

Black Women's Creative Praxes: Meditating on Interior Journeys of Becoming

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Abstract

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My dissertation turns spatial inquiry inward to explore the question: How do Black women use creative praxes as tools to more fully express the interior dimensions operating within self-actualization and collective liberation processes? Drawing on Black Geographies, Black Feminist Thought, and Black Studies frameworks, I conduct an autoethnographic, content analysis of 7 creative texts by Black women (i.e., memoir, essay, novel, personal development book, speech, photography catalog), as well as my own creative works (i.e., poetry, photography, painting) to understand how our internal landscapes and geographic visions are made knowable through creative praxes. My project is also deeply experimental in its weaving of personal narrative, creative theorization, and in-depth accounting of my efforts to conduct emancipatory social science scholarship. In particular, creative expression is examined as a form of geographic expression wielded by Black women to assert their embodied vision (i.e., ways of knowing and moving through the world) amidst living within and beyond settler colonial, racist, patriarchal,

capitalist landscapes in the United States. Centering Black women's experiential wisdom grounded in their inner knowing, I uncover how engaging with Black women on their own terms unveils journeys of becoming as socio-spatial responses to encounters with colonial systems of domination. Importantly, examining Black women's lived experiences, with a focus on Black interiorities, illuminates an ethic of Black well-being that caters to the whole of Black beingness. Specifically, exploring Black women's spatial imaginaries unveils the markedly metaphysical dimensions of Black women's well-being and placemaking practices that defy Eurocentric, neoliberal thought and modes of being human. For instance, Black women's ability to self-actualize into truer versions of themselves often involves undergoing a process of deconditioning from hegemony, so that they can embody alternative conceptualizations of self-definition, worth, and value that are based in Black abundance, enoughness, and a politics of refusal. Additionally, Black women regularly prioritize the creation of spaces where they can fully tune into their mind, body, spirit, psyche, and consciousness, over economic stability and profitability. Finally, I explore how Black feminists and womanists evoke relational place-making when they advocate for all people to undergo processes of becoming more aligned with their innate values so that they can take seriously their roles as shapers of a more liberatory future. Thus, my research makes the case for employing analytical frameworks epistemologically grounded in an interior vantage point of embodied vision to arrive at more nuanced pictures of the totality of the Black communities' geographic experiences.

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Acknowledgements

As a child I wrote a note that said, “I think in ten years I will go to doctor college to become a doctor.” While it took more than 10 years, little Danielle, we are here!

Truthfully, I am at a loss for words of what I can say that can come close to capturing the depth of emotions I feel in this moment of completing my doctorate degree. While hurdles are a part of graduate school, doing this project focused on Black women’s brilliance during a time of rising fascism and extensive attacks against marginalized communities across the globe, rampant late-stage capitalism, and witnessing the genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, has added to the weight of this doctoral journey. While disheartening, knowing my research may not be publishable if overarching ideological trends continue down the path they are on emboldened my exploration of Black women’s spatial responses to oppressive landscapes as an embodiment of their inner knowing and enactment of a politics of refusal. Because if not now, then when?

While doubts of completion are something that all graduate students navigate, I truly believed this journey was over for me when my sister, Mercedes, passed away 3 years ago. My world shattered in an instant. I have so much gratitude to Skye Naslund, who I was a teaching assistant for at the time, and Sarah Elwood, our department chair, for rallying behind me so that I could take the remainder of the quarter off. I know that without their compassionate support, which carved out the space for me to be in my grief, I would not be standing here today, degree in hand.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my late sister, Mercedes, who watches over me, and to little Danielle, who planted this dream within me, and continues to be my reason for being.

As you read on, know that this project is not a destination, but a work that invites you into a time of my life that is marked by a profound journey of becoming.

Ch. 1: Introduction

“Survival is not a theory”

– Audre Lorde

“You have worlds inside you. You have permission to share them” – adrienne maree brown

*My existence is intrinsically an act of resistance.
My breath is the arbiter of my enoughness.*

*Truly, get to know me
on my own terms.*

*And you will see that I have an entire universe
within*

*just waiting
to be perceived.*

The interior domain is a vast yet underexplored landscape within Geography that provides insight into how marginalized people, such as Black women in my dissertation’s case, make sense of their own encounters with the world around them. Grounded in Black geographic, Black Studies, and Black feminist literature, I expand spatial inquiry beyond the external, physical world to include the interior, metaphysical domain. By and large, the Western world privileges logical, rational assertions that can be scientifically proven, and by extension the physical, material world. In turn, inquiries into “interiority,” “the interior life,” “the interior domain,” “the interior landscape,” “the inner world” “intimate histories” are sometimes neglected (Willis 2000; Alexander 2004; McKittrick 2006; Quashie 2012; hooks 2015; Williamson 2017; Hartman 2019; Lorde 2020e; McKittrick 2021; Quashie 2021; Judd 2023). Often, it is assumed that a focus on the interior is wholly disjointed from and thus at the expense of the external world (Quashie 2012). However, to be clear, when I speak of interiority and exteriority, I am not imposing a liberal binary. Instead, my dissertation makes the case for how interior, private and exterior, public domains have fuzzy, relational edges that are always in and

of one another. Thus, my project's central argument is that one way to get closer to representing the fullness of Black lived realities in social science research is to intentionally center Black interiorities, because doing so epistemologically and ontologically decenters white, patriarchal thought and modes of being human that are deemed to be objective truth within the Western world's public sphere (Collins 2002; Harding 2004b; Hartsock 2004).

Having an expansive take on what is considered geographic inquiry makes space for me to investigate Black creative texts as tangible sites of radical theorization into interior landscapes. As Bettina Judd so beautifully articulates, “this connection between the inner life and artistic production challenges notions of knowledge as exclusively located in empiricism” (2023, 25). Explaining my thinking in-depth in Chapter 2: Crossroads, instead of defining creativity as aesthetically pleasing artistic artifacts, I am interested in creativity as the act of creation that brings something into being from one's own life force. The possibilities of this analytical framing are twofold. First, it allows me to examine the inspiration for writing the Black text as a geographic expression in and of itself. For instance, what personal experiences of the Black women creators aided in their decision to create the artifacts I am exploring? And two, I am able to examine the internal dimensions of Black women's lived experiences, which have been made knowable in their texts, as subaltern spatial practices providing insight into Black women's encounters with, and strategies to live beyond, oppressive discourses and landscapes. Yes, I am interested in their beliefs, hopes, feelings, dreams, fears, and longings, but also more underexamined aspects of interiority such as 1) following their intuition and inner knowing, 2) leaning into the unknown or that which is perceived as illogical, 3) perceiving the process as a part of their journey of becoming, which includes both deconditioning from hegemony and self-actualizing into who they know themselves to be, 4) perceiving their process of aligning their

inner values and beliefs with how they show up in the world at large as integral to rebuilding a more liberatory world, and 5) understanding the influence of spirituality on how they see and experience the world. In other words, I turn the gaze within to make visible the deeply embodied, alternative epistemologies (i.e., ways of knowing the world) operating within Black women's consciousness.

Analytical frameworks such as interiority (Alexander 2004; Quashie 2012; Williamson 2017; Quashie 2021), Black placemaking (Hunter et al., 2016; Allen, Lawhon and Pierce 2019), poetics of landscape (Glissant 1989; McKittrick 2006), a Black sense of place (McKittrick 2006, 2011, 2021), and Black women's standpoint theory (Collins 2002), are integral in my exploration of Black spatial responses from a vantage point of how Black women interpret their own lived experience. In other words, engaging analytics with an anti-colonial and multidimensional stance allows me to capture a fuller spectrum of responses to encounters with racist, patriarchal capitalist landscapes. For instance, I examine placemaking, which is a more traditional way to examine how space is produced and reconceptualized when Black women interact with the world around them. However, I also explore Black women's journeys of becoming more aligned with who they know themselves to be outside of Eurocentric logics as a subaltern spatial practice. In other words, bringing a geographic lens to Black women's well-being practices is essential since "Black female self-recovery, like all black self-recovery, is an expression of a liberatory political practice" (hooks 2015, 7). Poignantly, one of my main interventions is spatializing Black women's well-being strategies by illuminating how the deeply intimate processes of becoming, which include deconditioning from hegemony and re-aligning with one's internal values, is by its very nature a geographic expression, underpinned by a politics of refusal, that is in response to violent Western spatial formations.

The guiding question for my dissertation is: How do Black women use creative praxes as tools to more fully express the interior dimensions operating within self-actualization and collective liberation processes? To answer this question, my dissertation builds theory through auto-ethnography and content analysis of secondary creative sources by Black women to unveil how Black women harness the potential of the Black creative text in their pursuit of both personal and collective liberation. Committing to the emancipatory nature of my research, I turn to Black methodologies as a framework that insists upon Black well-being in every aspect of the research design, from the questions to theories and empirics engaged. In this way, my project answers the call for scholars to engage with research methods that take creative expression seriously as a form of theoretical worldbuilding to make intelligible forms of knowledge production emerging from marginalized communities (McKittrick 2021; Judd 2023).

Intimately examining the archive of creative texts by Black women pushes me to focus on how Black women understand their own experiences, which in turn spotlights the many subtle and overt ways Black women engage in revolutionary, liberatory practices in their everyday lives. In this way, my interest in utilizing a lens of refusal to explore how Black women live within and beyond systems of dominations is inspired by *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* by Saidiya Hartman (2019) and *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* by Katherine McKittrick (2006). For instance, Hartman's use of a close narration technique of archival documents depicting the lives of young Black women living in Philadelphia and New York in the twentieth century is a strategy to "recover the insurgent ground of these lives" that are full of waywardness, rebellion, and thinking otherwise (2019, xiv). Similarly, McKittrick's argument that "geography and black women have always functioned together" enables her to

uncover Black women's expressive acts that are often overlooked in dominant narrative (2006, xxiv). Hence, my theoretical and methodological decision to intimately examine creative artifacts is to materially attend to the layers and textures that constitute Black women's inner knowing and ways of being outside of essentialist paradigms.

In centering Black women's inner landscapes, I spotlight their multidimensionality, embodied knowing, and worldviews, in order to continue the work of building paths in social science research that honors Black life as fruitful on their own terms. Thus, I consider my research to be a work of "feminist black [geographic] studies, where the commitment to a feminist orientation determines the entirety of what black [geographic] studies might be" (Quashie 2021, 12). My contributions are primarily epistemological and theoretical in nature, choosing to rigorously examine Black feminist epistemological repossession to cater to the emotional, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of Black women's encounters with broader spaces and discourses. In doing so, I assert that Black people, the spaces they inhabit, and their spatial responses, are all inherently geographic (McKittrick 2006). My research is underpinned by the belief that it is Black ways of knowing, being, believing, dreaming, grieving, loving, that are often missing from the story that results in the sustained upkeep of degrading narratives about Black life and places within normatively white empiricist geographical thinking.

My dissertation demonstrates feminist epistemologies as valuable in unveiling life-affirming Black senses of place and connections to space, advancing Black Geographies' objective to interrogate Blackness from a vantage point of abundance. This is because unpacking the embodied wisdom derived from Black women's navigation of intersectional oppressions refuses Geography's colonial legacy of biological determinism and instead allows me to understand "the black body, as an analytic" "outside violation" (McKittrick 2021, 127).

Additionally, my project demonstrates how creative praxes are intuitive, empowering geographic expressions that capture Black women's construction of spatial imaginaries within and outside of Western formations of space. Importantly then, it is "refus[ing] the positivist contours of human geography" that reveals how internal landscapes and creative works are "alternative spaces for political struggle" left to be further probed (McKittrick 2021, 182). Ultimately, acknowledging Black women on their own terms showcases how affirming the interior dimensions of creative praxes humanizes our collective understanding of the relationship between the Black liberatory struggle and broader geographic landscapes.

It is important to note directly that my project is not focused on humanizing Black people, because even if inadvertently, this presumes their humanity is up for question. And to be clear, Black people's humanity is not up for debate. It is not up for negotiation. And there is no need for it to be proven. Instead, I frame my project as engaging with Black people on their own terms as a way of epistemologically centering Black ways of moving through and seeing the world based upon their situated positionings, and by extension ontologically decentering anti-black logics (Quashie 2021). In doing so, I honor Blackness as intrinsically worthy and enough on its own, without needing to be placed into opposition with whiteness.

While I am on the topic of Blackness, you will see that the word "Black" is both capitalized and lowercase throughout this text. While my personal philosophy for this convention is that "the word Black is capitalized when it refers to Black people and lowercase when it refers to Black as a color or adjective," I understand that everyone does not hold this same thinking (Gumbs 2020). In turn, I have chosen to capitalize "Black" when I am speaking and maintain the integrity of however it is written when quoting.

Finally, regarding my turning towards Black women for insight into Black liberation as a whole. I want to be clear that I “belie[ve] that Black women are inherently valuable,” and thus “our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else’s but because of our need as human persons for autonomy” (Combahee River Collective 2017, 18). This means that even if my research only derived findings related to Black women’s liberation, I would be delighted and consider my work to be just as necessary and significant. However, as a Black feminist, I also strongly believe fostering the consciousness and empowerment of Black women, by analyzing the interlocking systems of oppression they face (i.e., race, class, gender, sexuality, social class, culture, etc.), will teach us about conditions of social justice at large in ways that aid in the liberation of oppressed people across the globe (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 2002; Combahee River Collective 2017). In other words, while “Black feminist thinking might be specific in naming black women, ... its ambition has always been the breadth of being alive, the principle that the lived experience of one who is black and female is comprehensive enough to manifest totality” (Quashie 2021, 12). It is for this reason that while I empirically engage solely with Black women’s lived experiences and thoughts, I remain open to what insights can also be derived about Black liberation, and universal liberation. As I detail in Chapter 3, when I reflected on my personal experiences of geographic struggle as a Black woman for insight into what to explore in my dissertation, what kept coming into focus were the struggles I have had to self-define and self-evaluate in every sphere of my life, and the role of creative expression and tending to my well-being in allowing me to evoke a politics of refusal so that I could show up in the world on my own terms (Collins 2002). This aspect of Black women's navigating oppressive landscapes is not acknowledged enough in broader geographic discourses and as a Black woman who is

undergoing this process of self-recovery myself, I am passionate about foregrounding the grounded strategies we use to live as whole human beings in the world.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 2: Crossroads begins with the decision point I found myself up against upon completing my Master's. I detail how I was unsure if I wanted to continue with the doctorate because I was stretched so thin from graduate school and dissatisfied with the limits of normatively white empiricist geographic thought. Importantly, I reflect upon my realization that the only way to fully commit to a Black methodological framework dedicated to a liberatory end in my dissertation is to embody life-affirming values within my personal life as well. I then document crucial points in time when I had to make decisions throughout writing my dissertation to ensure my commitment to livingness remained at the heart of my project. In this way, my reflexive, accountable approach redefines what is considered research "findings" to include what comes up throughout the process of conducting research, opposed to solely what comes out of the content analyses of the creative artifacts.

Beginning with a personal narrative detailing how my topic is inspired from my own experiences of geographic struggle, Chapter 3 traces the epistemological and methodological lineages my project is a part of. I situate the questions, methods, theories, and epistemologies my dissertation utilizes into broader disciplinary conversations within Black Studies, Black Feminist Thought and Black Geographies. Focusing on depth rather than breadth, I explore the key theorists, concepts, and/or works that I am drawing on within my project to explicitly showcase how I am building upon existing research. I conclude with a conversation about my methodology, which further explores my interest in creative knowledge production and discusses the criterion I used to choose my artifacts (i.e., creative Black texts).

Chapters 4 and 5 are composed of five interrogations of creative texts by Black women. Directly following each empirical analysis is a “Creative Musing,” which offers an autoethnographic take on the subject matter previously discussed through an engagement with my own creative praxes. In other words, while the creative musings complement each of the analyses, they are also standalone pieces that can be engaged on their own and still offer insight into what the dissertation is about.

Chapter 4: Vision encompasses three analyses of popular culture media (i.e., memoir, novel, essay, photography catalog). The first analysis examines Viola Davis’ memoir *Finding Me* (2022) for insight into her transformative role in the television show *How to Get Away With Murder* (Nowalk 2014a). The second analysis rigorously examines Alice Walker’s 1983 essay “Writing *The Color Purple*” (2003) to contextualize the creation of her renowned novel *The Color Purple* (1982). Finally, I offer a critique of the analytical framing in *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840 to the Present* by Deborah Willis (2000). I explore how each of the author's center Black ways of knowing and moving through the world, evoking a feminist embodied vision that refuses the white, masculine gaze. Thus, I argue that one fruitful way to foster more life-affirming representations of the Black community is to uplift the internal domain because in turning the gaze within, you epistemologically center people’s situated knowledges opposed to objective stereotypes circulating within the public sphere.

Chapter 5: Embodiment includes two analyses of texts that are intended to offer advice to the reader (i.e., personal development books, speech). The first conducts an intertextual, inter-temporal analysis of *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* by adrienne maree brown (2017) and “Learning from the 60s” by Audre Lorde (2020b) to understand their similar guiding principles for people looking to be a part of the revolution. The second analysis

examines the spatial frameworks embedded within *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto* by Tricia Hersey (2022) to understand how colloquial metaphors like taking up space and holding space evoke the relational dynamic between interior and exterior realms. Generally, my examination shines a light on how Black women's wisdom regarding the role of personal transformation in collective liberation is immersed in geographic principles of relationality. In particular, I focus on how they each speak to the necessity for individuals to embody life-affirming values in their everyday lives, which involves undergoing processes of deconditioning from hegemony and self-actualization, if we as a collective are going to re-imagine more human and heart centered systemic structures.

Finally, in Chapter 6: Closing Remarks I reiterate major takeaways and contributions of my dissertation, speaking to both what I learned and what I hope others will learn as well.

Ch.2: Crossroads

crossroads: a crucial point especially where a decision must be made

—Merriam-Webster

*My becoming is inevitable
My own terms no longer negotiable
Here I stand, as I am
So, watch out world, here I come*

In order to understand many of my decisions in my dissertation, I must take you on a trip back to when I was at a crossroads in my graduate school journey, when I just completed my Master's and was beginning the Ph.D. I wrote this list of musings on December 20th, 2021, three days after submitting my thesis on the 17th. These dates are seared into my heart because on Dec. 15th, 2021, the beloved bell hooks transitioned from this earth and became an ancestor. Looking back, I realize hooks' early earthly departure at 69 years old, which is sadly the case of many Black feminist visionaries, is when my commitment to centering Black women's well-being in my dissertation was born. My post-thesis musing went:

How do I reacquaint myself with me?

Set an intention for the next 2 weeks.

Feel your feelings.

Having finished my first 2.5 years of graduate school, in which I finished my thesis, during racial unrest and a global pandemic, I have realized that I refuse to let systemically racist structures break me. I make them bend to me.

What does true surrender look like?

Who is Danielle outside of her studies?

When you're hustling from the beginning
To survive life's daily trials
The burnout is real;
it isn't if...
it's when.

Meaning the question isn't,

“Will I experience burn out?”

But instead,
“At what age did I begin to feel this heavy weight
in my chest that just won’t diminish?”

If I am honest, for a while there I didn’t think that I would continue on this path of pursuing my doctorate. I felt so broken after my Master’s, like life had been sucked out of me. I knew that if I was going to continue on this rollercoaster of graduate school that I would have to do things differently. For me, “doing things differently” came down to two things 1) taking care of myself physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, and 2) doing whatever it takes to craft emancipatory scholarship. Funnily enough, both of these threads connect directly to things I was ruminating heavily on throughout my Master’s, which is clearly illustrated in two of my poems that show up in my thesis’ Introduction, *Destined Destruction*¹ (Brown 2021, 11) and *How to Do Academia Ethically*² (Brown 2021, 16–17). Both poems creatively communicate my methodological decision to embrace mesearch as a component of my Black citational practice.

Destined Destruction – a poem by Danielle Brown

Refusing to be just another opportune Black Unicorn.
My position and commitments stand firm.
Choosing to enact a desire-centered approach.
Welcoming and centering those from the margin whose entire existence has been continually,
institutionally shunned.
Partially, Situated, Knowledges and Perspectives;
I see you, I hear you, and please know that you are valued and loved.
I don’t want to be in an Ivory Tower.
And I don’t want to be in an Ebony Tower.
I want to burn the tower down entirely,
hoping the smoke signals the dawn of a new day.
Giving physical and metaphysical space for the production of knowledge to exist everywhere...,

and nowhere....
In a single act of destruction destiny will finally run its course.

¹ Located in the Introduction section “Why Springfield, Ma?: My journey to embracing “mesearch”

² Located in the Introduction section “Methodological framework: the politics around my Black citational practice”

And while I may be signing away a piece of my soul.
Making a deal with the devil.
Giving away my token Black Pass to exist in this White dominated
academic world.

I also know dismantling scholarly gatekeeping fundamentally sets free many passed away souls
that have long been misrepresented and ostracized as aberrant by this institution.
Creating the necessary space for what is, or who is, a knowledge producer
to be intrinsically tied to what it means to be
—to hold space and exist in the world—

it is as simple as that.

How to do Academia Ethically? – a poem by Danielle Brown

Thinking with/as blackness as a cite/site of liberation
with my radical peeps through
transformative interdisciplinary conversations
sets my mind free to imagine what can be
outside of hegemonic knowledge systems
and makes my heart sore to the tippity top
of the bare leaved trees in mid-February.
As flurries of snow incircle me and set me aflame
because coolness is heat
and heat is passion flowing through constricted veins.
Like my pen against the paper or my cursor against the screen.
At times I feel unsure of how to breathe Black livingness into my thesis.
. My soul undergoing a temporary paralysis as I struggle with how not to reify erasures or
binaries.
. Questioning if refusal is the key to meeting the liberatory ends of my political citational
practice.

And then reflexively I remember as a Black woman who is also matter-of-factly
a
living

being.

That my first step must be to walk my talk.
And that means to take care of my flesh, which
right NOW requires me to step away

and

simply focus on b r e a t h i n g.

Since tending to myself as an essential component of crafting liberatory research were pivotal topics throughout my Master's journey, I was pushed to introspect on how to do things differently moving forward. Since there is so much outside of my control when it comes to my studies, such as benchmarks and deadlines... (oh so many deadlines), I asked myself if there are changes I could make that would lead me towards a more ideal outcome? The response that intuitively came forward from within me was to narrow the gap between thinking about and actually embodying an ethic of livingness. What do I mean by this? In my efforts to keep up with the machine that is academia, I had neglected my core values, and by extension my own sense of humanity. For instance, I did not have clear life-work boundaries; like many I know, I worked through my lunch, did not rest enough or prioritize essential life items like medical appointments, and felt immense guilt for taking time off for joy (even more so if it was a "break," because as the saying goes "grad students don't *actually* have breaks").

This constant grind also had impacts on my Master's research. To be clear, I am very proud of my Master's thesis, especially my courage to center Black geographic and Black feminist frameworks, and by extension reject traditional theories and methods representing the limits of white geographic thought. However, when I look back, I also notice that the difficulty of finding epistemological and methodological geographic frameworks committed to Black livingness versus ones predominantly scrutinizing Black people and places, and implementing said frameworks, took so much effort that I quite frankly had run out of time. All of this is to say, embodying an ethic of livingness is really difficult to do when living in a racist, sexist, homophobic, ableist, capitalist society. The messaging of work harder and produce more is hard to resist when one's output is what is valued and equated with success.

When making my decision to carry on in the doctoral program, I told myself that I refused to allow this institution of higher education to turn me into a version of myself who neglected my well-being, which can easily happen when you're in any space that is so all consuming, let alone one that was not built for Black women like myself to exist within. Ultimately, I concluded that I needed to take a more intentional and embodied approach to centering life-affirming tenets in my life and studies. I made a promise that my core values and deep care for humanity, both my own and others', would be my North Star, and once I no longer could see the light, it was my time to part ways, like it or not. Setting this clear boundary gave me permission to walk away from my academia if my values were compromised and freed me from the confines of wanting to be revered by the institution, in turn deepening my commitment to livingness, in all of its many forms. I created a list of guiding principles for my doctorate that are informed by my core values for my life. Some of my core values are:

- Be unapologetically myself
- Have integrity, which to me looks like having a small say do gap
- Service as an aspect of my purpose
- Truth-telling
- Honor my interconnectedness with community, nature, etc.
- Remember that I am constantly learning and unlearning
- Lean into pleasure, beauty and creativity
- I am a human being not a human doing
- Valuing impermanence, the unknown and natural cycles
- Rest is non-negotiable. Ease is my birthright.

My Guiding Principles for my dissertation are:

- I am Enough
- This is Soul Work
- REST!
- Allow who I am as a creative and artist to inform who I am as a scholar
- Presence over perfection
- Quality over quantity
- Depth over breadth
- Honor my commitment to livingness and abundance
- Trust the process, which requires me to trust myself

All in all, my crossroads moment emphasizes how the embodiment of my core values in my personal life shifted what I chose to prioritize in my academic research. In large part, the shift I have experienced between the Master's and Ph.D. has a lot to do with grasping what is in my control, amidst all that is out of my control, during the research process by ensuring my values are upheld and reflected in all spheres of my life. By no means am I saying I made these changes all on my own. Actually, it is quite the opposite. Evoking a politics of refusal and upholding my own humanity instead of waiting for the institution to do so (because truthfully, I would likely be waiting forever), led me to infuse my life with countless support systems, coming by way of people, places, and things. On the academic front, I was very intentional about putting together a dissertation committee who reflect and respect my decision to prioritize my well-being amidst my graduate school journey. I also put more effort into nurturing and building community outside of the institution as well, like friendships, my sisters, my husband, and participating in women's circles, but also with nature, spending time with the trees, birds, bodies of water, and chasing sunsets. Finally, I began to see my creative and spiritual practices as an intrinsic part of who I am and dedicated more time to them on a daily basis. This is to say, I chose to live on my own terms and carved out a heart-centered path for myself to walk down.

A Note on my Intentions

In every way, connecting my personal graduate journey to the politics of crafting emancipatory academic research mirrors the analysis I do of my empirics. Allowing the rawness of my inner world to be expressed and take up space here demonstrates how seriously I uphold Black feminist epistemologies of interiority and personal as the political as both avenues to clock epistemic violence and gateways to greater humanity. Additionally, you will find that many of the key analytical frameworks I utilize in my analysis of creative artifacts, such as Black

placemaking, poetics of landscape, interiority, Black women's standpoint theory, and a Black sense of place, also could be applied to my story as well. For example, here I discuss the inner work necessary to take the steps towards creating a life-affirming place for myself and my research to flourish, which requires my refusal to conform when encountering and navigating the oppressive landscape of the institution. In other words, this section is very much a theoretical teaser of what is to come.

As a Black feminist thinker, I believe an honest engagement that speaks to my positioning as a researcher is an essential component of the research process. To uphold my valuing of reflexivity and transparency, the primary goal of this crossroads section is to make time and space to unpack and honor all aspects of the research process. Importantly, I not only consider the empirics in my dissertation to be the output of my content analyses of the 7 creative artifacts by Black women. But also, since my dissertation is a creative piece being birthed into existence by myself, a Black woman, I consider what is coming up throughout the process of conducting the research itself to be important data that is worthy of being probed for valuable takeaways. While this "crossroads" section is entirely dedicated to reflecting upon the process of doing the research, I also engage in autoethnographic narration throughout the whole dissertation, some of which also delves into my research process. For instance, I begin Chapter 3: Tracing Epistemological and Methodological Lineages with a story of how my topic is inspired by my own life, and I start each of my analyses in Chapter 4: Vision and Chapter 5: Embodiment with a description of my first encounters with each of the artifacts to help contextualize why I decided to engage with the piece in my dissertation. Additionally, all of the creative musings that follow each of my analyses are entirely grounded in autoethnography.

In the remaining subsections, I detail various points when I found myself veering off the life-affirming path I envisioned for my research design and had to make critical decisions to get back on track. I wrote these reflections in real-time to ensure that the epistemological, political, and human reasons for my choices are organic and authentic. It is my hope that reflecting on how I made foundational shifts to my research design helps the reader follow the arc of my dissertation. In turn, normalizing all aspects that are a part of the process of producing emancipatory scholarship provides insight for others also committed to the struggle for liberation. I know that despite my intentions to not reify degradative and problematic discourses my work will still fall short in some areas. However, I truly believe the only way we are going to build the world anew is to dream, imagine, experiment, practice, over and over again, until we get there.

Facing the What If's

My approach to my dissertation is one full of trust and transparency, amidst many waves of doubt and uncertainty. As I survey the various crossroads I have come across throughout my doctoral journey, I want to begin touching upon the necessity of trusting in oneself and one's vision more than any fear that will arise, because really when it comes down to it, self-trust is the linchpin that makes crucial decision-making possible in the first place. I first came across this idea when I began hitting a metaphorical wall close to the end of the writing process for my Master's thesis. I felt stuck by the overwhelming feelings of *what if* largely due to my positionality as a Black woman in a predominantly white institution. *What if* I make a mistake? *What if* I write something that I wish to take back one day? *What if* I offend someone? *What if* my writing is torn apart by the very people I wish to affirm and uplift? One person who gave me

the courage to take the risk of facing the *what if's* is Audre Lorde and her wise declaration in “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” (2020f):

I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal, and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. (Lorde 2020f, 28)

I channeled all of the hesitancy and anxieties into this painting as a way of externalizing my internal woes, and upon feeling some weight lift off of my shoulders, successfully moved forward with writing my thesis.



