my grandmother hesitate to speak during the workshop, while her daughters jokingly made fun of her verbosity and at one point shut her down. Observe the following conversation:

Deena: Well you know, if you can't let it out that's dangerous.

Liz: Do you realize that?

Victory: Oh Lord (laughs)

Sunshine: We talking about Dominique here

Liz: I'm just saying, it's just wonderful.

Deena: Do I realize what?

Liz: Nah just what she said.

Victory: Oh no!

While she usually laughed their comments off, it was apparent she was affected. Likewise, in the above dialogue Liz backed down from her line of questioning toward Deena after her daughters, except Mik, conspired to disregard Liz' concern. The other side of this coin is Danielle who is considered quiet was solicited on many occasions to share her thoughts. In Danielle's case, it seemed just as difficult for her to have the freedom to not speak as it was for others in my family to speak.

In recognition of the difficulty in solidarity and communication between Black females Lorde (1984) declares, "But connections between Black woman [and Blackgirls] are not automatic by virtue of our similarities, and the possibilities of genuine communication between us are not easily achieved" (p. 153). The workshops ran relatively smooth for all that was operating in the background of this workshop. To put it bluntly, my family was in a state of turmoil. At the time, my mother and I were not on the best terms as she was not in the greatest of health and chose to keep those details from me. Simultaneously, the relationship between my mother and grandmother as well as between my mother and aunt Mik was strained. Yet, here we all were in the same room sharing our thoughts, feelings, and experiences of girlhood and at the same time. Concomitantly, we laid claim to how we saw ourselves amongst individuals who

knew us intimately and for many of us disagreed with these interpretations. Amplifying the difficulty of this workshop was intense emotion and mental work it requested, prompting the questions, “What's next? Am I gonna need some more tissue?” and “Are we almost done writing?” In this moment I was negotiating my identity as a grandmother, niece, daughter and cousin entering a familial space also as a researcher.

At the same time, due to the friction within the family I controlled for and yet pressed on the evident discord. To do so, I intentionally paired family members together who were at odds during activities where they conveyed who they were and how they felt in the world. Initially there was hesitancy, evidenced in the lack of eye contact, everyone came around to cry, laugh, disagree, and ultimately say our peace in the presence of one another. Turning back to Lorde's assertion, even if the connections (between Black women) are present, as they are, silence and miscommunication sometimes stifled genuine dialogue At the onset of the workshop, I could sense angst, confirmed in dry initial greetings between some and limited eye contact.

Considering Lorde's statement in the context of the preceding moment, it insinuates the interrelationship between connections between Black females and the relationships we have with the world. More importantly like Lorde's statement, it hints that interactions, in this case between myself and other family members, are connected to their locations in life and their feelings about this location. Now that I can express more candid feelings to my mother without being hit or disregarded and our family can share feelings and emotions without someone leaving and needing to drink it off, a shouting match ensuing, or a dismissal of individual's feelings if she had a different perspective; there is room for healthier (but not ideal) communication.

Both the cracking of silence as well as the admittance of harbored occurrences display the role of silence in Black girlhood in particular and Black females in general. Our communing

together served as a catalyst for a powerful and necessary release within our family illustrated the dialogue below:

Dom: Um, what do you think it did for you now that you have shared it? Even though you didn't necessarily share it in front of everybody else, what, if any, significance was there for you to share it?

Liz: I felt that uh, I felt that I had someone that I could trust, which is so hard for me. You know I value that highly and it's just it's just up and out! It's up and out. And not that I haven't moved on from it when it happened and all this other crazy stuff, but it was just like now's the time to just say it and now it's like something that was on the back of your mind and you have a chance to get it out.

Illustrated in the dialogue above is the linkage between healing and intergenerational silence.

Paralleling the letting go of harbored silences was Sunshine's unveiling of concealed feelings of hurt and pain from girlhood, during the "Know and Remember" activity, along with Mik's recognition that the experience was, "therapeutic. It was something that I needed unknowingly." Liz's takeaways coupled with Mik's characterization of the workshop as therapy, infer the power of this moment and time spent to ignite some healing. At least for my family, in that moment, the process of healing was imagined in new ways; ways that resonated with my family, and possibly ways that could also speak to other Black females.

Alongside the silence, discussed, written about, and splintered during this workshop with my family is a desire to break free of the holdings attached to "keeping it to yourself." As we talked about our girlhoods, reasons emerged that urged us to be silent in some parts of our lives. I say some parts because although silence proved pervasive in all of our girlhoods, I was also reared to be outspoken, confident, and demand to be heard. These requirements of course were to

be operationalized outside of the family and outside of my mother's house. In other words, in the eyes of the world, I was to perform the myth of the strong Black woman at all cost. In discussing these different demands on Black females, Beaubeuof-Lafontant (2009) asserts, "Such is the dilemma of strength—to choose appearances and remain unknown to other people, or to choose truth and risks being disregarded by them" (p. 5). To the contrary, it was in us collectively revealing our pains, silences, and joys that we were heard in ways we had not been before. Equally, it was in this moment that we were able to see our similarities and new potentials for the way we interact with one another.

As we talked and moved through our memories of girlhood, family stories and hurts, we envisioned therapy—a Black female therapy session. Maxine Greene (1995) insists, "Imagination as a means through what, above all, makes empathy possible...It allows us to break with the taken-for-granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions" (p. 3). Through intense dialogue, writing about our girlhoods, and using movement to capture and illustrate who we are and what we have experienced, we tapped into our archives of experience. Simultaneously, we offered our feelings and reflections about our lives. Further, we engaged in a collective reflection about our family, our individual lives, and how these connected to one another. In doing so, we cultivated a space for healing. Deena states, "It was like uh, you know I never been to a therapist. And I'm not gon go to one, imma call you...It brought out so many emotions!" Through the format of a workshop, each of us got to work through our individual issues, feelings and emotions. Similarly, we were also able to do so in the presence of family members who played some part in our lived experiences.

Aware of some of the tensions between family members at that time, imagining operating within the exercises with regard to how family members got paired together. I paired them

together for exercises with the hopes that by interacting some of that tension might be released. Such pairing gave them choice to acknowledge, work through, and or ignore the tautness. In this workshop silence was problematized and seen as multilayered. First the intergenerational reality of silence within my family was brought to the fore. While prior to this moment, I saw my experiences of girlhood, and particularly within our family, as standalone, I now know that silence is intergenerational.

Another space in which imagination showed face was in the amount of expression offered by Danielle specifically. In actuality she is extremely quiet, observant, and holds a great deal in. However, in previous text she has a breakthrough moment where she has changed because she wanted to. The final imagining is evident throughout the text in that each family member discloses their experiences of Black girlhood with each other. In the actual workshop this did and did not happen. It did occur because we were all present together writing, experiencing, and mutually reflecting. Yet, it did not happen because only Sunshine actually shared with the entire family some of her explicit memories of girlhood that were tied to family members in the room. In particular, she wanted us to know that she was hurt and carried with her things from girlhood and that those things greatly shape who she is and in some ways haunt her present day. My inner yearnings for family healing surfaced during the workshop and remained throughout my writing up process, which raises personal takeaways mentioned by family members.

We took away a rejuvenation to live life to the fullest, confirmation to continuing to work with adults so they can be of use to youth, a lighter spirit, new ways to express oneself and a deeper appreciation for the self and family. Collectively, this workshop helped address without directly addressing some of our family conflict. At the same time, it created a space for us to, as

a family, process previous experiences and our individual and familial responses to it. I took away the belief that healing does come with time and a willingness to grow and that when we open ourselves, anything is possible. The experience of conducting a workshop with my family around Black girlhood confirmed that positionality and context greatly shapes how I move through workshops as well as what happens prior to it. In this case my daughter and granddaughter identities proved most in this setting. As a result, aside from making sure all questions were answered before family members signed the consent form, our interactions mirrored that of family gatherings, minus the video camera.

Conclusion

I set out to include family in my exploration of Black girlhood because their teachings and models of femininity greatly shaped my childhood and is part of who I am today. Unknowingly, my family's participation in this project resulted in aired silences, dialogue about realities of Black females and the potential of imagining and re-framing Black femininity. As we sat and moved as we pleased, we also felt free to speak our mind. In that very moment, what became crystallized was another reality of silence in my family (and likely the lives of Black females): It inhibits visibility. This invisibility in turn fashions a paradoxical reality—silent acceptance of a mythical responsibility to be everything to everyone without complaining or demand to be recognized in life alongside a silencing of other females, to contain one's own silence as well as to be seen.

Inserting the legacies of racism and sexism into this conversation of airing female family silences, it becomes clearer that the vow of silence is culturally significant to the Black community as a means of creating a culture of memory that is nostalgic and locates the Black community as exceptional with regard to sexism in particular (Beale, 2003; Wallace, 1978).

Even those women cracking silence in creative works (see Morrison, 1970; Shange, 1975; Walker, 1983) were punished and verbally denigrated for their willingness to speak upon issues that were prominent and damaging to the Black community. Black females make such forced choices of hoarding silence at the risk of personal health or speaking inconvenient truths with the threat of communal and/or familial isolation in their daily lives. I am not suggesting these are simple either/or decisions but ones where due to our Black femininity; our very bodies are on the line in a way that white females' and Black males' are not.

Nonetheless, Lorde (1984) urges, "what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood" (p. 40). In the beginning there was concern and I was overcome with fear that my family might misunderstand my intentions in asking them to be honored by their presence in my research. With the cautions of research being colonizing and imbued with power relations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Smith, 1999), especially research on underrepresented groups, and my insistence to do research with and within communities of affinity, I was nervous. However, in one-on-one dialogue with family members about the project as well as during the pre-workshop conversation I realized my family did not have the trepidations I assumed they might and instead urged me to say what I need to say trusting that who needs to hear it, will, and who does not is of less concern.

This workshop confirmed as long as silence is privileged, imagining remains but a luxury and/or something seemingly out of reach. In regards to imagining, however, hooks (1990) asserts, "Spaces can be real and imagined. Spaces can tell stories and unfold histories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practice" (p. 152). During this workshop we were able to share our realities, name our wounds, and learn of each other's wounds. In doing so we created new possibilities for what it meant to be strong women,

cultivated new ways of relating to each other, and envisioned new processes for igniting healing. This chapter provides an understanding to some of the girlhood experiences of my family in particular and the silences held and experiences of Black females. Additionally, it aims to portray the potential value of dialogue around Black girlhood and femininity. Finally, overall it demonstrates the power of breaking silences and illustrates the workings of culture, history, and social inequities in the everyday lives of Black females.

Chapter Six

Ain't You a Black Girl?!: Celebrating, Questioning, and Imagining Black Girlhood

Site of Memory # 4: Excerpts of My Girlhood

Six years old and I'm in the living room watching BET. School had let out, BJ was in her bedroom watching soaps and my ma was upstairs. After school, and after my homework was done I tried to sneak to turn on the television because ma didn't like me watching it much and especially without BJ or another adult present. Funny thing is, BJ, my great grandmother let me sneak and watch adult things when her soaps wasn't on. Sometimes she watched them with me (smiles) But today BJ was in her room and the living room was free. I turned on BET and the video "Doing' the butt" was on. I sat on the floor close to the TV to get a clear view of the dance moves. You know I wanted to be a professional video dancer. Being the fast learner I was, after the first chorus, I was up on my feet in the middle of the living room shaking my butt (shaking butt in a circular and slow 1 then 2 movement) with my hands moving along with my butt as if rubbing, but not yet touching my butt. (pauses speech and imitates the words with her body). When the chorus came on (recites chorus while doing the dance), "She was doing the butt/Hey, pretty, pretty/ When you get that notion/ Put your backfield in motion, honey/Doing the butt/ Hey, sexy, sexy/Ain't nothing wrong if you/ Wanna do the butt all night long. I got soooo deep (stomps right foot) into the movement. Far as I was concerned I was in the video. (smirks). My movement intensified. I was There! So much so that before I knew it my tongue was stickin' out, and I was there in the moment, engulfed in my body. Doin' "da butt," usin' my butt. I was so there, deep in my movement, I did not hear my mother enter the room but, felt her stern hand slap my butt and then my face yelling, "Keep yo tongue in yo damn mouf!"

Thirteen years old, starting eighth grade and I been placed in Mrs. Monday's homeroom. Other students called it, the smart class. I exit the cheese, the bus, to be greeted by the smell of elephant dung, Camels, Bison's and other animals. I attended a magnet school and the junior high component was connected to the zoo. I passed the cafeteria, walked up two flights of winding steps, and after finding my locker put my coat in it. I stand outside of Mrs. Monday's door looking at her, the decorations on the wall, and the students inside, some of whom I'd known since third grade, most of whom were white. She approached and asked, "Are you lost?" I insisted I was not and that she was my homeroom teacher. She, even more certain, asserts I must be in another homeroom. Unsure why she did not think I was in her class, I suggested she check her class roster. I proceed to enter the class but, before I could enter, she put her arm out and stated, "We should go to the office to double check."

Introduction

“Ain’t You a Black Girl?!: Blackgirls’ Celebrating, Questioning, and Imagining Black Girlhood” is a resistance text, comprised of the voices, reflections, stories, and knowledge generated by six high school girls ages 14-17 who dialogue with and against stereotypes and element of shame, that have long haunted Black females. This chapter illustrates the role of stereotypes and complex negotiations of being Black and female in the United States in inducing shame within Blackgirls. These tensions and the need to have one’s individual uniqueness seen make for a contentious and yet promising Black girlhood because in the midst of fashioning Blackgirl identity, Blackgirls are burdened both by historical, cultural, and monolithic portrayals of Black femininity that undermine the myriad constructions of Black girlness and Black femininity. Since Black girlhood is fraught with everyday encounters of being Black and female alongside living tropes of Black femininity that imprint themselves onto Black female bodies, the crafting of Blackgirl identity can be understood as a dance with and through material and discursive dynamics produced by the complexities of negotiating racegender realities.

Moreover, these dynamics elicit gut responses to (other) Blackgirls that denote a divorcing of oneself from the collective in tandem with a yearning to not be alone, in the whirlpool of struggle associated with being a Blackgirl in the United States. Seeking to work towards obliterating the estrangement, the rhetorical question, “ain’t you a Black girl,” troubles the tendency of the girls to disassociate from constructions of Blackgirls they consider popular while probing for articulations of Black girlhood and images of Blackgirls that transcend oversimplified, one-dimensional, and dichotomous archetypes.

The dilemmas expressed by these girls, myself included, can be traced throughout history and have haunted Black females for centuries. However, when documenting the ramifications of

these stereotypes and tropes, those Black feminists, womanists, and others writing about them chiefly focus on the Black woman (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Boylorn, 2014; Collins, 2000, Harris-Perry, 2011; hooks, 1981; Lorde, 1984; Roberts, 1997; White, 2001). In contrast, “Aint you a Black girl” uncovers the myriad ways these archetypes take root in young Blackgirls’ lived experiences, readings of their/our bodies, and judgments of other Black female bodies. The dichotomous and limited constructions articulated of what constitutes being a Black girl functioned both as external pressures upon our bodies as well as ones we imposed on ourselves and others.

Black girl body’s, like those of Black women and bodies in general, are often dictated to, read, and assigned meaning and value based on external measures (see Boylorn, 2014; Carroll, 1997; Harris-Perry, 2011; Jones, 2010; Roberts, 1997; Rose, 2008). These placeholders are a function of schooling (Rury, 2005) and seek to put Black females alike in their place. Previously detailed in chapter two, schooling is a form of learning with the primary function of socializing people into their so called place according to normative structures related to identity markers such as class, race, gender, sexuality, and educational attainment to name a few. As a result people generally and Blackgirls specifically are taught how to construct themselves in many different contexts. Important to schooling and self-construction is that the teaching/learning process of schooling doesn’t only happen in schools. It is ongoing and pervasive.

In contrast to the place putting that happens through schooling, room is made for Blackgirls to exist and assign meaning and appraisal to their/our lives and experiences. While space is made for self-identification and self-definition to occur, I acknowledge the difficulty in creating new meanings, especially those particular to yourself, after operating within a specific paradigm and/or being labeled in a specific way for an extended time. Despite the difficulty

imagining may be within the confines of being dictated to, it is possible. However, the depictions and trends of Black girlhood offered here should not be essentialized and toted as *the* story of Black girlhood nor the events generalized to happenings in the lives of all Blackgirls. They should, instead, be taken as narratives that carry within them common threads connected to Blackness, femininity, and that contribute to the overall Black girlhood collective.