Figure 1 Coming to Voice – Front (2021), Painting by Danielle Brown

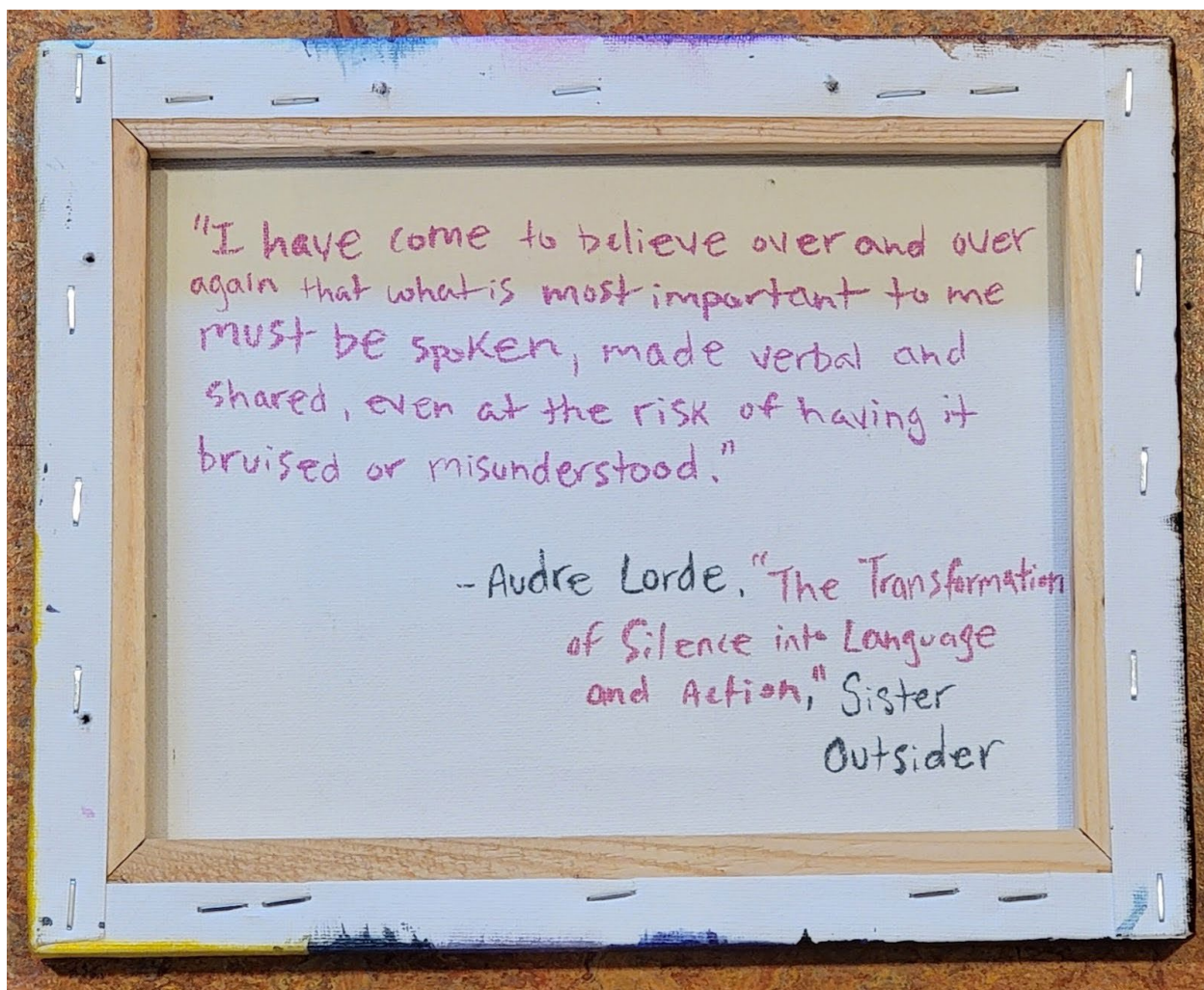


Figure 2 Coming to Voice – Back (2021), Painting by Danielle Brown

Through the entire dissertation process, many of these same *what if's* have arisen. However, for a variety of reasons, this time around these hesitations did not leave me frozen like they used to. This painting is always in eyesight when I am doing dissertation work. I continue to find immense comfort and support when looking at it because it is a reminder of how far I have come. I have incredible co-chairs who affirm that I am enough and my project is enough whenever small doubts arise. Music uplifts my spirit, shifting my energy towards that of abundance and helping me to tap into my inner knowing. I play the song "I Trust You" by Malka Russell before I start my dissertation work, which sets the intention at the beginning of the

engagement to work from a place of self-trust. Additionally, I actively allow my intuition to lead me towards supportive practices to indulge in alongside dissertation work, such as painting, collaging, reading, and going on Nature walks, trusting that giving them space will be generative for my academic work. Beyond academia, in therapy I work on my relationship with trusting myself and others so that it is an embodied ethic within my life. I could go on and on, but I will stop here for now. I'll end offering the reflective question: *what are some of the ways you foster an embodied ethic of self-trust in your life?*

Shining a Light on Life-Affirming Frameworks

Importantly, if there is one thing that I learned that has shifted my entire approach to my dissertation, it is that fully committing to a Black methodological framework requires constant questioning and reexamination throughout every stage of the project to ensure it continues to meet its liberatory intentions. This includes a constant reflexive engagement with what conditioning I as a researcher am inadvertently bringing to the table, as well as serious consideration whether my chosen questions, methodology, empirics, etc. continue to align with my guiding principles.

Here is a clear example of the importance of reevaluating if you continue to be aligned with one's affirmative, liberatory ends. One of my creative artifacts for the dissertation is *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker (1982). It would be easy to do an analysis of how the Black women characters clearly fall into known tropes (the caretaker, the strong one, the Jezebel) and yet also exist beyond these stereotypes. However, I have come to learn that my work is not focused on explaining who Black women are by referencing how they are more than the degradative things that have been said about them. This is a very similar trap I fell into within my Master's thesis where too much time was spent on "archetype-hunting" in relation to the criminal

and token scripts (Williamson 2017, 17; Ellison 1972). In my opinion, my efforts to capture diverse perspectives on Black people's lived experiences in Springfield, Massachusetts, from my research participants were flattened when I dedicated a large part of my analysis towards reinforcing and then breaking stereotype discourses. Truthfully, so much effort went into explaining how the participants saw themselves being boxed into certain racial tropes like the criminal and token while also existing beyond them that I had to rush to include the section on Black women's lived experiences and alternative forms of placemaking at the very last second. This is a decision that I often ruminate on and feel regret over. Learning from this experience, when I found myself beginning to entertain an analysis of *The Color Purple* (Walker 1982) that fits the women into known controlling images, I sat with the uneasiness that filled my entire being, asking myself, *whose story do you seek to tell, Danielle?* I decided not to waste my time on this line of inquiry at all, instead choosing to show how Alice Walker's journey of bringing *The Color Purple* (Walker 1982) into existence was a deeply internal process that echoes some of the themes within the novel itself.

Remembering My Projects 'Why'

Throughout the entire content analysis phase I was in my head a lot about if I was choosing the "right" artifacts. I wanted there to be certainty that I had chosen the best creative works to illustrate the goals of my project. However, I had to face the fact that there are many artifacts that could potentially be chosen and trust my intuition that the ones I have chosen are for a reason. Since it is impossible for my dissertation to do it all or for me to do it all, this ruminating was an opportunity for me to get clearer with myself about the goals of my project. Upon reflection, I realized that my hang up had to do with how I was interpreting the role of creativity in my project. Initially, I was primarily thinking about creativity as a form of artistic

expression, which led me to choose artifacts solely for their ability to diversify the types of artistic mediums being explored in my project. However, this wasn't sitting right with me. Something just felt off, like some of the artifacts were just there for the sake of it.

When I sat with the creative artifacts that felt like a resounding YES in my spirit, such as Viola Davis' memoir *Finding Me* (2022) to understand her role in the television show *How to Get Away with Murder* (Nowalk 2014a), it dawned on me that they all do a great job of highlighting the thread from inspiration to creation. This lends itself to capturing "creativity" as the ability to bring something into being from one's imagination and/or own thoughts, or simply "to bring into existence" (Kerr 2026). While there are certainly elements of artistry inherent within creativity, the greater importance is that something is being birthed into being through one's life force. Thus, the purpose of my dissertation is to follow the thread of inspiration to creation by exploring how Black women's lived experiences impact their approach to creating and ultimately what gets created. Where did the spark of inspiration come from to create the works that I have chosen to explore? I am especially interested in focusing on the lived experiences that illuminate the role of the interior in creation, including but not limited to one's feelings, dreams, desires, logic and belief systems, imagination, intuition, processes of becoming, and connection to spirit.

Zooming back out to think about which of my empirics best highlights my research objective to trace the thread of inspiration to creation with an emphasis on the interior led me to make some pivotal changes to my empirics. First, I decided to cut down my creative artifacts from 8 to 7, as well as replace some of the pieces, to ensure those left best illustrate my interest. This also frees up more time to explore them in every stage of dissertation creation, from content analysis to the write-up stage. I notice that many of the artifacts I cut out ultimately were mostly

there to try to have more artistic mediums showcased in my dissertation, but when I think about the heart of my project it is not to showcase many art mediums, it is to explore alternative epistemologies, which includes creativity, but also things such as the interior, inner knowing, etc.

An example that illustrates this shift of emphasis from privileging many artistic mediums to privileging the creative process with a focus on the role of the internal landscape is my decision to use the original book *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker (1982) as my artifact instead of the 2023 movie adaptation. Initially, I was really excited to use the 2023 movie because I thought it would be cool, contemporary and bring in another visual art component. However, returning to the big picture goals of my project helped me to see that using Walker's original 1982 book as my artifact allows me to explore the creative decision-making process of the original author Alice Walker, opposed to movie producers, actors/actresses, etc. For instance, two important elements I examine in Chapter 4: Vision which is made possible by returning to the original book is Alice Walker formatting the entire book as a series of letters and her dedicating the book to Spirit (Walker 1982). These elements, which hold so much insight into the pivotal role of the interior realm to fully understand the nature of the novel, did not come through fully when I watched the movie, but were apparent when reading the book.

Let the Work Change You

From the very start of imagining what my dissertation's topic would be I knew that I wanted the feminist principle of the personal as the political to take center stage. Inherent within this idea of the personal as the political is an embodied knowing that each of our human experiences is intrinsically bound up in our relationships with others. In Chapter 3: Tracing Epistemological and Methodological Lineages, I discuss at length how my work compliments existing theoretical conversations within Black Feminist Thought on this subject. However, here

I will touch upon how my relationship to individualism and the collective evolved throughout my content analysis phase and speak to how this evolution in thinking informed my dissertation.

It is always very exciting when there is a clear synergy between my interests and what is showing up in the work. While engaging with my 7 creative artifacts it was very clear that they all have something to teach us about the ways in which our personal transformation is wrapped up in collective liberation. However, I have to admit, initially I was conflicted when I began analyzing *Emergent Strategy* by adrienne maree brown (2017) and *Rest is Resistance* by Tricia Hersey (2022) for Chapter 5: Embodiment due to how each of them were actively calling out individualism as being a destructive force that is the antithesis of community care due to its promotion of caring about oneself above anyone else. At first when I read these passages rehearsing all of the ills of individualism, I felt a defensiveness rise up within me. While I understood where these thinkers were coming from, internally I felt targeted by these statements. *They just don't understand, for some of us we have to think about ourselves first...its survival*, is how my inner monologue went. What once felt like such a space of analytical synergy now felt like a place of distance, and that weighed on me heavily. So much so that I spoke about it with my husband, sister, therapist, and dissertation advisers, multiple times each. Upon sitting with all of these conversations, as well as reflecting by myself, I came to realize that the part of me that was getting defensive is the part of me who has felt alone and unsupported during pivotal moments in my life. And yet, when I really thought about it, all along my life path there have been people, communities, spaces, nature, Spirit, who have stepped in to support me through all of my toughest times. I did none of it alone, even though sometimes the weight on my shoulders makes me feel that is the case. While this is my truth, it sometimes gets buried underneath the

waves of resentment of wishing I could have had even more help, or better yet, never been put in the oppressive situations in the first place.

Things fully clicked for me one day on how our entire experience as individuals is wrapped up in our relational experiences with others when this topic was on my mind as I did my daily tarot card pull through bibliomancy. Without looking I ruffled through the pages in *Tarot for Change: Using the Cards for Self-Care, Acceptance and Growth* by Jessica Dore and landed on the Ace of Cups (2021, 180–183). To my delight, but not surprisingly because these sorts of serendipitous tarot pulls happen quite frequently, the entire passage is focused on how the suit of water can remind us that everything about our individual experiences, even down to our emotions and feelings, is informed by our being in relationship with our surroundings. It was in this moment of reading this passage that I fully faced the truth that on my lifelong journey of decolonizing from hegemony, which I had intentionally been on for about four years now, deconditioning from the ways individualism informs some of my ways of thinking is something I still struggle with and need to work on. How easy it is for me to slip into a feeling that I am all on my own, have gotten to where I am all on my own, and can only rely only on myself to get what I need done, when I feel that my back is up against a wall.

There are a few meaningful takeaways from this experience to clearly share here. Fundamentally, true reflexivity as a researcher requires that you be open minded enough to let the work change you. Sometimes the things that make you puzzled, pause, uncomfortable, and defensive is how you move out of your comfort zone and into the space of possibilities. Here, the possibility that came out of my willingness to face my own discomfort was a realization that my dissertation is the perfect space for a nuanced discussion on how feminism's commitment to honoring the relational self is epistemologically distinct from the established binary between

self/other that has been put forth by (neo)liberalism. Ultimately, my decision to lean into my discomfort, and listen to the wisdom of the Black women whom I engage with, has led to Chapter 5: Embodiment being entirely dedicated to uplifting Black feminists' and womanists' guidance on ways to individually and collectively work towards a geographic vision built upon relationality, interdependence and interconnectedness.

Fostering a Language of Livingness

I have always adored reading. Growing up, losing myself within the pages of a book was both an escape and a coming home for me. In my effort to tend to Danielle as a whole being, early on in my doctoral program I reclaimed reading books and listening to audiobooks *for* pleasure instead of solely reading *for* my dissertation. I emphasize *for* here because in reality, everything I come into contact with, from people, to places, to media content, to my feelings, hopes, and dreams, all inform me as a person and by extension my dissertation. However, there is a clear distinction in that there are many books I would have never taken the time to read at this time in my life had I not made the decision to prioritize doing things again, including reading, out of pure enjoyment and without the intent of them being used in any way, shape, or form for my academic work.

Throughout the content analysis phase I happened to be reading *All In: Cancer, Near Death, New Life* by Caitlin Breedlove (2024) and was delighted to find many connections to my dissertation. Namely, Breedlove welcomed the reader into her interior landscape during her time of going through chemotherapy, highlighting her thoughts, hopes, fears, dreams, leaning into the unknown and evolving intention for her writing. However, one section that left a huge impression on me emphasized the necessity to rethink the language we use on our journey of creating the world we want to conjure into being. Specifically, in her discussion of learning from

earth's patterns and cycles for insight into how we build our new world, Breedlove touches upon “feel[ing] a steady pull towards a different set of meanings that define those leading us forward and showing us the ways—words like *creators, collaborators, conjurers, and conveners...nurturers, generators, builders, counselors*” as opposed to always collapsing roles into the title of leader (Breedlove 2024, 58–59). Here, she speaks of being inspired by Ursula K. Le Guin, renowned science fiction and speculative fiction writer, usage of alternative language in their novels to describe the titles of individuals that better captures how we relate to one another (Breedlove 2024, 59–60).

Upon reading this call to embrace reimagining and re-envisioning our roles in personal and collective movement towards social justice, it made total sense that adrienne maree brown would be the person to write the Forward section of *All In: Cancer, Near Death, New Life* by Caitlin Breedlove (2024). This entire section has a strong resonance to points made by adrienne maree brown in *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (2017), which is a creative artifact explored in Chapter 5: Embodiment. For example, both women emphasize learning how to transform in ways that are sustainable and abundant by looking to natural cycles, as well as uplift reconstruction over deconstruction in our imagining of new paths forward. Breedlove poignantly states:

we live in a time when people are so scared to build that they critique for destruction not construction. Many old ways of thinking—ideas, infrastructures, and institutions—needed to die. Many of us have set about ripping them apart. This is part of a natural cycle, yet, it gives our generation few skills in tilling, planting, building, nurturing. (Breedlove 2024, 60)

Similarly, brown says, “We hone our skills of naming and analyzing the crises. I learned in school how to deconstruct—but how do we move beyond our beautiful deconstruction? Who teaches us to reconstruct?” (adrienne maree brown, 59). Both Breedlove and brown’s insistence

that the shift towards a more just future requires us not only to focus on what we wish to dismantle, but also what we hope to build, was a much-needed reminder for me that helping to build a language of livingness is one of the primary goals of my project.

Immediately after reading this section in Breedlove's book (2024) I knew that I would be making a shift in the language I had been using up to that point in my dissertation. It was time to reintegrate the terminology of *becoming* back into my theoretical analysis, which I initially was very excited about using but had stopped because I did not fully understand how to define what it meant. However, now I understand that *becoming* simultaneously holds the tension of both deconditioning and reconditioning processes taking place during one's self-actualization journey, while being inherently very life-affirming and liberatory. While I hope to touch upon the deconditioning processes taking place by the Black women creators of my chosen artifacts, the greater intent of my project is to illuminate the various ways Black women look towards the future when navigating oppressive landscapes and build a future full of possibilities for themselves and others.

This story is another example of how easy it can be to revert back to using analytical terms that may not be degradative per se but still are focused on dismantling what exists rather than aiding in the creation of something new. Both projects are necessary, deconstruction and reconstruction, or since I am referring to these processes at the personal level, deconditioning and reconditioning. However, there is an overwhelming amount of effort put into examining deconstruction and deconditioning, and nowhere near enough effort on reconstruction and reconditioning. How will we know what to build after dismantling oppressive structures if we do not begin imagining now what our new world should look like? And arguably even more importantly, what should our new world feel like?

Another big takeaway from this ah-ha moment of reintegrating the term *becoming* back into my analysis is to lean into the unknown when it comes to the terms you use and be willing to come up with something new. That may be where the real magic lies. Additionally, trust when nuanced, ambiguous, life-affirming verbiage cycles back around to the forefront of your analysis. This makes me think back to something else that I wish I had done differently in my Master's thesis, which is to trust myself to follow my own theoretical curiosities more, like allocating a greater portion of time to engage more with the nostalgic wanderings of the folks I spoke with that were saturated in their joy for life (Brown 2021). Nostalgic wanderings is a term I came up with in the thesis to capture the responses participants gave that did not fit neatly into the thematic categories I was interested in exploring in-depth but still felt were relevant given that they were inspired to bring them up when I asked my question in our interview. While nostalgic wanderings were given a bit of airtime in the thesis, I did not spend much time really delving into the intricacies of these moments. I sometimes wonder what could have been if I had dedicated an entire section, better yet an entire chapter to contributors' nostalgic wanderings, raising their value of importance in my analysis to the highest level. This is what I hope the term *becoming* is in the dissertation, a mysterious placeholder for all of the unique ways Black women conjure their authentic selves into being.

A Note on Vision

Three months from when I am set to defend my dissertation I have decided to make a key switch in my project, changing Chapter 4's title from "Gaze" to "Vision." I made this choice while writing the introduction and conclusion sections of Chapter 4 for a few reasons. First, when reading up on key texts on gaze, I realized that there is no way to get away from the term's heavy connotation of visual imagery and spectatorship. Given that discursive representation is

more of the focus of my project since my artifacts are creative Black texts, I began to wonder if there is another term that I could use that better captures my intent. Importantly, when I say that I am theorizing “gaze,” what I mean is that I am interested in exploring how Black women and people assert their own interpretations of their realities and thus refuse the white, male gaze in their lives and their creative praxes. Upon a lot of thinking I realized another way to capture my epistemological focus on Black ways of seeing and knowing the world is to use the term “vision” instead, as in feminist epistemological vision.

This led me to rethink how I was phrasing Black agency, from a project of refusing the white, male gaze, to assertions of their vision and/or way of seeing the world that is based on their embodied experience. To me, vision better suits my goal of fostering a language of livingness. By using empowering terminology that centers subjecthood, I emphasize how people define their own reality and value their own standard of worth over hegemonic valuation systems. To be clear, I still see assertions of one’s embodied vision as an enactment of a politics of refusal. However, vision brings to the forefront how Black people articulate their own ways of knowing and being, while gaze more epistemologically focuses on ways of knowing and being they are resisting against.

Many theorists have informed my theorization of vision and gaze (Collins 2002; Harding 2004a; Quashie 2012, hooks 2014; Campt 2021; Quashie 2021). Still, many will wonder why, given my interest in vision, which is closely related to gaze, why my dissertation does not include any images from my creative artifacts. Allowing someone more familiar with the subject to speak here, filmmaker Arthur Jafa states while conversing with Hans Ulrich Obrist:

“If you point a camera at a Black person, on a psychoanalytical level it functions as a White gaze. It therefore triggers a whole set of survival modalities that Black Americans have. It doesn’t matter if a Black person is behind the camera or not, because the camera itself functions as an instrument of the White gaze.” (Moderna Museet, n.d.)

So, in essence, the question is: how do you visually depict Black people without their being a white gaze, especially when it is intended for public consumption? The truth is, I do not know. This is an epistemological conundrum that I have not been able to overcome but also refuse to ignore since my intent is not to knowingly reinscribe anti-Black logics in my project. However, one thing I am clear about is that consent is a part of the answer. It is for this reason that I only feel comfortable with using photographs of Black folks that I have been able to look into their eyes, and feel a full bodied yes, which is myself. While I know that I could reach out to be granted permission for usage, this institutional bureaucratic process of licensing where I wield my authority as a researcher to gain access to photos from a publishing press, and not the Black people who are actually in the images, does not sit right with my spirit at this time. And so, I have chosen to forego it.

Ch. 3: Tracing Epistemological and Methodological Lineages

My Life as a Muse

I have always been aware and proud of my identity as a Black woman. However, I was always able to maintain a healthy sense of being Danielle, someone who is more than just her Black identity, since I grew up surrounded by other Black people on a regular basis. My hometown of Springfield, Massachusetts is highly diverse, and the neighborhood I grew up in was majority Black. Additionally, despite my undergraduate institution American University being a predominantly white institution, all I had to do was leave the campus because the DMV area had no shortage of Black people. This is not to say that I felt fully accepted within the Black community because I did not. Being more interested in books than pop culture, I often felt like I did not fit the dominant cultural mold of Blackness that was reflected by the media and those around me. However, despite an internalized sense of difference, I always felt like I blended into the communal fabric of the places I lived, not sticking out for merely existing. So, it was jarring when I moved to North Seattle and went days without seeing another person of color, let alone Black person. I found myself feeling hyper visible whenever I was outside, which led me to retreat into myself. My sense of isolation was heightened by the fact that within 6 months of moving to Seattle in September 2019 the pandemic was in full swing. This time was also marked by heightened racial tensions and protests because of videos circulating of Black people being murdered by the police and white vigilantes. I remember feeling so perplexed about the motto Black Lives Matter. *While I of course felt the sentiment was true, deep down I was angry and hurt that something so fundamental needed to be stated at all.*

I didn't even notice the transition happening, but all of a sudden, I found myself filled with anxiety whenever I went out of the house. When I walked on the street, I looked into the

windows of every car driving by to see if they were looking at me. I felt like an object to be viewed, more than an embodied subject. My headphones became my armor, safeguarding me against the world. Since I was avoiding enclosed spaces at this time as a COVID-19 safety precaution, I found myself walking to the pond down the street from me on a daily basis. While there were other people here too, what really held my attention were the abundance of trees, flowers, ducks and birds. The smell of dirt and pine, as well as the bird calls, transported me outside of myself and simultaneously grounded me within myself. I had never seen so much moss in my life. I truly felt like I was in a fairytale I grew up reading. I remember it like it was yesterday, the moment I took a deep breath and exhaled. I realized I didn't know how long I had been holding my breath. *But...damn, this breathing thing felt really good.*

I returned to the pond as often as I could to have this experience of breathing. A full body exhale that reaches beyond your chest to your gut. Soon, I felt an intuitive nudge to remove my headphones while at the pond so that I could fully bask in Nature's healing energies. While I still wore my headphones to walk to and from the pond, I took them off when I was at the pond to experience this sacred space with the whole of me. Months went by and I expanded my toolkit of wholistic well-being practices. I started therapy and continued to indulge in creative and self-explorative modalities to align my mind, body and spirit, like painting, poetry, collage, photography, journaling, reading, astrology, numerology, tarot and oracle cards. *My headphones broke and I decided not to replace them*, thinking I'd test my capacity to withstand the gaze of the external world, knowing that if it was too much, I could simply buy another pair. The headphones were never replaced. I've lost count of how many years it's been now since I have gone without headphones.

One day, I walked down the street, blasting music on my phone's speaker, singing aloud without a care of who heard or saw me, and it hit me that I hadn't looked into the windows of vehicles driving past me in months. The sense of embodiment I felt at the pond had extended to the rest of my world, and I no longer was concerned about whether a passersby was watching me or not. I took up space instead of shrinking myself from the pressure of other's gaze on me. It's not that I don't sometimes notice someone watching me, it just is not distressing as it once was. Fast forward to the present, I still visit the pond a few times a week, a place I no longer consider a where but a who, a confidant. To this day, the pond is still whom I feel the most in tune with my intuition, embodied, and centered when with. I thank the pond on every visit for holding space for me to just exist as I am. *And most importantly, on every visit I ensure to express gratitude for fostering my ability to take deep breaths.*

Questions

As a reflexive scholar who is in touch with her positionality as a Black woman, I bring all of who I am into my research. And so naturally when I was forming the direction that my doctoral project would take, I felt drawn to the way in which vision, gaze, and embodiment, ideas that played a major role in my own life at the time, also were concepts intrinsic to Black Geographies and Black Feminist Thought. Both Black Geographies and Black Feminist Thought have been at the forefront within the academy of making disciplinary interventions that center the situated knowledges and embodied vision of Black communities in order to decenter the “white-masculinist cartographic gaze” (Hawthorne and Meche 2016). Two of the ways the fields expand what is considered knowledge and who is considered geographic within the academy is by exploring the distinction between Blackness as an ontological and epistemological project that unsettles colonial, Eurocentric ways of knowing and being human upheld by White Supremacist

manifestations (i.e., anti-Blackness, racial capitalism, settler colonialism, neoliberalism, etc.), and Blackness in regards to empirical investigations about Black people and their places of living.

The methodological and epistemological direction of my dissertation was born when I began to take my own experiences of struggling with how to live on my own terms as serious spatial praxes. Seeing my lived realities within and outside of the academy as a muse, as detailed above and in Chapter 2: Crossroads, I began to wonder: how do other Black women work towards living more embodied lives by reclaiming their own vision of themselves and their experiences, and thus refuse to be defined by the white patriarchal gaze in their navigation of racist, capitalist landscapes? What role, if any, does this personal process play in their creative process, be it a dissertation like mine, or memoir, pictorial collection, television character, novel, speech, personal development books? In turn, the main guiding question for the dissertation is: How do Black women use creative praxes as tools to more fully express the interior dimensions operating within self-actualization and collective liberation processes?

In other words, what transformative metaphorical and material spaces give Black women the ability to blossom into the person they internally know themselves to be? How do we as a collective create more of these transformative spaces? How does the inner work done behind closed doors transform the physical world around you? What is the relationship between independence and interdependence in becoming who you're meant to be beyond the confines of who the world told you to be? How does the process of catering to one's well-being through processes of self-actualization and deconditioning from hegemony illuminate the embodiment of their wisdom in their everyday lives?

The remainder of this section is split into three subsections that trace the epistemological, methodological and theoretical lineages I am building upon: 1) Recurring Analytical Approaches in Black Studies, 2) Black Matters are Spatial Matters, 3) Personal as the Political. Each subheading captures the theories, concepts, and discussions within one of the fields I am drawing upon, with them being Black Studies, Black Geographies, and Black Feminist Thought, respectively. However, while separated by field for the sake of legibility, all three subsections are intrinsically linked and speak to one another, seamlessly picking up on conversations where others left off. I have started with “Recurring Analytical Approaches in Black Studies,” because it outlines how my analytical intention to take Black life seriously on its own terms informs every decision in my research design, from epistemological, to conceptual, to methodological (McKittrick 2021, 127). Ultimately, three questions that encompass the key lines of inquiry I am engaging within Black Studies, Black Geographies, and Black Feminist Thought, are:

1. As an ethical researcher who seeks to avoid intentionally perpetuating epistemologically violent scholarship, which analytical approaches in Black Studies aid in the creation of life-affirming, emancipatory research?
2. What is unveiled about how Black women sustain themselves and their communities whilst living within and beyond systems of domination when their well-being and placemaking practices are theorized as spatial responses to oppressive landscapes?
3. How does a deep attention to Black women’s embodied visions and inner knowing illuminate the interior dimensions operating within the Black feminist principle of the personal as the political?

Recurring Analytical Approaches in Black Studies

As discussed at length in the Crossroads chapter, looking back at my Master's experience made me fully realize the importance of every part of the research design in meeting one's emancipatory ends; from the questions asked and the disciplinary conversations you choose to engage with, to the investigative concepts, methods and empirics chosen. Accordingly, my analytical approach is to be more intentional about every aspect of the research design to ensure that I fill my dissertation to the brim with depictions of the breadth and depth of Black livingness while also not ignoring the realities of anti-Blackness on lived Black experiences. Honestly, this is no easy feat, and I am unsure of how successful I have been. Either way, I do know that I put in a lot of effort to center Black agency and abundance. Crucially, I have leant on analytical approaches recurring within Black Studies that vantage Black worldviews and experiences, namely autoethnography, a Black citational practice, and engaging with creative texts as theory.

In her essay "The Site of Memory," (1995) Toni Morrison explores how elements of autobiography, recollection, and memoir have been a significant part of the Black literary tradition within the United States, as evidenced by slave narratives. Historically, one of the main ways Black people have asserted their personhood is through writing about how their personal circumstances connect to the Black community's socio-political situation at large. For Morrison, personal narrative is one way in which Black people have evoked their agency and expressed their inner lives, which moves the veil aside that has often been drawn to coddle the (often) white reader's feelings at the expense of the writer's truth (Morrison 1995). This rhetorical method of personal recollection is used frequently within Black Feminist Thought because "for most African-American women those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences" (Collins 2002, 257). Personally, this idea of holding experiential

wisdom to a high regard rings true; making intellectual claims from a place of lived experience has always intuitively felt more valid to me.

I have always been drawn to autoethnographic methods, both as reading material and using within my own scholarship, because of how they ground theory into everyday realities. Thus, in order to theorize through Black women's embodied knowing, I have woven autoethnography, which is "the method and product of researching and writing about personal lived experiences and their relationship to culture" throughout my dissertation (Boylorn and Orbe 2014, 16–17). Elements of autoethnography appear at multiple levels in my project. First, I speak about my own relationship with the subject matter at hand since the research is inspired by my own journey. Second, all of the creative artifacts I empirically examine have elements of personal reflection on their lived experiences. And third, many of the epistemologies and theoretical concepts I utilize within Black Geographies and Black Feminist Thought are adept at capturing lived experiences. I am thrilled to bring auto-ethnographic research into the discipline of Black Geographies given that this method is not currently employed widely and/or is not often referenced as such (Hawthorne and Meche 2016; Eaves 2017; Hawthorne and Heitz 2018; McTighe and Haywood 2018; Reese 2019).

In the "Footnotes" chapter in *Dear Science and Other Stories* (2021), McKittrick discusses why Black citational practices, which include the texts we engage as theory, how we reference and cite, as well as what is included in the bibliography, are pivotal to meet the liberatory ends of one's project. Here, she asserts that in order to "radically reimagine liberation collectively" a Black studies citational practice must be predicated on a relational, interdisciplinary, shared dialogue (McKittrick 2021, 30). As discussed in the "Personal as the Political" section below, the use of dialogue in Black knowledge production is deeply rooted in

African and African American culture and oral traditions, which makes it popular within Black Feminist Thought as well (Sidran 1971; Smitherman 1977; Kochman 1981; Collins 2002). Importantly then, McKittrick argues for a Black citational practice that is not based upon inclusionary and exclusionary citing practices, such as aligning with a specific identity category or the naming of traditional disciplinary canons. Instead, the objective should be to align with those who share your emancipatory end of Black liberation, which is accomplished by theorizing “from a perspective of struggle (struggle is entangled with identities-places-embodiments-infrastructures- narratives-feelings),” (McKittrick 2021, 30). Ultimately, a shared political ethos between those you rigorously engage with ensures that the heart of your project is built upon a deep passion for “black life, black well-being, black livingness” (McKittrick 2021, 11; Quashie 2021).

Taking this call seriously, my work may be in conversation with white liberalism at points in time, but it is referential and in dialogue with life-affirming Black epistemologies to ensure discursive violences underpinned by White Supremacist, anti-Black logics are not given weight within my work. In other words, while I am interested in “critiqu[ing] racism and other practices of discrimination” I have no interest in “remain[ing] beholden to the systems of knowledge that profits from oppression” which means going out of my way to not describe at length dehumanizing discourses that reinscribe inequitable power relations (McKittrick 2021, 71; Hunter et al. 2016). It is for this reason I have made concerted efforts to make sure that the discursive framework I am building my entire project upon is all working towards fleshing out the fullness of Black women's lives without reinscribing racist logics that center monolithic narratives and degradative stereotypes. In fully leaning into intellectual dialogue with Black Studies, Black feminist, and Black geographic scholars also committed to life-affirming

examinations of Black life, I found a home within the academy for myself as a scholar as well as my research.

Importantly, evoking a Black citational practice as a way of affirming Black life supports a multi-modal engagement across a range of mediums, which expands what is perceived as theoretically insightful to include creative texts. As McKittrick effectively argues:

The creative text does not have to be good or artful or aesthetically pleasing or popular. What the creative text *is*, does not matter as much as what it *does*. And one thing black creative text and black creative praxes do is illuminate narratives of black life and humanity and, at the same time, create conditions through which relationality, rebellion, conversation, interdisciplinarity, and disobedience are fostered. Thus, the text is not simply a representation; the text is bound up in acts of psychic and physiological rebellion and disobedience that continually unveil the limits of casting black knowledge as only emerging from the violated body. Part of our task, part of creative praxis, is to also honor the creative text as a theoretical text. If we are committed to relationality and interhuman dialogue, if we are committed to academic practices that disobey disciplines, then the song, the groove, the poem, the novel, the painting, the sculpture must be relational to theory and praxis. These kinds of strategies—reimagining the black biologic as creative knowledge, disobeying the disciplines, viewing black texts as verbs rather than nouns, engendering interhuman relationalities, asking the groove and the poem for theoretical insight—provide intellectual spaces that define black humanity outside colonial scripts. (McKittrick 2021, 51–52 original emphasis)

I quote McKittrick at length here since this passage speaks to the heart of the epistemological and methodological project within my dissertation, which is to understand how Black creative texts are expressions of Black livingness that illuminate interior landscapes (McKittrick 2021; Judd 2023). Since creative praxes “opens up a methodological opportunity” to explore worldviews outside of hegemonic knowledge systems and unmeasurable on “colonial terms,” I am especially intrigued by this notion of what the creative text does being more important than what the creative text is aesthetically speaking (McKittrick 2021, 117). As detailed previously in the Introduction and Crossroads chapters, the focus of my dissertation is not to survey as many types of artistic mediums as possible (e.g., written, painting, collage, etc.), but rather to explore

creativity as a process of creation that brings something into existence from one's own thoughts and imagination.

Ultimately, using creative Black texts by Black women as my dissertation's artifacts to study fully embraces shared, interpersonal dialogue as a valid form of knowledge production. Following the thread of inspiration to creation opens up the space for me to examine Black women's motivations to write the creative texts as distinctly personal, interior spatial acts imbued with "psychic and physiological rebellion" (McKittrick 2021, 51). To clarify, "because black women's geographies are bound up with practices of spatial domination," I investigate what can be understood about livingness when we stretch the bounds of disciplinary rules regarding what is considered knowledge by taking all forms of Black geographic (re)production seriously and viewing creative, discursive expression interrogating personal processes of becoming as spatial acts (McKittrick 2006, xxiii). As a researcher who ruminates at length about how to conduct ethical research that is predicated on Black life, I strongly believe there is so much power in taking seriously the expressions Black women chose to assert their agency in the world, namely creative, discursive praxes. As I state repeatedly in different ways throughout this entire text, my insistence to uphold creative praxes as a deep well of theoretical insight into alternative ways of knowing and being comes from my own lived experience of writing poetry and creating art since childhood as a way of making sense of my encounters with the world, including people, environments, politics, narratives, belief systems, etc. I hold experiential wisdom on this topic, and am excited to theorize from this deep, intuitive knowing.

Black Matters are Spatial Matters

As a discipline, Black Geographies denounces how traditional geographic thought underpins Western spatial formation with racist logic systems. Specifically, Eurocentric

conceptualizations of the human born out of the Enlightenment period and transatlantic chattel slavery saw Black people as bodies to be controlled and animals' incapable of thinking for or taking care of themselves. The longstanding ramifications of Transatlantic chattel slavery positioning Black beings as mere property to create profit for the white world is an uneven material and discursive landscape that is predicated on a racist "logic of visualization" that deems seeable Black body flesh as inferior, damaged, and less than their white counterparts (McKittrick 2006, 47; Fanon 2008; Camp 2015; McKittrick 2015; Weheliye 2014; Robinson 2020). In fact, "[s]ight, in Enlightenment thought, was more than a sense; it was a way of knowing," which meant by Eurocentric standards, the dehumanization linked to Black bodies mapped onto Black modes of being, along with their sites of living (Camp 2015, 676). The result of such degradative engagement with race, racism, conquest, and exploitation during colonial times are the proliferation of racial constructs that deny all, or at least any positive, connections Black people have to space. The equation of Blackness with dispossession continues to be upheld by a white gaze today; remanifesting as supposedly neutral and normative under the guise of scientific determinism, which leads to the circulation of stereotypical narratives about the Black community being "'ungeographic' and/or philosophically undeveloped" as commonplace by academics, policymakers, the media, and everyday citizens (McKittrick 2006, xiii; Lipsitz 1995). I, of course, scoff at this idea of Black people being unable to have any positive connections to space. My life has been full of wonderful relationships with my places of living, and as I have heartwarmingly expressed earlier in this chapter, and continue throughout the entire dissertation, my local pond is one of the most important beings in my life.

While Black geographic frameworks have been integral to many prominent works (Du Bois 1903; Du Bois 1935; Wilson 1995; Woods 1998; Gilmore 2007; Fanon 2008; McKittrick

2006; Pulido 2006; McKittrick and Woods 2007; Bunge 2011), Black Geographies' codification as a subfield within the discipline of Geography is recent as of the mid 2010s (Bledsoe et al. 2018; Hawthorne 2019). Black Geographies central assertion that Black people are intrinsically geographic in nature is made possible by the discipline's epistemological vantage point of Black embodied vision, which is epitomized in their widespread motto "Black matters are spatial matters," (McKittrick 2006, xii; Hawthorne 2019). Markedly, they epistemologically center "black experiences and ways of being in the world" (Bledsoe 2021, 15) to center "where the imperative of a perspective of struggle takes place" (McKittrick 2006, 6). By examining the ways Black subjects construct knowledge and concurrently produce space, Black geographic inquiries uncover life-affirming knowledges, senses of place, and connections to space within and beyond domination and narratives of racial suffering (Du Bois 1903; Gilroy 1993; Fanon 2008; McKittrick 2011, 2015; Coates 2015; Sharpe 2016; Wright 2017; Cope 2018; Hawthorne and Heitz 2018; Robinson 2020; McKittrick 2021).

Importantly, Black spatial knowledge and resistance practices are made comprehensible by "untether[ing] Black knowledge from a violated body and de-center[ing] the body as the primary unit of analysis" (Hawthorne 2019, 4). In turn, refuting biological determinism's preoccupation with the Black violated body as the focal point of Black knowing paves the way for Black Geographers to uplift "the situated knowledge of these communities and their contributions to both real and imagined human geographies [as] significant political acts and expressions," (McKittrick and Woods 2007, 4). Some key thematic areas for inquiry in Black Geographies are space-making practices and Black spatial imaginaries (Woods 1998; Eaves 2017; Reese 2019; Summers 2019), racial capitalism (Robinson 2000; Gilmore 2007; Melamed 2015), carceral geographies (including cities, policing, surveillance and containment) (Gilmore

2007; Shabazz 2015; Maynard 2017), racist histories' contemporary manifestations (McKittrick 2006), and plantation futures (McKittrick 2011). Additionally, across the academy, social science scholars of urban planning, urban studies, domestic geopolitics, and borderlands have included Black geographic frameworks into their research inquiry to ensure their work takes seriously the importance of racial difference in the production of space (Brand and Miller 2020; Ramírez 2020; Roy 2020; Vasudevan and Smith 2020).

A Black Sense of Place

One avenue for exploration into how Black communities are influenced by, and subsequently negotiate, the convergence of race and place in their everyday lives, is through an examination of a Black sense of place (Woods 1998; McKittrick 2006, 2011; Shabazz 2015; Eaves 2017; McKittrick 2021). As McKittrick asserts, "black lives are necessarily geographic, but also struggle with discourses that erase and despatialize their sense of place" (McKittrick 2006, xiii). Examining the etymological roots in her landmark essay, "On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place," (2011) McKittrick emphasizes connections between a black sense of place and Doreen Massey's "sense of place" (Massey 1994). Specifically, McKittrick explains how Massey's conceptualization of "a sense of place" offers a way to understand capital, structural, and people's flows and movement in society with an attention to the differing power social groups hold in relation to the "geometry of time-space compression" of the paradigm and spatial organization (2011, 950 citing Massey 1994). Thus, an inquiry into a Black sense of place uncovers the role anti-Blackness has in the production of space as transparent space, as well as the many ways Black peoples and cultures work outside commonsense understandings of geography to enact Black world-making practices.

A Black sense of place is an expansive analytical framework, that is simultaneously a methodology, epistemology and concept. Some of the various ways McKittrick has defined a

Black sense of place over the years are: 1) “a methodology and an analytical frame that believes in and believes black humanity” (McKittrick 2021, 107), 2) “where we know from” (McKittrick 2021, 117), 3) “the process of materially and imaginatively situating historical and contemporary struggles against practices of domination and the difficult entanglements of racial encounter” (McKittrick 2011, 949) and 4) “alternative mapping practices” (McKittrick 2011, 949).

Importantly then, a Black sense of place is “not a standpoint or a situated knowledge,” but is a way of capturing how Black people’s interactions with their surrounding geographies, society, and culture are one that is based upon a “location of difficult encounter and relationality” due to their Black identity (McKittrick 2021, 106). Therefore, Black Geographies’ intention is not to recover a Black sense of place since Black connections to space are always in existence and recovery presumes that something has been lost. I would argue that Black Geographies’ mission is also not to discover a Black sense of place given that discovery often assumes that something previously unknown is being found for the first time. Instead, their objective is to uncover (i.e., reveal) Black senses of place, knowledge, and connections to space that are always in existence, and yet have been rendered unknowable in white geographic modes of thought and material orders.

My project examines how the ability to reveal more life-affirming Black senses of place within Black women’s lives is predicated on recognizing nuanced encounters with space as valid forms of geographic expression. Specifically, I explore Black liberation through the lens of deconditioning, self-actualization, self-recovery and becoming to empirically center Black epistemological repossession (which focuses on questions of being from a decolonization lens) as opposed to the often-studied Black material repossession (which tends to focus on questions of doing from a racial capitalist lens). To clarify, a plethora of Black geographic research

emphasizes how the material dispossession that occurred during slavery is playing out in modern unevenly developed landscapes, such as through material disparities in where people live, food access, gun violence, incarceration, policies etc. (Gilmore 2007; Shabazz 2015; Reese 2019; Summers 2019). Furthermore, various studies use “a Black sense of place” as an analytical tool to demonstrate the nuances (and paradoxes) inherent in Black people’s relationship to themselves in particular regions of the country that hold historic racial salience, such as the Black South, Chicago and the Mississippi delta (Woods 1998; Shabazz 2015; Eaves 2017).

However, less attention has been paid into how creative praxes, as a discursive process and act of placemaking, facilitates Black women’s personal journeys towards living more in tune with their own intuitive, ancient ways of knowing despite continuing to live in the anti-Black, patriarchal, capitalist landscapes of the United States. My interest in engaging creative praxes and processes of becoming as spatial politics that reveals life-affirming Black senses of place is working with bell hooks’ definition of decolonization as “breaking with the ways our reality is defined and shaped by the dominant culture and asserting our understanding of that reality, of our own experience” (2015, ix). In this way, my project’s emphasis on Black epistemological repossession centers a Black sense of place in order to illuminate how “racial violences (concrete and epistemic actions and structural patterns intended to harm, kill, or coerce a particular grouping of people) shape, but do not wholly define, black worlds” (McKittrick 2011, 947). Specifically, I demonstrate how utilizing the analytic of a Black sense of place is generative for a desire-centered analysis of Black life, primarily because of how its focus on Black encounters with space makes intelligible the interior “poetic, visual, psychic, and physiological responses” found within Black women’s creative and becoming praxes (McKittrick 2021, 50). Thus, by acknowledging Black women on their own terms outside of essentialist paradigms, I draw on a

Black sense of place to showcase how Black women's artistic expression, as a form of theoretical worldbuilding and a practice of placemaking, illuminates Black women's personal journeys of becoming as a rigorous spatial praxes imbued in a politics of refusal (McKittrick 2006, 2011).

Placemaking

One of the primary ways scholars explore how humans produce space and construct place is through the concept of placemaking. Placemaking is theorized as “the cultural, discursive, and material practices through which” both individuals and social groups shape their physical and symbolic spaces they inhabit to foster collective belonging (Elwood, Lawson and Nowak 2015, 123; Massey 2005). Importantly then, space is not a fixed location, but a dynamic, relational process that is always under construction, and placemaking is the term usually prescribed to understand people's role in the socio-political and material production of place (Massey 2005; Allen, Lawhon, and Pierce 2019). Because our Western socio-spatial ordering is produced through a Eurocentric gaze, it is essential that we understand how the iterative construction of place and identity impact marginalized communities (Martin 2003; Massey 2005; Larsen 2008; Massey 2014; Elwood et al. 2015; Allen, Lawhon, and Pierce 2019). A recognition of how placemaking is a social process that orders society within a particular political vision makes the risks to Black communities, in their many manifestations, everyday realities very clear: from identity formation, to uneven access to resources, and lastly formal and informal socio-political practices being unintelligible, all result in their geographic vision for how they would (re)order society being ignored.

As Black Geographers and scholars at the nexus of sociology and Black studies argue, even if unintended, often what still gets focused on within the social sciences is a negative representation of Black people's relationship to placemaking. Because a Black sense of place is still conceived of as placeless, and thus dead, “urban black residents and their neighborhoods”

are often portrayed “as bounded, plagued by violence, victims and perpetrators, unproductive, and isolated from one another and the city writ large, if not also pathological, dangerous, and depressing” (Hunter et al. 2016, 51; McKittrick 2011, 2021). Attempting to correct this tendency to situate Black life within a deficit framework, Black placemaking is conceptualized as the “focus on affirmative black identities and affirmative black geographies that celebrate black life even as black communities resist a racist society” (Allen, Lawhon, and Pierce 2019, 1004). From this epistemological vantage point, Black people are agents of placemaking who use their power to recreate their surrounding geographies of unjust socio-spatial processes into “sites of play, pleasure, celebration, and politics” (Hunter et al. 2016, 34). By centering “the agency, intent, and even spontaneity of urban black residents — across genders, sexualities, ages, classes, and politics —,” a Black placemaking perspective reveals Black communities as the producers of spaces that reflect and generate positive senses of place, including life-affirming, laughter filled, culturally imbued, sustainable gathering sites (Hunter et al. 2016, 51).

In my Master’s work exploring past and present Black experiences in my hometown of Springfield, Massachusetts, I encountered this contradictory portrayal of Black spaces with residents lived experiences head on (Brown 2021). Many of the participants I interviewed detailed at length how they grew up constantly hearing about how our hometown of Springfield, Massachusetts was ghetto, dangerous, and nasty, which left them feeling like their city was the butt of jokes, nonexistent, and belittled (Brown 2021, 65-67). However, as my thesis explores, Springfield has a rich history of past and present Black placemaking, with the place being the site of extensive Black abolitionist activity in the 19th century, as well as the home of many abundant familial memories and life-affirming community projects today (Brown 2021). In other words, while the dominant discourse, seeped in a settler colonial, Eurocentric lens pushed a

narrative of Springfield as placeless, speaking to the residents who lived their illuminated a plethora of positive senses of place, including the creation of many sites for the community dedicated to politics, art, culture, food, and building socio-economic power. I am not alone in utilizing conceptualizations of Black placemaking to make visible life-affirming connections between Black people and their places of living and being. Over the past few years, the concept of Black placemaking has been extensively employed to examine a wide breadth of subjects, especially by graduate students, including: American pop culture, entrepreneurship, speculative revanchism, urban communities, queer placemaking, student life and higher education, digital engagement, waste exposure and practices, agricultural initiatives, the King James Bible, maroon geographies, place naming processes, television series, health disparities, spirituality's connection to sociopolitical development and the historical relationship between African American and African heritage commemorative practices (Drayton 2019; Radney 2019; Giancarlo 2020; Whitley 2020; Brown 2021; Millhouse 2021; Palmer 2021; Murphy 2022; Shamsid-Deen and Porter 2022; Green 2023; Halkiyo and Hailu 2023; McCutcheon and Eaves 2023; Winston 2023; Neville 2024; Ordaz et al., 2024; Tichavakunda 2024; Golden and Tichavakunda 2025; Jackson 2025; Okechukwu 2025; Powell 2025; Rasodi et al., 2025; Williams 2025; Bialostok 2026; Montgomery 2026).

Thus, while placemaking is life, Black placemaking is the richness, complexity and fullness of Black life. My dissertation asks: how does Black placemaking provide a lens to understand the physical and metaphysical forms of spatial praxes Black women use to make place for themselves and their communities? I am especially interested in how the relational aspects of Black placemaking demonstrate how processes are always operating across, and imbricated in, other places and scales (Massey 2005). For instance, examining how Black

women cater to their well-being as a form of spatial praxes that teaches us something about place, politics, personhood, culture, and identity illuminates a distinctly multidimensional aspect of Black women's placemaking. In particular, my empirical investigation found that the creation of physical spaces of belonging often necessitated that the interior dimensions of the self, such as their spirit, psyche, and/or geospatial vision for society, be catered to as well (McKittrick and Woods 2007). In many ways, this idea of multidimensional Black placemaking reflects my own experience of communing with the pond. My intimate connection to the pond carries the symbolic weight it does because of how it tends to my wholistic well-being, mind, body, psyche, and spirit, stretching far beyond just a physical space of acceptance and safety to include a profound sense of metaphysical transcendence unlike that I have experienced anywhere else.

Poetics of Landscape

Lastly, I am familiar with Édouard Glissant's conceptualization of a poetics of landscape (Glissant 1989) from McKittrick's usage in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (McKittrick 2006). Specifically, a poetics of landscape brings attention to written and unwritten geographic expressions, such as "theorizing, feeling, knowing, writing, and imagining space and place" (i.e., "theories, poems, dramatic plays, and historical narratives)" (McKittrick 2006, xxi) as subaltern spatial practices that provide "spatial clues as to how more humanly workable geographies might be imagined" (McKittrick 2006, xxiii). In theorizing from Glissant's poetics of landscape, McKittrick reimagines uncharted ways of knowing from vantage point that honors the multitude of ways space is produced and reconceptualized when Black women interact with the world around them (Glissant 1989; McKittrick 2006). A poetics of landscape has been indispensable for my research since it takes seriously Black women's authentic, organic engagements with space and place as significant to our collective understanding of the geographic landscape. In particular, since my project's

empirics are literary creative artifacts created by Black women, a poetics of landscape celebrates the act of creating in and of itself as a geographic expression. Additionally, this concept upholds the clues embedded within narrative and storytelling as culturally insightful evidence into some of Black women's unique spatial responses and placemaking practices that allow them to sustain themselves while existing amidst landscapes of domination, broadening our understanding of Western spatial formations. Above all, a poetics of landscape has been the most helpful analytical tool for leveling the playing field between the empirical (i.e., the seen) and the metaphysical (i.e., the unseen) as equal bearers of geographic knowledge, which has opened up the possibilities for capturing some of the more internal aspects of Black women's spatial imaginaries discussed in the next section "Personal as the Political," such as Black women's intuition and relationship to Spirit.

Personal as the Political

Feminist Epistemologies

The nexus of embodiment, vision, and gaze have been concerns of feminist theorists over time (Haraway 1988; Reinharz and Davidman 1992; Rose 1993; Massey 1994; Guy-Sheftall 1995; Collins 2002, 2004; Harding 2004a; Hartsock 2004; England 2015; McDowell and Sharp 2016). My research aligns with feminists' belief that the social construction of realities and knowledges are always being influenced by societal power relations and thus requires us to theorize from alternative, embodied ways of knowing and moving through the world. Feminist theorists wholly reject positivist assertions that universal truths arise out of research that is neutral, objective and unbiased, instead calling out how Western Enlightenment knowledge systems are undergirded by a white, masculinist, colonial gaze. Importantly, feminist epistemologies affirm how we all "view the world from different embodied locations," paving the way within the academy for reflexive praxes that views positionality, both of scholars and of

the subjects under study, as an intrinsic part of knowledge production (England 2015, 364).

Three theorists that have been crucial to my own comprehension of the feminist project of reclaiming the knowledge that arises from our embodied, subjective experiences as unique forms of vision are Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, and Patricia Hill Collins.

As a graduate student, it can be difficult to fully grasp what is meant by epistemology as the study of knowledge. The stakes of whose knowledge claims are viewed as valid really clicked for me when I engaged with Haraway's framework of situated knowledges and partial perspectives, as well as Harding's framework of standpoint theory. Specifically, Haraway argues that the disembodied, impartial objective gaze put forth by positivism is "a god trick" because of how it creates an illusion for the majority of society that dominant thought is universal and neutral, when it is actually reflecting the knowledge arising from the social positions of white men (Haraway 1988, 582). This idea of a god trick helped me to understand how the "view of infinite vision" (Haraway 1988, 582) takes on an all-encompassing form of knowing because of how "the unmarked positions of Man and White" are conditioned as natural for many of us growing up in the Western world (Haraway 1988, 581). Alternatively, Haraway's framework of embodied objectivity emphasizes how our understanding of the world is situated, limited and partial since it is contextually dependent upon our social positioning, including our environment, identities, experiences, and the overarching power dynamics operating in society. Generally, Haraway's situated knowledges, which "insist[s] on the embodied nature of all vision," (1988, 581) stands out as an important framework for teaching me how knowledge is individually constructed based upon our social location, as well as how those "ruled by partial sight and limited voice" can come together as a community to illuminate a broader societal vision (1988, 590). While Sandra Harding also believes that knowledge is constructed through one's social

location in society, her epistemological framework of standpoint theory diverges on the topic of epistemic privileges possessed by marginalized groups in society (Harding 2004b; Hartsock 2004). Meaning, while both Haraway and Harding believe situated knowledge makes a larger vision for society possible, Harding's standpoint theory is unique in its assertion that "a social and political disadvantage can be turned into an epistemological, scientific, and political advantage" when subjugated groups go through a process of consciousness raising (2004b, 7–8). I have come to appreciate Harding's standpoint theory for its validation of how marginalized groups gain unique insights when navigating oppressive social structures that enable them to challenge the inequitable power relations operating within dominant thought.

Ultimately, since my project is grounded in Black geographic, Black Studies, and Black feminist literature, I largely look to Patricia Hill Collins' in-depth discussion of Black feminist epistemologies in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2002) to examine the spatial dimensions of Black women's well-being and becoming as a self-determinative politics of refusal emerging from intuitive, embodied ways of knowing. In particular, three aspects of Black feminist epistemologies detailed by Collins' that have been useful for thinking through my own project are: 1) Black women's standpoint theory, 2) four distinguishing features of Black women's epistemology from Eurocentric epistemologies, and 3) the matrix of domination.

Originally published in 1990, Collins articulates a Black feminist standpoint theory in her renowned book, *Black Feminist Thought* (2002) that reflects the longstanding insights and wisdom of Black women in both the grassroots activism and scholarly domains. Importantly, Collins argues that Black women develop distinct ways of seeing and knowing the world due to their embodied experience of intersecting oppressions, namely race and gender, but also

sexuality, class, nation etc. In turn, a unique standpoint emerges from Black women's "outsider-within locations," which "foster[s] new angles of vision on oppression" (Collins 2002, 11). Importantly, the goal of a Black feminist standpoint is not to put forth an archetypal Black woman whose lived experiences represent a homogeneous group. Instead, a Black women's collective standpoint represents a heterogeneous group's experiences of facing intersecting oppressions and is "characterized by the tensions that accrue to different responses to common challenges" (Collins 2002, 28). Thus, articulating a Black women's collective standpoint captures the "recurring patterns of differential treatment" in order to derive general themes "characteriz[ing] U.S. Black women's group knowledge or standpoint" (Collins 2002, 26). This idea is an important clarification for my own project's intent. My interest in interrogating Black women's creative artifacts as a window into the interior facets of their lived experiences is not to presume that any individual case study is a stand-in for all Black women. Instead, my intent is to examine Black women's personal journeys of deconditioning and becoming as one of many spatial responses to encounters with the U.S. landscape and broader systemic contexts.

Collins explores four major ways Black women's epistemological approaches invert many of the hallmarks of Eurocentric knowledge production, including lived experiences as a criterion of meaning, the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, the ethics of caring, and the ethic of personal accountability (Collins 2002, 257–266). First, unlike positivism, which argues that valid knowledge is that which is unbiased and objective, a Black women's standpoint finds credibility in knowledge claims that are connected to lived experiences. This is because Black feminism acknowledges the wisdom garnered through navigating intersectional oppressions, and in turn "give such wisdom high credence in assessing knowledge" (Collins 2002, 257). My dissertation is a good case in point of how Black women scholars often pull from

our own lives when choosing topics and methods. The main reason I have dedicated so much space in my dissertation to detailing the various ways my own life has been a major source of inspiration for many of my analytical decisions is because I am a Black feminist and seek to continue this time-honored epistemological tradition (Collins 2002, 257).

Second, because “dialogue implies talk between two subjects,” using dialogue is often one-way Black women’s standpoint destabilizes the power hierarchy within traditional knowledge production that puts the researcher into an authoritative position (Collins 2002, 260 citing hooks 1989). Instead, using dialogue promotes knowledge production through conversation, storytelling, and narrative, which fosters “connectedness rather than separation” (Collins 2002, 260; Belenky et al., 1986). This idea really resonates with my own thinking of approaching the creative artifacts as verbs rather than nouns so that their theoretical insightfulness plays an equal role to my own in the resulting knowledge claims made (McKittrick 2021).

Third, an “ethic of caring suggests that personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process” (Collins 2002, 263). Collins notes that three interconnected aspects that lie at the heart of an ethics of caring are valuing individual uniqueness, deeming emotions as appropriate in dialogue, and having a capacity for empathy (Collins 2002, 263–264). This idea of “talking with the heart” as an alternative epistemological approach really speaks to the themes I have chosen to focus on, such as exploring creativity as a deeply personal, intimate process of creation (Collins 2002, 262).

Finally, an ethics of personal accountability maintains that a reflexive approach to knowledge production is essential, given that a researcher's positionality, which includes their lived experiences, core beliefs, and personal worldview, can never be removed from their

knowledge claims (Collins 2002). The idea of being personally accountable when it comes to the ethics of my project has been addressed in various ways. For example, I hold myself accountable through honest self-reflection regarding my positioning as a researcher and past pitfalls I have had regarding spending too much time discussing anti-Black discourses within my Master's thesis. Additionally, my insistence on utilizing a Black citational practice where everyone I am engaging with shares my Black emancipatory intent is another way in which I have infused a level of ethical accountability into my project. As a whole, what stands out the most regarding these four features of Black women's epistemology is how they collectively put an emphasis on the interior domain in its advancement of embodied knowledge production.

The "matrix of domination" is one of Collin's most useful theoretical frameworks to exemplify how empowering Black women's oppositional knowledge is a social justice initiative that helps to dismantle oppressive structures (2002, 227). Specifically, Collins describes the matrix of domination as the:

overall social organization within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained. In the United States, such domination has occurred through schools, housing, employment, government, and other social institutions that regulate the actual patterns of intersecting oppressions that Black women encounter. (Collins 2002, 227–228)

Collins puts forth four domains of power within the U.S. matrix of domination, which are not only interlocking sites of oppression, but also potential sites of empowering Black women's resistance: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal (Collins 2002, 277–288). The structural domain of power includes the social institutions that organize our society, such as policies, the economic and political systems, schools, housing, etc. The disciplinary domain of power "manages power relations" through bureaucratic and surveillance organizational practices, such as social welfare, educational and medical institutions (Collins 2002, 280). The hegemonic

domain of power's goal is to rationalize the actions of the structural and disciplinary domains of power by normalizing Eurocentric ideological and cultural beliefs within the consciousness of the majority of people. Common social locations to help push hegemonic ideologies as common sense to the public are pop culture and media, academic and religious teachings, and familial and historical narratives. Finally, the interpersonal domain of power includes everyday social interactions and relationships, including microaggressions and discrimination.

As a Black feminist geographer interested in the spatial dimensions of epistemological repossession, Collin's matrix of domination is especially useful for making sense of how individuals are socially located within a system of power relations that are operating across multidimensional, interconnected scales. For example, my projects focus on Black women's creative praxes, nurturing one's well-being, and processes of deconditioning and self-actualization as everyday resistance strategies would fall under the hegemonic and interpersonal domains of power. In particular, her conceptualization of the hegemonic domain of power provides conceptual clarity and terminology for understanding how the often interior, immaterial phenomena of ideology, culture, and consciousness are in themselves a distinct site of oppressive tactics and resistance practices. Thus, concretizing the site where hegemony is justified makes the material consequences of largely immaterial, discursive phenomena more tangible, which in turn makes it easier to envision how it relates to broader systemic contexts. Importantly, since the hegemonic domain is where the justification of different ways of knowing takes place, this location is where many projects utilizing Black feminist epistemologies are located. Ultimately, positioning my research within the hegemonic and interpersonal domains of power substantiates how my empirical focus interrogating how Black women foster "counter-hegemonic knowledge

that fosters changed consciousness” in their everyday lives is an issue of importance to both Black feminist and Black geographic thought (Collins 2002, 285).

Well-Being

As both a markedly social justice project and an intellectual center, Black women have played an essential role in organizing against systemic oppression. Additionally, Black women activists have contributed to Black liberation discourses within the United States dating back to the times of slavery, such as Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Ida B. Wells Barnett (Davis 1995, Guy-Sheftall 1995; Collins 2002; Taylor 2017; Berry and Gross 2020; Hartman 2022; Jackson 2024). Contemporary second-wave Black feminism originates out of Black women’s collective recognition that the unique nexus of their racial, sexual, gender and class positioning in society left their unique challenges neglected as primary focal points of the 1960s and 70s anti-racist and women’s liberation movements (Collins 2002; Taylor 2017; Berry and Gross 2020). For instance, primary points of contention between white feminists and Black feminists stemmed from the fact that Black women have a long history of being in the American workforce while simultaneously being excluded from the social safety net, which led to differing perspectives on issues such as welfare policies, labor rights and access to the widow’s pension. When it comes to divisiveness within Black liberation movements, Black women were often not given enough recognition for their roles in the movement and there were differences of viewpoints on key issues such as bodily autonomy and accessing birth control.