Shame and stereotyping are recurring realities and steadfast in the lives of Black women and girls alike. They are not new in the lives of Black females. In fact, beginning with the United States' system of chattel slavery, stereotypes were created to justify the disparate social positioning of Blacks and Whites (Collins, 2000; Harris-Perry, 2001; hooks, 1981; Roberts, 1997). These same stereotypes were collapsed with those of femininity to dictate to Black females our place within social hierarchies (Collins, 1990; Harris-Perry, 2011; hooks, 1981; Jewell, 1993; Roberts, 1997; Wallace, 1978). Alongside these stereotypes are outgrowths of shame and anger that stimulate an overall paradoxical relationship between and across Black females and our bodies.

This chapter recognizes shame and stereotyping as deleterious and explores their relationship to Black girlhood in particular as well as the tension and estrangement it has created in and amongst the Black females as a collective. I do not admonish nor censor the words and experiences of Deborah, Christa, Philipi, Pasta, Nicole, and Pasta. Rather, make room for us to share events of our lives that have shaped us as well as the viewpoints we once had, still have, and/or question. In addition, these perspectives and happenings are placed in dialogue with each other to craft a larger discussion about the ways they/ we are Blackgirls and yet implicitly question, ain't I a Black girl? The query, "Ain't you a Black girl" functions as a signifier of the ways Blackgirls, for various reasons (e.g., hair, speech, music interests, beliefs about other

Blackgirls) have had their Blackgirlness questioned. Additionally, this statement begs that we as Blackgirls, Black females, and/or other readers reflect upon the ways we have “Othered” (hooks, 1995) Blackgirls, used Othering in how we speak of Blackgirls, and asks to what end or for what purpose this Othering takes place. Following the mistreatment, stereotyping and devaluation of Black women, Blackgirls endure similar blaming and shaming. Popular tropes and pathologies justify the suffering of Blackgirls, irrespective of their/our behavior and legitimize the negative and harmful labeling of Blackgirls as deviant, less than, and insignificant (see Cox, 2009; Fordham, 1993; Lei, 2003; Jones, 2010; Morris, 2007). Our Blackness positions our femininity as abstruse and vice versa. Accordingly Blackgirls, like Black women occupy liminal spaces, somewhere betwixt and between (Winn, 2010) never quite belonging anywhere.

Within this text are insights, cautions, along with topics presented and shared amongst seven Blackgirls: Pasta, Christa, Deborah, Unique, Philipi, Nicole, and myself. All, except myself, were in high school; six ranged in ages 14-17; six attended public high schools in Baltimore, MD, and Buffalo, NY, I attended an all girls Catholic High School; and all of us participated in after school enrichment programs. The voices and content of this chapter derive from data collected during two workshops and five volunteer interviews. Girls volunteered to participate in this project with the understanding that they self-identified as Blackgirls and had interest in having their voices heard. Due to their underage status, the decision to be shown via photo was determined by their parents. Aware that four of the six girls were not be allowed to have their photos published, I made took care to ensure their voices, thoughts, and knowledge manifest in various ways within this text. Therefore, this text comprises dialogue, pictures, researcher reflections that offer my feelings, thoughts, and analyses during and after engaging in the workshop with them. Because Blackgirls are everywhere, these workshops could have taken

place anywhere and thus, the pictures displaying the props and artifacts are used to enliven, for those who were not present, the contexts in which I was working.

Here, I first discuss the contexts under which I came to conduct the two workshops with Blackgirls in Baltimore, MD and Buffalo, NY followed by a transgressn text that synthesizes workshop flow and happenings, personal insights, my analyses afterward and impromptu negotiations in the moment. Embedded within this text are questions and prompts designed to have you, the reader or witness, engage. These are also questions we discussed in the workshop as well as ones I explored throughout this project. Next I analyze the text with a discussion of Black feminist, Performance theorists, and Black girlhood literature around the issues of shame and stereotyping. Here, I also expound upon the decisions I made in writing up the workshop such as what material to include and how identity negotiation based on context and relationship to the different girls, as well as Black girlhood literature and my sensibilities as a Black girl and Black girl advocate, shaped workshop flow and expectations. Finally, I close with a brief conclusion summarizing the major points of this chapter and what I hope you as a reader take with you.

Context

This chapter combines insights and happenings of two workshops conducted with Blackgirls in Buffalo, NY and Baltimore, MD. The workshop in Baltimore, MD took place in a classroom at University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC). This is also the location of Classic Upward Bound, a state funded enrichment program designed to provide college preparation to high school students, where I met Unique, Deborah, Philipi, Nicole, and Christa. The other workshop took place in Buffalo, NY with Pasta, a graduate of Buffalo Prep, an enrichment program for college bound inner city youth of which I am an alumna. As one who

values community and sustained relationships, my relationship with both Buffalo Prep and Classic Upward Bound exceeds these workshops. I had, however, only previously interacted with three of the six girls before these workshops.

Three of the six girls were former students of mine from the Classic Upward Bound Program and therefore called me Ms. Hill. Those who I had not interacted with addressed me on a first name basis. As a result, Dominique/Ms. Hill was used to denote these realities and the range of relationships I had with the girls. Unlike my family context, where they were situated in a familiar house with familiar people, the girls who participated in this workshop were not all familiar with each other. In fact, in the case of the Buffalo workshop there were only two Blackgirls present, Pasta and myself. In addition, these occurred in public spaces that needed to be warmed up. I therefore asked that each of these workshops open with “Black girl comforts” where we took time to warm up the space by writing words on chalk boards and paper, creating and drawing things, and strategically placing them throughout the room in which we were located. These comforts included names of people, concepts, i.e., love, family, friendship, statements, and pictures that made us comfortable and made the room more ours.

These two workshops happened one month apart, with the one in Baltimore, taking place first. I approached each of them with alacrity, anxiousness, and appreciation. With the workshop at UMBC happening on a Saturday morning, I awoke, expressed to my love my nervous excitement, ate a breakfast bar, grabbed my bags and apple, and proceeded to interstate 695. As I drove, I remembered wondering which girls would show up. While I knew some of them there was always a chance others could decide at the last minute to come. Besides, 17 had expressed interest. Five showed “cool,” “tired,” “ready,” and unsure (shoulder shrug). For a quick second, I wondered where the other 12 were but quickly shifted my attention to the girls who were present.

It was nine in the morning, they had gotten out their bed, commuted at least 30 minutes across time to “tell their story” as I shared during the information session, and I was ready to listen, to watch, and feel with them. My drive to the campus was approximately 20 minutes, giving me just enough time to think through the room setup, camera logistics, and where I would put my journal to make quick jottings.

On the other hand, my drive to my second workshop was almost seven hours across multiple highways. This drive afforded me plenty of time to get nervy then eager, then nervy again. When speaking with Mrs. Seys, the former History teacher and counselor of the program, the day before, she confirmed that fifteen girls expressed interest and were expected to attend. Due to the inner workings of the program, she expressed it was best that she communicated with the parents and girls directly. I provided Mrs. Seys with the consent and assent forms as well as brief write-up of myself. Furthermore, as an active alumna of the program, I had returned home many times to talk with students informally as well as give the keynote for a graduating class. Moreover, I had the approval of Mrs. Seys, which required a great deal to attain but also gave you validation amongst students, parents, and program teachers alike. Therefore, when I arrived, an enthusiastic parent expresses how she’s heard so much about me and is looking forward to her daughter Pasta participating in the workshop. After 30 minutes, Pasta, her mother, Mrs. Seys and I remained the only people present at the Gateway Family Resource Center. I felt a bit tired, disappointed, confused, and anxious to know Pasta’s story. It was clear to me by her mother’s Spanish accent, her hair texture, and name that she was Latina but from which country I was uncertain until we started talking. 45 minutes passed as we waited for the other 19 who confirmed to show. I decided I would not keep Pasta any longer. Her being there was important

and in that moment all that mattered. Concurrently, the researcher part of me fixated on the numbers, 1, guestimating what my adviser would say. I texted her:

Dominique: So I'm in buffalo and 20 girls were signed up but only two have shown up. Just sharing.

Adviser: Make it count for those two and you! It's going to be life changing!!!

Dominique: Correction I and her mother, the other is here for tutoring.

Adviser": I is magic number!

Dominique: Yesssss it is. Jill said it. After this I'll ask you what's the set # of girls I need to have, to stop collecting as I get confused when it's autoethnography and quantity/quality debate.

Adviser: ☺

On the one hand, I was thrilled only Pasta showed because I presumed it would allow us to talk and share more. On the other, I worried how only one girl showing up would direct the course of my research. More so I felt an internal discomfort. Then I was not able to fully articulate it but, now I recognize it as distress by being a Black girl advocate seeking to create space for Blackgirls to share their lived realities, viewpoints, and desired as a research and discovery space.

Pause

Write down your assumptions about Blackgirls ages 14-17.
Think about what you have seen, heard, and experienced.

Transgressn Text

Time: One year ago and present

Place: A workshop in a public venue

Characters:

Christa—,17

Deborah—,16

Nicole—14

Pasta— 16

Philipi—15

Unique—16

Setting:

There is a semi. Inside it are props—words on paper, books, and locs in a bag. Dominique/Ms. Hill at the peak of the semi circle looking around the room, thinking about what she was going to say and how she was going to feel when the girls walked in. Six girls enter the room, only a few say, “hello” loud enough for her to hear. Dominique, Ms. Hill to a few, greets everyone with a smile and wave and turns on her ipod. The girls plop into their chairs, arms crossed, some legs crossed, some slouched, one with legs folded underneath her. It is time to begin the workshop.

Ms. Hill/Dominique: Hello everyone. We are going to get started with this workshop. But before we do, there is paper, pens, index cards around that we should make use of. Lets warm this place up. I call em’ Black girl comforts. Write down anything, draw anything that would make this room more home more comfortable for you during the next hour and a half.

Pasta: Like anything?

Ms. Hill/Dominique: Yes, anything. And please use the board. Use the space. Once you draw and write all you wanna add, put it anywhere in the room. Does that make sense?

Unique and Deborah: Says, yes

Pasta, Nicole, Christa and Phillip: Nods, yes



Figure 2. Index cards with writing and drawing on them.

Black girl comforts: Butter pecan icecream, crazy, family, PePe, My love, sunshine, friends

Dominique/Ms. Hill: Okay does anyone wish to add anything to warm up this space? It needs us. (she laughs)

Unique: I love fashion. Cool kids read!

Deborah: Education. Family. Respect.

Christa: Music

Nicole: I love my sister

Dominique/Ms. Hill: Anything else? Or are we all good? Okay so now that we have warmed up this room a lil bit and made it more us, I'm going to share something with you. You can sit back and chill.

(Dominique/Ms. Hill exits one door and enters the opposite, takes off her book bag and starts her performance of schooling by dancing to "Hear my Call"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjKf31z42ac> by Jill Scott. She dances, talks, and recites poetry. Nicole is looking down at the papers on the floor. Making intentional and direct eye contact with each girl walks close to them and backs away slowly.)

Dominique/Ms. Hill: (breathing deeply) Reactions.

Deborah: I could feel your pain of people stereotyping you and assuming you less Black because of how much butt you didn't have.

Christa: Yea. It was like, when you were talking you were telling my story.

Unique and Deborah: (Nod in agreement)

Pasta: You almost made me cry. That was beautiful. (she laughs as one tear rolls down her face)

Dominique/Ms. Hill: Thank you. Thank you all for your comments. For those of you who have not spoken, I would love to hear from you but you feel free to jump in and participate and when you don't, well that's okay too. Alright so I'm going to give you an index card ask you to write down anything that comes to mind when you immediately see me. It can be a word, a person, a place. Whatever.

(Freeze. Dom steps outside herself and comments on the proceedings thus far.)

Dom (*reflection*): So far it's evident that
the body is a touchy topic
for these girls just like it was
and continues to be for me. That saddens
me because I wish
Blackgirls somewhere didn't
experience their bodies as being
too much, insufficient, and so on.
I still consider myself
a Black girl but I wonder,

“would they see me similarly?
Comment on my age? My hair?
Would they see me as a Black girl,
or was I too old for that to them,
And what, if any part of my performance,
would they be drawn to?

(Deborah, Pasta, and Unique begin a side bar conversation about school)

Unique: I mean school is cool. It's very stressful, but I don't hate it. I can't hate it. I like to learn, but sometimes it's too much! (*Leans forward*) Like, it's like I'm tryna find a balance between it and everything else.

Pasta: I am in theater at a performing arts school. I don't fit in but school is still fun, cuz I can hangout with my friends.

Unique: The balancing makes it hard. Last year I got inducted into the National Honor Society. I felt kinda proud of myself for all my hard work but not important. I can't say I ever felt important in school but I can tell you when I feel unimportant—when I'm around a lot of smart people who seem to have it all figured out. Teachers seem to pay more attention to people who seem to know everything versus the people who don't always get it.

Deborah: (*smiling*) I'm a nerd, a big nerd. I love reading. I love biology. You know nerdy stuff like that. I love school. I love learning. I love going to class. I mean there are some things I don't like about going to school. Like, the food and some of the students and how they think about some things but I really like school.

Nicole: (jokingly pointing at Deborah). Wait! Aint you a Black girl? (laughs)

Deborah: What's that supposed to mean?

Unique: I think what she's trying to say is that what we know about Blackgirls has nothing to do with liking school or being a nerd. Not all of us are idiots and start twerkin' in the middle of the hallway for no good reason! I actually read books.

Christa: Or having 20 bodies! That's trashy pride!

Dom (*reflection*): Wait! Wait! I want to ask, “Ain't you
a Black girl?! I get it. Unique and Christa
are likely tired of seeing the limited
depictions of Blackgirls. More so, they
are tired of not seeing themselves
represented in these depictions.
Yet I am very uncomfortably
with these dichotomous and implicit judgments
taking place. This is not what I learned

in SOLHOT. This is not the way to celebrate Blackgirls. But I want Blackgirls' voices to be heard. And all of our voices won't and don't sound the same. And perhaps until Blackness is given its own freedom this good/bad is what can be expected. I do not and will not silence them. What they are saying is important. I just need to figure out how to translate it into something useful when they are done saying what they gotta say.

Dominique: Can we take a pause and write down everything that comes to mind when we immediately hear the words "Black girl" or think about them?

- Overly Sexually
- Deceitful
- They Sabotage each other
- Hurt

Ratchetness
Attitude
Loud
Obnoxious
Attention seekers
Rude
Lack of confidence
Lack of respect

- Ratchetness. - attitude.
- Loud. - lack of confidence
- obnoxious. - lack of respect.
- attention seekers.
- rude.

Figure 3. Index card with immediate word associations when we hear the words "Black girl" or think about them



Figure 4. Descriptive words.

Different
Loud
Quiet
Scary
Odd
Weird
Invisible
Attitude
Amalgamation
Misunderstood
Dance
Booty
Geto
Me

Pause

Write down your reactions to Blackgirls' assumptions about Blackgirls? Were you surprised? Were your assumptions different or the same as those listed above? After you have finished writing and identifying the similarities, look at them. Keep these with you as you travel through this journey of Black girls' renderings, theorization, and experiences of Black girlhood.

Philippi: I think it's good to be a Black girl.

Unique: It can be. Sometimes I just feel like the world is against me. To me being a Black girl is always fighting stereotypes that people have about all of us being loud, obnoxious, ghetto, ratchet, promiscuous, not intelligent, don't work hard and it goes on.

Dominique/Ms.Hill: It is clear we all know what it feels like to be misunderstood and judged. Would that be an accurate statement?

(Everyone nods in agreement)

Dominique/Ms. Hill: Okay. I am going to ask us to continue on the journey of reflecting on our experience by writing from the prompt, "I Know What It Feels Like..." for two minutes. Your writing can be in any form—poem, song, a bunch of words scattered on the page, whatever feels right in the moment.