The Combahee River Collective Statement is a poignant declaration of Black Feminist Thought that defines the principles of the field, namely empowering Black women to address issue areas that impact their lives and embodying an inclusive politics that promotes cross cultural coalition building (Combahee River Collective 2017). Importantly then, Black Feminists embody an intersectional politics that intentionally struggles for the liberation of all people

impacted by the interlocking system of racial, sexual, class, and heterosexual oppression, and thus are “concerned with any situation that impinges upon the lives of women, Third World and working people” (Combahee River Collective 2017, 26). Examples of social justice projects Black feminists have played a crucial role in organizing include disparities pertaining to the workplace, welfare, childcare, domestic violence, rape and sexual assault, sterilization, abortion, healthcare, gun violence, and criminal justice reform. Additionally, a few of the intellectual topic threads Black feminists have covered are the navigation of the white gaze and controlling images (Cohen 1997; Collins 2002; Cahill 2007; Cacho 2012; Noble 2018; Hartman 2019), embracing Black sexualities as a dimension of selfhood (Cohen 1997; Thorpe 1996; Hammonds 2004; Bailey and Shabazz 2014; Moore 2014; Stallings 2015; Ellison 2019), affect, pleasure and the erotic (brown 2019; Lorde 2020e; Judd 2023), nurturing well-being and self-care (Collins 2002; hooks 2015; Lorde 2020c), and lastly cultivating tools for liberation and reimagining (brown 2017, 2021; Benjamin 2022; Davis et al. 2022). All in all, a constant within the breadth of Black Feminist Thought is an understanding that despite the nexus of oppressions impacting their daily lives, Black women are not a monolith and deserve to exist as their multifaceted, whole selves in the world.

My work contributes to Black feminism’s focus on nurturing one’s well-being through self-definition and self-valuation as a self-determinative, empowering political act (Collins 2002). In the purest sense my dissertation continues Black feminists’ work on expanding the “feminist principle that the personal is political” by exploring Black women’s well-being with a deep attention to interiority and inner knowing (Combahee River Collective 2017, 20). Importantly, both Black and feminist epistemologies employ an ontological worldview that conceptualizes emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual well-being in our heteronormative,

racist, patriarchal, capitalist system as both a markedly political process, as well as an innate human act of survival (Collins 2004; McKittrick 2006; McKittrick and Woods 2007; hooks 2015). As Audre Lorde powerfully asserts on this matter, “[c]aring for [one]self is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (Lorde 1988, 125). In this way, my work takes up McKittrick’s call to “get in touch with the materiality of our analytical worlds” (2021, 11) through an empirical investigation that “pos[es] new and different academic questions that emerge from a black sense of place (where we know from)” (2021, 117). This research goal also connects directly with my goal of epistemological repossession because a key part of the process of deconditioning from hegemonic modes of knowing and being involves leaning into self-definition and self-valuation as resistance practices that allow oneself to become the authority in their life (Collins 2002). Lorde eloquently sums this idea up, stating:

racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and time. I urge each one of us to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices. (2020, 103)

The extensive work of rejecting dominant modes of thought in order to live as their true authentic selves is being done every day by many Black women out in the world. Thus, my dissertation's exploration of the spatial dimensions of Black women’s well-being practices answers both McKittrick’s and Lorde’s call to understand the layers and textures involved in Black women’s journey of embodying ways of knowing and living that are aligned with their values and belief system.

Another work that bestows wisdom on how nurturing Black women’s well-being is an empowering, political act of resistance against systemic oppression is *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* by bell hooks (2015). Here, hooks discusses the psychological impacts and inner wounds (i.e., hearts, minds, bodies, spirits) all Black people carry due to living under

the oppressive systems of White Supremacy and capitalism that hierarchically relegates them to the status of inferior human beings. hooks poignantly speaks to how healing our interior and exterior facets of self is integral to our individual survival, as well as sustained collective political action, when living under this racist, sexist, capitalist system, arguing:

Black female self-recovery, like all black self-recovery, is an expression of a liberatory political practice. Living as we do in a white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal context that can best exploit us when we lack a firm grounding in self and identity (knowledge of who we are and where we have come from), choosing ‘wellness’ is an act of political resistance. Before many of us can effectively sustain engagement in organized resistance struggle, in black liberation movement, we need to undergo a process of self-recovery that can heal individual wounds that may prevent us from functioning fully. (hooks 2015, 7)

hooks wholly substantiates my interest in exploring the spatial dimensions of Black women’s becoming as a politics of refusal when she acknowledges how the decision of Black women to do the work of healing to reveal their true selves in this violent paradigm is indeed a part of the Black liberation struggle. This aspect of Black women’s representation is not acknowledged enough in broader discourses and as a Black woman who is undergoing this process of self-recovery, I am passionate about bringing this integral element of Black women’s experiences to the forefront of my work.

Finally, a work that encapsulates my own thinking as it pertains to creative expression as a window into the interior domain that sheds light on Black women’s becoming as a politics of refusal is “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” by Audre Lorde (2020d). Pointedly, Lorde asserts that “poetry is not a luxury” but instead a vital aspect of Black women’s lives that taps into a deep source of knowledge which allows them to bring their hopes and dreams into tangible fruition (2020d, 25). In her discussion of unlatching from hegemony, she states, “The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free (Lorde 2020d, 26). Here, Lorde’s conceptualization of poetry as an

act of speaking from one's innate being, versus poetry as an adherence to conventional structure and rules, echoes my own engagement with creativity as an act of birthing into existence through one's own life force. Additionally, in switching from an epistemological focus on thinking to feeling in accessing one's inner knowing, Lorde is directly engaging the integral role of embodiment in liberating oneself from the confines of whiteness. In an even more candid elaboration of how Black feminist epistemologies is a deeply internal, embodied form of knowing, Lorde states:

When we view living in the European mode only as a problem to be solved, we rely solely upon our ideas to make us free, for these were what the white fathers told us were precious. But as we become more in touch with our own ancient, non-European consciousness of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes. (Lorde 2020d, 25)

In this statement, Lorde acknowledges the grave necessity of Black women to get in touch with their interior domain where feeling, consciousness, and true knowledge dwells to overcome internalized notions of what is the right way to live placed upon them by Eurocentricity. Tangible changes to Black women's external worlds can really take hold when they are able to embody their own standards of self-definition and worth, which I argue is in itself an act of refusal insisting that one live on their own terms.

Interiority

Black feminist scholars are pivotal to my thinking on the crucial role of the interior domain as a significant site of analysis to flesh out a fuller understanding of who Black women are beyond traditional representation in the public sphere (Morrison 1995; Willis 2000; Alexander 2004; Quashie 2012; Williamson 2017; Quashie 2021; Judd 2023). Importantly, all of the authors critically inquire into the contradictions between cultural depictions and lived realities of Black women's social locations through a range of modalities that analytically shine a

spotlight upon the intersections of internal and external landscapes, including literary criticism, visual art, personal narrative, media analysis, and creative writing. Alexander (2004), Williamson (2017) and Quashie (2012, 2021) have been especially useful in fostering a more nuanced engagement with interiority in my project. In particular, they all flesh out how interiority is more than just a lens to examine people's emotions, hopes, and dreams, but is also a way to privilege Black embodied selves operating outside and beyond the colonial, patriarchal white gaze. Said differently, an interior focus opens up possibilities for more accurate, nuanced and multidimensional renderings of contemporary Black experiences to come into view and be understood on their own terms outside of how Blackness has monolithically been defined in relation to whiteness. Important to Black Geographies' objective to honor Black knowledge from a site of abundance, these Black feminist thinkers demonstrate how the very ability to discern Black women's creative praxes as a radical spatial politics of refusal and expression of worldmaking requires the usage of research methods that honor the intuitive, embodied, expressive forms of knowledge production held within internal worlds.

In *The Black Interior* (2004) Elizabeth Alexander examines a variety of African-American creative artifacts, such as photographs, films, and art, through an interior lens. Specifically, she conceptualizes the black interior as "black life and creativity behind the public face of stereotype and limited imagination. The black interior is a metaphysical space beyond the black public everyday toward power and wild imagination that black people ourselves know we possess but need to be reminded of" (Alexander 2004, x). Alexander's idea of the black interior as an embodied sense of knowing oneself outside of the confining limitations of the outer world that Black people must remember they possess is very similar to Audre Lorde's discussion of the knowledge held in Black women's interior domains in "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" (2020d).

Through this lens Alexander can explore who Black people are beyond their public images that have been defined by the rules of whiteness. She declares that “‘the black interior’ is not an inscrutable zone, nor colonial fantasy. Rather [she] see[s] it as inner space in which black artists have found selves that go far beyond the limited expectations and definitions of what black is, isn’t, or should be” (Alexander 2004, 5). Generally, the way in which Alexander explores creative artifacts as tangible representations of multi-faceted Black selves echoes my own project’s intent to vantage a fuller breadth of Black livingness by exploring creative Black texts as windows into interior landscapes that provide insight into the creator’s embodied vision.

In *Scandalize My Name: Black Feminist Practice and the Making of Black Social Life* (2017) Terrion L. Williamson examines logics of Black women’s representation within dominant narratives by understanding the relationship between “the intramural (black community) and the interior (black self)” (16). In her exploration of Black social life, she points to the sustained practice of “archetype-hunting” (Williamson 2017, 17; Ellison 1972) within stereotype discourses, arguing that since there is already a long history of “the stereotype com[ing] to stand for all of us” why not use this relational lens as “the grounds on which to enact a radical engagement with the self that cannot be itself alone” (Williamson 2017, 19). In other words, to understand more humanizing aspects of Black social life beyond well-known stereotypes, Williamson centers “the way black people go about making themselves” by privileging their individual world orders over hegemony (Williamson 2017, 16). In turn, privileging “what [Black] folks think about themselves” allows for inquiries into black social life “from the vantage point at which it is lived, rather than at which it is merely viewed or policed or looked in on occasionally” (Williamson 2017, 15–16). Ultimately, Williamson’s decision to theorize from Black inner knowing opposed to a white gaze to understand Black social life through embodied

lived realities reminds me of my own project's intent to put forth a life-affirming representation of Black women by spotlighting interior Black worlds.

Finally, in *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (2012) Kevin Quashie engages interiority through his conceptualization of “quiet.” Specifically, he argues that to challenge dominant conceptualizations of Blackness as “identities formed and articulated and resisted in public” we must expand notions of Black humanity to include a greater focus on the interior (Quashie 2012, 24). Importantly then, “despite its name, the interior is not unconnected to the world of things (the public or political or social world),” (Quashie 2012, 8) but instead illuminates the ways in which our interior worlds are actually “the source of human action—that anything we do is shaped by the range of desires and capacities of our inner life” (Quashie 2012, 21). In other words, Quashie’s shift towards black interiority with the metaphor “quiet” questions what else can be uncovered about Black cultural representation when we tap into the interior domain as a valid source of knowing and stop allowing public expression to dictate all of how we understand Black expressions.

Quashie then extends his conversation on quiet and interiority in *Black Aliveness, or Poetics of Being* (2021). He admits that “in trying to refuse publicness as the totalizing denominator of how blackness is figured and represented—[he] may have overemphasized the inner life at the expense of thinking through what it means to be in the world” (Quashie 2021, 20). Thus, in order to explore what it means to be Black in the world without the public’s policing of Blackness, Quashie invokes a Black social world where anti-black logics are suspended, even if just for a moment, and puts forth the term “‘aliveness’ as a term of relation” that allows one to explore the totality of the Black human experience from a vantage point of livingness, not death (2021, 20–21). This analytical move provides an opportunity to explore

what it would mean to understand Black social worlds from a point of view where Black humanity can never be called into question. In doing so, Quashie imagines a Black world where the totality of the Black experience is predicated upon a logic of beingness, instead of anti-Blackness or Blackness, explaining how “an antiblack world expects blackness from black people; in a black world, what we expect and get from black people is beingness. In a black world, every black being is of being, the verb that infers a process of becoming” (Quashie 2021, 10–11). Given my own interest in understanding Blackness on its own terms as a way of exploring Black women’s becoming as a politics of refusal, I am intrigued by Quashie’s usage of the term aliveness as a way to vantage Black beingness, and by extension Black people’s processes of becoming. Additionally, in many ways, my usage of a Black citational politics that brings together a chorus of voices all committed to a Black emancipatory project is my own way of theorizing from a life-affirming Black social order. I find it very affirming to my own project that like Quashie, my project’s insistence of theorizing through Black ways of knowing and being led me towards exploring Black women’s journeys of becoming as a spatial, culturally salient expression of epistemological repossession.

Spiritual Dimension

Another metaphysical dimension of the interior that is explored in my project is that of the spiritual realm. Feminism’s focus on ways of knowing the world and the self through embodied knowledge has largely remained secular in nature, leaving examinations of embodied knowing as a form of spiritual knowing underexamined (Alexander 2005; Judd 2023). However, it is my lived experience that a byproduct of becoming more embodied in my everyday life was an alignment between my mind, body, and spirit, which led to a greater attunement to my own intuition. This is because, as both M. Jacqui Alexander and Bettina Judd explain, spirit encapsulates a “sacred subjectivity—a particular way of knowing that allows for subjugated

knowledges to emerge” (Judd 2023, 10; Alexander 2005). A work that encapsulates the empowerment that arose within me when I felt in tune with my spirit is “Poetry is Not a Luxury” by Audre Lorde (2020d). On this matter, Lorde writes:

For each of us as women, there is a dark place within where hidden and growing our true spirit rises... These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived strong through that darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. (Lorde 2020d, 24–25)

I return to “Poetry is Not a Luxury” (2020d) here because, similar to Lorde, the richness of my interiority, from my spirit, to emotions, and creativity, also were illuminated for me once I underwent a process of consciousness raising that brought me back into connection with the places within myself that existed before hegemonic conditioning. For me there was no denying that this deep sense of being tapped into my body's wisdom was indeed a sacred, spiritual connection to self, which extended into a profound sense of interconnectedness with all beings. While not commonplace within academic theorization, there have been Black feminist explorations into the role spirituality plays in racialized and/or Black women’s identities (Alexander 2005; Palmer 2021; Dillard 2022; Jud 2023; Magloire 2023). Generally, this idea of spirituality playing a part in Black women becoming more actualized people is in the “tradition of African humanism” where “each individual is thought to be a unique expression of a common spirit, power, or energy inherent in all life” (Collins 2002, 263). Thus, the majority of these works explores how one way in which African diasporic communities understand their multifaceted selves better is to reconnect with ancestral African spiritual practices.

Interestingly, aside from “Poetry is Not a Luxury” by Audre Lorde (2020d), the Black feminist work that best encapsulates my reasoning for including a spiritual lens to my analytical approach embodies a central message that transcends race and gender to explore something more

universal, love. Notably, in *All About Love: New Visions* (2001), bell hooks explores the transformative potential of love to foster change and healing for ourselves, as well as society as a whole. When responding to how “Some folks have difficulty with Peck’s definition of love because he uses the word ‘spiritual’”³ (2001, 13) hooks explains that:

He is referring to that dimension of our core reality where mind, body, and spirit are one. An individual does not need to be a believer in a religion to embrace the idea that there is an animating principle in the self—a life force (some of us call it soul) that when nurtured enhances our capacity to be more fully self-actualized and able to engage in communion with the world around us. (hooks 2001, 13)

hooks draws a clear connection between the spiritual dimension, embodiment and self-actualization, explaining how to nurture one’s spirit is to tend to the soul, which in turn allows them to participate more fully in life. This idea resonates with my interest in exploring the interior dimensions of Black women’s creative praxes as a deeply personal experience of birthing something into existence through one’s life force, in addition to their mind and body. In other words, to exclude a discussion of the spiritual domain in my analysis would cut off from the richness of the internal world. Importantly then, while I refer to spirituality and spirit throughout my dissertation, both in connection to my own experience and that of the Black women creators, I am not speaking from any specific spiritual tradition, but more generally using spirituality and Spirit to epistemologically distinguish the knowledge flowing through one’s life force from their mind and body.

When I gave myself permission to lean into Black women’s inner knowing as a site of spiritual knowing in my project, I found that many of the Black women whose creative texts I explore also spoke to a spiritual dimension of their interior. In fact, the spiritual dimension of

³ In *The Road Less Traveled* (1978), psychiatrist M. Scott Peck defines love as “the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth” (hooks 2001, 4).

their creative process is at the forefront of my analysis for two out of my six collaborators, Alice Walker (1982, 2003) and Tricia Hersey (2022). Generally, one of the main ways the spiritual realm is evoked in my project is in connection with embodiment, where following their bodies' wisdom is perceived to be a spiritual experience that reconnects them to their soul, which in turn taps one into an alternative sacred, ancestral knowing. The second way the spiritual domain is evoked in my project is as a “commitment to a way of thinking and behaving that honors principles of inter-being and interconnectedness” (hooks 2001, 77). Spotlighting the spiritual dimension of Black women becoming truer versions of themselves unveiled how fostering one’s life force often results in a deepened concern for all beings' wholistic well-being, both human and non-human. Another way the spiritual dimension is evoked in my project is through the lens of Black women creators being a medium for spirit to “mov[e] in us and through us” (hooks 2001, 77). This idea of being a channel for spirit to speak through an individual may look like being called by something greater, or feeling an internal push, to create. The final way the spiritual dimension is evoked in my project is in relation to placemaking, where a place of life, renewal and respite is constructed on both the earthly and spiritual planes. As a whole, my research demonstrates how spotlighting the spiritual dimension helps to contextualize the true depth, breadth and complexity of interiorities in Black women’s creative praxes and becoming journeys. Additionally, my project showcases how Black feminist epistemologies centering embodied, experiential knowledge creates a dynamic analytical lens that is able to hold the metaphysical aspects embedded within Black women’s lived experiences.

Methodology

Since my project approaches methodology, theory, and epistemology as inextricably connected parts of the research design, the discussion of my methodological process shows up

throughout all of the chapters, especially the Introduction, Crossroads, and earlier in this chapter. Therefore, this brief methodology section serves as a space to highlight a few aspects of my methods I do not discuss elsewhere. Namely, below, I go into more detail about my interest in creative methods, list my creative artifacts, and explain the criteria used for choosing the creative Black texts. Additionally, I'd like to directly state that my intent is not for my methodology to be scalable and reproducible, but rather to craft a project that is unquestionably grounded in my values and lived experiences. I am curious about what emerges when scholars lean into intuitive, embodied ways of knowing in all aspects of the research process rather than adhering to empiricist forms of knowledge production.

My dissertation employs auto-ethnography and content analysis of creative secondary sources by Black women, such as poetry, photography catalog, photography, novel, paintings, memoir, essay, speech, and personal development books. As discussed earlier in the “Recurring Analytical Approaches in Black Studies” section, my decision to use auto-ethnography and content analysis of secondary creative Black texts contemplates how we as researchers can engage in more life-affirming, emancipatory social science inquiries through the use of methodologies and questions that insist on Black well-being (McKittrick 2021, 117). As you can see from the following list of artifacts, my research goal is not to survey as many types of artistic mediums as possible, but instead is to explore creative Black texts to understand the author's intentions for bringing them into the world. Thus, when I speak about engaging a “black creative praxes” (McKittrick 2021, 51), I am referring to what it does, such as allowing for the creator to embrace a stance that is “one of disobedient relationality that always questions” how to build alternative spaces of liberation (McKittrick 2021, 45; Judd 2023). I am especially interested in creativity as an evocation of the author's interior landscapes.

Just like many of the other decisions in my dissertation, my interest in creative knowledge production is deeply personal. I first began to write poetry as a young girl to find a way to express what otherwise felt inexpressible. Somehow, putting my deepest emotions, pains, and yearnings into a poetic rendition or journaling format, felt easier for me. I always loved the assignments in middle school, high school, and undergrad, where I could create a picture, diagram, poem, poster, letter, etc. to communicate the subject matter at hand. And so, it is really no surprise that once I got into graduate school I leaned even further into creative expression as a vehicle to communicate complex ideas. The thinking for me has always been that creative mediums are not only more easily accessible to more audiences, but are also forms of self-expression that captures alternative ways of knowing and seeing the world that otherwise are rendered unknowable within traditional written formats.

I have been a part of a wide array of creative projects throughout my time in graduate school, both within and outside of the academic sphere. For example, I have read my poetry in front of many audiences, emceed for creative events, been interviewed about my creative praxes, lectured about my use of creative methods to undergraduates, published poetry, performed a poetry set for a podcast, created a blog, shared my creations on social media, and been a part of small groups geared towards understanding how we can create teaching materials that welcome creative responses. Out of all of these wonderful experiences, two experiences stand out as especially meaningful. First, publishing my poem “Ode to Springfield,” which was written for my Master’s thesis, in my hometown’s Black newspaper, *Af-Am Point of View: Our Community News Magazine* (Brown 2020). And second, having my painting “Branching On,” grace the cover of *Abolishing Poverty: Towards Pluriverse Futures and Politics* (Lawson et al. 2023).

Theoretically and methodologically, my project orients to creative material artifacts as fruitful on their own terms, beyond the limits of many Western spatial formations. Creative works contain worldmaking capacities and Black spatial imaginaries that allow one to self-actualize beyond a white, patriarchal, cisnormative, capitalist gaze of what a life is supposed to be (Campt 2021). Given my research focus, I am especially interested in how creative expressions are a form of knowledge production that have the ability to externalize interiorities and illuminate an otherwise politics (Sharpe 2016; Hartman 2019; King, Navarro and Smith 2020). Some of the guides who have inspired my approach of creative theorization that my work is in conversation with are: music (Woods 1998; McKittrick 2021), poetry (Brand 2011; Gumbs 2016, 2018, 2020), speculative-fiction (Butler 2003; brown and Imarisha 2015; Gumbs 2018), visual analysis (Willis 2000; Hartman 2019; Campt 2021), literary criticism (Quashie 2011, 2021), personal narrative/memoir (Morrison 1995; Williamson 2017; Benjamin 2022), mixed media (Clark 2021; Henderson 2021), and multidisciplinary (Alexander 2004; Sharpe 2016; Judd 2023). Besides Katherine McKittrick's work which I have already spoken at length about, Ruha Benjamin's conceptualization of "poetics of living" in *Viral Justice: How We Grow the World We Want* (2024) is an example of non-traditional creative theorization and use of personal exploration that deeply inspires me.

Additionally, Bettina Judd's *Feelin: Creative Practice, Pleasure, and Black Feminist Thought* (2023) stands out as a model of Black Feminist research advancing Black women's artistic production as a deeply interior form of knowledge production that theorizes from Black women's inner knowing. *Feelin* (Judd 2023) brings together everything I have previously spoken about in this chapter, echoing many of the intersecting elements that lie at the heart of my project's investigation into Black women's interiorities, including personal narrative, creative

praxes, the spiritual dimension, and the lens of creativity as bringing something into existence. Importantly, Judd's conceptualization of *feelin* encapsulates how Black women's artistic practices are a way of intentionally tapping into their internal realms. For instance, she explores Black women's "impulse to create" as an endeavor to feel all of their feelings, and in this way also highlights how lived experience informs creative praxes (Judd 2023, 6). Poignantly, *feelin* is a way of knowing that "deals with states of being across mind, body, and spirit," and thus is able to capture existential experiences relating to one's consciousness (Judd 2023, 10). Ultimately, like my dissertation, "*Feelin's* central argument is founded on the idea that art is experience. That is, that Black women's creative process is also experience" (Judd 2023, 23 original emphasis). While both of our works are centering different disciplinary lineages, with Judd focusing on affect studies and me focusing on Black Geographies, each of our commitment to Black Feminist Thought, creative praxes, interiority, and inner knowing makes the central premise of our projects very similar. As a Black woman making her way through graduate school, I am grateful to have a text like Judd's *Feelin* (2023) that acts as an intellectual guide as I explore my interest in Black women's creative praxes as a site that illuminates interior journeys of becoming as spatial responses to external landscapes.

The goal of my doctoral research is to understand the hidden spatial practices within both written and unwritten geographic expressions to deepen our collective understanding of the Black liberatory struggle being expressed in contemporary creative works by Black women. Analytic frames such as interiority (Morrison 1995; Willis 2000; Alexander 2004; Quashie 2012; Williamson 2017; Quashie 2021; Judd 2023) and poetics of landscape (Glissant 1989; McKittrick 2006) are essential in my unpacking of what creative works are doing since they enable us to engage a multidimensional perspective to artistic expression as a distinct Black

spatial politics. Said differently, my work centers the interior domain, externalized through creative expression, as a vast yet underexplored landscape that provides meaning into how marginalized people, such as Black women in my dissertation's case, take part in self-actualization, placemaking and world-building. I strongly believe that one way to put forth liberatory social science research that disrupts overarching degradative narratives about Black people and their spaces of living is to legitimize creative works as insights into alternative, life-affirming Black geographic expressions.

Criteria

In addition to trusting that I would intuitively know the right artifacts when I came across them, I discerned which creative artifacts to explore based upon the following loose criteria:

1. Materials expressing auto ethnography/personal narrative/recollection, which includes an explanation of their inspiration for creating the artifact
2. Materials that connect interiority to Black culture/worldmaking/social worlds/overarching discourses about Black life
3. Materials created by someone who identifies as a Black woman and/or with Black women's liberation struggles
4. Materials produced in/about United States Context

Point 1: As justified throughout this chapter, choosing artifacts that include an element of auto ethnography/personal narrative/recollection is in line with Black Studies and Black Feminist traditions valuing of lived "experience as a criterion of meaning" when making knowledge claims (Collins 2002, 258; Morrison 1995; Hammonds 2004; Boylorn and Orbe 2014; Williamson 2017; Bailey and Trudy 2018; Brekke, Joseph, Aaftaab, 2021). Additionally, ensuring there is an explanation of the author's inspiration for creating the artifact is an analytical move that brings into focus the interior dimension of their personal experience, which provides a

fuller picture of “the reservoir of human complexity that is deep inside” Black women (Quashie 2012, 26). Importantly, this decision allows me to vantage how the producers of the creative Black texts perceive their own purpose, reasoning, push, pull and/or motivation to create the pieces, which allows me to decenter my own interpretation as to why they chose to create the artifact. In other words, one way I explicitly engage the creative Black text theoretically, and not just empirically, is to understand the intentions behind the creation of the artifacts in the first place (McKittrick 2021). What led them to take their internal idea and produce something tangible for the external world?

Point 2: I will be looking at creative works that explicitly evoke Black interiorities in their examination of overarching Black cultural discourses. This can look a few ways, such as providing a testimonial on how they have personally gone about evoking their own embodied vision and refuting anti-Black discourses in their life. For instance, theorizing with Viola Davis’ memoir illuminates how her individual experiences as a dark-skinned Black woman help us to understand Black women’s representation in contemporary popular culture representations (i.e., media) and their struggle to be portrayed as multifaceted humans. Another way this criterion shows up is Black women pulling from their personal experiences and feelings as inspiration to intentionally imagine a world where Black people have their full humanity, personhood and rights. Ultimately, explicitly connecting the interior domain to Black social worlds and/or overarching discourses about Black life is another example of Black feminist’s extension of the “principle that the personal is political” (Combahee River Collective 2017, 20).

Points 3: I have chosen to center my work on Black women and/or Black women’s liberation struggles to honor my political and philosophical commitment to Black feminist thinking. In turn, my focus on Black women’s outsider-within status seeks to uplift the wisdom

that originates from their unique vantage point on systemic oppression (Collins 2002). In this way, my work adds to the large body of work that promotes the poignant statement from the Combahee River Collective that, “if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (2017, 22–23).

Point 4: Lastly, my empirical focus is on the United States because that is the geographic context my knowledge is based within, and keeping a narrowed research scope allows me to have a final product with more nuance.

List of Creative Artifacts:

All of the following texts are pieces that I already had on my bookshelf, but the majority I had not engaged with in-depth before choosing them as artifacts for my dissertation.

1. *Finding Me* by Viola Davis (2022)
Type: memoir
2. *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker (1982)
Type: novel
3. “Writing *The Color Purple*” by Alice Walker (2003)
Type: essay originally written in 1983
4. *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840 to the Present* by Deborah Willis (2000)
Type: photography catalog
5. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* by adrienne maree brown (2017)
Type: personal development book
6. “Learning from the 60s” by Audre Lorde (2020b)
Type: Speech originally spoken in 1982
7. *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto* by Tricia Hersey (2022)
Type: personal development book
8. my own creative works (poetry, paintings, photography, prose, etc.)

Ch.4: Vision

At this point, it is common knowledge that how people are visually and discursively depicted in scholarly and popular culture media plays an important role in the empowerment of communities. However, despite this widespread consensus, a large part of our institutional focus continues to be fleshing out and describing stereotype discourses instead of understanding the layers and textures that constitute Black lived realities (Williamson 2017). As Terrian L. Williamson so eloquently states on this topic:

critics become so invested in saying what black people are not—they are *not* angry, they are *not* lazy, they are *not* violent, they are *not* hypersexual— that it becomes difficult to fathom who black people *are*, other than, perhaps, the inverse of every negative thing that has ever been said about them. (Williamson 2017, 17 original emphasis)

In other words, despite the intention of conducting a desire centered analysis of Black life, oftentimes what occurs is a project of “archetype-hunting,” where stereotypes still lie at the center of the analyses, albeit with the goal of trying to disprove their accuracy opposed to affirm them (Williamson 2017, 17; Ellison 1972). I say to this approach, yes, “I suppose *that* is a project, but it is not mine” (Williamson 2017, 17 original emphasis).

Instead, my research utilizes a feminist epistemological lens to explore Black people’s assertions of their embodied way of seeing and experiencing the world in their everyday life, made knowable through creative praxes, as empowering spatial strategies to oppressive paradigms. In particular, I emphasize how turning inward towards interior landscapes is an analytical tool that privileges embodied vision, which illuminates the fullness of the Black experience, especially that which is marked by refusal. In other words, my primary interest lies in understanding how more life-affirming depictions of Black people are predicated on centering feminist vision opposed to the male gaze. This is because emphasizing embodied, situated

knowledges allows for Black interiorities shaped by alternative conceptualizations of self-worth, value and definition to be theorized as central to understanding Black encounters with broader landscapes. Admittedly, while references to stereotype discourses do still appear infrequently in my analysis to contextualize how whatever is being discussed is situated within broader socio-political dynamics, the crux of my examination does not hinge upon detailing how Black people are defying, the opposite of, or more than degradative scripts.

In the following sections, I examine four creative texts by Black women: *Finding Me* by Viola Davis (2022), *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker (1982), “Writing *The Color Purple*” by Alice Walker (2003) and *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present* by Deborah Willis (2000). My first analysis engages with Viola Davis’ memoir, *Finding Me* (2022) to examine her intentional assertion of her own embodied vision in her role as Annalise Keating, and in doing so disrupts the white gaze in the television show *How To Get Away With Murder* (Nowalk 2014a). I explore how Davis’ advocacy for an authentic, multidimensional and vulnerable representation of dark-skinned Black women not only led to a more life-affirming depiction of Blackness on prime-time television, but also became a transformative experience that healed childhood wounds within herself. The second analysis explores *Reflections in Black* by Deborah Willis (2000) to understand how intimate photographs showcasing the personal lives of Black people aids in disrupting damage centered narratives of loss, violence, pain and suffering often attached to the Black community. Here, I critique the move to collapse all life-affirming depictions of Black people into a counter-narrative of whiteness, questioning how this move unintentionally denies the ability for Black beingness to be understood from a vantage of Black social worlds. The final interrogation examines Alice Walker’s process of writing *The Color Purple* (1982), with an eye towards fleshing out how

Walker's internal world played an integral role in the novel's creation. Ultimately, my examination of popular culture representations (i.e., memoir, novel, essay, television show, photography catalog) affirms how Black women's intentional assertion of their embodied vision in their creative praxes, seeped in a politics of refusal, lead to more nuanced, empowering depictions of Blackness and Black womanhood.

Viola Davis

First Encounter

While I am sure many people's first encounter with Viola Davis is watching her in a show or movie, my first real engagement with Davis came when I listened to the audiobook of her memoir, *Finding Me* (2022), in autumn 2022. I was going through another phase of reading memoirs by Black women and was drawn to pick hers up. In many ways, what led me to read Davis' memoir was an inner curiosity to understand why I had avoided watching any films or shows with her in them for so long. Upon reading *Finding Me* (2022) I understood that what I was feeling was not all in my head; as an actress Davis truly puts her full self into her roles, and every bit of the strength and vulnerability she expresses on the screen is an embodiment of who she is as a person. As she says in her memoir, "you bring everything you are into your character. You bring memory, you bring triumphs, you bring pain, you bring insecurity. That is what makes a character human" (Davis 2022, 278). In turn, my analysis examines Davis' process of drawing from her past and present experiences, as well as hopes for the future, to humanize her characters, which answers my dissertations' guiding question: How do Black women use creative praxes as tools to more fully express the interior dimensions operating within self-actualization and collective liberation processes?

I find it interesting how it is this very fact of Davis bringing herself into her roles that had kept me at arm's length for so long. Being perfectly honest with myself, I realize that I had avoided watching any media with her in it because even just the occasional clips I had seen of her on the screen stirred up so many emotions within me that up to that point I was unable to face. It took me being at a point in my own journey of becoming where I could hold space for the full range of my own emotions as a Black woman, that I could venture to look at another Black woman's courageous full expression head on and not collapse within myself. Yes, my strength,

but also my fears, my anxieties, my pain, my sadness, my trauma, alongside my light, my hopes, my joys. This all occurred during a time in my life where whenever I heard myself laughing boisterously, it was so foreign that I did not even recognize the sound.

I devoured Davis' memoir fairly quickly, being awestruck at her vulnerable strength, her grace, her determination, her optimism, her sense of humor and aliveness. Listening to her detailed life story, from childhood to stardom, was not only deeply inspiring, but it was also healing. I tear up even now while writing, reflecting on her memoirs impact on me because there is something about her unapologetically standing in her truth and owning who she is fully that touches my soul. My vulnerability here exemplifies how authentic Black women's representation is about so much more than equal numbers in public spheres or showing that people like you can "make it" in a material sense. Instead what makes intimate, multidimensional representations of Black women so deeply impactful is that in being a living example of how we each have embodied ways of moving through the world, gives permission to others to also own all of who they are, even if it falls outside of what Blackness or womanhood should or should not be (Lorde 2020e; Alexander 2004; Quashie 2012). This similar idea is echoed by Davis when she admits how she did care if *How to Get Away with Murder (HTGAWM)* (Nowalk 2014) viewers found her depiction as a complicated, Black woman believable because "our level of dreaming, of self-love, and acceptance, is equal to the love, support, and permission of the images around us" (2022, 281). This statement by Davis, which speaks to the power of images in nurturing viewer's self-worth and personhood, beautifully sums up my main analytical inquiry in this section: How does authentic representation in pop cultural media give permission to both the creator and the observer to be unapologetically true to themselves? In turn, the dimension of interiority that I explore in-depth is how Davis' journey of becoming through her role in *HTGAWM* gives insight

into creative expression as a site to both explore our inner sense of worth and beingness, as well as enact justice in our little sliver of the world.

There She Is

Viola Davis' memoir as a whole is impactful in its description of her navigation of adversity throughout her life as a Black woman. From living in poverty and experiencing childhood sexual trauma, to professional peaks and valleys on her journey to finding her place as an actress, all while maintaining hope and staying true to herself (Davis 2022). Instantly upon listening to the section in Davis' memoir when she describes her experience of getting the role in *How to Get Away With Murder* (Nowalk 2014), I knew that it was a story I wanted to appear in my dissertation. Upon finishing the audiobook, I binge watched all six seasons of *HTGAWM*, and the rest was history. I am not alone in my sense of being captivated by Davis's role in *HTGAWM* and memoir *Finding Me* (2022). Both of these works helped her to clench the renowned EGOT status, a much-coveted performing-arts award in North America, with her receiving an Emmy for her role in *HTGAWM* in 2015, a Grammy for her memoir *Finding Me* in 2023, an Oscar for her role in *Fences* in 2017 and a Tony for her role in *King Hedley II* in 2001 (Tikkanen 2026).

For context, *HTGAWM* follows the ins and outs of the personal and professional life of the very complicated Annalise Keating who is a criminal defense attorney and professor at Middleton University in Philadelphia (Nowalk 2014). She teaches a highly sought after Criminal Law 100 course, which she nicknames "How to Get Away with Murder," hence the title of the show. Keating is married to her former therapist Sam Keating, is having an affair with police detective Nate Lahey and has a long term on and off again lover Eve Lethlo. Additionally, significant traumatic events from Keating's past continue to haunt her present life, including losing her unborn child in a hit and run and being molested by her uncle as a young girl. As the

series evolves, Keating struggles with alcohol dependency as a way to cope with all of her past and present trauma while continuing to persist through her demanding career. Having asked a few of her Criminal Law 100 students to work at her law firm, a large part of the show's storyline revolves around the team working on current cases, all while increasingly being involved in their own drama and murder cover ups.

In Chapter 17 of *Finding Me*, “There She Is” (2022, 257–291), Davis provides an in-depth look into her relationship with the media industry. My analysis largely draws from Chapter 17 in Davis’ autobiography (2022, 275–284), where she describes her role as Annalise Keating in *HTGAWM* as deeply powerful and transformational, to explore how precious artifacts like memoir are so important in rendering knowable “the psychological toll of being a Black woman” in this modern day and age (Combahee River Collective 2017, 22). First, the section “Why Not Me?” examines how Davis immediately encounters anti-Black, misogynistic narratives related to Black women’s sexuality and multidimensionality when taking the role as Annalise Keating in *HTGAWM*. Here, I emphasize how Davis’ decision to take the role anyways was largely to heal the wounds of her 8-year-old self, as well as for all of the women watching. The section that follows, “That Black Woman,” then details various ways in which Davis engaged in a politics of refusal by putting forth her own embodied vision of how the character Annalise Keating should be depicted on the screen. In using herself as a muse, Keating took control of the narrative, self-advocating for her character to depict an unapologetically multidimensional, complex and complicated, Black woman. The final section “I am Enough” explicitly affirms the necessity of engaging with self-authored portrayals of Black women’s lived realities, such as creative practices delving into interior worlds like memoir, to more fully understand how efforts to self-define and self-evaluate are spatial responses emerging from encounters with oppression. As a

whole, I argue for the necessity of analytical frameworks that capture “how the racist trope and absolute space are co-relatedly working against black life,” such as a Black sense of place, poetics of landscape, Black placemaking, and Black women’s standpoint theory, if we want to make visible the many ways in which Black women cater to their well-being amidst their encounters with hegemonic discourses and landscapes (McKittrick 2021, 11).

Why Not Me?

Reading Davis’ memoir *Finding Me* (2022) is an invitation to a peek into who Viola Davis is as a Black woman who also happens to be an actress. Davis explains she had mixed emotions when the offer came to her from creator, showrunner, and executive producer Peter Nowalk and executive producer Shonda Rhimes to play the leading role in *HTGAWM* (Nowalk 2014) because of how:

The eight-year-old girl who had never been told ‘You’re worthy; you’re beautiful’ suddenly found herself as a leading lady, and a mouthpiece for all the women who looked like her. I had no weapons to slay those naysayers, to change culture itself. The obstacle blocking me was a four-hundred-year-old racist system of oppression and my own feeling of utter aloneness. (Davis 2022, 279)

While the opportunity to play the leading role in a prime-time television show was something she had long been waiting for, there was also a fear that stirred up longstanding internalized beliefs based upon racially gendered constructs of beauty and worth. As we see here, Davis is eerily aware that her appearance as a dark-skinned Black woman in her late forties in such a visible role would evoke emotions for all of those watching, from other Black women who would see themselves in her, to the critics who would judge her.

Davis vulnerably describes how folks in the industry reacted to her casting by providing a look into a discussion she had on the matter with a Black friend taking part in a play in New York. While Davis’ friend expressed enthusiasm about her receiving the role, they also shared

that the plays other Black cast members held many reservations about if her casting would limit the show's success because of how her lack of beauty and femininity made her unable to be sexualized (2022, 276–277). Davis' initial sense that accepting the role would force her to take on longstanding racist discourses was correct when her capability to pull off a believable character was immediately questioned. Having to confront not only public perception, but also the wounds she has carried since childhood, Davis contends:

Still, I knew the media would say I was miscast. That beautiful moment of finding out that I had got the lead role in *How to Get Away...* Was mixed with a fucked-up moment of feeling that I didn't deserve it. Until I remembered the teachings of Sanford Meisner, who said the most important question an actor can ask is 'Why?' I asked myself: *Why can't I be sexualized? Why can't I be vulnerable? Why can't I have a husband and a boyfriend? Why can't I be a leading lady?* As I continued to ask myself the question *Why?* I reached a dead end that asked me *Why not?* (Davis 2022, 277 original emphasis)

This quote is just a small portion of a longer discussion in *Finding Me* (Davis 2022) on how dark-skinned Black women are not considered to be real women because of their perceived lack of femininity and sexiness by white supremacist and patriarchal standards, which in turn deny Black women's complexity. Davis makes her internal process knowable for the reader when she shares how she came to a place of refusing to be boxed within a monolith, and instead choosing to assert her multidimensional, expansive self both within and beyond her acting roles. In asking herself over and over again "*why can't I...*," she confronts and comes to a place of denouncing dominant groups' devaluation of her self-worth, and in doing so provides a glimpse into how one comes to make the powerful decision to reclaim authority over how you define and value yourself (Davis 2022, 277; Collins 2002).

Davis' insights reveal how memoir provides us the opportunity to theorize a Black sense of place through the interior, which captures the relational nature and visceral power dimensions of Black people's encounters with colonial landscapes (McKittrick 2006). For instance, Davis

immediately feeling the weight of 400-year-old systems of oppression, materialized through having her casting as Annalise Keating called into question, is a poignant illustration of McKittrick's argument that "the dead spaces are inextricably linked to the dehumanizing scripts – they require one another" (McKittrick 2021, 11). In other words, Davis immediately facing racist, anti-Black, misogynistic discourses, otherwise known as "misogynoir," talks back to the larger sociopolitical landscape, and demonstrates historical and contemporary systems of oppression collapsing together and creating an instance of Black struggle (Bailey and Trudy 2018). This example highlights how Black people continually come up against "difficult entanglements of racial encounter" within the United States because it is Davis' engagement with the media landscape, which has been permeated with white supremacist and patriarchal understandings of humanness and womanhood, that marks the entire situation so salient when it comes to her Blackness (McKittrick 2011, 949).

That Black Woman

I deeply admire how Viola Davis used her voice to self-advocate for changes that would make her character in *HTGAWM*, Annalise Keating, become a living embodiment of how she sees, defines, and values herself. Her Blackness, womanhood and childhood are all an essential part of who she is as an actress, and in trusting her vision for the role, makes it so that Annalise reveals the complexities of her unique Black womanhood. As Davis states:

I felt like I had two choices: either apologize for who I was and try to alter how I looked to meet their standards and try to fit in to what the masses were saying; or I could stay true to myself and make Annalise me, what I look like, what I sound like. I was at the point in my life where I chose me. That was a huge busting-out moment. I achieved on a different level than awards. I was finding me. (Davis 2022, 283)

Recognizing how the weight of the moment provided her two options, to shrink or blossom, Davis chose to take up space and fight for what she envisioned to be manifested on the screen. In

doing so, she wielded what power she had gained throughout her career to insist that if the role is going to be played by herself, a Black woman, then the role's entire essence should undeniably reflect that it was made for a Black woman. Thus, Davis' decision to fully make the role her own in *HTGAWM* was cemented when she brought aspects of her personal story into the character, and in doing so asserted her truth, healed childhood wounds and found her authentic self.

Davis describes two major changes to her role that she advocated for, one in regard to her character's physical appearance, and the other to her name. First, she asked for there to be a scene where she took off her wig and makeup because it would "force them to write for THAT woman" (Davis 2022, 281). Standing her ground led to the noteworthy scene in season 1, episode 4 "Let's Get to Scooping," in which Annalise Keating is outpouring her emotions, with tears streaming down her face, removes her wig which shows her short curly textured hair underneath, as well as takes off her eyelashes, lipstick, foundation, and eyeshadow, which shows her face without the cosmetic embellishments (Nowalk 2014b, 00:40:30). This is the real me, Davis as Keating showcases to viewers, the multifaceted woman behind the mask that is often done up to be palatable. Providing further insight into her reasoning behind advocating for this scene to be included in the series, Davis expounds how:

Taking off the wig in *HTGAWM* was my duty to honor Black women by not showing an image that is palatable to the oppressor, to people who have tarnished, punished the image of Black womanhood for so long. It said all of who we are is beautiful. Even our imperfections. With *How to Get Away with Murder*, I became an artist in the truest sense of the word. (Davis 2022, 281 original emphasis)

Instead of allowing any internal or external negative feedback to make her feel unqualified for the part, Viola Davis evoked her agency in shaping the character by advocating that the character needed to have moments of realness. Importantly, her insistence that there be scenes included in the series that show who the dark skinned Black woman really was beyond Annalise's public

persona as a badass lawyer underscores Toni Morrison's point that the power of personal narrative lies in its ability to part the veil for the observer so that they can see a person's inner truth, which in turn expands how Black people are known to a vision that is more authentic and empowering (1995). In stepping into her power, a character that is closer to Viola Davis' true self is given the opportunity to take up space on the screen, which disrupts the 400-year-old discourses surrounding Black womanhood, worth, sexuality, and desirability. This scene is the epitome of the white gaze being refused and demonstrates the power of creative expression to put forth a narrative that is more honest, multifaceted, affirming and equitable (Nowalk 2014b, 00:40:30).

Funnily enough, while the wig scene I just discussed is widely popular, with it often appearing in articles and interviews, this is not Davis' favorite wig scene in the show. Instead, in an interview with *The Root* Davis explains that "her favorite wig moment is when she didn't wear a wig," at all, but instead when she had her natural hair tended to by Cicely Tyson, who plays her mother in the show (*The Root* 2020). Here, she is speaking about Season 1, Episode 13 "Mama's Here Now" when Annalise sits in-between her mother's legs and has her scalp scratched and kitchen combed out, with "kitchen" being a cultural reference for the tightly coiled hair around the hairline and at the nape of the neck (Nowalk 2015, 00:33:14). Reflecting fondly on this experience in the interview, Davis recalls how this full circle moment "was absolutely perfect" because Cicely Tyson was someone she had looked up to from the start of her career as an image of success, encouraging her "to dream bigger than [her] circumstances" (*The Root* 2020). Davis also speaks to the cultural significance of the moment as an intimate reflection into many Black people's childhoods sharing how "It's just something that I don't see that's so culturally specific, but so much about bonding and our everyday" lies in caring for one another's

hair (The Root 2020). Of all the moments within the show, this one epitomizes Black placemaking as the cultural production of sites that evoke affirmative Black senses of place, in that many Black people watching the show, including myself, have embodied memories from childhood of sitting down in front of a loved one and having their scalp scratched, hair detangled, and styled (Allen, Lawhon, and Pierce 2019). These relational moments are much more than an end to getting your hair done; they are communal acts of care and togetherness embodying a distinctly Black cultural vantage point.

The intimacy that is involved in caring for one's hair, how it reaches beyond the external hair itself to include a meeting of heart, mind, and spirit, is epitomized in the fact that it is while Annalise's mother is tending to her hair that they finally confront the family secret that has internally tormented Annalise for decades (Nowalk 2015, 00:34:15). In this scene, Keating's mother finally discloses how she knew Annalise's uncle had molested her as a child, and shortly after learning about the incident, intentionally burned the house down with him inside of it. Annalise has been haunted by the idea that her mother did not protect her from abuse, and in this moment finally realizes that her mother protected her in the greatest way possible; murdering her uncle so that he could never molest her daughter again. It is not lost on me that it is during this intimate moment of tenderness, where the underdiscussed violence of child sexual abuse, often left as familial secrets within the Black community, is finally brought to light and some semblance of intergenerational healing is found (Simmons 2019).

The second adjustment Davis asked for was to have Annalise's last name, at the time DeWitt, to be changed to something that felt more authentic to that of a Black woman (2022, 281–282). It was changed to Annalise Keating, and even that “still didn't fit right” (2022, 281). At this point, pulling from her personal history of knowing her own mother had undergone a

name change, Davis proposed the idea of having Annalise Keating's real name be Anna Mae. This allowed for a greater depth to her character's backstory where Annalise chose to change her name to "fit in" to the white, male dominated world (2022, 281–282). The racial and socio-economic significance of Annalise's decision to no longer go by her given name of Anna Mae is also explored in Season 1, Episode 13 "Mama's Here Now" (Nowalk 2015, 00:10:45). During a heated exchange with her mother, she asks for her to respect her decision to be called Annalise instead of Anna Mae, in which her mother, played by Cicely Tyson replies "get rich, get yourself a rich name. Annalise. Your name is Anna Mae. Something else your mama gave you from the poor box" (Nowalk 2015, 00:10:45). Here is another scene made possible by Davis' advocacy that explores the often-hidden tensions of what it actually looks like to contort oneself into someone who will be deemed more valuable based upon hegemonic standards, even if it is at the expense of denying who you are.

I have covered various instances clearly showing how Davis' decision to fight for her character to be that Black, natural haired woman behind the wig had far reaching impacts when it came to her character arc and the series script as a whole. Ultimately, for Davis, the importance of having attributes of Annalise be undeniably those of a Black woman, such as her name and hair, was to make it evident that the role was made for a Black woman and thus not "interchangeable" with that of a white woman (2022, 275). Once again, Davis' story of encountering, refusing, and overcoming anti-Black, gendered societal constructs is a powerful example of how one woman's transformational journey of becoming can help foster more life-affirming, culturally salient depictions of Black women in the public sphere.

Finally, in her memoir, Viola Davis explicitly describes how one of the ways she connected to the complexity of Annalise Keating was by examining the ways her own

“brokenness” overlapped with the “brokenness” of Annalise Keating (2022, 282–283). As Davis explains, “her probable dissociative disorder could stem from that because it is prevalent in most sex abuse survivors” (2022, 282). Having personally experienced many different types of sexual abuse growing up, Davis was able to connect to Annalise Keating’s backstory of having been a victim of childhood sexual molestation. Annalise Keating also being a sexual abuse survivor made the character more real for Davis and allowed her to make some sense as to why her character inherently showed up so complicated in many spheres of her life. I am personally in awe of Davis’ ability to pull from all of her experiences as a Black woman, both joyful and traumatic, as a way of accessing the spirit of a character so that she can more fully embody her role on the screen. It really speaks to the heart of what is meant when it is said that the point of wanting to engage with life-affirming portrayals of Blackness is not to erase experiences of injustice but to provide a more nuanced understanding of the totality of Blackness as it is really experienced and lived.

By fully leaning into complexities that are often not afforded to cultural representations of Black women—yes strong and gets her job done well, but also sexual, beautiful, vulnerable, complicated, and makes mistakes—Davis was a driving force in the creation of a multifaceted depiction of a Black woman on prime-time television. In particular, in making herself a muse for Annalise Keating’s character, Davis becomes a living example of how Black feminist epistemological approaches, which validate lived experiences as a criterion of meaning, are personally and collectively rewarding, boldly proclaiming how:

As soon as I opened myself to the possibility of playing Annalise Keating, and using myself as the palette, I created a different character for television, and I slayed the demons within myself. At Shondaland, and on *How to Get Away with Murder*, I found my tribe. I let myself feel the fear, face the pain of my eight-year-old-ugly-girl-self, but I didn’t let it rule me. I used it as fuel, because, after all, you bring everything you are into a character. (Davis 2022, 278 original emphasis)

Davis' story illustrates the radical potential of art as a vehicle to respond to spatial inequalities when she describes her reasoning for making changes to the role of Annalise Keating as both actively working against the rampant sexist and racial oppression within the media industry, and a journey of becoming her fuller self. Additionally, while much of my analysis has focused on Davis evoking her agency to fight for what she believed in, it is important to note how she could not have made these shifts in the character alone. Instead, her emphasis on how she "found [her] tribe" of people at Shondaland who believed in her and worked to make her vision a reality provides a real-world glimpse into how working towards more equitable human geographies is a deeply relational project that requires us to show up for one another (Davis 2022, 278).

Ultimately, the way in which Davis' memoir makes knowable the tangible impacts she had in changing aspects of Annalise's character so that she was a more empowering and nuanced depiction of Black women demonstrates the power of concepts like poetics of landscape and engaging creative texts as theory (McKittrick 2006, 2021). In particular, Davis' story makes clear how "paying close attention to the materiality of the black story" (McKittrick 2021, 11) is one way to illuminate "real responses to real spatial inequalities" (McKittrick 2006, xxiii). Thus, a more workable human geography is made possible when we intentionally spotlight assertions of one's embodied vision that critique and/or outright refuse existing oppressive geographic arrangements.

I am Enough

Overall, the revolutionary impact of Davis' role as Annalise Keating in *HTGAWM* on her personal life, as well as the media industry, demonstrates how nontraditional creative mediums capturing alternative worldviews can help us to understand marginalized communities encounters with geographic landscapes. While memoir is often used as a site of theorization in

Black Feminist Thought, its emphasis on personal lived experience as a valuable source of knowledge production is less common within the social sciences. As Toni Morrison asserts in “The Site of Memory,” (1995), the autobiography, personal narrative, and memoir is a Black literary tradition fundamental to life-affirming portrayals of Black life in the United States. Dating back to slavery, these mediums have been essential in pulling the veil back and more accurately depicting Black lived realities because of how they illuminate the internal realms of Black people without the societal pressure of coddling white feelings. In turn, I argue valuing creative artifacts like the memoir, which celebrate the breadth and depth of interior landscapes, is a methodologically fruitful way to epistemologically uplift Black people’s lived realities from a vantage point that honors their unique embodied locations.

Importantly, my entire analysis was made possible because of Davis' memoir, which allowed us to understand the profound impact of starring in *HTGAWM* on her personal deconditioning and self-actualization journey. For instance, Davis insists:

My art, in this instance, was the best healing tool to resolve my past, the best weapon that I had to conquer my present, and my gift to the future. Annalise Keating released in me the obstacles blocking me from realizing my worth and power as a woman. (Davis 2022, 279)

Given my passion for illuminating how interior geographies expressed in creative praxes can shed light on oppressive external geographies, I am heavily inspired by Viola Davis' clear articulation of how she harnessed her voice and creative talents to engage with the media industry on her own terms. In particular, Davis recalls in exquisite detail how her role in *HTGAWM* was “healing” (2022, 276) and marks it as the site “where my radical transformation took place. In the course of playing Annalise, I understood that I was no longer and never was that ugly Black nigga. The role liberated me. I said to myself: *All I’ve got is me. And that is enough*” (2022, 284 original emphasis). Thus, Davis gives us a special insight into how an

essential aspect of many Black women's journey of becoming is an embodied sense of enoughness, which is related to an all-encompassing belief in one's worth and value that allows you to stand in your power despite what the world tells you (Collins 2002). Ultimately, Davis' dedication and drive to have a truer version of herself actualized on the screen is a poignant example of how one Black woman's personal journey of becoming can embody world-making capacities that have far reaching impacts on other people and spaces.

Without Davis' memoir, sure, I could have still examined how her role as Annalise Keating in *HTGAWM* is reflective of broader social issues. However, so much of the media critique would have been a secondary analysis based upon my perception as an outside viewer and researcher, opposed to centering on the articulation of the person themselves as they understand the relations between their inner and outer lives. Through Davis' memoir, we are able to assess how the personal, Viola Davis' own feelings towards her role, can alter the political, Black women's representation in the media, when the embodied wants, needs, dreams, desires, insecurities, are given the space to be present and held too. From this vantage point, I assert that what makes creative engagements with mediums uplifting internal geographies so deeply incisive theoretically is how they push social science researchers to theorize through people's lived realities and unique worldviews, which ultimately paints a fuller picture of the many spatial imaginaries operating in our world.

Creative Musings



Figure 1. *Communing with Viola Davis (2026)*, Photograph by Christoff Luehrs

I am... a poem written by 15 or 16-year-old Danielle in 10th grade

I am a human
Or at least that's what I'd like to be treated as
For once in my life
It seems in this day and age
Filled with sex and drugs
Right and wrong
Good...bad
Black...white
Gay...straight
Female...male
People don't see me for me
They see me as an assumption
A stereotype I've already been labeled as
Which leads everyone
Including you
Calling me a bitch
Whore
Worthless
Fat
All of these names shot at me
As if I deserve this bullet in my chest
Because they do leave a wound
Deep inside of me
Which continues to bleed
Leaving me a negative outlook on myself
When you don't even know me
Who am I?
I am Danielle
As simple as that
I laugh
I cry
I don't always believe in love
But when I do it's with a furious passion
I have a drive inside of me
That wants to succeed
To prove all of you wrong
And when I say you...
I mean every single person I've ever met
Because admit it or not
You have judged me
At least once
It's human nature To
pick me apart.

*Poem written in 2012 or 2013

I see you, little Danielle ...29-year-old Danielle's poetic reply to her younger self:

I notice that not once in your poem do you directly reference Black girlhood,
and yet the complexity of what it means to hold both Black and girl/woman
in this racist, patriarchal paradigm is impossible for me
to ignore.

I see you, little Danielle,
struggling with the internalized stereotypes placed upon you at birth.
Please know that your refusal to be defined by degradative scripts come through loud and clear,
and I applaud you for seeking to understand who you are beyond the confines of Eurocentric
binaries that try to place you in the category of either/or.

I see you, little Danielle,
and yes, you are a human.
I know all too well that discursive violence
is just as real as physical wounds,
and I am so sorry that you had to live
for even a second
doubting your worth.

I see you, little Danielle,
flipping the narrative, and proudly proclaiming your
agency,
vulnerability,
personhood,
dignity,
humanity,
on your own terms.

I see you, little Danielle,
for all the ways in which,
despite living in a world that sought to
pick you apart
flaw by flaw
you unapologetically and gracefully
told the world to fuck off,
stood your ground,
and affirmed your enoughness
for yourself.

I see you, little Danielle,
and I understand your wish to prove others wrong.
You'd be happy to hear that our drive no longer comes from trying to convince others of our
worthiness,
but instead from pursuing our own hearts calling.

I see you, little Danielle.
Please know that you inspire me.
And that I am so deeply honored to walk this earth
with little you inside of me.

*Poem written in 2026

Deborah Willis

First Encounter

Since I was a child, I have always held a deep connection to books; reading books but also just being around them. I find rifling through the pages of a book extremely soothing. Libraries and bookstores are places of immense comfort for me. Combine this with my interest in Black culture, politics, history, and the human condition, and it makes a lot of sense that I naturally have found myself being a collector of books. As I got older my awareness heightened about the importance of books in knowing an accurate representation of Black history. I have witnessed concerted efforts across the United States to whitewash the historical record through tactics such as book banning and suppressing Black histories from public school education. Understanding the necessity of taking Black knowledge keeping into our own hands led me to begin collecting books by Black people and about the Black experience, especially books by Black people exploring the Black experience in the United States. Whenever I add to my collection, which now takes up quite a bit of space in our tiny apartment, I jokingly say to my husband, but with an undertone of sad truth, that there may come a day when I need to stow these precious artifacts away under the floorboards for safekeeping so that present and future generations know the truth.

One of the books I acquired about Black experiences in the United States is *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present* by Deborah Willis (2000). I remember the day pretty clearly. The History department at UW, which is in the same building as the Geography department, was advertising a book sale to clear out their large stacks of books sitting around. That day I bought many books about Black American history, but right away *Reflections in Black* (Willis 2000) stood out as quite the gem for my collection with it being a book chronicling the Black experience through photographs. However, at the time I did not know

my intuition had led me to a book that would someday be an artifact in my dissertation. At the time all I knew was that it piqued my interest given its emphasis on how creative praxes illuminate the inner workings of Black people's lives. And I was deeply enamored by the plethora of gorgeous photographs of Black people in every configuration you can imagine.

Reflections in Black by Deborah Willis (2000) is truly a work of American history, being the first collection to compile nearly 600 photographs by Black photographers going all the way back to photography's inception as an art medium. The book includes a Foreword by Robin D. G. Kelley and is split into five parts: The First Sixty Years: 1840-1900, The New Negro: 1900-1930, 1930's and 1940s Photography, Social and Artistic Movements: 1950s-1979, and Photography in the 1980s and 1990s. Willis opens each section describing which types of photography were being used at the moment to capture the lived realities of Black Americans in that specific time and place. She substantiates her discussion with profiles of a few key Black photographers from each time period that encapsulates how "the camera became a mighty weapon in the hands of pioneering black photographers" (Kelley 2000, ix). Each narrative opening is then followed by photographs by Black photographers taken during the specified time periods. As a whole, the book documents the evolution of Black photographers amidst the backdrops of larger historic, sociopolitical, geographic, and cultural trends within Black America from 1840-2000. Excitingly, for the book's 25th anniversary, Willis released an updated edition in October 2025.

The Personal as the Historical

Willis' insight into the essential role photography plays in illuminating Black interiorities and livingness is a gift to us all. I am particularly intrigued by the way *Reflections in Black* (Willis 2000) upholds memory as a critical facet of the interior landscape that, when materialized

through a medium such as photography, has the potential to illuminate the totality of the Black American experience far beyond what is typically depicted through a colonial gaze.