(Dominique cues music and sits down to write)

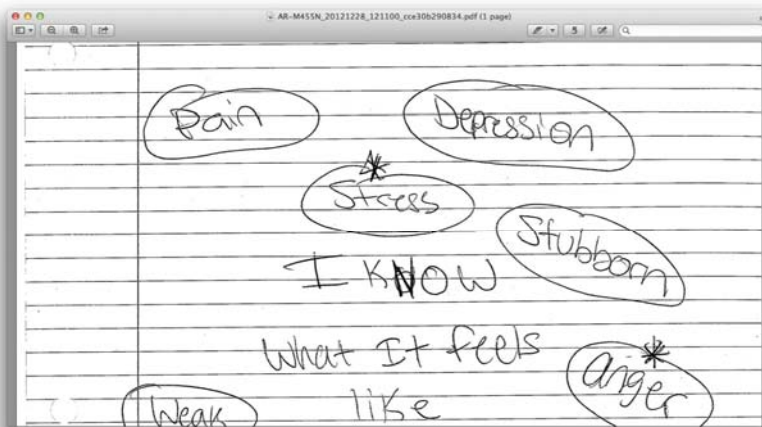


Figure 5. "I Know What It Feels Like..."

Nicole: Grades! My mom is always on me about my grades. They're always a problem. She never asks me why I got a certain grade. She never asks, what's going on with me or in my life. She just goes off!

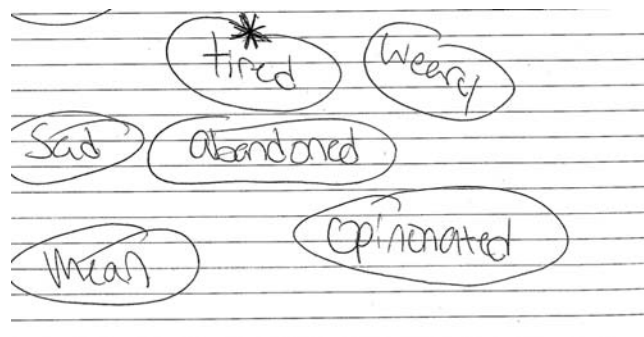


Figure 6. "I Know What It Feels Like..."

Dom (reflection): I want to hug each of these girls

and I will before the session is over. These girls love school. These girls speak of not getting positive attention from teachers. All of them are part of enrichment and college preparatory programs geared toward ensuring the academic success of inner city students. This factors sets them apart from the trending stories told about Blackgirls (see Brown, 2009; Evans-Winters, 2005; Jones, 2010; Lei, 2003; Morris, 2007; Winn, 2011) and yet embedded in them all is a lack of freedom, a lack of space, to be and express and live out their truths about Black girlhood without consequences. I wonder the correlation between high academic performance and stress for Blackgirls. I wonder how many adults in their lives know their feelings and experiences. I am not suggesting support is completely lacking, but I do question who celebrates and encourages them in the midst of this go thru.

Christa: Feels like I'm just waiting, waiting, waiting, for a father who's not gonna show up. I can't say that I feel sad. Won't tell you I feel like I'm missing out. What I'll say is, I feel like I'm waiting. But, I'm not really expecting anything.

Phillipi: I been through a lot! Although I am quiet, I like to write about these thoughts and feelings. Though I do not share them all

Deborah: I know what it feels like to want to be things I am not and to have things I just don't have.

| |
|---|
| I know what it feels like |
| • to be discriminated |
| • to be hated |
| • to hate yourself ✓ |
| • feel like life isn't worth it anymore |
| • to cry at your reflection ✓ |
| • to conform |
| • to pretend to be someone you aren't |
| • to want to be white ✓ |
| • to want long silky hair |
| • to hate your kinky curls |
| • to hide those feelings |

Figure 7. "I Know What It Feels Like..."

Dom (*reflection*): For some folks, it makes sense that these feelings would be felt by these girls. Or that their lives would be drenched in sadness. Truth is, they are (sad) but they aren't. We are not sitting here whining about our lives. I shared my story, well at least some of it to say we, Blackgirls, can make use of these experiences. We can put them to good use. We do not have to bury them alive and let them continue to eat away at us. This is what this workshop is about, undressing and getting real about where we are so we can get some place else.

| |
|---|
| I know what it feels like to be judged purely based on my origin and where I am from. I know what it feels like when I can't choose what I wanna do based on my own skin color, I feel discriminated. |
|---|

Figure 8. "I Know What It Feels Like..."

Unique: I am familiar with being judged and discriminated against. I guess that's why claiming your body as your own is so important

Dominique/Ms. Hill: Looks like everyone has written out their thoughts to the prompt.

Pasta: Wait! I'm almost done.

Dominique/Ms. Hill: Okay no problem. We will wait.

Nicole: Yea. Take your time. We aint going no where.

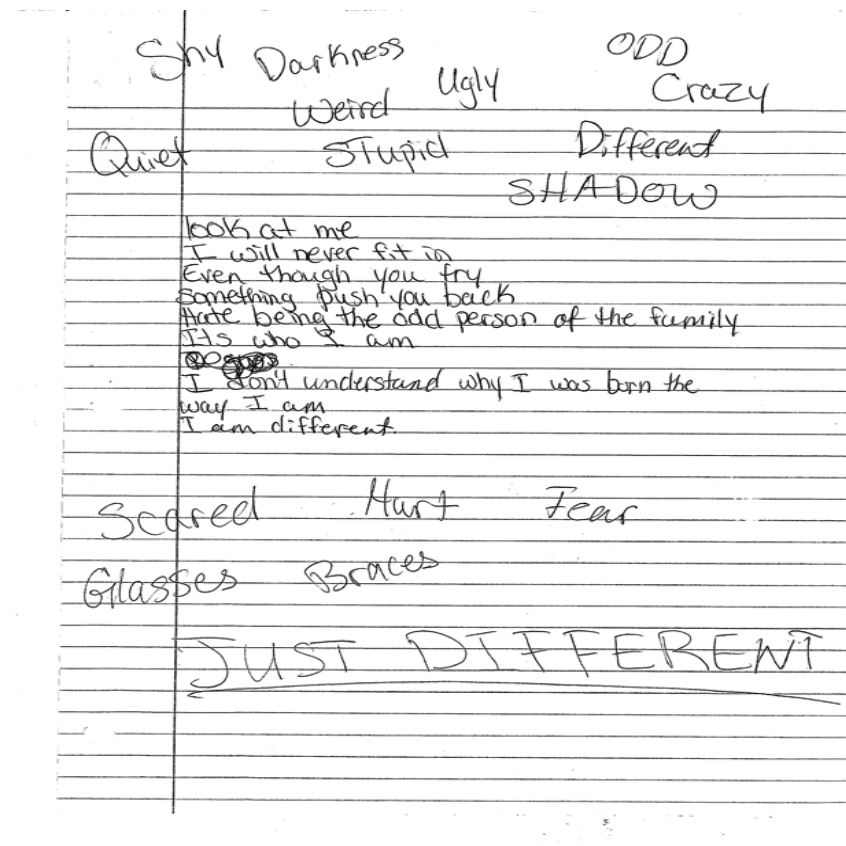


Figure 9. "I Know What It Feels Like..."

Pasta's response to the prompt, "I know what it feels like:" Shy, Darkness, Ugly, quiet, stupid, odd, crazy, different, shadow, scared, hurt, fear, glasses, braces, JUST DIFFERENT. Look at me. I will never fit in. Even though you try, Something push you back. Hate being the odd person of the family. It's who I am. I don't understand why I was born the way I am. I am different.

Dominique/Ms. Hill: Okay. Now I am going to ask that you all identify three words that stand out to you in what you just wrote. Once you identify them, circle or mark them in some kinda way because we will be doing something with them.

Dominique/Ms. Hill: When you have finished marking your three words, go ahead and stand.

(The girls stand and with each word everyone takes a pose or makes a movement that captures that word or phrase to them. After they create a movement or pose for all the words or phrases, they put the three words together in any order they choose. As a group we do it together and

once everyone is comfortable with their movements, we pair up and share our phrase with our partner. Pasta and Deborah are a pair Unique and Nicole are a pair. Christa and Phillipi are a pair. The girls share their phrase with their partner and when everyone is finished people sit down)

Dom (*reflection*): Here we are talking about our bodies, pointing, touching, and naming body parts that people poke fun at, body parts that have or at one point had all of us wishing we were a different color, had different hair texture, a larger butt, or something other than who we are and what we got. I wanted, no needed us to engage with that story through our senses. I wanted them/us to see how it felt to share what it feels like to be us with no explanation and no apology and using our bodies.

Dominique/Ms. Hill: How did that feel?

Phillipi: (smiles) I could be seen and I could see others.

Deborah: (smiles) It made me feel different and I liked it. This time different felt good.

Unique: I liked it because I got to share in a different way other than just talking.

Dominique/Ms. Hill: Okay, okay. Any other thoughts?

(heads nod no)

Dominique/Ms. Hill: Okay. If there are no other thoughts about this exercise, I am going to ask you to look on the floors and the table for things I brought that are pieces of my life. I am going to ask you to choose at least one thing you relate to. After you have identified something you can come up and place it in the circle and say whatever you want about it. You can also say nothing.

(Christa comes up and places her item)

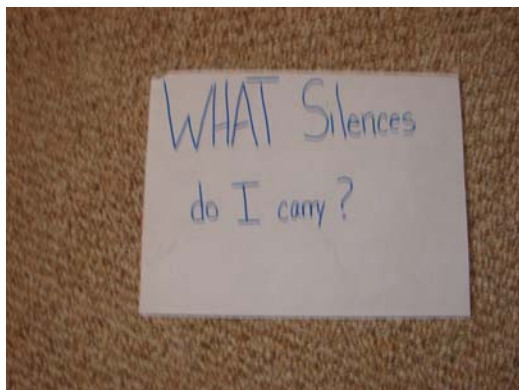


Figure 10. What silences do I carry?

Christa: I keep a lot to myself because I don't want to be judged. Sometimes I share but I don't really express how I feel deep down. I talk but I don't talk. I keep a lot to myself because I have been criticized for things I say and feel. It's easier to keep things to myself but it hurts. It's hard.

(Phillipi stands and comes to the circle to place her items there. One of the pieces of paper she has balled up so the words on it cannot be seen. She opts not to speak and I decide to acknowledge her desire to participate the way she wanted. I let her sharing be a secret sharing—just as she wanted)



Figure 11. Phillipi's contributions

(Unique comes to the center of the room and places her items in the circle)

Unique: Broken. I am working on not being broken. That's complex. I'm complex, I think. I can be really sensitive sometimes but then sometimes, I just don't care. Then, I'm kinda shy at times depending on the situation. If I don't feel comfortable, I'm not gonna be more out there. But, sometimes when I am comfortable, I can be outspoken. Whether I am comfortable or not, I am very opinionated. I'm not insensitive and I am conscious of people's feelings. So I don't just say anything out my mouth but I like to express myself. It isn't always easy, expressing. Especially when you have parents who want to invade your privacy and go through your journals. That made me stop keeping a journal.



Figure 12. Unique's contributions

(Deborah scoots to the edge of her chair and then decides to get up to place her items in the circle)



Figure 13. Deborah's contributions.

Deborah: I have cried at my reflection in the mirror. So when I say with confidence that this forehead is mine, all mine—it means something! I realized it doesn't really matter what everybody else thinks of you; it just matters what you think of yourself. Even though what I think of myself may change as I get older, ultimately it matters most what I think of myself. People try to make me feel bad for being smart. Just because I talk a certain way doesn't mean I'm an oreo. Or that because I'm from Africa that I'm a booty scratcher. Or that big lips can't just be big they have to be dick sucking lips. That really bothers me!

(Pasta gets up and brings her items to the circle, places them there, and walks away)

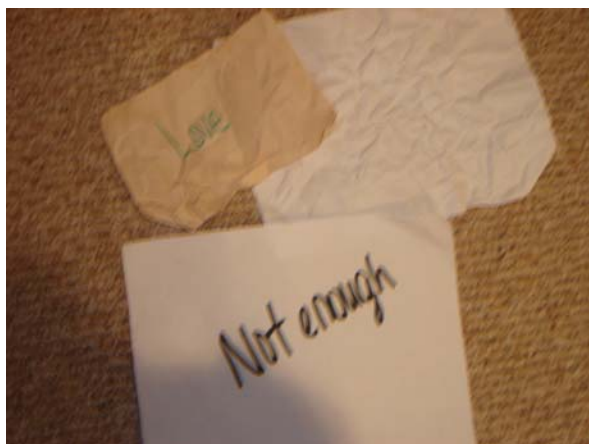


Figure 14. Pasta's contributions.

Dominique/Ms. Hill: Wow. So we all have stuff in common (smiles). That is nice to know. Was anyone surprised?

Pasta: Yes. Dominique your stories and experiences differed from my point of view. I never thought that someone like you would be looked at as a low by another person, like your eighth grade teacher. It surprised me.

Dominique/Ms. Hill: Can you say more about why it surprised you?

Pasta: It's crazy. I don't have a definition for people who are Black. I would say different, cuz it's wrong to make people feel not perfect or anything like that because they are Black. Being Black, it's just different and people have their own point of view about it.

Dom (*reflection*): Pause. Aint you a Black girl?
 Again, I want to ask, this time to Pasta
 because her language seems to indicate
 a disassociation. At the same time, I get
 it. Maybe because she's lighter. Or maybe because
 she speaks Spanish. Maybe it has to do with her
 being Dominican. Maybe her family has emphasized
 ethnicity, Dominican.
 Maybe because all of these
 things as well as other
 reasons, I am unaware of.
 But I gotta be honest and say I'm confused.
 But then again, maybe she's just not one of those
 Blackgirls. You know
 those ones that make it "bad" for the rest of us.
 The ratchet ones mentioned earlier.
 The loud, full of attitude, obnoxious ones
 who "twerk in the middle of the hallway
 for no good reason." Maybe she is a Black girl
 like Unique who likes to read books.

But what's the danger in seeing herself/ourselves as different from other Blackgirls? If these Blackgirls spoken about were here would they do the same thing to these girls? And better yet, what can I do to get Blackgirls to start seeing their reflections in each other no matter how different on the surface or in behavior we appear?

Unique: Aint you a Black girl Pasta?!

(Pasta shrugs)

Pasta: What does it take to be a Black girl anyway?

Phillipi: I don't have a definition for Black girlhood but I am so proud of being Black and I love my skin.

Nicole: My Black is beautiful!

Deborah: I'm a Black girl, which means that I'm different. I'm special. I'm not like other girls because I have a different type of ethnicity. Not just that I'm like Irish or Polish. Being Black just feels different because it's not like there's a specific type of Black. There's all types.

Pasta: Well, I guess I am Black when I realize that sometimes I feel very uncomfortable in school in a way, because of my skin and how people are like, "oh look at chu hanging out with all those Black people" and I be like, "okay." I don't know, sometimes I feel very uncomfortable when I'm around people who are loud and obnoxious and I wonder, "am I really that person's friend? Or am I that person behind a shadow?"

Unique: My big butt and my stomach, they belong to me. It's hard to claim anything when you don't really know who you are or are unsure of yourself. I sometimes feel lost but I guess that's what Black girlhood is about: learning how to be strong and trying to make it through the struggle. What happens if I start loving and expressing myself? I wonder.

Deborah: Black girlhood is about being strong and being able to love yourself through all kinds of experiences. Like I'm reminded of when I had to fight to be recognized as smart. Initially, I was put in all standard classes. I know I had just moved to the United States but I was not stupid! I was so angry because I knew I should've been in honors or AP. I like school and I like learning. My parents really push me in school. If I didn't do well or wasn't so smart, I don't think they'd love me as much. But I really love school!

Christa: *(interrupting Deborah)* School's not fun anymore. Sometimes, school or the people there can make you feel really insignificant. Like in elementary school, I had all white classmates and all white teachers. And in fourth grade I had this teacher that when I gave answers, whether they be right or wrong, I would get a lecture, a two-minute spill on either

defending my answer better or making sure that I knew what I was talking about before answering the question. I could be right as all outdoors but she just had to pick my answer apart. Seemed like she enjoyed picking me apart. All I know is that was one of my worst days in school!

Phillipi: I loveeee school! And I love to learn. My favorite class is my ESOL class because even when we are just reading stories, I feel important. I did not always feel important in school. Like when I first got to school in America, it was difficult. I didn't understand English. It took hard work but I love school.

Nicole (*to Pasta*): So, aint you a Black girl?