When it comes to *Reflections in Black's* (Willis 2000) historical approach, from the book's structure to the basis of the narrative and visual storytelling, something that stands out are the connections to Willis' own origin story. While Willis' inspiration emanates out of 25 years of photographing, curating, and writing about African American photography, her embodied understanding of the meaning of the intimacies of Black photography goes back to her childhood. As a child she learned to honor the connections between her personal life and African-American history, reporting:

I often took snapshots of family members, and the very event of placing these images in family albums became cause for discussion, interpretation, and examination. These family photographs remained important to me as I pursued photography professionally...Inspired by these family stories, I feel as if I have always been reworking and revising the past as I scrutinized the photographic history of images of African-Americans my entire professional life. (Willis 2000, xii)

Willis' articulation of learning how to think critically about Black photographs from her own familial experience is a very clear demonstration of how the personal as the political is more than just theory, but is a life-affirming analytical and methodological framework that can be harnessed to do research differently. Generally, Willis' weaving of both the historical and the personal when examining Black photographic archives relates to both McKittrick and Hartman's assertion that intimate approaches to history uncover Black livingness operating in the archive (McKittrick 2006; Hartman 2019; McKittrick 2021). Importantly, McKittrick and Hartman's emphasis on verbiage is central, noting that what comes forward when we approach the archive from an anti-colonial, Black vantage point is not us discovering Black livingness, with the use of discovery making it sound like something new is being found, but uncovering Black livingness that has always existed, yet was veiled within the colonial gaze. Similarly, one contribution of my

research is to affirm the life-affirming and worldmaking capacities held within Black interiorities by intentionally noticing what might otherwise go unnoticed within texts by Black women.

Beautiful, Sacred, Intimate Images: A Reframe

This rich archive of Black social life provided by Willis offers me the perfect case study to explore one of my larger ontological and epistemological projects, which is to think through how we as researchers affirm Black livingness on its own terms without making Blackness a counter to whiteness. Willis's historical project tracing Black photography from 1840 to 2000 is largely presented as a rewriting of American history, and thus heavily focuses on how Black photographers used photography as a tool to create counternarratives about the Black community (2000). For instance, in the Foreword, Introduction and chapter summaries Willis and Kelley make clear that Black photographers have always valued photography's ability to create counterimages that refute overarching stereotype discourses about Black people circulating at any given time. This was done by authentically capturing the Black community in its true essence, such as individual portraits of Black people and abolitionists across all class levels, as well as communities at social events. More overtly politically leaning photographs are also popular, like portraits of key Black leaders and documenting protests and rallies during significant social movements, including the Black power, Black Arts, and Civil Rights Movements (Willis 2000). While this project to put forth a counternarrative is very important and meaningful to our collective understanding of American history, here I shine a light on a facet of Black livingness captured within Willis' archive that I argue does not fit into the mold of being a counterimage.

During the first sixty years of photography's inception (1840–1900) which includes when slavery was still formerly established and directly after its abolishment, portraiture was used

widely since it was accessible to folks across all class levels (Willis 2000). Willis explains that it was common practice to photograph subjects at personal celebrations, “such as birth, confirmation, graduation, courtship, marriage, military service, anniversaries, death, or some social or political success” (2000, 3). It was very important to Black photographers to capture organic portrayals of the sitters, which was achieved by giving a lot of agency on how they would be depicted to the subjects being photographed (2000, 3). Here, Willis directly speaks to how relationality and the interior in these sacred moments are operating on multiple levels when she describes that the photographer and subject were relating human to human. Thus, an essential component of ensuring the fullness of the sitters’ innate being is portrayed in the photos required for both parties to meet on an intimate and vulnerable level (2000, 3).

Interestingly, when Willis situates the usage of portraiture during the mid-1800’s into the larger socio-political landscape, what stands out is how black portraitures from the mid-1800’s are being called “counterimages,” which would mean that images are being created for the purpose of being compared to, and refuting, the widespread racist caricatures of Black people at the time (2000). For example, Willis focuses on how “many black photographers contradicted these depictions by making representative portraits of their subjects” (2000, xvii). Additionally, she explains that “[m]ost of their African-American clients wanted to celebrate their achievements and establish a counterimage that conveyed a sense of self and self-worth” (Willis 2000, xvii). This contextualization certainly makes a lot of sense, especially given the rampant usage of minstrelsy images to depict Black people throughout recent history.

However, when I read the sections discussing Black portraiture in the nineteenth century through Quashie's conceptualization of “aliveness,” which asks us to affirm Black beingness by intentionally decentering anti-Black logics from the analysis (2021), Black portraits would not be

considered counterimages at all, just images. *Beautiful, sacred, intimate, images*. My analytical move for Black portraits to be read simply as images on their own terms is substantiated by Willis' own words when she points out that:

As with most portraiture, *the photographs made in the nineteenth century were not intended for publication or presentation*. The African-American clients merely wanted to have their likeness preserved for future generations. Thus, it is only now, more than a hundred years later, that these photographs represent a vital part of African-American history. (Willis 2000, 3 emphasis added)

Despite these images now being in the public domain, the fact that these portraits of people in the Black community were taken with the familial sphere as the intended audience further leads me to believe these photos should be contextualized on their own terms. I go so far as to argue that continuing to frame the intent of these photos as personal images rather than political counterimages temporally extends the agency provided to sitters by honoring the ways in which Black photographers “allow[ed] their subjects to collaborate with [them] in defining their own image” (Willis 2000, 15). Through this lens, the decision not to call nineteenth century portraits counterimages is an epistemological decision to affirm sitters' embodied vision by continuing to give them the right to maintain control over their images, even in death (Willis 2000, 15). Honoring the original intent of how these personal images came into being is not only deeply humanizing, but also renders the refusal embedded in their initial decision to claim their images for themselves knowable despite the artifacts now being used for a greater racial purpose.

By putting forth an alternative reading that shifts the vision of who the public is towards a Black personal sphere I am “embracing the luxuries of thinking with and through the materiality of texts,” which gives insight into Quashie's conceptualization of aliveness as a term that captures Black beingness within a Black social world where “blackness (not anti-blackness) is totality” (Quashie 2021, 10). My analytical move to put forth an alternative reading imbued in

Black livingness echoes Quashie's reinterpretation of Lucille Clifton's poem "won't you celebrate with me" (1993) as a work of Black female knowing and worldmaking instead of an "anthem of oppression" (Quashie 2021, 25). Similarly, if read through a lens of aliveness that honors the fact that Black portraits from the nineteenth century were intended for present and future familial usage, then these images have a "self-oriented relationality where the [sitter] is also the [audience]" (Quashie 2021, 25). In other words, intentionally shifting towards a Black embodied vision when engaging with Black portraits from the nineteenth century both uncover Black interiorities and evoke Black social worlds that are not in relation to whiteness. By extension, understanding memory making as it is produced within a Black social world, such as maintaining the fact that these portraits were intended for personal, familial usage for present and future generations, fleshes out a more comprehensive definition of Black placemaking that includes affirmative Black spatial imaginaries, past, present, and future.

My nuanced reading of how Black portraiture in the nineteenth century can stand on its own, instead of being collapsed into a counter argument as it has been done in *Reflections in Black* (Willis 2000), provides insight on how Black inner lives are enough in and of themselves to be held, understood, and theorized. Drawing on interiority, Kelley makes an essential point in the photography catalog's Foreword when it comes to Black livingness, or as Quashie calls it, aliveness, when he states:

Although racism certainly circumscribed their lives, their interior world was far more meaningful to them than the rantings of a white-robed Grand Wizard or the visible signs of Jim Crow. Study these photographs and you'll discover in the gaze and gestures of ordinary African-Americans a complex and diverse community too busy loving, marrying, dancing, worshiping, dreaming, laughing, arguing, playing, working, dressing up, looking cool, raising children, organizing, performing magic, making poetry to be worried about what white folks thought about them. (Kelley 2000, x)

Speaking candidly, if we truly believe Black people's interior worlds are so rich and complex that they are "too busy" living full, intricate, abundant lives "to be worried about what white folks [think] about them" all of the time (Kelley 2000, x) than let us also theorize accordingly. To me, this means to allow engagements with Black life to stand on their own, without collapsing all of our life-affirming theorizations into counter arguments. Here lies another way to creatively and intimately expand the historical record to include multi-faceted depictions of the Black community that reflect all of what it means to be a Black human being in this world.

Creative Musings



Figure 2. Communing with Deborah Willis (2026), Photograph by Christoff Luehrs

Blurred Images: A Visual Poem by Danielle Brown

*Are you listening?*⁴



Figure 3. *Blurred Images* (2026), Photograph by Danielle Brown

Absence is defined as
“somebody/something not existing or not being available.”⁵
Or more simply put
“a lack of something.”
But I am not convinced
that an absence should so easily be equated with lack,
especially depending on the circumstances, don’t you agree?
Such as the distinction between someone or something choosing not to be included versus an
exclusion as an act of forceful erasure.

You see, I’ve always been enamored by blurred images.
I thought they were cool, edgy, and unique.
And yet a part of me would feel a twinge of sorrow
that the full image I was hoping to capture did not appear on the screen.
A glitch that led to an absence felt like I had lost something that was mine to have.
To keep.

But once I began to commune with Nature.

⁴ Brown, Danielle Lynn. 2026a. “Blurred Images: A Visual Poem.” Published April 17, 2026.
<https://youtu.be/gP65GAB--V8>

⁵ Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, n.d. s.v. “absence,” Accessed May 26, 2026,
https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/absence#goog_rewarded

Fostering my belief in the interconnectedness and sovereignty of all being's,
something clicked within me, a newfound way of seeing blossoming internally.
And that same sense of despair and deservedness that used to rise within me.
When, let's say, an animal would move right when I was taking a photo.
No longer took hold in my belly, but would instead float away, and gratitude would take its place
instead.

Because I realized that I did indeed capture exactly what was meant to be seen.
Once opening up to the possibility that what I was taught was only half of the story.
And that absence can also be a form of presence
if viewed as an assertion of one's sovereignty.

So now, when I go to take a photo
and the outcome is blurred, unfocused.
I chuckle, knowing
that there is something deeply sacred about a being's refusal to be captured.
And who am I to determine when or if
someone or something should become a lasting memento for my viewing pleasure, or merely
savored in this very moment.

*Poem written in 2026

Alice Walker

First Encounter

Growing up, I only ever heard *The Color Purple* (1985) discussed in bits and pieces since my mother made intentional efforts to keep inappropriate media from my sisters and I. While I did not fully understand the sensitive nature of the movie's topics (i.e., sexual and physical violence against Black woman, incest) as a child, there always was a heaviness in the air every time the movie came up. Over time, I internalized the message that I should stay away from *The Color Purple* (1985), and the movie took on a lore-like status for me. So much so that even into adulthood I continued to act upon the **beware, do not proceed** messaging from my childhood and chose not to interact with any adaptations from the franchise for a long time. As a result, my first engagement with the cultural legacy that is *The Color Purple*, the 1982 novel and the 1985 and 2023 film adaptations, was during graduate school when I was deciding if I would use the artifact in my dissertation. As I discuss more in depth in Chapter 2: Crossroads, while I initially gravitated towards using the most recent 2023 rendition of *The Color Purple* since it is a temporally relevant visual medium, once I decided to fully embrace my dissertation's centering of Black women's creative praxes I knew choosing the original book version of *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker (1982) was the only way to proceed with integrity.

Alice Walker is a renowned African American author of the 20th century, known for her novels, nonfiction prose, short stories, and poems. She is most known for her novel *The Color Purple* (Walker 1982), as well as her collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Walker 2003). Feeling that Black women's lived realities were neglected in mainstream white feminist movements, Walker coined the intellectual framework "womanism" in the late 1970s/early 1980s as a counter to feminism, which she believed to be heavily identified with white women's issues at the time. As Walker so eloquently states in note 2 of

“Alice Walker’s Womanism: *Coming Apart* (1979),” (2006) which is the first time “womanist” appears in text, “‘Womanist’ encompasses ‘feminist’” however:

An advantage of using ‘womanist’ is that, because it is from my own culture, I needn’t preface it with the word ‘Black’ (an awkward necessity and a problem I have with the word ‘feminist’), since Blackness is implicit in the term; just as for white women there is apparently no felt need to preface ‘feminist’ with the word ‘white,’ since the word ‘feminist’ is accepted as coming out of white women’s culture. (Walker 2006, 11)

Thus, in contrast to feminism’s epistemological linkage to white women’s thought and issues, which privileges sexism at the erasure of other social positionings, womanism is a broad, culturally salient term that captures the complexities within Black women’s embodied experiences of intersecting oppressions like race, gender, sexuality, class, nation, etc. Given how womanism is epistemologically grounded in Black thought, it also illuminates Black women’s commitments to the Black community and humanity at large.

I was first introduced to Alice Walker in Spring 2018 during my junior year in undergrad in a “Feminist Artists of the Diaspora” course. The course examined African, Caribbean, and African American women artists whose work span the literary, visual, music, and performance realms. The goal of the course was to explore how the artistic works help us to contextualize and offer critiques of modern socio-political processes, movements, and everyday lived realities. It was during the first week of the class when engaging with Feminist Foundational Readings that I first read “Womanist” (Walker 2003) and “Alice Walker’s Womanism: *Coming Apart* (1979)” (Walker 2006),” both of which are the origins of Alice Walker’s womanism. It is around this time that I also realized *The Color Purple* (1985) film was adapted from a book by Alice Walker.

Tracing *The Color Purple*’s Becoming

Set in the early 1900’s, *The Color Purple* (1982) is a historical novel that traces the lives of a group of Black women living in rural Georgia over 30 years. The book centers the

experiences of Celie, a 14-year-old poor, Black girl who suffers extensive oppression, namely sexual and domestic abuse, at the hands of her father Alphonso (she later learns it is her stepfather) as well as a local farmer, Mr., who she is given to when she is still a teenager. Structured as a series of letters written from Celie to God, and later on letters between sisters Celie and Nettie who are separated for over 30 years, the book explores the larger community of Black women a part of Celie's life who help her to hold on to hope, and ultimately overcome her turmoil (Walker 1982). While Celie is certainly the connection between all of the characters, the novel shines a light on the unique struggles and triumphs faced by all of the Black women in Celie's life. At its heart, *The Color Purple* (1982) is a celebration of Black womanhood and sisterhood, demonstrating how love, support, and resilience are essential on one's transformative journey of becoming.

Given that *The Color Purple* (Walker 1982) has undergone a thorough analysis, I thought long and hard about what angle my examination would take⁶. I found my answer when I read her 1983 essay "Writing *The Color Purple*" while perusing the essay collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (Walker 2003, 355–360). In this essay, Walker lets readers behind the scenes of writing *The Color Purple* (1982) from conception to completion, which directly speaks to my

⁶ *The Color Purple's* (Walker 1982) cultural impact is evidenced by the hundreds, if not thousands of articles written analyzing the multitude of themes running through the book. Even a quick search brings up a range of topics on every end of the spectrum, such as but not limited to: Black women's empowerment, identity, and journeys of self-discovery; womanist readings exploring the role of community; significance of motherhood; religion and spirituality; literary reflections on the style of the book, from the formatting of it as a series of letters to the southern African American vernacular used; domestic and sexual violence; gender dynamics; and the accuracy of African American and African history depictions. Truly, the list goes on and on, with articles written in disciplines across the board. However, the majority seem to come from the humanities, social sciences, arts, cultural, theological, literature and linguistics point of views. Another trend I've noticed has been explorations and critiques of the differences between the novel and movie adaptations. Many of the novels more controversial themes, including domestic violence, rape, and depicting a lesbian love story has led the book to be banned countless times across the United States.

interest of rigorously examining the discursive threads of creative praxes from inspiration to creation. Excitingly, I see all five facets of the interior realm I highlight in the dissertation's Introduction as areas of interest demonstrated in this piece. Thus, after a brief detailing of Walker's initial stroke of inspiration, my examination then traces Walker's process towards creation with a particular focus on how her relationship to Spirit led her to follow her intuition into the unknown, which ultimately led to her own and the novel's becoming. Importantly, for the sake of feasibility, my analysis does not pull on any statements Walker has made about *The Color Purple* (1982) in various interviews and is solely based upon what Walker discusses in her 1983 essay "Writing *The Color Purple*" (2003) and the novel itself. The analysis is split into two sections, each exploring facets of interiority that complement one another. Each section first explores how interiority is evoked in Walker's process of writing *The Color Purple* (1982), and second, provides an example of how these inner facets are also mirrored within the novel itself. In doing so, my dissertation substantiates the influence of Black women's embodied vision and lived experiences on their creative process by demonstrating how centering Black interiorities illuminate Black diasporic spatial imaginaries beyond Western formations.

In "Writing *The Color Purple*," (2003) Walker recounts how the idea for the complexities of intimacy to be the central premise of a historical novel fell into place when out for a hike with her sister, Ruth. In connection to a love triangle they each knew about, Ruth explained that the wife had asked the mistress for her underwear and "instantly the missing piece of the story [Walker] was mentally writing—about two women who felt married to the same man—fell into place" (Walker 2003, 355). Given that *The Color Purple's* (1982) inception is premised upon such an overt and complex illustration of the personal as the historical as the political, it makes

so much sense that the novel's origin story, as well as the novel itself, is filled to the brim with layers upon layers of Black interiorities.

Leaning into the Unknown to Follow Intuition

Alice Walker's process of writing *The Color Purple* (1982) is such an intriguing, and masterful illumination of the integral role intuition and the unknown can play in creative praxes. Importantly, much of Walker's writing process centered on curating a space where the characters felt comfortable enough to come forward and tell her "their story," which in turn becomes the novel's storyline (Walker 2003, 359). Hearing how this communication works in Walker's own words, she explains "when I was sure the characters of my new novel were trying to form (or, as I invariably thought of it, trying to contact me, to speak *through* me), I began to make plans to leave New York" (Walker 2003, 356 original emphasis). Being tapped into her intuition, Walker knew that the novel could only be written if she gave permission for the characters to take up more space in her life, and so she gave herself fully over to the creative process of "spirit moving in [her] and through [her]") and journeyed into the unknown (hooks 2001, 77).

Walker made multiple moves to accommodate the characters' need to live in nature, first moving to a small house in Brooklyn with a maple tree view from her writing space, and then to San Francisco. However, neither place felt like home to the characters, whom either remained quiet or offered up complaints: "'What is all this tall shit anyway?' they would say" in New York about the skyscrapers (Walker 2003, 356). "'Us don't want to be seeing none of this,' they said. 'It make us can't think.'" was said about the bustling energy of all of the vehicles and people in San Francisco (Walker 2003, 356). Walker leaves no doubt on who these geographic moves were for, stating "this too had been a decision forced by my characters. As long as there was any question about whether I could support them in the fashion they desired (basically in undisturbed

silence) they declined to come out” (Walker 2003, 357). Finally, realizing that the characters were from the country, Walker and her lover moved to a country house in northern California that resembled where the characters lived in Georgia.

However, despite uprooting her entire life to move to where the characters felt comfortable and quitting her job at Ms. Magazine, Walker found that the busyness of continuing to travel to speaking engagements was too much for Celie and Shug, who were the two characters primarily announcing themselves. They wished for complete silence, telling Walker to “Give up all this travel. Give up all this talk. What is all this travel and talk shit anyway?” (Walker 2003, 357–358). And so, despite being “terrified” not knowing how she would financially support herself, Walker obliged their wishes, telling those who approached her about speaking gigs that “[she] was taking a year off for Silence” (Walker 2003, 358). Luckily, she was able to pull together enough funds to take a year completely off from work between selling a book and remaining on retainer for Ms. Magazine; although she did not do any work as a long-distance editor during this year at the request of, you guessed it, Shug and Celie (Walker 2003, 358).

During this year off in the countryside of northern California Walker immerses herself in the beautiful abundance of ease. Aside from spending time with the many characters who now come forward to weave their story, Walker quilts, walks amongst the red woods, swims, talks to trees, goes apple picking, rests in the meadow, basks in the time with her lover, and spends time with her daughter (Walker 2003, 358–359). Ultimately, Walker and the characters come to love and trust one another, and it does not even take her a year to write *The Color Purple* (1982). Not only does this story teach us something about silence as a site of co-creation, but also the

sovereignty of quiet as a holder of Black multitudes far beyond what dominant narratives of Black culture are able to comprehend (Quashie 2012).

Drawing on the epistemological framework of a poetics of landscape, which brings attention to written and unwritten geographic expressions as subaltern spatial practices, allows us to take seriously the uncharted ways of knowing that led to the reproduction of space from a country cottage to a sacred sanctuary (Glissant 1989; McKittrick 2006). In particular, we can then conceptualize Walker's curation of a space predicated on creating the conditions for her to become a vessel for the characters within her to enter into the world as a form of multidimensional Black placemaking. I reference the multidimensionality of Black placemaking because there was an incredible amount of interdependence and relationality between Walker and the characters within her when it came to choosing what place could operate as a writing sanctuary; a sanctuary where the determining factor came down to an inner and felt sense of belonging and connection to the place. Said simply, here we see an ecosystem of Black beings, engaged in a web of connections that extends beyond the page, coming together to make life-affirming place with one another. Accordingly, we are given insight into the expansiveness of relational placemaking as a boundaryless, interconnected spectrum containing interiors and exteriors that flow into and out of one another to be made possible (Massey 2005).

Connection to Novel

Written as an epistolary novel, one of *The Color Purple's* (Walker 1982) defining characteristics is that it is formatted entirely as a series of 91 letters. Although letters are addressed to someone, the practice of letter writing is quintessentially interior in nature, often done in silence and solitude because of its deeply personal and intimate nature. Similar to how Walker creates a writing container for herself that is based in silence when she intentionally

moves away from the city to the countryside in California, in the novel letters are a container that provides insight into what is going on inside of Celie.

This idea of the letter formatting being a container for immense self-exploration for Celie being similar to Walker's writing sanctuary is further evidenced by the active role the unknown plays in each of these cases. As detailed above, Walker trusts her intuition and journeys into the unknown when she makes decisions on where she will live, and how she will support herself, based upon what is necessary for the characters to speak through her and onto the page. While different in nature, there is also a heavy atmosphere of the unknown when it comes to the formatting and content of the novel.

For instance, the majority of Celie's letters are written to God, and thus have no intent to be delivered to any real person. Instead, Celie began writing letters to God when she is 14 as a way of processing being raped by her stepfather after he tells her "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (Walker 1982, 3). It is the very fact that Celie is writing into the unknown, with no real person to read them, that allows Celie to feel safe enough to indulge in introspection and delve even deeper into her own psyche.

Additionally, while all of the letters are written by either Celie or Nettie, you never actually know whose lived experiences any given letter is going to go into detail about. The unknown of walking into each letter not knowing whose experiences you will be reading about is underscored by the fact that despite all of the letters being written by Celie or Nettie, the first person often switches when they are detailing other characters' stories, so that it is as if the characters themselves are telling their own stories.

Further, there is a major atmosphere of the unknown surrounding pinning down the timeline of events since none of the letters are dated. While there are hints scattered throughout

the letters that allows the reader to derive that the novels' passage of time spans 1909–1947, many times as a reader you have no idea of how much time has passed between events or letters.

Finally, there are also thematic links between trusting in the unknown and intuition reflected in Celie's journey, with one key instance standing out as essential to the overall plotline. Shortly after going to live with Mr., Celie sees her daughter Olivia in town and engages in a brief conversation with Olivia's new mom, Corrine, who is the Reverend's wife (Walker 1982). Sometime later (remember the letters are not dated) Nettie runs away from home and is staying with Mr. and Celie for a while. However, Nettie is forced to leave when she refuses to have sex with Mr.. Upon Nettie's departure, Celie says, "But I only got one thing to give her, the name of Reverend Mr.. I tell her to ask for his wife. That maybe she would help. She the only woman I even seen with money" (Walker 1982, 18). In this moment, while Celie does not know what the outcome will be, she is showcasing a profound level of trust in her intuition when she tells Nettie to seek out the Reverend and his wife for assistance. I find this moment so powerful because if Celie would not have told Nettie this, there is a good chance that her sister's story as it's written, being a missionary and caretaker to Celie's children, would never exist. Additionally, given that so much of the novels' storyline focuses on what is out of Celie's control, I love how much agency Celie has in this scene, even more so since this detail is cut from both the 1985 and 2023 film adaptation.

The Influence of Spirit on Becoming

Nestled in the first few pages of a book, there is often a personal note from the writer that expresses appreciation to someone who has positively impacted their life. This meaningful touch, while subtle and easily overlooked, is a powerful testament about who the author considers to be

an essential source of support on their writing journey. In *The Color Purple's* (1982) case, Walker wrote the dedication to Spirit, stating:

To the Spirit:

Without whose assistance
Neither this book
Nor I
Would have been Written. (Walker 1982)

By writing *The Color Purple's* (1982) dedication to Spirit, Walker directly acknowledges how she regards the characters coming forward from within during her creative process as a spiritual and sacred experience. This notion is further cemented in Walker's brief but sweet acknowledgments at the end of the book, where she writes:

I thank everybody in this book for coming.
A.W., author and medium. (Walker 1982, 245)

In calling herself a medium, it is evident that Walker considers her inner dialogue with the characters as a form of communication between herself and Spirit. Furthermore, returning to the exact words of her dedication, which states that both herself and the book were “written” through the “assistance” of Spirit; here she not only acknowledges that her communing with divine presence made her book possible, but it also made her possible. While it is clear what aspect of the book itself was written since *The Color Purple* (1982) was in fact manifested in the world as a tangible novel, it is unclear from “Writing *The Color Purple*” (2003) or the novel's dedication and acknowledgments what aspect within Walker herself became more self-actualized. Sitting with this unknown is okay and does not take away from the fact that the creative process of writing *The Color Purple* (1982) was a profound, distinctly interior, life-changing experience and journey of Becoming for both author and artifact.

Connection to Novel

Just like Walker's connection to Spirit plays a key role in both the author's and novels becoming, a central component of Celie's growth is a profound evolution of her belief system. About two-thirds of the way through the novel Celie begins to steadily lose faith in God, which is demonstrated in her starting to write her letters to her sister Nettie instead of God. Celie's first letter written to Nettie captures a poignant conversation between Shug and Celie on the topic of religion (Walker 1982, 164–168). Celie discusses how the God she envisions is an old, white man, and based upon all of the trauma she has experienced, including a lynched father, a mentally ill mother, being separated from her sister, and raped from her stepfather, she perceived God to be “trifling, forgetful and lowdown” “just like all the other mens [she] know[s]” (Walker 1982, 164). Having also previously thought God aligned with Celie's dominant view of God, Shug explains that God is not found in a church, but inside of you, and all around you, especially in nature and other people. That “God ain't a he or a she, but a It” (Walker 1982, 167). The letter ends with Celie remarking how “[she is] still adrift” and finds it difficult to “chase that old white man out of [her] head” (Walker 1982, 168). How “[she] been so busy thinking bout him [she] never truly notice nothing God make. Not a blade of corn (how it do that?) not the color purple (where it come from?) Not the little wildflowers. Nothing” (Walker 1982, 168). Fast forward to the end of the novel, Celie has ended her romantic relationship with Mr., goes out into the world, and returns home on her own terms as an empowered woman to run her pants business and live on the land she inherits from her real father. In the final letter, which narrates Nettie and Celie's children, Olivia and Adam's, homecoming from Africa, Celie again addresses the letter to God, but with a new twist, writing “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (Walker 1982, 242). While Celie's journey of deconditioning from a white supremacist, patriarchal view of God is unequivocally different from Walker's relationship

to Spirit, the point remains that Nature as a spiritual site of interconnectedness is mirrored across Walker and Celie's journeys of becoming.

Reflections

As a whole, tracing Walker's process of writing *The Color Purple* (1982) from inspiration to creation shines a spotlight on some of my dissertation's main methodological questions: what is generative research? What possibilities are opened up if we hold our research design to the same level of scrutiny as our artifacts? What if the creative processes and lived experiences one engages in throughout the research process were taken seriously as part of the research design and/or considered empirics in and of themselves? How has the academy's privileging of the empirical, or that which is seen, over the metaphysical, that which is unseen, limit our understanding of Black spatial imaginaries beyond Western spatial formations?

Ultimately, centering my analysis on *The Color Purple's* (1982) origin story, opposed to solely a content analysis of the novel itself, provides the greatest insight into how "viewing texts as verbs rather than nouns" is an analytical move that illuminates the creator's embodied vision operating within a piece (McKittrick 2021, 52). In particular, focusing on the actions taken to birth the novel unveils how spirituality lies at the heart of both Walker's as the creator, and the novel's, states of being at the time of creation (i.e., verb). Therefore, to actually honor where Walker knows from, and how this informs her encounters with place, necessitates you to take her dedication to a "spiritual life" seriously (hooks 2001, 77; McKittrick 2021). In many ways, Walker's way of living attuned with Spirit exemplifies hooks' description of a "spiritual life" as a "commitment to a way of thinking and behaving that honors principles of inter-being and interconnectedness," as well as belief "that there is a place of mystery in our lives where forces that are beyond human desire or will alter circumstances and/or guide and direct us" (hooks

2001, 77). Aside from a specific writing location, a large part of what the characters brought into Walker's writing process was a refusal to live by external societal expectations based in capitalist, neoliberal systems and return to nature where she could fully become attuned with what is going on in her inner world.

I argue Walker's refusal to write the story when the characters are still shadows in her mind, but instead allowing the characters to write their own story is a rebellious act because of how it validates the metaphysical and unseen realm as a place of knowing from. That is because centering Walker's embodied way of knowing and existing in the world when writing *The Color Purple* (1982) allows us to clearly see how it is because of her "committ[ment] to relationality and interhuman dialogue" with spirit that "the text is bound up in acts of psychic and physiological rebellion and disobedience" (McKittrick 2021, 52, 51). In turn, this intuitive move enables her to write from a state of abundance, and by extension demonstrates how engaging with one's spirit is an avenue to "honor black life in ways that do not require beginning with, and then saving, the violated black body" (McKittrick 2021, 50). This gets at the questions: where does Black knowing come from? What is permissible within the academy? In tracing *The Color Purple's* (1982) origin story the entire text takes on a whole new life; you feel its life force, exactly because it is born out of Black anti-coloniality, out of intuition, and out of honoring the totality of Black interiorities as means of accessing alternative Black spatial imaginaries.

Generally, like Walker and Celie, intentionally turning inward in order to express outwardly is something that I relate to. I am also deeply in touch with my own inner experiences and see writing as a way to process and communicate what is happening within my inner world. For instance, many aspects of Walker's creative process, like fostering spaciousness through tuning into Nature's frequencies, wading through silence in order to create, as well as perceiving

my creative praxis as an act of co-creation with divine source, are all reflected in my own doctoral journey. In my transition from my Master's to my Ph.D. I have made a point of fostering the spiritual and ancestral elements of my work by leaning into the ways I am a channel for Spirit to flow through. There have been many times I have struggled to write and I have asked Spirit, or as I typically say Source, to speak through me because at that moment I was stuck. This practice of venturing into the unknown has actually allowed me to let go and trust what is meant to be expressed will be born into form. Even at the start of writing *The Color Purple's* (1982) section, I didn't know where to begin, and I went to my sacred pond, to just exist for a while, and this poem came out. The first words I wrote with this artifact in mind, will now be the closing words for the section...talk about a full circle moment that just feels right:

Walking through the trees,
I feel a profound sense of mystery overcome my being.

Ever so gently, the leaves billow in the wind;
and the stream flows.

Rocking my spirit,
I am a baby back in the arms of Mother Earth.

Nature's essence are like waves washing over me
stimulating my senses.

Such a pleasure.
Such a blessing.

What a gift it is to exist, fully immersed
in presence at this moment.

Creative Musings



Figure 4. *Communing with Alice Walker (2026)*, Photograph by Christoff Luehrs

Getting Nowhere Fast: A Visual Poem by Danielle Brown

*Are you listening?*⁷



Figure 5. *Getting Nowhere Fast* (2026), Photograph by Christoff Luehrs

a stranger said to me at the pond, “well you’re getting nowhere fast,” in response to seeing me standing there, and I thought to myself:

i go out into nature to bask in silence, and give myself the space to
wander into the splendid abundance of nothingness,
bumping into miracles and shaking hands
with wonder.
having lengthy chats with imagination now a staple of my everyday.

...i ask myself, is this what a brief

moment of freedom feels like?

My heart flutters, whispering... *yes, I think that it
may just be*

*Poem written in 2026

⁷ Brown, Danielle Lynn. 2026b. “Getting Nowhere Fast: A Visual Poem.” Published April 19, 2026.
<https://youtu.be/AXmDBSVcVn0>

Conclusion

Ultimately, Davis (2022), Walker (1982, 2003) and Willis (2000) have left me with a newfound understanding of how epistemologically centering feminist embodied vision captures more nuanced and empowering spatial responses to systemic oppression than are otherwise rendered unknowable within the limits of the white, male gaze. In particular, they demonstrate how centering Black embodied ways of seeing and experiencing the world within creative modalities complexify and expand visual and discursive representations of Black people. For instance, Viola Davis insightfully articulates how her push to advocate for changes to the role of Annalise Keating stemmed from her insistence of reclaiming her enoughness for herself. Davis was determined to heal the feelings of unworthiness brought up from the casting that she has carried since childhood attached to her being a dark-skinned Black women. Additionally, Willis' dedication to putting together a catalog of Black photographers 1840–2000, not only illuminates the personal dimensions of the Black American experience, but also unveiled how historically, Black people have used their agency to intentionally remove their images from the sight of the public, choosing to keep them for their private, familial usage. Finally, in allowing the characters within her to reorient her life, such as moving across the country into the silence of the woods and quitting her job, Walker shows how trusting her own vision and defying external logics was integral to her birthing a novel imbued with Black cultural characteristics. Together, Davis, Willis and Walker show how even if full on negation of the “white-masculinist cartographic gaze” is impossible due to overarching power dynamics, if you engage with Black people on their own terms you will see their hopeful intentions to assert their subjective visions of themselves and their community (Hawthorne and Meche 2016).

Ch. 5: Embodiment

“We are the ones we’ve been waiting for”

– June Jordan

My purpose in centering embodiment in my analysis is to explore how revolution is a series of events that happens both inside and outside of us (Lorde 2018, 45). Specifically, my epistemological stance aligns with feminist belief that all knowledge is embodied knowledge since it is informed by our unique social positioning, which is contextually dependent upon societal power dynamics, our environment, identities and experiences. However, given that the hegemonic domain shapes the cultural contexts we live within, and by extension our bodily experience of the world, it is often essential for individuals to intentionally look internally and return to their own inner knowing if they are to actually embody life-affirming values in their everyday lives (Collins 2002). Importantly then, in this chapter I explore how the individual choices we make transform structures at large (Benjamin 2022). As Lorde poignantly states in “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” “in a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action” (Lorde 2018, 19). From this viewpoint, embodying our values and worldviews in our everyday lives is both personally and collectively rewarding, with processes of deconditioning from hegemony and self-actualization playing an important role in dismantling oppressive structures and building a new world. Importantly then, the journey of becoming is a necessary step in individual and collective consciousness raising, and essential to fully grasp conceptualizations of power, logics, and spatial imaginaries that are operating within marginalized communities. As a Black feminist geographer, I am deeply interested in how geographical relationality and relational placemaking, as socio-spatial processes, helps to contextualize this topic of the role of individuals in social justice movements, especially in regard to alternative spatial imaginaries for society that are

underpinned by the ethos of intersectionality, interdependence, and interconnectedness (Massey 2005).

This chapter's two analyses explore the spatial elements embedded within creative texts by Black women. The first analysis engages in an intertextual, inter-temporal conversation between *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* by adrienne maree brown (2017), Audre Lorde's 1982 speech "Learning from the 60s" (2020b), and myself. Here, I explore how, despite being written 35 years apart, Lorde and brown each evoke relational placemaking when sharing similar guiding principles regarding how shaping change within our individual lives helps to dismantle oppressive structures and build the world anew. The second analysis examines the way *Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto* by Tricia Hersey (2022) employs spatial language when arguing that individual and collective rest and dreaming are underexamined locations for where imagining a new world can take place. Generally, all three artifacts discuss how deconditioning from hegemonic paradigms is a necessary step in crafting lives that enable us to embody our life-affirming values, believing that it is being more self-actualized individuals that will create the conditions for us to collectively dismantle oppressive systems of domination and craft a liberatory, just future (Benjamin, 2022).

adrienne maree brown and Audre Lorde

“I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept”
– Angela Davis

“Transform yourself to transform the world”
– Grace Lee Boggs

First Encounters

As a Black Feminist Geographer, I fully believe in the transformative potential of the personal as the political and have always perceived the body as a site of individual and collective resistance, refusal, and transformation. Having entered into adulthood during a time of collective hegemonic reckoning and steadily emerging fascism on my home soil as well as across the globe, I have witnessed countless movements formed to tackle every issue imaginable—be it White Supremacy, sexism, ableism, homophobia and transphobia, xenophobia, climate change, sexual violence, genocide, etc. The weight of this moment is palpable, and I often feel both immense optimism regarding the shift towards calling out oppressive systems, as well as powerlessness, grief, and sorrow at the gravity of what it will take to actually hold our governments accountable. Some of the daily practices I lean on to tend to my mind, body, and spirit amidst navigating the weightiness of it all include nature walks, divination tools, creativity, therapy, reading, rest, and spending quality time with loved ones. However, whenever I find myself doubting that true change is possible, it is Black Feminist thinkers who act as my compass, gently guiding me back to myself: *The Danielle who knows that while it may seem trivial, her actions and beliefs matter now more than ever. The Danielle who knows that hope is radical, because it allows us to imagine another world is possible, and gives you the push to actually work towards this reimagined world in this lifetime.* Thus, through an intertextual, inter-temporal weaving of *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* by adrienne maree

brown (2017) and “Learning From the 60s” (2020b) by Audre Lorde (2020b) I am uplifting some of the advice I have personally found useful regarding how to understand our individual roles in collective liberation.

While I had come across adrienne maree brown’s name and works before in passing, my first time understanding the true brilliance of her words came in the form of a sweet note in my email inbox. It was September of 2021, and I was in the throes of writing my Master’s thesis for an end of year completion date. Like many graduate students, I had doubts surfacing about my ability to keep up with the pace needed to wrap up such an intellectually and physically grueling process. Randomly, I received a note from Sarah with a few encouraging words expressing how *I’ve got this*, and a photo she had taken of a page in a used copy of *Emergent Strategy* (brown 2017). In the photo, you see the underlined quote “You have worlds inside you. You have permission to share them,” (brown 2017, 198) in bright pink pen, alongside a margin note that read *I needed to read this 4/11 night before generals*. In the email, Sarah expressed how she felt like the previous book owner who had taken notes in the book, a fellow graduate student, was speaking right to me, and so she wanted to pass the piece of wisdom along as I finished up my thesis. I remember feeling so deeply seen, understood, and supported in a moment in which isolation and a sense of being misunderstood were my constant companions.

As I engaged more with brown’s work, I resonated deeply with how they unapologetically own the totality of their multifaceted being. brown self-describes as “an auntie, sister, daughter, woe, writer, facilitator, coach, mentor, mediator, pleasure activist, sci-fi scholar, doula, healer, tarot reader, witch, cheerleader, singer, philosopher, queer Black multiracial lover of life” (2017, 29). I was drawn to using *Emergent Strategy* (brown 2017) as one of my artifacts because of how brown centers the wisdom of the earth and non-human beings in her exploration

of ways individuals and organizations can embody changes that help to build a more liberatory world. Even more, I feel seen by the way Brown brings the spiritual dimension into their analytical approach, stating that they see the embodied process of learning lessons from the earth as being “conduits of the wisdom of this planet” (2017, 50) which supports their calling to lead “from spirit towards liberation” (2017, 12). I grew up immersed in the outdoors, with the most impactful memory being my five years of working at a community urban garden in high school. However, my relationship with Spirit has deepened in the last few years, which has further fostered my intimate, reciprocal, kinship relationships with the earth, land, animals and plants, in my everyday life. These non-human connections also inform my approach to scholarship.

Audre Lorde is one of the Black Feminist greats. Self-describing as a Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet, Lorde is a Black Feminist ancestor whose essays, poems, speeches, and novels continue to have profound impacts on Black feminism today. My first engagement with Lorde’s works was in the same “Feminist Artists of the Diaspora” course during my junior year in undergrad where I first read essays by Alice Walker. I distinctly remember her essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House” from *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Lorde 2020c) leaving me speechless. Up to that point, as a political science major, I had never come across a Black woman so fiercely speaking truth to power. Throughout graduate school, I have regularly returned to Lorde, especially for her insights on the deep wells of inner knowing held within the consciousness of women.

In particular, as I explore throughout Chapter 3, “Poetry Is Not A Luxury” (Lorde 2020d) has played an essential role in the trajectory of my entire dissertation by affirming my own creative engagements as a mode of accessing my embodied knowledge. In particular, Lorde gave me permission to fully lean into the spiritual dimensions of Black women’s creative praxes as a

site of inner knowing within my research, as well as empowered me to pursue Black women's well-being practices as a spatial response to hegemony. In other words, poetry "is a vital necessity of our existence" because of how it makes it possible for us to tap into the truest parts of ourselves often relegated to the shadows, and thus illuminates the ways Black women's worldviews and experiences evoke a consciousness outside of white western patriarchal thought (Lorde 2020d, 25). As I continued to return to her works for counsel on how to navigate my dissertation from this deep reservoir of inner knowing inside myself, I re-read Lorde's speech "Learning from the 60s" from 1982 (2020b). After already having decided to utilize *Emergent Strategy* by adrienne maree brown (2017) as an artifact, I felt intuitively pulled to put their two pieces in conversation with one another given how much the guidance from these amazing Black Feminist thinkers affirmed one another so beautifully. At first, I tried to resist and stick to the script I had laid out for myself, but my intuition was clear that an intertextual, inter-temporal weaving of these two works was the only way for me to move forward, and so here it is.

Advice from Black Feminists on Shaping Our Liberatory Future

While there is a 35-year gap between when Audre Lorde delivered her speech "Learning from the 60s" in 1982 (2020b) and adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (2017), the basis of each of their messages to those invested in liberation work echoes one another and speak directly to the Black feminist principle of the personal as the political. Here, my intertextual, inter-temporal analysis of these two Black feminists' works explores four core principles at the heart of each of their advice: 1) change, 2) relationality and interdependence, 3) difference, and 4) complexity and decentralization. In doing so, this piece employs the Black Studies methodological practice of engaging in intellectual dialogue across space and time to uplift the "concrete clues" they have each offered us about how increasing our

awareness of what is going on within ourselves help us to personally and collectively “live this world differently” (McKittrick 2021, 33).

Change

Audre Lorde first delivered her speech “Learning from the 60s” (2020b) at Harvard during Malcolm X Weekend in 1982. Lorde makes clear at the beginning of her speech that the majority of her address comes directly from her engagement with Malcolm X’s work, or as she calls it, was “born from his words” (2020b, 127). Offering some context to her intellectual relationship with Malcolm X’s work, she admits that she initially did not relate to much of his religious and political stance. It was only after his death and realizing the evolution of some of his positions in each of these spheres that she was able to find true resonance with his teachings. Importantly, upon a closer reading of his words, she “found a man much closer to the complexities of real change than anything [she] had read before” (Lorde 2020b, 126–127). This idea of harnessing the transformative power of change is a theme that runs through her speech, especially in connection with the Black community's survival. Going as far as to say, “the ability to change” is “one of the most basic Black survival skills,” Lorde asserts that the only way for us to ensure our existence as a people is to foster change in each of our individual lives (2020b, 127). Lorde powerfully declares:

Each one of us must look clearly and closely at the genuine particulars (conditions) of his or her life and decide where action and energy is needed and where it can be effective. Change is the immediate responsibility of each of us, wherever and however we are standing, in whatever arena we choose. (Lorde 2020b, 133)

As Lorde continues on with her speech, she builds her entire argument upon this foundational premise of change, urging the crowd to embody lessons learned from the Black Liberation Movements in the 1960s so as not to repeat the same mistakes in the present (2020b).

Similarly, adrienne maree brown's inspiration to center change in *Emergent Strategy* (2017) also stemmed from an in-depth engagement with a prominent Black visionary's body of work. Specifically, emergent strategy began as a way of capturing the types of leadership displayed by the protagonists in Octavia Butler's science fiction novels, many of whom were young Black women navigating apocalyptic and otherworldly conditions (brown 2017, 24). Alongside being inspired by the "adaptive and relational leadership model" in Butler's science fiction novels and short stories, brown also "developed her ideas of 'shaping change' in conversation with Octavia Butler's concepts of 'shaping God,' which is introduced in the Earthseed verses of her *Parable of the Sower*...(1993)" (2017, 23, 1). The way in which both brown and Lorde rigorously study the works of Black thinkers to learn something about how the world operates, and how this engagement is the catalyst for their own thinking, are prime examples of the radical potential of approaching creative Black texts as theoretically insightful embodiments of unique societal visions (McKittrick 2021).

Over time, brown's interest in harnessing the potential of change remained central when applying emergent strategy to the real-world contexts of personal usage and community organizing, expanding her inspirations to include biomimicry and permaculture, both of which have to do with modeling human systems after principles found in the natural world (2017, 23). Evolving again, the current definition of emergent strategy, which is also the book's central premise, is:

ways for humans to practice being in right relationship to our home and each other, to practice complexity, and grow a compelling future together through relatively simple interactions. Emergent strategy is how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for. (brown 2017, 24)

Drawing from the natural world, brown's conceptualization of emergent strategy encompasses six interconnected elements: 1) fractals, 2) intentional adaptation, 3) interdependence and

decentralization, 4) nonlinear and iterative, 5) resilience, and 6) creating more possibilities. Notably, while brown provides necessary context as to what each element is and where it is found in nature, the majority of their time is spent exploring personal and organizational applications to provide grounded examples of how embodying the role of a changemaker helps usher in a more equitable world (brown 2017). This idea of actually working to incorporate these principles into one's everyday life, opposed to simply intellectualizing them, is brown's true offering. Crucially, a third of the book is dedicated to an array of embodiment tools, such as self and group assessments, a list of brown's personal practices that help them to weave emergent strategy into their everyday life, and facilitation strategies for those working with various group configurations (e.g., organizations, alliances, etc.,). Thus, brown's journey of creating emergent strategy is in itself a living example of leaning into the radical potential of change, in that they model what it looks like to allow oneself, and one's thinking, to evolve over time.

Relationality and Interdependence

Continuing to pull from Malcolm X's teachings in her 1982 speech at Harvard, Lorde moved on to addressing the Black community's uphill battle to overcome the 400-year-old racist paradigms internalized within Black people. Acknowledging the difficulty Black people are up against given how "we must move against not only those forces which dehumanize us from the outside, but also against those oppressive values which we have been forced to take into ourselves," Lorde directly addresses how the systemic shifts we wish to see out in the world begin with internal work (2020b, 127). Notably, Lorde expands upon my exploration of the interior as a site of becoming in Chapter 4: Vision when she makes essential connections between being conditioned to embody oppressive belief systems and how we relate to one another. On this matter she asks the audience to reflect on how they are parts of a whole,

inquiring “what is that internalized and self-destructive barrier that keeps us from moving, that keeps us from coming together?” (2020b, 133). Providing further contextualization to her arguments, she declares “coalition, like unity, means the coming together of whole, self-actualized human beings, focused and believing, not fragments autonomous, marching to a prescribed step” (Lorde 2020b, 134). Here, Lorde fleshes out a relational framework for movement building when she clarifies how self-actualization is not an isolated process. Specifically, she cautions people to avoid conflating her call for individuals to take on the autonomous work of deconditioning from their internalized oppression with a prescription for the fight for liberation to be pursued in the same autonomous fashion. On the contrary, it is our ability to embody our unique ways of knowing and moving through the world that allows us to come together as a strong united front against inhumane systems and structures.

While brown (2017) and Lorde (2020b) are addressing different audiences, —brown speaking to social justice organizers in the 21st century and Lorde speaking to the Black community in the 1980s—they each insist that systemic change requires each of us to do the internal work to unlearn oppressive ways of being and relating to one another so that our newfound embodiment of life-affirming values can extend into our social justice movements. In particular, from the very beginning brown’s centering of relationality in her conceptualization of emergent strategy really spoke to me as a Black feminist geographer. By conceptualizing fractals, which are “never-ending pattern[s]” that repeat from the micro to the macrolevel, as a main building block of emergent strategy, brown provides language to understand the necessity of each and every one of us to take seriously our own deconditioning and self-actualization journeys (2017, 51). As brown explains:

And this may be the most important element to understand—that what we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system. Grace articulated in what might be the

most-used quote of my life: ‘*Transform yourself to transform the world.*’ This doesn’t mean to get lost in the self, but rather to see our own lives and work and relationships as a front line, a first place we can practice justice, liberation, and alignment with each other and the planet. (brown 2017, 53 original emphasis)

Importantly, brown’s acknowledgement that a fractal existence is an intrinsic aspect of our condition as beings on this planet is a recognition of the geographic principle of relationality, which engages with the ways in which processes operating in one site are always imbricated with other places and scales (Massey 2005). Thus, if we want to build a human-centered system that reflects life-affirming values, such as abundance, reciprocity, and wholistic well-being for all, then we all must first look internally at ourselves and start embodying these values in our everyday lives. Without this internal work, the past will continue to repeat, and long-lasting, widespread, deep-rooted systemic shifts are unlikely to happen.

Difference

Lying at the heart of Lorde’s 1982 speech is the question to the Black community in the 1980s: “can we really still afford to be fighting each other?” (2020b, 132)⁸. Recalling how difference was such a salient point of division in the 1960s, she details how the Black community turned against one another, holding each other to narrow, external, politically correct definitions of Blackness, instead of orienting their anger towards those in power who oppressed them. This was not only harmful to their progress as a people, but was doing their enemies work for them. Specifically, she reflected on how:

In the 1960s, white america — racist and liberal alike – was more than pleased to sit back as spectator while Black militant fought Black Muslim, Black Nationalist bad-mouthed the non-violent, and Black women were told that our only useful position in the Black

⁸ Many of Audre Lorde’s works examine the role of difference in coalition building. For instance, in “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” (2020a) Lorde explores the saliency of difference within women’s organizing, paying special attention to the impacts it’s had on splitting white and Black women’s feminist movements.

Power movement was prone. The existence of Black lesbian and gay people was not even allowed to cross the public consciousness of Black America. (Lorde 2020b, 129)

Aware of where this pull to conflate difference with the enemy comes from, Lorde explains how an inability to withstand difference is an internalized wound within the Black community due to how their differences have been wielded against them as a people. Confronting others' differences head on would almost act as a mirror, making them have to look their own differences in the face, and many fear what "those differences might say about ourselves" (Lorde 2020b, 128). In a jarring statement to make her point about the costs of perceiving any semblance of diversity within the Black community as suspect, she likens the political correctness in the 1960s to "a new set of shackles" (Lorde 2020b, 128). Using her own lived experience as an example, Lorde explains how she had a felt sense of rejection from the Black community in the 60s because of her positioning "as a Black lesbian mother in an interracial marriage" (2020b, 129). It is from this experience of feeling pressured by the Black community to ignore part of her identity in order to fit into a certain mold of Blackness that the renowned quote from Lorde comes from, "that is how I learned that if I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive" (2020b, 129). I find it interesting that whenever I have seen this quote by Lorde, I always assumed she was referring to the white system because it is often an isolated quote. However, read in context, we see that she is actually critiquing how folks in the Black community in the 1960s freedom movements were expecting people to perform specific types of Blackness to gain community acceptance.

Ultimately, reading "Learning from the 60s" (2020b) in full, I have an even greater appreciation for Lorde as an intersectional Black feminist and the ways in which she has sought to bring the Black community together. As Elizabeth Alexander reminds us in *The Black Interior* (2004) Black people have also used their "limited imagination" of blackness to police one

another throughout history, which strips our community of “complex black selves, real and enactable black power, rampant and unfetishized black beauty” (x). Thus, an essential part of Lorde’s advice in the 1980s, which I believe stands today, is an insistence that the Black community learn from the past and not fall into the trap of white hegemonic reductionism, which pushes a monolithic understanding of Blackness. Remarkably, Lorde’s emphasis on how holding one another to narrow definitions of Blackness is a form of internalized oppression that stems from a perceived need to prove one’s worth echoes advice given by the renowned Black feminist thinker Toni Morrison. In a powerful speech just a few years earlier in 1975, “A Humanist View,” which was a part of a Black Studies series at Portland State University Morrison declares, “It is important, therefore, to know who the real enemy is, and to know the function, the very serious function of racism, which is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work” (The Black Agenda Review 2025). Thus, honoring the wisdom of the Black feminist thinkers who came before us means to take seriously how Black people’s survival depends on doing the internal work to reject white, masculine conceptualizations of Blackness and reorient towards a feminist epistemological view that celebrates the fact that we all hold different embodied locations. This in turn will also help us to welcome the full breadth of Black ways of knowing and moving through the world in our Black Liberation movements so that we can stand in solidarity while struggling to dismantle the systems and people who are actually upholding systemic racism (Lorde 2020b; Quashie 2012).

Likewise, in *Emergent Strategy* (2017) brown also cautions readers to be wary of the ways in which holding a strong conviction in values can have the negative result of fearing any perceived deviation from one’s personal viewpoints. However, brown and Lorde each reference distinct social spheres related to their social-political contexts. brown connects to the

contemporary (i.e., 2010s) critique and cancel culture within social justice movements, especially by way of social media, while Lorde discusses divisions within Black liberation movements in the 1960s. Like Lorde, brown also views the move to vilify difference as tracing back to the human hierarchy of value. Distinctly though, while Lorde is speaking more towards racial human hierarchies, brown is more generally speaking to the ways in which “some people are disposable—can fail at being human” and given no chance at a future (2017, 132). Connecting to the emerging cancel culture by those who consider themselves progressive, brown points out how “even those of us who critique these punitive methods, who are committed to justice, practice our own versions of prisons, blacklists, takedowns, and public executions” (2017, 132). In a piece titled, “We Are Still Beginning,” which was originally published in 2015 and was republished in *Emergent Strategy* (2017), brown discusses the increasing pattern she has witnessed by social justice organizers and participants to use social media as a site to destroy one another, especially by way of memes, think pieces, and specially targeted statuses (144–150)⁹.

As she tells it:

In most cases, very complex realities get watered down into one flawed aspect of these people’s personalities, or one mistake or misunderstanding. A mob mentality takes over then, an evisceration of character that is punitive, traumatizing, and isolating... What we do now is find out someone or some group has done (or may have done) something out of alignment with our values. Some of the transgressions are small—saying something fucked-up, being disrespectful in a group process. Some are massive—false identity, sexual assault. We then tear that person or group to shreds in a way that affirms our values. (brown 2017, 144–145)

⁹ In a piece titled “A Protocol for Haters” in *Emergent Strategy* (2017, 117–121) brown also explores the rise of critique culture on social media. However, their approaches are different in that “We Are Still Beginning” examines media critique amongst social justice participants and organizers, whereas “A Protocol for Haters” examines critiques of movements by those who are not actively involved in movement work.

Here, brown is getting at how being a part of a community can be a double-edged sword when everyone embodies their values so deeply that any real or imagined, big or small, deviation from the groups' perceived shared ethics are considered a slight that a person cannot come back from.

To be clear, I don't read brown as saying that people should not be accountable for their words or actions, but instead raising a valid question of whether accountability must equate to exclusion and/or public execution. brown's self-awareness is inspirational on this matter, admitting how she herself is not above "get[ting] caught up in a mob on the Internet in a way I rarely do in life" and upon reflection on why this is the case realizing "at the most basic level, I feel better about myself because I'm on the right side of history...or at least the news cycle" (2017, 145). Here, we see a brown vulnerably showing what it looks like for a person to have a level of internal awareness that allows them to decipher why their actions are misaligned with their personal values. Pulling from their work as a facilitator and mediator, brown leaves us with three questions that ponder how conflict stemming from different values can be generative: 1) "Why?" 2) "What can I/we learn from this?" and 3) "How can my real-time actions contribute to transforming this situation (versus making it worse)?" (2017, 147–149 original emphasis). brown's advocacy for a level of solidarity that honestly values differences as generative—as opposed to rejecting or merely tolerating them—is very timely. Having witnessed my fair share of cancel and critique culture by social justice allies, participants, and organizers, on social and mainstream media, I know I will return to these three questions when I find myself highly skeptical of another's words or actions whom I otherwise hold similar emancipatory viewpoints to ensure my overarching commitments to working towards justice for all are upheld.

All in all, I appreciate how both Lorde and brown tap into their experiential wisdom and provide examples of their own relationships to this very sensitive topic. For instance, while

Lorde gives us a peek at the internal struggles one faces as a target of divisive politics, brown offers us some understanding of how someone may unintentionally find themselves a participant in divisive politics. Poignantly, by raising awareness of how hegemonic ways of thinking and being can show up in our lives, brown and Lorde demonstrate the importance of reflecting upon if the belief systems you currently embody align with your actual values.

Complexity and Decentralization

Ultimately, all of the inspirational advice from Lorde's 1982 speech "Learning from the 60s" (2020b) that I have identified thus far as useful to incorporate into current emancipatory socio-political organizing boils down to this: complex, decentralized, multi-issue movements are the only way to move towards our united goal of survival. Lorde cautions against waiting for a new charismatic Black leader to save us from our struggles, which puts all of our hope for systemic change in the hands of one person who, just like that, could literally or figuratively be assassinated, halting a movement's momentum (2020b, 133). Instead, Lorde advocates for all people seeking liberation from systemic oppression to come together, across race, age, sex, sexuality, religion, class, and otherwise, from a place that values one another's differences just as much as their similarities. In this model, it is the very fact that we are empowered self-actualized individuals coming together to rally behind our "common interest, survival" that allows us to properly focus on the actual threat, which is not one another, but the oppressive system, as well as those who act as its enforcers (Lorde 2020b, 133). Thus, instead of employing an overly simplified approach to building coalitions solely along identity lines, Lorde calls for a more complex approach to match the "multidimensional threats to our survival" (2020b, 130). Lorde asks that we see the ways in which our struggles connect, stating:

Each one of us here is a link in the connection between anti-poor legislation, gay shootings, the burning of synagogues, street harassment, attacks against women, and

resurgent violence against Black people... In what way do I contribute to the subjugation of any part of those who I define as my people? (Lorde 2020b, 131)

In other words, building community from a vantage point that honors how our struggles intersect expands who one considers to be *their people* to include all those who are oppressed, which then enables them to see how an attack against one is an attack against us all. Thus, in preaching intersectional coalition building as a form of militancy, Lorde is asking that we work towards a future that is spacious enough to include everyone who finds themselves holding subjugated embodied locations within our modern hegemonic hierarchies, both in the 1980s, and today (2020b).

In the same fashion, citing the civil rights movement as an example, brown also warns against idolizing high profile charismatic leaders because of how the concentration of power can leave followers lost if they are no longer around, stalling forward momentum (2017, 98). Alternatively, throughout *Emergent Strategy* (2017) brown continuously advocates for a decentralized movement that upholds difference as an operating principle, stating “we have to create futures in which everyone doesn’t have to be the same kind of person...I want an interdependence of lots of kinds of people with lots of belief systems, and continued evolution” (57). Just like in nature, where diversity is abundant, with the trees, the animals, the sun, all having different functions that create a sustainable ecosystem where all beings’ needs are met, we must also remember that each of us are living embodiments of a unique mix of skills and lived experiences that “holds pieces of the solution,” but in and of itself is not *the* solution (brown 2017, 63).

Providing nuance to their argument, brown explains how a complex and decentralized movement towards liberation not only helps in the creation of a just future for more diverse

beings with distinct lived experiences and worldviews, but also opens up more possibilities for avenues to get there. Poignantly, brown offers the following words on the matter:

It isn't that we never need sharp, directed, focused, and even single-issue moments—we do. It's just that we live in a system that thrives when conditions are abundant and diverse, in a universe that holds contradictions and multitudes, and we often reject that chaotic fertile reality too soon, as if we can't tolerate the scale of our own collective brilliance. In my observations of the natural world, there are examples of scale that offer another way—when we think about snowflakes, grains of sand, waves in the water, stars—there is evidence that many possibilities exist for how we manifest inside our potential. (brown 2017, 156)

Said differently, instead of being so focused on creating a homogeneous vision for the way forward that a movement ends before it begins, we must lean into the fruitful chaos that arises when you bring together a diverse community rallying behind the common objective of survival. Importantly then, brown advocates for a version of collective movements that are rooted in complex, sometimes, contradictory, embodied experiences, arguing that honoring individual interior experiences actually fosters relational creativity. One minor divergence we see here between Lorde's and brown's perspectives comes to how they each view the plausibility of *single-issue movements*. While Lorde is clear that “there is no such thing *as single-issue struggle* because we do not live *single-issue lives*” (2020b, 130 emphasis added), brown believes that “*single-issue moments*” are not only plausible but can be necessary at times (2017, 156 emphasis added). All in all, regardless of this slight distinction, brown's overarching vision for movement building centers “collaborative ideation,” which is when diverse groups of people come together with their unique ideas for solutions to co-create more possibilities for paths forward (2017, 19). The point being that coming together to collectively assemble a spatial imaginary where all people's lived experiences and embodied visions for society are considered generative increases the likelihood that the liberatory future we are fighting for is inclusive and equitable.

Reflections

What intrigues me as a Black feminist geographer is how brown's (2017) and Lorde's (2020b) arguments, which each center the principles of 1) change, 2) relationality and interdependence, 3) difference, and 4) complexity and decentralization, are fundamentally spatial in nature. By calling for everyone to embody how they are *shapers of the future*, brown and Lorde illuminate the connections between the feminist principle of the personal as the political and the geographic conceptualization of relational placemaking (Massey 2005). This is because relational placemaking captures the social production of space and identity as a spatial politics, and thus it is through placemaking that we "shape the world to our socio-spatial vision" (Allen, Lawhon, and Pierce 2019, 1010). Pointing directly to where they each use this exact phrasing of shaping the future, in *Emergent Strategy* (2017) brown says on this matter, "We are all learning what it means to be somebodies who shape the future, to operate at the scale of transformation" (121). Similarly, Lorde asserts in her 1982 speech "Learning from the 60s," (2020b), "We who are Black are at an extraordinary point of choice within our lives. To refuse to participate in the shaping of our future is to give up" (133). Thus, both brown and Lorde each challenge us to recognize how our unique journeys of becoming are always operating within a broader systemic context and as a result are already engaged in the "socio-spatial (re)ordering of society" as a whole whether we realize it or not (Allen, Lawhon, and Pierce 2019, 1010). In the end, a key takeaway from my intertextual analysis of brown and Lorde identifies how Black feminist articulations of shaping the future into a more just collective geographic vision is an insightful expansion of the spatial process of relational placemaking (brown 2017; Lorde 2020b; Butler 2024).