Dom (*reflection*): Yes!! Ask her. Make sure she doesn't leave here separating herself from you all. But again, something isn't sitting right with me. What have we been taught about Blackgirls? Are we mixing race and the ethnicity in a way that allows and maybe even encourages us to separate us from us? And what do we continue to carry in our thoughts, our bodies about Black girls that separate us from ourselves?

Dominique/Ms. Hill: Alright, we are preparing to bring this to a close because you all have afternoon activities but before we go does anyone have any final reactions, thoughts, comments or other things they want to share?

Christa: I loved being in this workshop. I was amazed at how I could relate to everything she said. But I really liked it because I got to write about how I felt and be open and not worry about people having to look at me funny because of what I was sayin'.

Phillipi: My favorite part was writing on the board to make the room nicer. Also when we were listening to the song and writing our thoughts and everything else.

Deborah: Being a Black girl is being beautiful. Being able to face discrimination and opposition and still be able to just be who you are. I am a Black girl and that makes me different and this time, being different feels good.

Unique: Yea. I feel like when you just talk all the time people don't always get it. I need them to get it!

Christa & Pasta: When are we doing this again?

Dominique/Ms. Hill: I'm not sure but I would love to do it again with you all. But for now we are coming to a close. So I want you to stand up. I want you to think about a body part that you give a lot of attention to and this can be for good or bad reasons. Once you have identified that body part, we are going to do a call and response activity. So if I were going I'd say, "these lips" and you'd repeat, "these lips" and point at your own lips. I'd say, "they're not yours" and you'd repeat. And I'd say, "they're mine, All mine" and you'd repeat. You gotta say it like you mean it and with authority!

(Everyone nods)

Dominique: These legs

All Blackgirls: These legs.

Deborah: These lips.

All Blackgirls: These lips.

Phillipi: This skin

All Blackgirls: This skin.

Unique: This butt.

All Blackgirls: This butt.

Pasta: It aint yours. This smile.

All Blackgirls: This smile.

Christa: This body.

All Blackgirls: This body.

Nicole: This Black girl

All Blackgirls: This Black girl

All Blackgirls: She definitely ain't yours!

All Blackgirls: She's mine! All mine!

Analysis

The preceding text offers intimate access into the lives and circumstances of six Blackgirls—Christa, Deborah, Unique, Phillipi, Nicole, and Pasta. While the preceding narrative can be deduced to represent a specific group of Blackgirls, these six Blackgirls who are all part of college preparatory programs, the themes of stereotyping and shame engrained within these accounts are the bridge between these stories and Black female collective. Furthermore, they both affirm and talk back to literature that cast Blackgirls and/or some Blackgirl behavior as delinquent, outlaw and/or doomed (Fordham, 1993; Lei, 2003; Morris, 2007), invisible (Henry, 1998; Rollock, 2007). Below I offer some insight into tensions and the need to have one's individual uniqueness seen and make for a contentious, and yet, promising Black girlhood exposed in the preceding transgressn text and their connection to the larger cultural struggle faced by Black females in fashioning themselves/ourselves in the face of deep-seated tropes and stereotypes. I outline assumptions about the workshop versus what actually happened. Using Black feminist theory and cultural theory of the body, I discuss workshop dynamics and their role in revealing the recurrence of stereotyping and shame as themes in the lives of Blackgirls with a meta discussion on the presence of these themes in narratives of Black femininity interspersed. Altogether, this chapter conveys the important lessons learned from this experience surrounding the value of collecting data in an arts based workshop format, the influence of the context on the portrait I offer of my girlhood and educational experiences, and what centering the body, specifically a Black female body, could contribute to scholarship.

Assumptions versus what happened

When walking into both of these workshops, I assumed at least seven to ten of the 15 girls who signed up would show. Also I presumed the girls might be shy and hesitant to participate. Upon entering both spaces, my Black woman subjectivity proved most salient.

Looking into each of their faces, I remembered my yearning as a young Black girl to be seen, valued, and respected by Black women, especially in high school. High school, particularly the latter years, because I was coming into myself, I had opinions, perspective, life experience, and desired for them to be heard and not dismissed because of my age. I sought to commune with Black women in hopes they might see me as one of them. So when I met Christa, Pasta, Unique, Nicole, Deborah, and Phillipi, I wanted to hear, respect, and learn from them. Similarly, I needed to show them that a Black woman could share her struggles, be vulnerable and open, and learn from those younger than them. Initially, this goal existed because these were nostalgias I had of Black women while a high school student. As we got deeper into the workshop and the girls shared their experiences of not being heard by their Black mothers, being fatherless, and having negative experiences with teachers, this intended aim became urgent.

Contrary to my assumptions regarding numbers, five girls showed in Baltimore and one girl in Buffalo. Initially, for say one-to-two minutes my mind raced with questions and qualms: Where are the other girls? Sleep in bed? Changed their minds? What does this mean for the project? Maybe they didn't need to have their stories heard? What more could I have said? Concurrently though, I engaged in another internal conversation: Remember, one story counts. Tell that to my committee. Who is here is supposed to be here. Make sure they leave knowing their importance to the world, to each other, to me. Make sure they know their bodies are valuable. Don't let them leave without a piece of you to take with them. So when driving almost seven hours to Buffalo, NY to be greeted by two smiling faces, a mother and her daughter, and freeing myself of the concerns of rigor and the politics of legitimating research, something most if not all researchers, especially graduate students must do, what became most pertinent in that moment was that I connected with Pasta. What became equally important, though unbeknownst

to me, in that moment, was my ability to be a Black woman that she, and the other girls could relate to and/or see as someone who she/they could trust with her/their experience(s).

During the workshop, I aimed to function as an initiator. I did not want the sessions to seem like class and it was most important to me that the girls either related or did not relate to me based upon my experiences and not based on a position of power. My voice was present and most salient in terms of the exercises created to explore our experiences and the activities initiated. Otherwise, the girls were strongly encouraged to do or not do based on their comfort and interest level. As Brown (2009) expresses, “Even in youth programs aimed at doing things differently by “empowering” young people, program processes do not necessarily translate into doing things so that [B]lack girls’ and women’s voices and bodies are included, heard, and valued” (p. 27). I aspired to offer a space where Blackgirls could be heard and express themselves/ourselves in ways that made the most sense to us with the hope that the experience would be empowering.

So, while this workshop was not part of a formal empowerment program, I did enter with the hopes that they left more excited, more hopeful, more forthcoming in their needs, just *more* (Johnson, 2013), which to me links to empowerment. Unlike empowerment programs or programming that operate under the assumption girls enter void of power that these workshops helped to harness and affirm that power. There was a recognition of the power they had. I did not assume they didn’t know their power or that they had none. Instead I presumed that by having the space to claim that power in a way that made sense to them, to know the story of an older Black female who once did not know her power, and to share in naming their/our hurts, triumphs and queries that our muscle for imagining Blackgirls generally and ourselves specifically would be strengthened. More. In this recognition that Christa, Deborah, Unique, Pasta, Phillipi, and

Nicole came with knowledge and sense of how they see themselves in the world and vice versa, there was friction, disease, and complexity. I found myself considering if I would intercede but I came to decision that it was more important, within this moment, that these girls were given the space to speak their truths and they be heard without critique or judgment—I allowed some of that to show up in the transgressn text. To shine more light onto the particular tensions that came up within these workshops and the themes of stereotype and shame that arose, I now offer dialogue that places what happened in conversation with Black feminist theory, and popular images and characterizations of Black females.

Shame and Stereotyping

Stereotypes operate in the lives of Black females by binding standards of Blackness and standards of femininity to each other, which result in Black female bodies seen as seemingly paradoxical terrain (Beale, 2003; Davis, 1983; hooks, 1981). This reality dates in the United States back to slavery and early reconstruction when racial propaganda via stereotyping were utilized to justify the social placement of Blacks versus Whites (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1981; Omi & Winant, 1986). Dwyer & Jones (2000) assert, “Marking and making difference by binding White and Other in their respective places, this racialized geography has been reproduced on and through the built environment” (p. 213). Therefore, our bodies, more specifically their identifying markers and the value attached to them, influence people’ experiential moving through society. This demarcation between White and other, as Dwyer & Jones (2000) articulates, blossomed through slavery and continues to be reproduced on different landscapes, including bodies. Thus, the mixture of Blackness and femininity create for Blackgirls and women alike, occurrences that are fraught with constrictions and typecasting. In society these stereotypes are often situated around sexuality and hypersexuality (Collins, 2000; Harris Perry,

2011; Roberts, 1997; Riggs, 1986) and performances of femininity (Cox, 2009; Fordham, 1993; Jones, 2010; Lei, 2003; Morris, 2007). Unlike popular culture, the girls in this chapter focused mainly on stereotypes associated with performances of femininity, in particular conceptions of beauty and so-called authentic Blackness. There were few references to sexual expression and sexuality but, was not a primary topic.

Paralleling the external societal pigeonholing aforementioned are the ways these stereotypes get translated into the lives of Blackgirls. The preceding text illustrates the internalization of stereotypes and how doing so eventuates demeaning and disassociation from a Black girl collective. Each Black female's self expression was placed, by her, in conversation with popular representations of Black femininity. Many of the constructions of Black girl identity were stereotypical, contradictory, complex, and yet filled with possibility. When describing Blackgirls as a collective, the tendency was to extrapolate oneself from the equation, which then allowed the category Blackgirls to receive characteristics that were mainly constricting, stereotypical and descriptors they themselves opposed. Even when characterizing themselves they relied on shaming other Blackgirls. Unique declares, "Not all of us are idiots and start twerkin' in the middle of the hallway for no good reason! I actually read books." Unique's commentary signals implicit embarrassment and shame and a break between her Black girl self and the Black girl she references. Furthermore, she assumes there could be "no good reason" for twerkin' in the hallway.

Offering an alternative perspective to the insistence that dancing, in particular, twerkin' has no justifiable place in the school hallway is Brown's (2009) claim, "Black girl dance ciphers are critical to understand the power that is embedded in the processes by which we have socialized in our bodies and disciplined our of certain spaces" (p. 93). Although she was not

referring directly to school spaces, this statement begs that we, as Blackgirls and people wishing to understand and work with Blackgirls, must consider what is being communicated when Blackgirls are dancing. Similarly, Atenico (2008) conducted ethnography on girls, 'one White and one Black, embodied experiences with dance who participated in a high school dance program. Interested in how dance informs identity and how identity informs how one moves in different contexts he found there was an interconnectedness of the body, movement, and appraisal. While Hip Hop and other "urban" forms of dance were not valued in the dance program both girls saw these forms as true to self-expression and form of resistance. Exhibiting the usage of dance as a means of subverting popular readings of performing femininity, Jenny, a Blackgirl, attends Salsa clubs and enacts behavior resembling female subjugation as a means of commanding the dance floor and the club. There, Jenny utilized her physical body to control and dominate the dance floor and using it as space of power to exercise what is often criticized in other spaces.

Displayed in Atenico's study and Brown's Hip Hop a feminist insight is the utility of dance, particularly for Blackgirls as a tool for resistance. It is quite possible that the girl Unique mentioned was in fact "twerking" in the hallway for no good reason" other than it felt good. At the same time, it is worth noting that whether or not she intentionally opted to deploy the hallway as a political and resistance space (Dickar, 2008), her decision to dance in such a policed and disciplined space was an act of defiance and there is no shame in that! The act of the "twerking in the middle of the [school] hallway," then, can be seen as a political and act of resistance. The Blackgirls to whom Unique referred were using their bodies to transform the school way into a place of comfort and/or just a place in which they had authority.

While the above analysis is quite plausible, as supported in Atenico's (2008) and Brown (2009), I also comprehend Unique's disdain and disassociation with this image of the Black girl. In *The hip hop wars*, Tricia Rose (2008) makes mention of stripper, especially in the context of Hip Hop, as one "praised and demeaned for [her] sexual actions" (p. 168) as well as her close connection to the prostitute and pimp culture. Accordingly, Black females who use their bodies to dance for a living are marked deviant and yet valuable to Hip Hop ecology. In a similar way, the jezebel, imagined as a hypersexual, seductive, and temptress is a necessity to plantation ecology. Moreover, I catch glimpse of both the (Black female) stripper and the jezebel in Unique's debasement of these unnamed Blackgirls and more specifically on the act of "twerking in the middle of the hallway." As a provocative form of dancing, rooted in Black culture, that involves a great deal of back arching, pelvis thrusting, and butt popping, twerking places the body on display. More times than not, the Black female body alone can be seen as (hyper)sexual, wrong (Jordan, 1980), and on the whole deviant. Add dancing, especially twerking, to basic characterization of being a Black female and the Black girl becomes a close cousin to the stripper, an up-and-coming jezebel.

Although this conflation is problematic, the larger problem with this configuration resides in the dichotomous framing of the Black girl. The Black girl who twerks cannot also be the Black girl who is a brilliant student. Similarly, the Black girl who loves reading cannot be sexually active and definitely not with more than one person, which brings in politics of respectability (see White, 2001) and the fight by Black people at large and Black females in particular to be seen as human. More specifically, for Black women to be viewed in a light similar to that of White women generally—pure, naïve, in need of protection, valuable. Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) describes politics of respectability and its connection to sexuality as, "a

response to the myth of hypersexuality. Black women who served as school teachers, nurses, church mothers, civic leaders, and the like hoped that their public displays of strict sexual respectability would counter existing prejudices and help control the terms by which they would be seen” (p. 61). Haunted by the stereotype that to be Black and woman meant to be hypersexual, it makes great sense for a young Black girl who desires to be seen positively, to reject and debase behavior that inhibits favorable light to be shown on her. Further, her outward disapproval of individuals who she will likely be clumped with becomes a strategic and shame motivated move.

While there was some shaming directed toward other Blackgirls regarding behaviors like having “20 bodies”¹⁸ or “trashy pride” as iterated by Christa, the vast majority of shame discussed was that felt by the girls, including myself in the workshop and its accomplice stereotypes. Five of the six girls at some point spoke of experiencing being mistreated, discriminated against, and/or hurt as a result of stereotypes. In response to standards of beauty, only two girls—Phillipi and Nicole—stated, Black is beautiful. In contrast, some of the shame disclosed connected to having “dark skin” (see Boylorn, 2013a), “dick-sucking” or big lips (Richardson, 2013), an insufficient sized butt, a gut, and just being different. Harris-Perry (2011) denotes the emotion of shame as having three key elements—the social, global, and psychological where it urges a person to withdraw, submit or appease others (pp. 104-105). She insists, “We do not feel shame in isolation, only when we transgress a social boundary or break a community expectation” (p. 104). Christa’s judgment of girls who have what she considers a large body count, to use her words, exemplifies how going against politics of respectability marks a Black girl body as less valuable. Furthermore, going against this unwritten rule with material consequences, nonetheless, are grounds for justified devaluation of a Black girl body.

¹⁸ Bodies stands for the number of sexual partners one has had. In this case a teenage girl having “20 bodies” and bragging about it is “trashy pride.”

Transitioning into the inwardly directed shame related to body shape, complexion, and other so called issues connected to the body; these instances illustrate all three elements of shame. In this case, we talked about the guilt associated with our physical body's inability to rise to the acceptable Black female archetype. For example, both Deborah and I admit being picked on for not having a butt and the trauma that has brought us throughout our life from being accused of being inauthentic to not enough. Adding to this blow is Deborah's fight with her beautiful dark skin and the overall pain she feels. In doing the interactive exercise "Feels like" she writes:

| |
|---|
| I know what it feels like |
| • to be discriminated |
| • to be hated |
| • to hate yourself ✓ |
| • feel like life isn't worth it anymore |
| • to cry at your reflection ✓ |
| • to conform |
| • to pretend to be someone you aren't |
| • to want to be white ✓ |
| • to want long silky hair |
| • to hate your kinky curls |
| • to hide those feelings |

Figure 15. "I Know What It Feels Like..."

Evidenced in her writing is a battle with being a Black girl and the global and psychological elements of shame. Her painful experience of being judged, discriminated against, and mistreated for her physical appearance, and her consequential desire, then, to be White is the internalization that she must be wrong. Further, that perhaps being White would make her less wrong. This hate Deborah sees in the mirror and corresponding longing to be White connects to the psychological element of shame in that she, at times, withdraws from what she considers the

Black girl collective and immerses herself in books and school, which she sees as uncharacteristic Black girl behavior.

Although Deborah and I revealed the hurts of having an insufficient sized butt while Unique admired and carried hers as a badge of honor, indicating that we all share the experience of the butt being an authentication of Black femininity, there were other elements of our body, namely our lips, that engendered shunning from other Black people. However, these “dick sucking” and big lips have served to distinguish the Black female throughout history. Take for example, Saartjie Bartmann also known as Hottentot Venus (see McKittrick, 2006) who is presented as a larger Black woman with an excessively large butt, supple breasts, and supposedly larger than “normal” vaginal lips. Bartmann was forced to stand on display while people gawked, examined, touched, and prodded at her. She symbolized bodily excess that White patriarchal systems needed to control bodily, psychologically, and socially. Transferring the Hottentot Venus stereotype into the present day lives of Black girls, when they/we refer to their/our “excess,” (i.e., big butts, big lips, big thighs, big stomachs, dark skin), they/we are inciting an ongoing legacy of the ways their/our Black female bodies have been interpreted as monstrous and hypersexual throughout time. In a sick and unfortunate way, this image then affirms certain excesses, especially the butt, while eschewing others.

In the midst of this affirming and eschewing is the reality that these physical attributes are generally situated as positive or negative. In other words, in different contexts and within various locales a different preference exists. Therefore, the general assertion that a Black girl a big butt is a positive attribute while big lips are not in the Black community, is not to squelch the possibility and reality that in some places, beyond in reference to assumed sexual ability (see Richardson, 2013) big lips are beautiful and having a big butt is immaterial to being a Black

female. These blows to girls' self-esteem are understood in academe in particular as outcomes of White supremacy, patriarchy, as well as romanticized and essentialized conceptions of Black females marketed within the Black community and beyond. And while these ideologies undoubtedly play a part in the shame they/we describe, their/our bodies and wounds tell a more embodied and layered story.

Inadequacies that were pointed out did not always come in the form of the physical either. Some girls shared feeling academically not enough. Deborah admits, "My parents really push me in school. If I didn't do well or wasn't so smart, I don't think they'd love me as much while Nicole complains about her mother's disinterest in the everyday happenings in school, she instead focused in on her grades exclaiming, My mom is always on me about my grades. They're always a problem. She never asks me why I got a certain grade. She never asks, what's going on with me or in my life. She just goes off!" Paralleling Deborah and Nicole is the narrative of Kristen offered by Rebecca Carroll's (1997) study of Blackgirls' experiences when Kristen exclaims, "My self-image problems have never been about my appearance or my gender...My self-image problem was about making the grade. Going to private schools brought a lot of pressure with it" (p. 131). She goes on to discuss the difficulties achieving the grades she want, inferring a shaming developed around the complex of "making the grade."

Echoing the strain of making it in private schools are Horvat & Antonio's (1999) examination of Blackgirls' experiences at an elite private school that found many girls faced undue symbolic violence in the name of academic success. Exploring the emotional and financial cost of Blackgirls at this school to advance academically, they claimed the violence experienced by Blackgirls was a trade-off for skills of how to function in a white-dominated society. While Horvat & Antonio articulate some of the cost afforded to Blackgirls in the process of academic

achievement, they do not address the impact of systemic issues on agency. Also, little space is given for the girls themselves to share their experiences, their reading of the school culture and the potentially long term deleterious effects of symbolic violence. On the other end of academic shame are the girls in the juvenile justice system, like those in Winn's (2011) book *Girl time*. In a similar way but on the other end of the spectrum these girls faced the shame of the label delinquent and reinforced messages of lacking intelligence, to name a few. Whether tagged smart by the type of school you attend or participating in enrichment programs like Pasta, Unique, Phillipi, Christa, Deborah, and Nicole, Blackgirls are typecast and thereby internalize undue shame.

Unlike the "loud Blackgirls" in Morris' (2007) and Lei' (2003) studies, these Blackgirls rejected loudness as a personal descriptor but purported it as a popular identifier of Blackgirls when asked, what immediately comes to mind when they thought of Blackgirls. They equally shunned hypersexuality, or "having 20 bodies," as an indicator of their performance of Black girlness. Instead Nicole expressed the need to be respected and that not coming with a large "body count" or being promiscuous. Simultaneously, these girls saw anger, celebrating the body, and being able to be yourself and express your feelings however that come up and out as vital. Viscerally, the tendency toward separating and implicitly downing other Blackgirls saddened me.

As I shared, they shared, and I continued to reflect upon my life and their stories, the more I was convinced their frustration and lashing at Blackgirls who were loud, promiscuous, and always twerkin' was perhaps because they were seen. Though not seen in the most positive light in educational literature, the Blackgirls they smirked at had made space for themselves. They were visible. Relatedly, the developing area of Black Girlhood Studies were rendering

alternative ways of understanding loudness, what is often touted as hypersexual, and other stigmas attached to Blackgirls (Brown, 2009; Love, 2012; Winn, 2011). Blackgirls like Black women are measured against their White female counterparts. White girls and women are generally typecast as quiet, feminine, and precious and the prototype of femininity (Scott, 1995). In contrast, Blackgirls and women are then rationally assumed to be loud, hypersexual, and expendable (see Collins, 2000; McKittrick, 2006; Harris-Perry, 2011). In lieu of this dichotomous framing of White and Black female bodies loudness ejects Blackgirls from feminine (a)sexuality by dissociating her/us from femininity. Alike, loudness is also inversely associated with intelligence and thoughtfulness (see Fordham, 1993; Lei, 2003; Morris, 2007).

Directly clashing with the preceding place assigned to Black female bodies in relation to White ones, Pasta, Unique, Deborah, Phillipi, Christa and Nicole rejected the “loud Black girl” and offered narratives that illuminated the lack of attention they received, in school particularly, because they were not loud. Unique states, “I can’t say I ever felt important in school but I can tell you when I feel unimportant—when I’m around a lot of smart people who seem to have it all figured out. Teachers seem to pay more attention to people who seem to know everything versus the people who don’t always get it.” In this moment, Unique expressed the shame associated with not feeling smart enough and the frustration she feels for not getting the attention, read: help, she needs. Slightly different from Unique’s more implicit rebuff of being loud, is Pasta’s critical self-reflection that spawns out of being around Blackgirls she deems loud: “I don’t know, sometimes I feel very uncomfortable when I’m around people who are loud and obnoxious and I wonder, “am I really that person’s friend? Or am I that person behind a shadow?” Pasta’s pondering of her reasons for discomfort around “loud and obnoxious” people were narrowed to questioning if her dis-ease came from the lack of actual friendship they had or because she was

actually a masked version of them. Pertinent to her query is the consideration that she might in fact be loud and/or that others might read her as loud. Either way, Pasta shared clear awkwardness and shame when it came to being loud.

Embedded in the narratives of Pasta, Unique, Deborah, Phillipi, Christa, and Nicole, as well as myself is an apparent determination to fashion an identity outside of deep seated stereotypes, images, and tropes that minimize possibility for Blackgirls and women alike. Christa states, “I loved being in this workshop. I was amazed at how I could relate to everything she [I] said. But I really liked it because I got to write about how I felt and be open and not worry about people having to look at me funny because of what I was sayin’.” Important to Christa’s statement is the sense of comfort in being able to speak her reality, which included feeling she has lost herself and that her White teachers helped with this. Even deeper, is the undertone of potential shame she might have felt if she could not relate to anyone in the workshop. In their own way, were calling for what bell hooks (1990) names Radical Black Subjectivity (RBS), where narrow constructions of identity and Black femininity in particular are expanded to facilitate a deeper and more complex understanding of lived identity. Thus, power becomes a malleable and flexible entity that can be utilized by all.

Illuminated here is a call to expand the images, representations, and analyses of Blackgirls. Harvey Young (2010) asserts:

When popular connotations of Blackness are mapped across or internalized within Black people, the result is the creation of the Black body. This second body, an abstracted and imagined figure, shadows or doubles the real one. It is the Black body and not a particular, flesh-and-blood body that is the target of a racializing projection. (p. 7)

For Blackgirls, this Black body is a Black female body and in direct competition with her daily flesh-and-bone self. In other words, Blackgirls in particular and Black females in general are routine opponents to the Black female body saturated in stereotypes, tropes, and popular valuations of Blackness and femaleness that justify the mistreatment, devaluation, and dismissal of individual Blackgirls. Nicole, Christa, Deborah, Unique, Phillipi, and Pasta are Blackgirls constantly trying to make sense of themselves as Blackgirls in relationship to other Black female bodies as well as the Black female body. At times, the abstracted Black female body, as discussed above, or characteristics of that body were rejected by these girls. Other times, being a Black girl was claimed with pride, at the expense of shunning other images perceived as a threat to their Black girl being.

Black females are special because we must traverse rough terrain to be successful, self-actualized and live. Black females are vulnerable because we occupy at minimum two social identities that oftentimes produce intense material realities (Beale, 2003; Carroll, 1997; Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981; Lorde, 1984). It is this compounding of race and gender that receives little attention corroborating and prolonging the label of Black females as vulnerable. For these reasons and others, Blackgirls' lives need to be attended to. And since we are speaking of the Black girl, she lives beyond the age of 17 (Brown, 2009) and she has a voice. Black Girlhood Studies recognizes the fluidity between Blackgirls and women and therefore defines Black girlhood as, "the representations, memories, lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful, Black, and female [and] ...is not dependent then, on age, physical maturity, or any essential category of identity" (Brown, 2009, p. 1). As such Black girlhood and thus being a Black girl holds identities, positions, experiences, and stories often positioned as hierarchical

and in competition together. To be a Black girl, then, recognizes the temporal and fluid nature of the identity Black girl.

Adding to the aforementioned conceptualization of who is a Black girl is the indefiniteness and dynamic relationship between Black girlhood and womanhood. Illuminated in the above shared experiences burdened and colored by archetypes and stereotypes of Black females carried throughout history, are the similarities between Blackgirls and women. These paralleling realities of negotiating, trying on, rejecting, and being subsumed by stereotypes and the shame that follows them, display the fluidity between girlhood and womanhood for Black females. Due to White patriarchal ideology that maintains Black is less than White, female less than male, and Black females always on the wrong side of the coin, then, Blackgirls are ejected from “girlhood” insofar as girlhood is constructed as “innocent.” Under this construct Blackgirls, regardless of their/our ages, are invidiously hypersexualized from the moment we are born into the world and perhaps how sexual abuse against Blackgirls is concealed. It becomes incumbent, then, that those of us interested in minimizing her, the likelihood that she is misread and mistreated, need to hear her before she forgets or disregards her own voice. We need to provide her all the space she needs to be, to release, and to share what she knows about herself.

Articulating the transient, fluid, and also powerful potential of understanding Black girlhood as a continuum that is not broken or abandoned when womanhood arrives, is my poem “Trans is Home: So Call Me A Misfit.” Written to document my evolving thoughts about my identity and performance of Black femininity, “Trans is Home” embodies my ongoing narrative and my progressing reaction to stereotypes and eventual fashioning a self of whom I am proud.

“Trans is Home: So Call me a Misfit”

Call me a misfit because I say my home is in my mind
Everyday I am trying to *transcend* your limited perception of me

In college, I kissed a woman and smiled afterward
How could home be anywhere but in the mental?
Even as we speak I am *transitioning* into some place, new
Trying to take responsibility for once deeming myself lesbian, now queer
Call me a misfit because use my body and its movement as a political demo

Call me confused because I refuse labels
When I wake up my mind has already been in *transit* for a lifetime
Last year I killed the victim inside
How else could I reclaim my body?
Home is nestled in between my soul and spirit *transforming* in meaning
Some call people like me Black
Taking responsibility for my life, it is/was created by my thought
Call me a misfit because despite chains, I know freedom

Call me weird
Call me feminist
Last year, I began again
How can my vision take flight when I'm stuck in my wounds?
Call me a misfit, because I started a revolution in my heart
Today I call home the space between who you think I am and who I am en route to becoming
transbody, transBlack, transwoman,
So call me a misfit
Call me anything you like

Conclusion

This above discussion synthesizes what I was taught about Black girlhood from the seven Blackgirls who participated in a workshop, my analyses of the process, with hints of what makes for a healthy teacher, parent, and fellow Black girl. I questioned why I did not push beyond providing space for our experiences to be aired and shared. It was not until months after these workshops as well as revising the text above that I realized: I did not wish to counter, critique, challenge, or so called correct their renderings and understandings about Blackgirls and Black girlhood. Too often Black females are dictated to about who we are and how we should be and I did not wish for that moment to be another one of those. It was more important to me that their voices and theories be lifted up and affirmed. In acknowledgement, however, of my discomfort with some of the ways Black girls were categorized and read by the Blackgirls in these

workshops and my aspiration that no matter how dissimilar Blackgirls see themselves from other Blackgirls, I created a text that revealed possibilities. Crafting a text that placed all of us and our experiences and sensibilities about Blackgirls in the same room at the same time facilitated a moment of possibility. In this coming together and sharing space, their views of Black girlhood and Black girl identity could be complicated and hopefully spark our imaginations of what could be.

Connected to a goal of crafting a representational text that illumined and transcended what happened in the workshops, my inner impulse to share with them a representation of Black femininity that was honest, dynamic, and imperfect were girls' experience of the workshop as transformative and a place where they could come to know they are not alone in the Black girl identity struggle. Christa says, "I guess you could say in that moment, I was Christa. Whoever she is. In that space writing and moving I felt connected. I could just be and that was new for me. I realized I'm not the only one that feels the way I do." Vital to Christa's words is the feeling of finding a space where a Black girl can just be. Without being on trial, without feeling bad for who she is or how she looks, she can just be and that be more than enough. In summary, these workshops forced me to consider the desired relationships I wished to have with Blackgirls. In addition it brought to the table responsibilities I assume as a self-identified Black girl who is ascribed and wears the marker of Black woman. For the girls, it forged a space where they could display through dance, movement, writing, and dialogue their perspectives and understanding of Black girlhood and Black girl identity.

This chapter completes the illustrations of what emerged from this autoethnographic exploration of Black girlhood using my body and story as an entryway. What follows these chapters comprised of collection, analysis, and possibility is a provisional conclusion comprised

of implications for future research and the pedagogical insights of this study encapsulated in a pedagogy named transgressngroove. Transgressngroove is a feminist embodied approach to teaching that privileges the body and provides possibility for educators, in and outside the classroom, to mobilize vulnerability, activate the body, emphasize and celebrate identity, and promote self-awareness.

Chapter Seven

A Provisional Conclusion

Introduction

As a provisional conclusion, marking the closure of this initial inquiry into Black girlhood realities, specifically those about the body, culture, and education, this chapter reflects upon the process, summarizes key insights and developments, and discusses next directions regarding my work on Black girlhood. This chapter first shares acumens of this project about my identities as a Black girl advocate and scholar-artist; trends silence, stereotyping, and shame in Black girlhood and Blackgirls; and the efficacy and potential of the arts based process in capturing alternative renderings of the Black female body and Black girlhood. Next I describe novel feminist praxis, transgressngroove, which emanates out of Black female experience and centers Black female ways of knowing. In this section I briefly describe its major components, grooves, practices and orientations. Also, I offer a more comprehensive display of the orientations. The orientations, grooves, and practices emerged as techniques and tools for disrupting the previously mentioned trends of silence and shame in Black girlhood, particularly. However, taken together, transgressngroove as a feminist praxis is theory and practice that forges an intentional relationship between knowledge, the body, self and cultural interrogation, self-awareness, and education. The last part of this chapter charts future directions of this work. Here, I disclose articulations by project participants concerning what this work [auto/ethnography] does and the utility of this scholarship, especially the artistic workshops used for data collection, which will drive my next research project, hoarded silences in Black girlhood.

What I Know (and Have Come to Know)

Dominant girls' studies paradigms leave a host of questions unanswered, including and extending beyond, what narratives of girlhood value who Blackgirls are and who they become as women? What spaces dedicated to girls not only include Blackgirls but, more

to the point, do not harm their sense of self and chosen communal affiliations? In what ways do girls marginalized by race, gender, class, age, and sexuality experience girlhood?" (Brown, 2009, p. 36).

I am a Black girl advocate

From placing my body up for conversation in three critical community spaces to which I belong and remain accountable—academe, my family, and Blackgirls—I am taking away clarity about the contestation and potential of Black girlhood. This voyage through girlhood has revealed many things. When initially engendering this project, I knew that my body was important, that the arts would help in my journey, and that I needed to center my experience but the *why* of this knowledge was less certain. And yet, at the start of embarking upon this project, being vulnerable was not on the agenda—at least not in the way it is front-and-center now to my work. In the beginning I only took into consideration vulnerability in terms of the risky nature of qualitative research and the potential disregard my work might receive in academe when purporting to base my scholarship on Black females.

First, I knew that insider research or auto/ethnography, work where you are also a member of that population is sometimes frowned upon and deemed void of rigor within higher education and specifically within the paradigms of research. I, therefore, entered aware that in taking a more intimate approach to this research—where invasiveness without relation was the goal, where I wanted them to know me, where the line of questioning was not unidirectional, where I believed they had something to tell me and it might come out in what they did not say or how they moved—I was running the risk of my work's validity and credibility questioned. Even still, something inside said I needed to go in that direction anyway.

I intended to use this organic moment as an opportunity to look in depth into dynamics of Black girlhood. While I was open and expectant that the journey would be transformative, I did not bargain for it radically and so immediately shifting how I saw my family, my approach to working with girls, and myself. In the beginning, I presumed I would be required to question and revisit, critique, and make sense of my previous perceptions of Blackgirls and my experiences as a Black girl. Originally, I indicted society, formal schooling spaces, and people who, upon reflection, I allowed to confine my Black girl identity to the walls of their imagination. I blamed them for enmity and wounds I carried. Then, I made no room for ownership of how I, directly or indirectly, allowed such happenings to occur. In other words, I undermined my agency as well as myself. My experience of Black girlhood was saturated with silences, being stereotyped, and feeling shamed. In doing this project, I uncovered the way these experiences shaped my personhood and how some of their remnants crept into all aspects of my life, especially how I related to other Black females. Overtime, these same critical reflections included a coming to terms with internalized pathological views about Blackgirls, thinking about my being from a deficit position, handing my body over to others, and a limited perspective of the choices, despite my life's circumstances, I had. This shift in perspective facilitated an expansive understanding of my evolving identity as well as the power of a body-centered arts based public practice.

In doing this project I was alerted to the multiple layers of vulnerability and that it is my calling. I have become aware that I know a lot about vulnerability, about being placed on a line I did not volunteer to be on, and feeling obligated to stay on the line anyway. Likewise I know about the power of vulnerability as a tool for creating spaces where identity, social injustices can be explored. In the same vein, I am aware and am becoming better at creating a process for transmuting wounds into vision. Related, this work confirms that to step to us (Black females)

and call myself a researcher of our population, the area of Black girlhood is pertinent. And to look at Black girlhood in a way that is not shaming, denigrating puts me in a position to be an advocate. Moreover, that being a Black girl advocate means I must model vulnerability even if they, other Black females, refused to come near it.

Blackgirls and Black girlhood are sites of possibility

Three key issues and three importance practices revealed themselves. The recurring issues of silence, stereotyping, and shame were ubiquitous in all of the workshops as well as during my time of critical self-reflexivity when I created my personal archive. Many times they worked in tandem, encouraging and enlarging the other. When it came to our personal narratives, I cannot recall a time when they were not collaborating with or at least quietly conceding to each other. In some cases, like when the girls found a common stereotype, recalling the memory prompted others to crack the silence (Ulysee, 2003) around being stereotyped and/or shame attached to a stereotype others held about them.

The practices of imagining (Greene, 1995; Weems, 2003), voice-instigation, and body activation, however, worked and were in many ways successful in creating a space where we, as people in academe, as Blackgirls, as family members, as women, as people desiring to be better, could indulge in alternative ways of being. These served as tools to help me communicate my experiential on the topics of Black girlhood and my educational process as a Black girl. Furthermore, they facilitated a space where workshop attendees could, if so compelled, be vulnerable. In the case of these three practices, they also worked hand-in-hand building off of, encouraging, and supporting the other. The enactment of this experimental project helped me to identify trends in Black girl experience as well as interventions and potential preventers of these trends.

However, the most important is that the challenge and possibility then of Black girlhood and Black Girlhood Studies are to produce work on behalf of and work with Blackgirls that claim, embody, and contribute to the infinite and conflicting representations of Blackgirls. Likewise, displayed in chapters four through six in particular and this project in general is the need of specificity, to create with Blackgirls from what they/we bring into education spaces. Also, that in working with Blackgirls and exploring Black girlhood it is necessary to be mindful of the multifarious reality of Black girl experience while also creating and working from the tools and assets presented by the particular girls present.

Arts and bodies make for useful education tools

By deploying the arts, especially poetry, performance, and dance to capture the lived realities of being a Black girl within the context of the United States, we (as Black females) got to use our bodies to convey our experiences. In doing so, they/we give permission to the body to tell, be, and create knowledge. From a larger cultural standpoint, this approach to exploring Black girlhood subverted the structural undermining and mistreatment of Black female bodies while recognizing actual narratives that affirm the devaluing of Black female bodies particularly and the collective Black female body generally.

Going beyond what the project accomplished from a scholarship standpoint, for project participants the use of arts and the centering of the body, chiefly the utilization of multiple modes, enhanced relatability, authenticity, and made room for participants to try new things. This is demonstrated in the statements below from different participants across the various workshops:

Christa (workshop with Blackgirls): [I liked most] Writing how I felt and being open and then not worrying about people having to look at me funny because of what I was sayin'.

Deena (family workshop): It was good. It was good. It gave you a chance to open up and to think about things you probably haven't even thought about cha self.

Drea (workshop at Colgate University): Yes! Like going back to your dance, when you took us into that space, it was like literally seeing myself through a dance through you. I saw every struggle that you had and yet I saw every struggle I had. I saw your progression, even from the floor on up....Being told, you know, to get it together, to be more prim and proper and saying that my vernacular my dialect would always be more than that of the other. So yea. You took me through many spaces and definitely back to many places just the same way.

Deborah (workshop with Blackgirls): Um, I liked the part when we had to express ourselves in dance because I usually don't do that

Danielle (family workshop): Well, I just seen another side of myself. Never been the type to say what's really on my mind.

Pasta (workshop with Blackgirls): [What I liked about the workshop] Everything. Like, I like writing and putting my emotions out there and I love expressing myself. Even though no one could hear or understand or just let it out into the wind and let it catch, or let the wind catch it.

Jaime (workshop at Colgate University): Definitely when you were talking about, when you were reading your story about Mr. Dodd I was [reflecting], and how your own self worth and how you thought about yourself as a student and later as an academic, what his effect was on you, definitely brought up some memories for me about school and the way I was taught to act in school and be in school and what I was taught was um, be a good student or not...Um and not really ever being asked what it was that I was interested in or supported in figuring that out.

The former statements not only speak to what they each thought about the workshop but also my ability to connect with and be vulnerable before others. In reference to specifically using this style to examine Black girlhood, it again depended on the context, the body up for scrutiny, and the people involved in the inquiry.

For example, when conducting the workshop at my alma mater, I was one of three visually identifiable Black females. Furthermore, since it was conducted in a formal academic presentation venue where I was the presenter, it was mostly my body and my story on display. There, my original performance focused on my body's relationship with education and in

particular interactions with white teachers and afforded me to examine what can be gained from sharing such intimate information through the arts with other academicians, especially those in the fields of Education and Gender Studies. These observers focused their attention on my scholarship and what it was contributing to their respective fields. In contrast, in the other workshops, my original performances invited participants to ask questions, tell their stories, and reveal their frustrations and critiques of Black girlhood, while unveiling how I saw/see myself and how others understand and relate to me. Thereby, in centering the body and employing an arts based process, we (as educators and learners) are awakened to additional questions about the self, culture, and others that deserve probing. Next, is an overview of a budding praxis, transgressngroove, which was birthed from the employment of this study and the utilization of auto/ethnography. In this next section I discuss the ingredients that went into transgressngroove; describe its major components—essential elements and orientations; and how to represent the fruits that grow from an enactment of it.

Transgressngroove: Black Girl Praxis

Emanating out of the process of utilizing my body as an entryway into an exploration of Black girlhood is the developing feminist praxis, transgressngroove. Transgression or transgressn (as spelled here) is about rejecting, crossing, and eradicating boundaries. While enacting an auto/ethnography drawing upon the arts to capture complexities of being a Black girl and Black girlhood, given its birth context, transgressngroove is Black girl praxis. Its utility, however, should not be restricted to Blackgirls. Instead, recognizing it as such pays homage to the backs on which it stands and the (Black and female) bodies and sensibilities that both cultivated it and deserve credit. This praxis centers (Black female) bodies and troubles boundaries; as praxis that privileges the body, transgressngroove provides possibility for people to mobilize vulnerability,

identity, and self-awareness to activate the body. Although enlivening the body is a fruitful endeavor to undergo, this praxis is particularly of use to teachers and other educators in educational spaces. In fact, transgressngroove as praxis in education is an intentional intervention that challenges the Cartesian mind/body duality and places the body at the fore of education and experience.

To transgress one must undercut and push on boundaries. These boundaries can be imposed directly or indirectly on them or someone else. Either way, then, to transgressngroove requires a break away routine, normative views and ways of doing things, and a willingness to groove or improvise. Likewise, it requires action and signifies a will to be deviant in the name of social justice as well as building, storing, and imagining relationships anew. In this particular project the borders it aims to destabilize and chip away at are those between and across the categories and social locations of girl/woman, artist/scholar, and researcher/researched. Connected, to groove within the transgressn is to simultaneously identify the boundaries, embrace and question them, while imagining and celebrating the process of transformation. Transgressngroove is theory and practice and has key components I termed grooves, orientations, and practices along with form of re-presenting called a transgressn text. As a manifestation of an organic process exploring Black girlhood, the discursive and material realities of it, transgressngroove embodies the knowledge and lessons learned from enacting this study. Illustrating the synergy between theory and practice of this praxis, what follows is an overview of this praxis, including what it accounts for and brief descriptions of its components.

Components of transgressngroove

When it comes to attending to the body, especially the Black female body, it is pertinent that it be addressed with care, thoughtfulness, and attention to sensation. Attention to the body,

as a universal concept, and bodies, in particular, must consider it a site of culture and knowledge production. Far too long and too often, this Black (female) body, its collectivity and individual realities, have faced undue scrutiny and violence. This is a truth felt by different types of bodies. However, I am speaking specifically to the Black female body, which is fraught with mythic pathology, unjust policing, and misreading (see Beale, 2003; Boylorn, 2013c, 2014; Collins, 2000; Davis, 1983; Fogg-Davis, 2006; Harris Perry, 2011; hooks, 1981; Jordan, 1980; Roberts, 1997; Walker, 1983; White, 2001).

Acknowledging this truism in the lives of Black females, including my own, allocated intentional space to explore what the Black female body endures, knows, and has to say about the experiences. Equally, room existed to name what we know through our bodies and from these processes; I came to see the possibility of/in our bodies. As previously mentioned in chapter three, *Autoethnography as Methodology*, Black feminist philosopher Katherine McKittrick (2006) articulates the Black female body, specifically the wounds, struggles, and history it carries can serve as entry into imagining new ways of living and being in a Black female body as well as a means of healing. She discussed the act of revisiting the body (the site she calls it) as the key to “sight” or what I see as a re-visioning project. In essence, she dared Black females to return to our hurts, pains, we endured as individuals as well as a collective to re-cast new visions for being Black and female. Transgressngroove organically emerged as a response to her call to re-vision, as it positions Black female, girl and women’s, bodies as site of knowledge production surrounding body knowledge and particularly for enlivening self-awareness and embodiment. To demonstrate the body-centered nature and fluid nature of transgressngroove, I offer the poem “Transgressngroove With Me” its embedded process as well as what this praxis involves.

“Transgressngroove ”

Step inside/
papers,
poems,
memories,
loves,
losses,
will guide you/
look around, Release/
Dance their meaning/
listen to the quiet
In it, you’ll find your rhythm/
spirit some call it,
jazz some named it,
a calling some say/
Til you can hear it
recognize it, Sway
sway anyway
Get inside of you/
Dance your way in to,
papers,
poems,
memories,
loves,
losses,
will help share you/
Use them, to show/
listen to the bodies/
listen to the context/
In them, you’ll receive direction/
Step deep inside/
Be, move, dance, feel
Step outside/
Be honest, critique, feel, write
Step inside/
Feel, move, expose, create dialogue
Step out/
Re-present, represent feeling, self...
In-on-off paper

Illustrated in the poem above is the back-and-forth shifting and sharing of self. Likewise it displays the centrality of the body and the pertinence of sensation or embodiment to transgressngroove. Finally, the above poem also identifies context and the tools of movement

and dialogue. What follows is an articulation of the provisional essential practices of this praxis—body-activation, voice-instigation, and imagining.

body-activation. More than being physically present, there is a demand to activate the body. This activation happens through movement. This moving can be dance but does not have to be. And because the body is all encompassing of the entire self, body activation is about connecting the mental, physical, and spiritual. It is about stirring up the tactile aspects of the body as well as the cerebral. Initially, this element had no name and was present in my research process because as a dancer, I loved to move. Likewise, as a teacher I am also in tune with communicating through the body. Engaging in this process, those bearing witness to the experience began to comment on the utility of using movement. Danielle states, “It prolly wouldn’t have had that much of an affect on me if I didn’t see your emotions, like as you were moving.” Similarly, in speaking with a former professor, Dr. Johnston, who attended the Brown Bag workshop at Colgate University, she says:

And then I was thinking um, a lot about how the mind and body are connected. And I remember being very um, I think moved is one word to describe it and pressed disturbed, maybe—that might be strong. But when you started to scratch your skin. Um, and you started that, if I recall in the performance before you actually explained what you were doing...It made me think about um, pain and not only about pain that gets inflicted upon us but also that we inflict upon ourselves.

Illustrated in both statements is the value of having seen my physical body work through and revisit my experience. Their ability to see my body in motion added a complex dynamic and enhanced their sensitization to what I was sharing. With transgressngroove, not only is the body centered in this praxis but also, the body must be put in conversation with other bodies.

voice-instigation. Throughout this project the element of voice continually inserted itself. First it introduced itself during my archival creation that documented my girlhood. Sometimes it surfaced in relationship to power and constructing the workshops in a way that made more room for participants' voices. Other times it surfaced in subtle ways when stories were recounted that inferred their voices were silenced or undervalued. And other times voice was discussed as a multimodal tool that we accessed in other ways beyond actually talked with our moves like using movement, writing poetry, and body language. The significance of voice, and in particular its utility for self-awareness and body-activation, became clearing while reading about the practice of "coming to voice" created by Theatrical Jazz Aesthetic practitioner Sharon Bridgforth. She framed the concept instruction is used to help women engaging in this aesthetic to identify and refine their creative and artist voice (Jones, Moore, & Bridgforth, 2010).

Concurrently, voice-instigation then, is also the practice that creates distinction as well as connection. As a praxis with objectives of stirring our sense of self that we might live more in our bodies, be more self-aware, and willing to see ourselves in others. Voice-instigation permits heterogeneity along with communing of disparate truths as well as similar and yet dissimilar bodies. Another part of voice-instigation is in relation to the re-presentation of fruits when engendering transgressngroove. In privileging the body, the genre of self-expression should align with the bodies engaged as well as the context in which trasnsgressngroove is orchestrated.

For example, if this praxis is implemented in a college classroom than the praxis of course centers the body and assignments in the course have intentional elements of self and identity exploration, self in culture, and using the arts to hone and clarify voice. Equally, an objective of the class would be to enliven body awareness in order that students become more aware of how their bodies are read in different spaces as well as how they read different bodies.

Some possible re-presentations of their experience with the praxis may be a performed monologue; a research paper around a particular topic from an autoethnographic standpoint; and a multimedia project documenting their awareness around the body to name a few. I use this particular example as I see this praxis as particularly useful to challenge body mind split in education particularly. However, I contend transgressngroove as useful to spaces and people on an educational pursuit involving social justice, self-awareness, and using the body to prompt the journey.

imagining. The intentional usage of arts based instruction coupled with the need for enlivened bodies in transgressngroove, has the goal of maximizing imagining. Imagining in this sense refers to fluid movement between what is and the possibilities of what could be (Brown, 2013; Jones, 2005; Greene, 1995; Weems, 2003). It is not, however, about blinding oneself to the realities of society, self, and other topics that need social redress. Further, imagining is operationalized at all times. Transgressngroove and students alike are asked to consider the possibilities for their identities, their relationships with others, society, and themselves. Accordingly, imagining may happen through reflection (alone or in communion), everyday living habits, and/or the illustration of what was gained when this praxis was orchestrated. Imagining here is about expanding the range of possibility we see for our daily living, education (in the formalized schooling and more informal sense), as well as society.

The preceding concepts are critical to the praxis transgressngroove. Together they stimulate a process that is multilayered, impassioned, and intuitive. Also, these practices serve as the required ingredients to the displaying, via text, performance, or another education relevant format, of what manifests each time this practice is executed. Similar to other art forms that draw on the body and performance (Jones, 1997, 2002; Jones, Moore, & Bridgforth, 2010; Spry, 2011)

transgressngroove places emphasis on process. Simultaneously, there is an expectation that something is birthed from its enactment. Yet its form and structure is informed by and goes back to the reasons transgressngroove was orchestrated as well as what facilitators, students, and observers wish to do with what is taken away from the experience. With an understanding of transgressngroove's fundamental practices, I now describe the component of orientations that are used to acclimate those participating to the mindsets guiding this practice.

Orientations

Guiding attitudes, or orientations, emerge from the knowledge gained from this project in conjunction with ways of knowing cultivated in me by black feminists and black female affirming spaces. They stimulate the body, help it groove, and situate learning, teaching, and knowing through the body as non-negotiable when doing feminist justice healing work. Sara Ahmed (2006) asserts, "to be orientated is also to be turned toward certain objects, those that help us to find our way" (p. 1). To be oriented in this project is to turn to the body to cultivate measures that are specific to the context and to the bodies and persons in that context. Below are the five current orientations of transgressngroove. Resembling my commitment to arts, which includes music and poetry, each orientation description contains a song (via link), at least two quotes from black feminists and/or about black girl and black woman affirming spaces, an explanation of the orientation, and closes with an excerpt from Audre Lorde's *women on trains* poem. The music introduces the orientation. While, as a metaphor for the movement on a train—back and forth, shaky, abrupt stops, simultaneous shuffling and shaking, etc., "Women on trains" serves as a refrain and poetic analysis at the end of each orientation. Lorde's poem invites us into the adversities, misunderstandings but overall beauty of orienting or re-orienting of self—invigorating possibility.

orientation 1: Commit to doing dirty work.

Click the link:

<http://youtu.be/KadCGuz2aN0>

Listen and then read

“Healing takes place within us as we speak the truth of our lives”
(hooks, 2005, p. 11)

“The significance of Black girlhood celebration is building on what we have learned as Blackgirls and Black women and then liberating ourselves from it”
(Brown, 2009, p. 22)

Say, “yes” to the process, with the understanding that it will be full of uncertainties, unknowns, and likely difficult moments. Say, “yes” with the goals of deeper understanding, healing, and self-awareness. Recognize the vulnerability and risks involved and get naked anyway. Strip down until there is nothing to hide you from yourself. Ask questions. Locate scars. Reflect on injuries and their remnants. Connect scars. Recognize that this practice is about a commitment to self-improvement, self-actualization because, “those of us committed to feminist movement, to Black liberation, need to work at self-actualization” (hooks, 1993, p.5). To take interest in addressing social ills, we must first take stake in ourselves, our growth, our healing. Say, “yes” to moving forward when the direction is not yet clear. Critically reflect. Do not self-debilitate. Move. Groove. Transgress. Embrace the journey.

“Women on Trains” *excerpt*

~Audre Lorde

Leaving the known for another city
the club-car smells of old velvet
rails whisper relief mantras
steel upon steel
every fourth thud breaks the hum
“stand and fight,” I said
leaving my words for ransom
“your only way out.”

orientation 2: In the moment, breathe. be.

Click the link:

<http://youtu.be/pBsU7QH7Gjw>

Listen and read as you see fit

“Be present. To do this work, a woman has to show up, to bring her full self, to feel exactly what she is feeling right now. This single task is the most difficult”
(Jones, 2010, p.6)

“We accepted the invitation to be who we’ve forgotten we could be. The way we danced was anything but static and isolated—two things very much oppositional to being liberated Blackgirls and women.
(Brown, 2009, p. 92)

Take a deep breath in and release. Breathe in. Release. Look around and take in the surroundings. Make connections with the environment, the people. Create, “something different and something more from the meeting of bodies in their contexts” (Madison, 2006, p. 320) from working from what exists and shows up in the space. Acknowledge visceral reactions, thoughts, and feelings. Pay attention to your breathing. Nervous? Anxious? Excited? Uncertain? Frustrated? Some combination of emotions? Use the context and the body to be present to the moment. When reflecting alone, do what you are moved to do. Dance a lil’ or a lot. Talk outloud. Write in quiet. When in public, do the same. Identify feelings, own and sit with them. Move them out. Write them out. Talk them out. Most importantly, let them out.

“Women on Trains” *excerpt*
Women on trains have a chance
to unweave their tangles

orientation 3: Share yourself. undress in public.

Click the link:

<http://youtu.be/qn2Xg2gza-Y>

Listen and read as you see fit

“Progressive, holistic education, “engaged pedagogy” is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization”
(hooks, 1994, p.15)

“SOLHOT as a cultural space continues the production of the ever-produced narrative of Black girlhood featuring Black women and girls coming together, contradicting each other, resisting, creating new ways of being, and falling apart”
(Brown, 2009, p. 25)

Stand in the mirror. Undress. Identify wounds and memories that shape beliefs about the self, the world, and others. Touch the scars. Feel their texture and remember. Once naked in your own company, strip down before others. Examine and appreciate your body, your self, while they watch. Feel. Come to know self, again with others watching and witnessing. Share stories of race, family, mistakes, stories that shape your identity. Share what it feels like to be you, and appreciate her. Offer images, movements, and poems of the journey and invite those present to participate. Whether or not those witnessing join in, disclose and be open to its power.

“Women on Trains” *excerpt*
Between new lumber and the maples
I rehear your question

orientation 4: Work from the body.

Click the link:
http://youtu.be/tjd_yUWw0QQ
Listen and read as you see fit

“So much of how we remember is embodied: the scent of home; of fresh baked bread...But violence can also be embodied, that violation of sex and spirit, which is why bodywork is healing work is justice work”
(Alexander, 2005, p. 367).

“Ultimately, Urban Bush Women moves toward putting the Black female body back together, healing the old wounds and creating more complete, positive images of Black women” (George-Graves, 2010, p.37)

How can I center my body? How do I bring the Black female body into view? What does the body need to reveal and say? These are central questions to this work and to answer them the body must be centered and “it is on the body that treatments, remedies, and beliefs about normality are instilled...The body is a thing to divide and conquer” (George-Graves, 2010, p.

39). So work to hold it together. Use the body to make sense of context. Let the body direct the next move in the dance. Based on what the body is saying and how it is feeling, *improvise*. The body is the self. Be patient with it and let the movement be fluid. Accentuate the body. Privilege the body. Let it move in ways forgotten. Let the body teach. Permit the body to learn. Shift.

“Women on Trains” *excerpt*
I counseled you unwisely my sister
to be who I am no longer

orientation 5: Conjure and activate.

Click the link:
<http://youtu.be/6amnrbrlkyE>
Listen and read as you see fit

It is at these crossroads of subjectivity and collectivity, Sacred knowing and power, memory, and body that we sojourn so as to examine their pedagogic content to see how they might instruct us in the complicated undertaking of Divine self-invention” (Alexander, 2005, pp. 299-300).

“An aim of the jazz aesthetic is for the courageous choices of the artist to evolve into everyday habitual acts of freedom...the transformations they experience in tAP¹⁹ inevitably make their way to the larger world as the women practice, at every turn, the power they have learned”
(Jones, 2010, p. 9)

Stir up the pot. Open your mouth and call upon those who came before, those who help you stand 10 feet tall (Badu, 2011). Shout their names and dance a celebration. When alone, create an altar a space for them to rest and watch you. Pray to them. Call to them. Dance for them. Gyrate for them. Call to them in your movement until they are compelled to join you. When sharing with others, call to those who firm up your stance and invoke their energy into the space. Make it clear that there is more to this room, this creation space, this context, than what we can see. Be okay with being, whatever that means, so others feel obliged, comfortable, and/or

¹⁹Founded in 2002, tAP or The Austin Project is a collaborative project started by TJA practitioner and professor Dr. Omi Osun Joni Jones dedicated to using art, mostly writing for social change. Comprised of women of various ages, backgrounds, sexualities, and race—though most are women of color—tAP brings these women together to create, unpack themselves, and build themselves again. See Jones, Moore, and Bridgforth, 2010.

eager to do the same. Stir up the pot together. Observe what is brewing. Throw a spice in the pot to add to the brew. Stir up the pot. Adorn your body in the brew. Take some with you.

Everywhere you go stir it. Dance it. Share it. Wherever you go.

“Women on Trains” *excerpt*
to acknowledge
both you and I
are free to go

Birthed from a process in which my Black female body, Black feminist sensibilities, and the arts were centered this praxis is feminist, embodied approach to educating that privileges the body. As an alternative approach educational approach, in and beyond education-identified spaces, it mobilizes vulnerability, emphasizes and celebrates identity, and promotes self-awareness to awaken possibility. Gloria Anzaldua (2000) demands, “Throw away abstraction and the academic learning, the rules, the map and compass. Feel my way without blinders. To touch more people, the personal realities and the social must be evoked—not through rhetoric but through blood, pus, and sweat” (p. 34). She, like other feminists of color who consciously work from their subjectivities (Boylorn, 2013a; Brown, 2013; Pratt, 2003, 1984; hooks, 1990; Lorde, 1984; McClaurin, 2001; McKittrick, 2006) maintain that our best work, as women especially, is embodied work.

Above is an illustration of the working essential practices and orientations that ground transgressngroove. All of these components draw from Black feminist sensibilities of working from and utilizing the body coupled with the specific knowledge communicated by the Black females in this study. The preceding discussion of the components of transgressngroove articulates know how I came, enter, and require others to work within this praxis. Within this verbalization is the level of bodily and personal commitment needed, along with who and what feminist exercises shape my practice. Taken into account the roots, components, and aims of

transgressngroove into account, another objective it has is to engender creations and these are called transgressn text.

A transgressn text is a fruit or manifestation that is cultivated by a transgressngroove process. The crafting of a transgressn text is fluid, context and aim specific, and a sacred venture. It is fluid because there is no linear or chronological order. It is not a direct transcript of what happened during the process. Instead transgressn texts are arts-infused pieces that synthesize what happened and/or data, analysis of the process, and the possibility that emerges from the overall journey. The creation of a transgress text is context and aim specific because its structure and form(s) it takes depends on the context, in which this praxis was facilitated as well as the desired aims of its enactment.

Therefore it can be a written text, performance, poem, recording, multi-media project, dance, and/or a revised course syllabus. In other words, the manifested form of this text is inextricably linked to the context in which this praxis is enacted, voicing elements, what is to be presented, i.e., a dissertation, and for what purpose. What is required in this writing up and representing within this praxis is that like the process of deploying transgressngroove, what is birthed must embody the essential elements—body activation, voicing, and imagining. To close, I leave you with an original poem “Cultivating a Measure,” which salutes and pay deference to those Black girl and women articways of knowing that come to make transgressngroove. It embodies the actions, people, practices, and other measures privileged in transgressngroove in general and particularly in this project.

“Cultivating a Measure”
Body knowledge,
Listen with your whole self,
Be present,
Own your feelings,
Feel everything,

Ingredients of this dance/
Uncertainty is part of the process/
Music, listen to it,
Dance and celebrate,
Improvise,
Listen to what your body tells you
Be vulnerable,
Tools for this dance/
To Enter build and exit with intention/
Pasta
Deborah
Christa
Deena
Pillipi
Unique
Nicole
Hip-Hop
Jazz
House
Village of Warrior Women
Ruth Nicole brown
bell hooks
Katherine Mckittrick
SOLHOT²⁰
Audre Lorde
Omi Osun Joni Jones
Sharon Bridgforth
Urban Bush Women²¹

²⁰Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT) <http://solhot.weebly.com/> takes on various forms and operates as noun, verb, and adjective. As a pedagogical intervention to conventional ways of knowing and learning about youth, SOLHOT gives me new language, tools, and entry points into girlhood work. It demanded that I realize my life needed saving and that a Black girl celebratory space could help all Black females, even the ones who presumed ourselves grown and ready to “save others.” SOLHOT affirms my auto/ethnographic work and takes to task why specificity, vulnerability, and self-work are necessary in education for social justice as well as Black girl work. SOLHOT indites educators, parents, and other adults who forget girlhood (and boyhood) and teaches us to be present and move from our body. From a scholarly perspective, SOLHOT is a hip-hop feminist practice and “space for Blackgirls organized by Black women, girls, and those who love and care for Blackgirls. In U.S. society, there is rarely the space or opportunity to be a Black girl and celebrate Black girlhood in all of its complexity. SOLHOT provides such an opportunity” (Brown, 2009, p. 63). Therefore SOLHOT is a place of possibility for crafting, celebrating, and maintaining alternative scripts for Blackgirls and Black girlhood.

²¹URBAN BUSH WOMEN (UBW) <http://www.urbanbushwomen.org/> was introduced to me during my third year in my doctoral program when I had just discovered that dance was a major part of my academic voice. My relationship with UBW began through their Summer Leadership Institute (SLI), a 10-day institute dedicated to bringing together artists, community activists, and students invested in arts for social change. This institute took place at Tulane University in New Orleans, LA, and here I came to understand

Cynthia Oliver
Guide this dance/
You dance with me/
Taught me to act,
When I yearn for more,
Than what I am given, act
From vision, not sight/
Lorde,
Cover, watch over, and adorn me,
in a passion, an investment, a yearning to speak,
for my health
for the women who did not or grew weary of speaking
Ntozake Shange
Jacqui Alexander
Bless this spiritual work
This body work, is spiritual work
This self-loving work is justice is spiritual work
And if I don't know nothing else
I know
This journey
This seeking
T'is road I am on
is about intention
Openness and alignment

Where I am (and Am Going)

This project is a talking back (hooks, 1990) to the deficit and scant literature that position Blackgirls and/or Black girl specific realities as delinquent, doomed (Lei, 2003; Morris, 2007), invisible (Henry, 1998; Horvat & Anotnio, 1999; Rollock, 2007), and dispensable (Fordham, 1993; Grant, 1994). While these studies about Blackgirls, especially those related to education

the interwoven relationship between community, performance, social justice, and Black females. Here I learned fundamentals of using the body to tell a story, how to build anti-racist and social justice work into artistic expression, and how to enter-build-and exit communities with meaning. Founded by Jawolle Willa Jo Zollar, as a means to tell the untold stories of women across the globe, UBW has expanded its dancing wings to the SLI institute as well as working with organizations, universities, and programs passionate about arts for social change and social justice interventions. As a dance company with its roots and homebase in Brooklyn, NY, UBW is more than a dance company, it is an ensemble of people mostly women of color committed to telling and re-telling silenced, untold, and important stories of underrepresented people throughout the world.

frame her/us as a problem, barrier, and/or site of concern, there is obviously more to the materiality of Black girlhood and being a Black girl. Breaking out of homogeneity and flattened narratives, often deployed in studies about Blackgirls, the above renderings of Black girlhood take direction from Black Girlhood Studies and articulate a layered and robust depiction of Blackgirls' material realities and demonstrate how readings, historically and culturally, are inscribed onto the Black female body and influence our livelihoods.

As a Black girl advocate who locates herself as a Black Girlhood Studies scholar, this project humanizes Blackgirls and brings to light the interplay of culture and the body in our everyday living and educational experiences. Our voices and narratives subvert and complicate traditional renderings of us as pathological and negative. Moreover these one-dimensional and dichotomous representations are contested and replaced with alternative Black girl scripts created on their/our terms. This voyage through Black girlhood has revealed many things. One vital revelation is that the challenge and imagining power of Black girlhood and Black Girlhood Studies are to uncover and embrace inconvenient truths and then paint infinite and disparate representations of Blackgirls that recognize, critique, and transgress material truths and realities of Black girlhood. As theatrical jazz aesthetic practitioner Omi Osun Joni Jones (1997) reminds about the work of performance specifically and arts based practices generally, "performance does not have the measurable closure and definitive answers that are most easily accessed in the academy...The performance stops but does not end. This undermines the academy's commitment to answers and conclusions, and declares the significance of process and exploration" (p. 64). Thus, this is not an ending but a provisional pause of this arts-based practice.

During each of the workshops enacted, I asked participants for whom they thought my

work, both its design and goal, would be of most benefit. More specifically, I wanted to know what value, if any, those participating in my project saw in connection to their own lives and/or their work. Below are some of the responses:

Danielle (Family workshop): Well yea I think it's useful. I think it's more useful to the females that think that they don't have a voice and if they're afraid to talk, maybe showing how they feel or expressing their feelings in a different way such as movement.

Christa (Baltimore workshop with Blackgirls): When can we do this again?

Sunshine (Family workshop): So I think like now, it's more for the Black or African American, whatever term you wanna put on the color of our skin, because at this point it's not to say that it doesn't and won't help everybody but, right now we are the most challenged group of people right now that in my mind needs the most help and nobody's helping us unless we help ourselves. Because we [Black people] don't know how to channel so many things. We don't know how to release them other than through violence or shutting down. Nobody's taught us any other way.

Unique (Baltimore workshop with Blackgirls): Um, I liked getting to express myself in a different way other than just talking cuz, I feel like when you just talk all the time people don't always get it. And I also like how, like I don't know, it just seemed comfortable. It was comfortable. I didn't really feel that weird doing it.

Jaime (Colgate University workshop): Um, well I'm definitely gonna do the exercise you did with us, um about the free-writing for a minute and then picking out those words. I think it's extremely useful to bring people into a room a space and get them thinking about what they're doing...usually I use this kind of work when a student already does it. So we have a lot of students that do, that write poetry or and um, do a number of other things. So usually we put them in the front and we say okay you do this so keep doing it and you know, we'll learn from you and watch you and experience this with you. But I think what I will do now is ask that all my students participate in this in some way and not have it be something that you feel like you have to be good at to do...It connects you to the work that you do in a way that I can see myself connected to work that I do. Um, that I don't usually talk about or is not something I ever bring u, you know that I have a stake in this personally ...It's different! Most of us don't ever start a conversation talking about ourselves. We're always talking about things as if we're unaffected by them and they're just observations and so I think that's another way that artistic expression changes things in how the information comes out.

Pasta (Buffalo workshop with Blackgirls): I learned how to put my emotions into a piece of paper since I'd never done it

Deena (Family workshop): Well groups of women because every woman dun been through somethin' and didn't know how to express it and held it in.

Illustrated in the preceding claims are the connections workshop attendees saw between

marginalization, identity, the arts, and healing. Embedded within these articulations are personal insights into the value of this work.

While healing was not explicitly stated as an accomplishment of this project, in particular the workshops, each of the above iterations by individuals, all female, who attended one of the workshops; it is clear that they saw potential in the process. Embedded within their articulations is the power of the arts in highlighting issues that place “othered” persons’ bodies on the line. Alongside the aforementioned power of the arts is its ability to serve as a tool of resistance, self-awareness, and healing.

Taking heed of the wisdom and experiential knowledge of participants within the study, the next directions for my scholarship is honing and elucidating the dimensions to the praxis transgressngroove. The refinement process will be informed and accompanied by additional workshops with Blackgirls and women, including continued work with my family. Building on the trends of silence and shame that surfaced within this study, my next project will explore hoarded silences of Black girlhood. These silences are showcased, mentioned, and hinted at in Black Girlhood Studies literature and dissertation data. Some of the particular silences involve mental and physical abuse, sexual exploration and desire, and personal longings. The goal of this next venture is to admit the silences, disclose the stories grounding them, talk back to them, and transmute them into sites, or opportunities, for re-creation of self, culture, and community.

Where I am/am going is to continue seeing, being seen, hearing, being heard, celebrating, being celebrated, and affirming Blackgirls. Agreeing with Jones (1997) that there is no ending at all to performance, I pause with an original poem, “Black girl theory,” written as synthesis of what was realized, cemented, and echoed about Blackgirls and Black girlhood during this exploration. This poem is an embodiment of Blackgirl living—what we know, experience,

question, and have yet to realize.

“Black Girl Theory”

We Blackgirls got voices
That people, even we, tune out, tone down,
turn quiet/ But we always got something to say,
we Blackgirls/

We Blackgirls carry secrets,
hurts that sit in our bones/
come out in our songs/
and released in our smiles

We Blackgirls, got choices
Minimal, invisible, but present/
Decisions, to be/Or not to Be/
That is the most critical

We Blackgirls carry answers,
solutions to our ailments and yours/
just watch our movement,
and mind our stories

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Appendix A

Parental Consent Letter



University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Department of Educational Policy Organization & Leadership
1310 South Sixth Street, Champaign Illinois 61820

Phone: 217 333 2446 Fax: 217 244 7064

Parental Consent Letter

Transgressngroove: An Exploration of Black Girlhood, The Body, And Education

Insert date

Dear Parent:

My name is Dominique C. Hill and I am doctoral student in the department of Educational Policy and Organizational Leadership at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign. It is under the advisement of Research Principle Investigator, Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown, Assistant Professor in Educational Policy Studies and Organizational Leadership and Gender and Women's Studies, that I am doing my dissertation. My interests are Blackgirls' life experiences, and how students experience school. My dissertation specifically examines the Blackgirls' experiences within school. The purpose of this project is to examine and capture the impact of schools on Blackgirls. To accomplish this purpose, poetry, creative writing, conversation, and dance will be used to show and collect these experiences.

It is my intention that results from this project will be shared in university presentations and published works. In addition, it is my hope this project serves as the beginning of an ongoing relationship between myself and the girls of **insert program name** I am happy to provide you with a summary of the research, if you request it.

Skits created by students as well as pictures and videos taken of your daughter in the creation of the process may later be shared in various formats, including book manuscripts, journal articles, and a doctoral dissertation.

Participation of your child in this research study is entirely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw your child from the study at any time. Removing your child from the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which your child is entitled to as a student. The decision of your child to participate, decline, or withdraw from participation will have no effect on your child's grades or your/their current or future relations with **insert program**. To withdraw your child, simply contact me, Dominique C. Hill using the contact information below.

Should sensitive information come up during participation that requires ethical attention in reporting, that decision will be left to the discretion of **insert program Director and counselor**

name. In conversation with the legal guardian of the participant, it will be suggested that he/she make contact with the counselor, **insert name.**

In this study, no personally identifiable information will be revealed about your child in any publications based on this research with the exception of information appearing in photographs and videos. It should be noted that images in photos might include information that might identify a girl. Pseudonyms (fake names your daughter will choose) will be used to replace real names that might identify a girl. Your child's actions or the things they say may be presented publicly without specific reference to them or with reference only by pseudonym.

Your child will be asked to participate in an interview that will last for 20 minutes. I will ask your child questions about their background and experiences in the workshop and at school. For example, I will ask your child questions like,

Student Background

- How old are you?
- How would you describe yourself

Workshop

- What did you like most about the workshop?
- What is one word to describe how you felt during?
- Can you show me (through a pose) what it feels like to be you?
- What is something you learned from the workshop?

School

- How do you like school?
- Can you think about a time you felt important in school? And tell me about it.
- Can you tell me about a time in school you felt unimportant? And tell me about it

Your child's participation in this project should not involve risks beyond those risks experienced in the everyday lives of young girls. Your child's participation in this study may help others (and themselves) in the future as a result of knowledge gained from the research. Through participation in this project both you and your child are contributing to the knowledge and understanding of Black girlhood as well as how to create spaces and activities that foster self-development, Black girlhood celebration, and speak to the specific needs of Blackgirls.

In the space below, please indicate whether or not you want your child to participate in this project. Ask your child to bring a copy of this completed form to parent information session **insert date.** The second copy is to keep for your records. If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact me either by mail, email, or telephone.

Sincerely,

Dominique C. Hill
hill12@illinois.edu
716-713-2101

Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown
Responsible Principal Investigator
Rnbrown@illinois.edu
217-240-3370

Consent Statement

I have read and understand the description of this research, including information about the risks and benefits of my child's voluntary participation. Please initial next to the chosen response.

I give permission for my child to participate in this research project.

Signature

Date

Print name

I give permission for my child to be video-recorded and photographed during the workshop.

____ Yes

____ No

I give permission for my child to have my photos displayed at conferences, workshops, community events, etc.

____ Yes

____ No

Signature

Date

Print name

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant please contact, Bureau of Educational Research, osurr@education.illinois.edu, (217) 333-3022.



University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Department of Educational Policy Organization & Leadership
1310 South Sixth Street, Champaign Illinois 61820

Phone: 217 333 2446 Fax: 217 244 7064

Assent

Transgressngroove: An Exploration of Black Girlhood, The Body, And Education

insert date

Hello. My name is Dominique C. Hill and I am a student at the University of Illinois. Under the direction of Research Principle Investigator, Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown, Assistant Professor in Educational Policy Studies and Organizational Leadership and Gender and Women's Studies, I am doing a project that looks at how Blackgirls experience life in and outside of school. This project includes watching a performance I created, talking about what you saw, and then creating a small project of your own.

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary, which means that you can decide if you want to do this project. If you want to stop participating in the project at any point, you can stop. The information from this project will be kept secure; meaning all information including photos, interviews, and other information will remain in a locked file cabinet. Only my adviser and myself will be able to look this information. At the end of the session, an interview will take place that will last up to 20-minutes and will be done in a way to remove your name from all information. This project or the information you share during it will not go on your school record and will not count for a grade.

I intend to share what is learned through this project at academic conferences, books, my dissertation and some performances that I create on Blackgirls' life experiences. I can give you a summary of the research completed, if you want it.

What about my privacy and confidentiality?

In this study, no personally identifiable information will be revealed about you in any publications based on this research with the exception of information appearing in photographs and video. If you appear in a photo someone may be able to identify you as a participant in **insert program name**. Your behavior and things you say may be presented but will be used with a pseudonym, a name you may make up instead of your real name to make sure that information you share is not connected to you personally. You will be asked questions about your background, school, and about the performances, the one you saw and the one you started to create. For instance, I will ask you questions like:

Student Background

- How old are you?
- How would you describe yourself

Workshop

- What did you like most about the workshop?
- What is one word to describe how you felt during?
- Can you show me (through a pose) what it feels like to be you?
- What is something you learned from the workshop?

School

- How do you like school?
- Can you think about a time you felt important in school? And tell me about it.
- Can you tell me about a time in school you felt unimportant? And tell me about it

What are the risks and benefits involved in participating in this project?

Your participation in this project should not involve risks beyond those risks experienced the everyday lives of young girls. We hope by participating in this project, you will learn more about being a Black girl and how to create spaces that celebrate and help Blackgirls be more successful in school.

In the space below, please indicate whether or not you want to participate in this project by signing and initially where appropriate. Please bring a copy of this completed form to the informational. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for yourself. If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact me either by mail, email, or telephone.

Sincerely,

Dominique C. Hill
hill12@illinois.edu
716-713-2101

Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown
Responsible Principal Investigator
Rnbrown@illinois.edu
217-240-3370

Assent Statement

I have read and understand the description of this research project. I give my permission to participate in this research project. Please initial next to the chosen response

_____ Yes, I want to participate.

_____ No, I do not want to participate.

Signature

Date

Print name

I give permission to be video-recorded and photographed during the workshop.

_____ Yes

_____ No

I give permission to have my photos displayed at conferences, workshops, community events, etc.

_____ Yes

_____ No

Signature

Date

Print name

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant please contact, Bureau of Educational Research, osurr@education.illinois.edu, (217) 333-3022.

Appendix B

Adult Consent



University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Department of Educational Policy Organization & Leadership
1310 South Sixth Street, Champaign Illinois 61820

Phone: 217 333 2446 Fax: 217 244 7064

Adult Consent

Transgressngroove: An Exploration of Black Girlhood, The Body, And Education

January 27, 2013

Greetings (Insert name).

Project Information:

You are invited to participate in a research project on dance and poetry as tools to tell stories of the body, the self, and life experiences. Under the supervision of Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown, this self-study project will be facilitated by Dominique C. Hill. The goals of this study are to offer the arts as mediums for engendering and working through difficult topics; illustrate schooling experiences in an alternative form; and proffer communal processing of the self as means of deepening self understanding.

Procedure Overview:

In this project, Dominique C. Hill will guide participants through a creating and sharing process where she will offer a performance that fuses her self-reflections, understandings, memories, and questions about schooling as an example. In these sessions, participants will be asked to complete a short survey prior to the start of performance, share their thoughts on her presentation as well as construct mini presentations of their own. With the permission of participants, each session will be audio and video recorded in order that researcher can review for session demographics, responses, content, and the researcher's movement. All willing session participants will participate in a 20-30 minute audio interview. All audio and video recordings obtained during this research project will be kept secure. The audiotapes will be kept in a locked file cabinet and will be accessible only to project personnel. The audiotapes will be transcribed and coded to remove individuals' names. Some video footage will be publicly disseminated to display the process and research outcomes.

Anticipated Risk & Benefits:

There are no anticipated risks to this study greater than normal life and we predict that the enactment of a sharing and co-designing environment will increase understandings of arts

as a educative tool as well as the effectiveness of communal processing, both good and not so good schooling experiences. As family members, more intimate information may be revealed, but will only be done so through relationship association. Also, some video recordings will be made public but will not reveal names or single out any information that will identify anyone specifically outside of relationship association. Actual names will not be used in data, only relationships to maintain the honesty and integrity of the work. While some negative experiences may be shared during the process, the group processing and artistic expression of it aims to help in making sense of and generating something useful and positive from all memories and reflections offered. It is intended that this project affords participants a space to think through memories and relationships that may otherwise remain concealed; consider their impact on others and vice versa; and attain another pedagogical tool (arts-specifically dance and poetry) to use when teaching and engaging in difficult content and dialogue. The results of this study may be used for a dissertation, a scholarly report, and a journal article and conference presentation. In any publication or public presentation pseudonyms will be substituted for any identifying information. It is possible that the researcher may want to include a still photo from the video as an illustration of the research for dissemination. Please check at the end of this letter if you approve dissemination of a still photo and/or video.

Participant Information:

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time and for any reason without penalty. There are multiple levels of participation in this project (see below) and you are free to refuse participation in any part of engagement in which you do not feel comfortable. You are also free to pass on any question you do not wish to answer. You will receive a copy of the research results after this project is completed.

Contact:

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact Ms. Dominique C. Hill by telephone at 716-713-2101 or by e-mail at hill12@illinois.edu, Professor Brown at (217) 333-2990 or rbrown@illinois.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant then contact the Bureau of Educational Research at (217) 333-3022 or osurr@education.illinois.edu.

Sincerely,

Dominique C. Hill

Subjects will be given a copy of the consent form.

___ Yes ___ No I consent to being video and audio-recorded during the session and allowing the researcher ONLY to access this information

___ Yes ___ No I consent to an audio-recorded follow up interview

___ Yes ___ No, I agree to all dissemination of still photos that may contain my image

____ Yes ____ No I consent to the public dissemination of video and audio-recordings during workshop session

I have read the following consent form, discussed any concerns or questions I have with the investigator, and understood the project's risks and benefits.

Signature

Date

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant please contact, Bureau of Educational Research, osurr@education.illinois.edu, (217) 333-3022.

Adult (Unstructured and Open-Ended an) Interview Questions

1. If you had to put yourself on a scale of 1-10 in terms of the value you place on artistic expression, where would you put yourself with 1 being none or very little and 10 being high?
2. How often, if at all, would you say you utilize dance and poetry as part of your self-expression?
3. Can you offer one word to describe how you felt while watching it and being apart of the workshop?
4. What feelings and/or memories emerged during the workshop? About your life. Your girlhood?
5. How, if at all, did the use of dance and poetry, offer a different entry into the material, my Black girlhood?
6. What are you taking with you from the workshop?
7. What immediately comes to mind when you think of Blackgirls? And what topics or themes come to mind?
8. How would you describe Black girlhood?

Appendix C

Black Girlhood Studies Bibliography (A starting place)

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