Creative Musings



Figure 1. *Communing with adrienne maree brown (2026)*, Photograph by Christoff Luehrs



Figure 2. *Communing with Audre Lorde (2026), Photograph by Christoff Luehrs*

Ode to Nature: A Visual Poem by Danielle Brown

*Are you listening?*¹⁰

To the wetlands,
my dear neighborhood pond,
my confidant.

Thank you for holding my grief in a world that asks me to
appear as if I'm okay.
Wrapping me in your musky smells and bird song.

Without you, I worry that I would have already slipped
away within myself to hide from the external strain that
comes with trying to act as if fear, worry, and despair
don't sit in my belly on a daily basis.

Thank you for reminding me on every visit that I'm
worthy of feeling all of my emotions, from the joyous to
the solemn ones. You understand my well of depth in
ways I fear no human ever could. Filling the hollow ache
with times of respite.

Bird cataloging has become one of my favorite activities
because, for a moment, my world is filled with colorful wonder.

When I'm with you is one of my few instances of peace and tranquility. When taking full breaths
comes to me easily.

Thank you for teaching me that sometimes stillness is the loudest form of presence.

That what appears on the surface is never all of what it seems, for there are entire worlds lying
underneath just waiting to be seen.

Thank you for teaching me not to be afraid of my ebbs and flows, for cycles and seasons of
death, and rebirth are a part of what it means to be a living being on this earth.

In a world that teaches me that to slow down is a death sentence; you teach me that to float is just
as valuable of a life preservation technique as swimming.

*Poem written in 2024



Figure 3. Ode to Nature (2026),
Photograph by Christoff Luehrs

¹⁰ Brown, Danielle Lynn. 2026d. "Ode to Nature: A Visual Poem." Published April 28, 2026.
<https://youtube.com/shorts/76Kf7LyjPgI?si=Qyxa7elq05zEwL-J>

Lessons from a Snail: A Visual Poem by Danielle Brown

*Are you listening?*¹¹

Journal Prompt: What are you ready to put your heart and soul into?



Figure 4. *Lessons from a Snail* (2021),
Photograph by Danielle Brown

At 24 years old I have come to the realization that I have been a member of the academic institution for the majority of my life. Having started daycare at 2 years and 9 months old, from what I'm told, I have been a part of this world for about 21 years or so. I am now standing out in my neighborhood pond, or whom I like to lovingly call my wetlands, at 7 am and I just watched a snail pass an illusionary grass finish line that I had placed in my head as some kind of grand completion. The snail did not ask for this! The snail waivered, slowed, and then finally finished passing the grass line. Instantly, I thought...Yes, snail! Thank you for reminding me that life's a journey and slow and steady finishes the race. As I near the end of my Master's thesis, pushing it back to Autumn, comparing my stumble to the snail's slow but graceful completion made me momentarily feel really good about myself. Fleeting reasoning with grind culture thinking. Within 3 minutes I questioned, "*Why did I put the snail in a race at all?*" Isn't it more likely the snail is just out for a stroll, a lot like myself. So, to answer the prompt, I am ready to put my heart and soul into deconditioning myself from white supremacist, capitalist, settler colonial logics and value systems.

*Journal entry written in 2021

¹¹ Brown, Danielle Lynn. 2026c. "Lessons from a Snail: A Visual Poem." Published April 17, 2026. <https://youtube.com/shorts/3L9EcdnmF5U?feature=share>

Tricia Hersey

First Encounter

Despite social media becoming mainstream while I was in middle school, I avoided all social platforms throughout my teenage years. I finally joined Instagram in my first year of graduate school in June 2020 as a way to display the art I had been creating in response to the pandemic and police murderers of Black and brown people. During this time, I turned to creative expression as a way of processing the heavy weight of all that I was witnessing and living through. Creativity, mostly in the form of poetry, protest art, paintings, and photography, became a soothing balm for me during a time when depression, isolation, rage, fear, and powerlessness racked me on a daily basis. I fondly remember staying up until well past midnight, working under the soft glow of moonlight streaming in through the window, to complete a “Say Her Name” protest art, because my spirit would not let me sleep until the last bead was glued down.



Figure 5. *Say Her Name* (2020), Painting by Danielle Brown

Once completed, my inner churn was quiet, and I rested peacefully that night. Despite my longstanding hesitation towards social media, I felt called to make myself heard during that profound moment in history as a form of refusal against a system that sought to silence, numb, oppress, and dehumanize Black people like me. Spirit restless, but alive, my inner monologue during this time of my life screamed *my existence is a form of resistance* on repeat.

Aside from being a public display for my art, another aspect of social media I found helpful at the time was the ability to be a part of like-minded communities. I began following Tricia Hersey, otherwise known as the Nap Ministry (@thenapministry) shortly after joining Instagram. Hersey's work was one of many posts circulating at the time detailing the negative toll of witnessing Black death on the observer's mental, emotional, psychological, spiritual, and physical health. In line with her more general mission of rest is resistance, much of Hersey's guidance at this time circled back to encouraging folks to lean into their humanity and divinity more than ever by slowing down and resisting the temptation to overwork themselves tirelessly participating in activism efforts.

Tricia Hersey is widely known as the Nap Bishop and founder of The Nap Ministry, an organization that promotes rest as a form of resistance. Hersey's longstanding work as a community organizer, poet, artist, and theologian are all demonstrated in the types of projects The Nap Ministry does, which includes performance art installations, immersive workshops, Collective Napping Experiences, and the Resurrect Rest School. In the past few years, Hersey has put out a number of books and tools for people to learn about, and embody, the rest is resistance framework in their daily lives, including *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto* (2022), *The Nap Ministry's Rest Deck: 50 Practices to Resist Grind Culture* (2023) and *We Will Rest!: The Art of Escape* (2024). I went back and forth about which component of The Nap Ministry I

should examine in-depth, especially given that some of the projects are more creative in the traditional sense. However, answering McKittrick's call to concretize metaphor (2021), I have chosen to hone in on the spatial metaphors used within *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto* (2022), namely make space, taking up space in Third Spaces, holding space and DreamSpace. This decision also supports my interest, as discussed in Chapter 2: Crossroads, of helping to build a reservoir of life-affirming terminology as a way of fostering a language of livingness within the academy. I believe an important part of this includes decentering academic jargon that is often inaccessible to those outside of the institution. Specifically, holding space and taking up space are two colloquial metaphors already on my radar due to an increased usage of them within public wellness discourse, including using them regularly myself. On the other hand, DreamSpace, Third Space and make space are metaphors that I was introduced to while reading *Rest is Resistance* (Hersey 2022). Ultimately, this analysis analytically “reckon[s] with materiality of metaphor” by examining how spatial metaphors are a discursive tool used to evoke the relational dynamic between people’s interior and exterior domains (McKittrick 2021, 11).

Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto (2022) is a seminal work by Tricia Hersey that captures the inspirations, mission, key tenets, and primary projects of The Nap Ministry. The political ethos underlying The Nap Ministry is intrinsically tied to Hersey’s personal story. As a Black woman, wife and mother in divinity school in 2013, Hersey found herself experimenting with rest as a survival tool from the physical and spiritual exhaustion she was under from excessive workloads, financial and familial struggles, and the psychological turmoil of living in a white supremacist system (2022, 3–4). The drain on her was unbearable, and as “[she] inched closer and closer to the edge and as [her] exhaustion increased [her] Spirit started whispering, ‘No more. You must slow down. Rest a little.’ [She] listened” (Hersey 2022, 136). In pointing out that

her Spirit told her to rest, Hersey is making it clear how she perceives our need to rest as a form of embodied knowledge, in that it is our body's instinct to rest. As I discuss in-depth in Chapter 2: Crossroads, I resonate with Hersey's experience of being pushed to the brink of exhaustion in graduate school and deciding to make my wholistic well-being a non-negotiable to make it through the program, as well as more generally live with my mind, body, and spirit in alignment. Besides Hersey's lived realities navigating racist, capitalist oppressive landscapes, she also found inspiration for exploring rest as a form of resistance through other personal experiences, like her family's relationship to rest and growing up in the Black Pentecostal Church. Additionally, Hersey was heavily influenced by Black thought and practices, such as slave testimonials, the American maroons, womanism, Black liberation theology, bell hooks, Octavia Butler, Audre Lorde, Afrofuturism, and the Civil Rights Movement (Hersey 2022).

The Nap Ministry's chief message, which is explored in *Rest is Resistance* (Hersey 2022), expounds rest as a form of resistance against white supremacy and capitalism. Tracing Western logic's equation of human productivity with one's intrinsic value back to chattel slavery, Hersey argues that we are disconnected from our true selves, which leads us to operate more as human doings vs. human beings. Thus, The Nap Ministry puts forth rest, imagination, and dreaming as practices to help us to decondition from grind culture to illuminate how “[p]rotest and resistance don’t look one way. It's what’s really happening on the ground in the small and important details of our lives” that holds the greatest potential for individual shifts in consciousness to lead to mass cultural change (Hersey 2022, 192). This idea echoes adrienne maree brown’s promotion of emergent strategies as a way of believing the small lived details of our lives hold the potential for personal and collective transformation (2017). Specifically, while I use the term “deconditioning” and “becoming” to capture the idea of returning to who we were before we

internalized white supremacist and capitalist modes of being human, Hersey captures the same idea throughout the text when referring to waking up, manipulation, deprogramming, brain washing, socialization, indoctrination, mind shift, unraveling, and internalization. All these terms point to how rest as an embodied, liberatory practice is just as much of a spiritual movement as a political and social justice one because of the way in which it reconnects us to our spirit, divinity, and intuition. Ultimately, the principle of geographic relationality lies at the heart of Hersey's framework, arguing that shifts in our personal relationships to rest will change not only how we treat ourselves, but extends to how we treat one another, making it an act of community care. It is through rest we will remember that "nothing we accomplish in life is totally free of the influence of spirit and community, we do nothing alone" (Hersey 2022, 18). As a result, widespread shifts in collective consciousness that disentangles our inherent worth as human beings from our productivity makes a just, anti-capitalist world more possible.

Make Space

Given that a system of profit over people has been in place for centuries, Hersey believes that it would be naive to think that those in charge will just hand out opportunities to slow down and rest simply because people begin to protest against grind culture (Hersey 2022). Instead, Hersey asserts that we must look at the ways we have internalized the messaging that our value comes from how much we produce and, while it may seem illogical at first, trust our intuition by making rest a nonnegotiable in our lives. This idea of looking inward to awaken to the ways in which the capitalist system actively dehumanizes us echoes much of Audre Lorde's work, but holds particular resonance to her 1982 speech "Learning from the 60s," when she says, "Within each one of us there is some piece of humanness that knows we are not being served by the machine which orchestrates crisis after crisis and is grinding all of our futures into dust" (2020b,

131). Similarly, Hersey also believes that we are disconnected from that which makes us human, which is why she argues rest is a form of soul care that reconnects us with the ancient ways of being that have been stolen from us. On this point she asserts:

Rest disrupts and *makes space* for invention, imagination, and restoration. Rest is an imagination tool because it makes space to simply be. To be a human being is an ancient miracle that we overlook when we work so hard to prove our worth via exhaustion. If nothing else in this book resonates with you or breaks into the cracks of your consciousness, please let it be this: You are enough right now simply because you are alive! You are divine, no matter what capitalism or white supremacy has trained you to believe. Imagine what it would feel like, taste like, and smell like to believe you don't have to prove who you are by your accomplishments and labor. (Hersey 2022, 162 emphasis added)

Hersey's powerful ontological claim that body care is soul care brings attention to the way in which embodiment is inherently a relational process of being human that simultaneously takes place in both interior and exterior sites (Massey 2005). To be clear, to make space to rest means to evoke our autonomy and grant ourselves permission to "simply be" as much as possible so that we can return to our natural state (Hersey 2022, 162). This point resonates with my previous analysis of Audre Lorde (2020b) and adrienne maree brown's (2017) works about how reimagining our relationship to change and difference can help many people to become more aligned with their own embodied vision.

Importantly, making space is an expression of refusal given that time for rest and leisure is something that will not just be handed out but instead time people will have to take for themselves. A deep belief that "[o]ur refusal will *make space* for abundance" (Hersey 2022, 4, emphasis added) is a foundational element of the Nap Ministry's rest is resistance message, further epitomized in Hersey's insistence that people are not resting to be more productive, but because we are enough as we are and it is our divine human right to do so. Given that working to make ends meet is a necessity for the majority of people, this may look different from person to

person. Thus, we lean into our creativity and experiment with reimagining what rest can look like in our everyday life. For instance, while you may not have enough time to take a one-hour nap, do you have five minutes to sit with your eyes closed when you otherwise would be scrolling on your phone? This idea of making time for oneself to just be because we know that we are enough exemplifies *enoughness* as an expression of embodying one's self-worth, often in spite of what systems of domination tell them. Enoughness is a theme that has emerged throughout all of my investigations, some overtly like Viola Davis, and many more subtly. The fact that this term has risen to the surface affirms how engaging with Black thought on its own terms, which in effect is saying it is enough as it is, creates the space for depictions and articulations of enoughness to be uncovered within the archive (McKittrick 2006; Hartman 2019; McKittrick 2021).

Taking up Space in Third Spaces

Inspired by how American maroons liberated themselves to create alternative ways of living and being amidst a landscape of violent chattel slavery, Hersey believes that people should embody a politics of refusal and take up space in Third Spaces (2022). Notably, while many scholars describe maroons as runaway and/or fugitive slaves, Hersey is clear that she does not see maroons as runaways or fugitives because of how it infers that they “belong[ed] to the systems” (2022, 106). Instead, seeking to honor Black autonomy and sovereignty, Hersey describes maroons as Black people who refused to participate in slavery, and instead chose to build communities outside of the plantation, often in the forests and caves. Hersey calls these maroon communities Third Spaces, which were “temporary place[s] of joy and freedom” that existed within, but were not of, the systems of domination (2022, 134). Hersey's argument reflects a Black geographical approach to placemaking because of how it “highlight[s] black agency in the production of space and black geographic experiences in the articulation of black

geographic visions of society” (Allen, Lawhon, and Pierce 2019, 1002). Said differently, her decision to center Black agency, spatial imaginaries and practices in her conceptualization of maroonage is a poignant display of theorizing from Black embodied locations as a way to illuminate the Black community's geographic visions for their own lives, as well as society at large.

Seeing parallels to how maroons refused to participate in slavery to her refusal to participate in grind culture, Hersey calls for readers to “Take up Space / Be risky in your observations. / Be a maroon. / Decide you ain’t ever going back to enslavement” (2022, 159). In other words, to take up space within this capitalist, white supremacist system means to lean into subversive placemaking practices as a means of survival like the American maroons and

create temporary spaces of rest and space no matter what. It’s truly a deep mental mind shift to thrive in a place with no pause button. It’s a *Third Space* and a spiritual place. It’s intuitively knowing the pace is not sustainable and a politics of refusal that opens once you tap in. (Hersey 2022, 147 emphasis added)

Generally, The Nap Ministry’s emphasis on marronage as “a form of cultural opposition to European-American culture” (Glissant 1997, xxii) reminds me of Celeste Winston’s temporally updated definition of “maroon geographies to name historical and ongoing spatial praxes of Black flight from and placemaking beyond racial violence that emerges during transatlantic slavery” (Winston 2021, 2185). To be clear, since The Nap Ministry’s message is not meant for only Black people, while everyone she is speaking to would be creating Third Spaces to take flight from white supremacist, capitalist systems of domination that extends from trans-Atlantic chattel slavery, technically not everyone who Hersey refers to would be participating in Black flight (2022, 75). Nevertheless, the point stands that Hersey conceptualized the rest is resistance framework from her own experiences as a Black woman in the United States of America, and it is “guided by the deep beauty of Black resistance, Black scholarship, Black history, Black

leadership, maroonage, and crafting systems of care outside the dominant culture” (2022, 146). Thus, it is because of The Nap Ministry’s philosophical grounding in Black experiences and intellectual thought that I still see powerful analytical links between Hersey’s discussion of taking up space in Third Spaces (2022) and Winston’s conceptualization of maroon geographies (2021, 2023). They each are utilizing maroonage as a lens to understand contemporary placemaking efforts taken to survive white supremacist and capitalist systems of domination enduring from transatlantic slavery.

Holding Space

This idea of taking up space in Third Spaces, temporary respite stops amidst the otherwise non-stop pace of everyday life, is embedded in The Nap Ministry’s DNA. Crucially, on May 21st, 2017, when Hersey was completing seminary school and still searching for stable employment, she followed her calling and offered the first Collective Napping Experience in Atlanta Georgia. As Hersey tells it, “[t]he way it came together [felt] pulled together by Spirit” (2022, 64). Upon following the advice of confidants to check out a woman’s rental space named Charlie, Charlie granted Hersey the ability to use the space any time at no cost for her creative community rest experimentation, which was quite the blessing since Hersey could not afford rental fees (Hersey 2022, 64). What was meant to be a one-off event quickly grew into Hersey’s full-time job and a collective movement, with in-person and virtual Collective Napping Experiences offered. It deeply moves me how anti-capitalist values were engrained from the beginning of The Nap Ministry’s existence, which is epitomized by Charlie offering Hersey the initial rental space at no cost, and then the events themselves being free to the public.

The intent of the Collective Napping Experiences is to show people how to make space for rest in their lives however possible. Importantly, these embodiment experiences are

conceived as a form of community care that taps people into a spiritual dimension since they are a place “to rest together, to *hold space* for each other and to enter the portal of rest as a sacred act” (Hersey 2022, 65 emphasis added). To give insight into what these experiences feel like, imagine yourself surrounded by a group of people, all lounging with eyes closed on pillows and blankets, with candles and “a rest altar containing archival photos of Black people resting, raw cotton, jars of water, fresh flowers” in the room (Hersey 2022, 107). You hear Hersey begin to read a statement giving you permission to rest and thanking you for being alive, as you drift off to a curated playlist intended to deepen you further into rest. You do not even remember drifting off, and yet here you are beginning to stir, over an hour having passed by, slowly awakening. As you come to, you are greeted by the soft stirs of others emerging from slumber, and then eventually are welcomed to share your experience with the group during The Nap Talk (Hersey 2022, 110–112).

Now that you know what it feels like to be a participant, to further give insight into what a room charged with collective rest feels like, let’s hear from the vantage of the one holding the transformative space, Tricia Hersey:

As I walked around slowly connecting with the room, there was a moment when everyone in the room was peacefully sleeping at the same time. A powerful silence engulfed the room and I remember being overwhelmed by this divine moment, as forty strangers shared space in such an intimate and vulnerable way. Everything felt so sacred, safe, and expansive as the energy of collective rest filled the room...So many tears emerged when I *held space* for the ‘Nap Talk’ after the rest experience. (Hersey 2022, 107–108, emphasis added)

There are a number of reasons people often wake up in tears after their collective nap, with the majority boiling down to finally recognizing the extent of their exhaustion, realizing their relationship to rest has been riddled with shame, and finally feeling “held and seen” after a long period of loneliness (Hersey 2022, 108). Interestingly, like Alice Walker leaning into silence to

hold space for Spirit and the characters inside of her to emerge (Walker 2003), we again see silence acting as a spiritual site of co-creation where people turn towards their inner worlds to foster multidimensional placemaking. It is important to note that both Walker and Hersey identify as womanists rather than Black feminists. As I discuss in my exploration of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) in Chapter 4: Vision, womanists and Black feminists are both concerned with the intersectional oppression of women of color. However, womanism more overtly evokes the salience of Black culture within their epistemological frameworks "since Blackness is implicit in the term," which is often expressed through womanists directly addressing the Black community's liberation as a whole within their projects (Walker 2006, 11). A key difference between Walker's and Hersey's experiences of multidimensional placemaking is that while it was necessary for Walker to find a very specific site so that the characters within her would come forward and she could write *The Color Purple* (1982), Hersey believes Collective Napping Experiences can happen anywhere "there is a clean floor or outdoor space" (2022, 109). Ultimately, it is the accessible nature of these Collective Napping Experiences that stand out because of how they make it possible for countless people to take part in a consciousness raising, life-affirming, intimate experience of communal placemaking. For many, this may be their first time being given permission to let go, turn inwards, fall into a sacred slumber, and awaken renewed, with their body, mind and spirit having been tended to.

DreamSpace

What makes rest is resistance as a social justice movement so unique is that it is just as embedded in the metaphysical and spiritual realms as it is the physical and political realms. The intentional emphasis on bridging these spheres that are often perceived as conflicting is radical and subversive in nature, which is exemplified in the proclamation, "[o]ur collective rest will

change the world because our rest resides in a Spirit of refusal and disruption. Rest is our protest. Rest is resistance. Rest is reparations” (Hersey 2022, 12). Markedly, for Hersey, systematically denying people their physical right to rest also robs them of their DreamSpace, a place where imagination, hope, creativity and deep healing are in abundance. Given the persistence of capitalism and White Supremacy, the DreamSpace may be the only space of true reprieve and safety many may be able to access on the regular basis from the violences of grind culture. However, having multiple uses, while the DreamSpace is “[a] place we can go to that is unlike the weight of this world” it is also “[a] resting place for us to enter in to work things out” (Hersey 2022, 187). Importantly, dismantling the oppressive systems of domination we currently live under requires us to tap into our DreamSpace because that is where we will be able to come up with complex, dynamic, creative solutions that we would never have conceived of otherwise. Paradoxically, “[b]y putting people to sleep we are waking them up” to the idea that we are all changemakers, who collectively can imagine a rested future (Hersey 2022, 98). Crucially then, tending to our interior worlds and reclaiming our DreamSpace is the first step to ushering in an anti-capitalist, anti-colonial world.

Reflections

Ultimately, I continue to be amazed at the extent of the spatial language embedded within The Nap Ministry’s rest is resistance framework (Hersey 2022). Hersey’s spatial metaphors making space, taking up space in ThirdSpaces, holding space, and DreamSpace, all stand out as relational, interconnected concepts that illuminate how people embody themselves as *spaceshifters*. Drawing from the popular culture reference of shapeshifters, space-shifting is my own spatial concept that has emerged throughout my process of writing the dissertation, which captures Geography’s ability to make visible assertions of agency to engage in placemaking

within and beyond inequitable social structures. Often, I hear shapeshifting discussed in dominant discourses as the idea of transforming oneself to fit into the world around them. However, being a true geographer at heart, I consistently think about spaceshifting as the idea of physically and energetically shifting the space around oneself to align with their own values. Admittedly, there are many similarities between these two ideas, with the difference coming down to what is being forced to be altered. With shapeshifting a person is altering oneself to fit their environment, but with spaceshifting a person is altering the environment to fit themselves as they are. And that is what I see Hersey doing with her usage of spatial metaphor throughout *Rest is Resistance* (2022). While there is definitely an element of self-transformation occurring when a person is leaning into rest to decondition from hegemony and return to their natural state, it is not to fit into existing oppressive landscapes at the expense of one's humanity and dignity. Instead, the journey of becoming Hersey calls for empowers individuals and communities to refuse to participate in the existing societal landscapes so that as a collective we can build a new world. Thus, Hersey's spatial metaphors are space-shifting in nature, in that they are used to make visible the ways in which people refuse to bend, break, or shrink themselves to fit into the existing capitalist, White Supremacist status quo. Alternatively, Hersey's usage of spatial metaphor reveals spaceshifting as a physical and metaphysical process of placemaking, in that it makes clear how people choose to assert one's agency and autonomy to actively take part in already existing, or if necessary produce, emancipatory spaces where they can exist on their own terms.

Creative Musings



Figure 6. *Communing with Tricia Hersey (2026)*, Photograph by Christoff Luehrs



Figure 7. *Dreamscape: Refusal* (2021), Painting by Danielle Brown



Figure 8. *Dreamscape: Nature is my Site of Liberation* (2020), Painting by Danielle Brown



Figure 9. *Dreamscape: Take Up Space* (2022), Painting by Danielle Brown

Conclusion

Embodiment is a clear empirical thread running through *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* by adrienne maree brown (2017), “Learning from the 60s” by Audre Lorde (2020b) and *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto* by Tricia Hersey (2022). While thematically distinct, with brown focusing on ways individuals and organizations can learn from the wisdom of the natural world, Lorde addressing how the Black community should implement lessons learned from the 60s in the 1980s, and Hersey asserting that rest and dreaming can teach us how to dismantle White Supremacy and capitalism, all three works ultimately explore how “[o]ur bodies are a tool agent for change” (Hersey 2022, 12). This idea underscores the finding made in the conclusion of my analysis of brown and Lorde’s texts, which is that Black feminists and womanists conceptually engage with ideas of relational placemaking when they hone in on the interior to explore how embodying life-affirming values helps to shape the world into a liberatory place for all people to live in.

The connections between their three approaches extend beyond the empirical to the analytical. brown, Lorde and Hersey all explicitly theorize from the interior, which then inform their theoretical approaches. I read all three of their artifacts as love letters to Black people and Black culture despite being written for a broader audience. While each of their pieces has clearly been written for the public, their intimate examinations of the personal as the political are not performative in nature. Alternatively, by expressing from the interior, they put a spotlight on their multidimensional “selves that go far, far beyond the limited expectations and definitions of what black is, isn’t, or should be” (Alexander, 2004, 5; Quashie 2012; Williamson 2017). For instance, I think about when brown, informed by her own life, questions what if future generations embodied love as a central principle in their organizing, and emergent strategy was simplified down to its most basic meaning as a “philosophy for how to be in harmony and love, in and with

the world” (2017, 25; Kelley 2002). Or Lorde’s insistence to embody all of the parts of herself, refusing to be bound to a limited definition of Blackness even if that means feeling excluded by the very Black community she loves and works so hard for (2020b). And lastly, Hersey’s surrender into rest and dreaming in an effort to save herself from the exhaustion of grind culture is one of the greatest acts of self-love I can fathom (2022). All three of these Black women express Black culture in a distinctly interior way, and in doing so uncovers the depths of Black humanity that are often left out of public depictions of Black culture.

Even more intriguing is how brown, Lorde, and Hersey all overtly discuss the ways in which their analytical approaches are informed by the metaphysical dimension of the interior that connects them to their spirit and ancient inner knowing. While brown and Hersey directly explain how their connection to spirit and inner knowing informed the creation of the artifacts I have analyzed, this direct connection is less clear in the specific empiric I analyzed by Lorde. However, in other works of hers, like “Poetry is Not a Luxury” (2020d) which I explore in Chapter 3, Lorde overtly details how much of her strength to make lasting changes in her life comes from the hidden power that emanates from liberating herself from white consciousness and being tapped into her spirit, which emanates a non-European consciousness. Thus, I believe it is being so deeply connected to their own interior worlds, spirit and ancient consciousness that enables brown, Lorde and Hersey to so effectively vantage epistemological frameworks centering embodied ways of knowing and moving through the world. Generally then, brown, Lorde, and Hersey each illustrate how theorizing from one’s lived experiences of reconnecting with their inner knowing can act as a powerful jumping off point to examine spatial responses to violent political landscapes that lie in the hegemonic domain and revolve around altering one’s state of consciousness (Collins 2002). In my dissertation’s case, the spatial response to systemic

oppression that has been unveiled as deeply interior, intimate, and necessary for personal and collective liberation is undergoing the process of deconditioning from hegemony so that one can self-actualize into an individual who embodies life-affirming values in their everyday lives.

Ch. 6: Closing Remarks

*To Be, or
Not
To Be, is
No longer
An option*

*To breathe, or
Not
To breathe, is
No longer
An option*

*To dream, or
Not
To dream, is
No longer
An option*

*To create, or
Not
To create, is
No longer
An option*

We have reached the end of a collection of stories featuring Black women utilizing the creative Black text as a vehicle to assert Black people's right to exist on their own terms. Now, I ask you, the reader: *what is and is no longer an option for you in your life?* I would like to caveat this question with an admission that embodying a politics of refusal is easier said than done, especially when you navigate the world holding intersectional identities. In reality, pushing back against hegemonic power could lead to ostracization, violence, and even death. It is for this very reason that I find it even more consequential to elevate examples in my project of Black people's insistence to be seen how they perceive themselves, which I have found is often not through Eurocentric eyes. These empowering images offer a peek into the vast spectrum of multifaceted selves that actually make up the Black community, disrupting overarching monolithic narratives

about Black people. Importantly, my project provides an example for how researchers can affirm marginalized people's negative encounters with oppressive systems without assuming these experiences define their lives or dictate their self-worth. In turn, one of my primary takeaways is that utilizing a life-affirming lens does not ignore Black people's struggles against systems of domination, but instead recognizes these struggles as only part of the story; there is also tons of love, joy, causes for celebration, and alternative consciousness operating, too.

Broadening geographic inquiry to include a greater emphasis on interior landscapes enabled me to center Black women's social worlds, which illuminated their unique standpoints on, as well as recurring responses to, systemic oppression (Collins 2002). For example, critically examining Black women's well-being strategies for navigating the racial, patriarchal capitalist landscapes in the United States as subaltern spatial responses made visible the "psychological toll of being a Black woman" and the extent to which internal work must be done to heal mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually from their encounters with violent discourses and systems (Combahee River Collective 2017, 22). In particular, many of the creative artifacts I engaged with illuminated how necessary it was to undergo journeys of becoming, which involved deconditioning from Eurocentric values and returning to their own self-defined and self-evaluated consciousness, so that they could show up in the world true to who they are without reverting back to colonial ways of knowing and being.

Importantly, my work fleshes out an ethic of Black well-being that is committed to something more than our current ideas of wellness in dominant society, which is often heavily connected to the material world, and is expressed in ways like spending money on luxurious getaways and fancy spa days. Additionally, dominant conceptualizations of wellness that are related to self-reflective, healing practices, such as therapy, typically aim to help people fit into

existing systems so that they can prove their worth as well-functioning, successful members of society. Alternatively, the ethic of Black well-being that has arisen in my project is not centered on striving within current White Supremacist, neoliberal systems. Instead, it is deeply connected to the unconscious and focused on how to live beyond systems of oppression whilst continuing to live within them by catering to one's wholistic well-being; mind, body, spirit, and psyche. Tricia Hersey and Alice Walker offer models to look to on this matter, in that they illustrate how carving out ways to nurture the whole of Black beingness, especially one's spirit, may mean putting one's livelihood, and, potentially, life at risk—even if the latter was (thankfully) not the case for Hersey or Walker's scenarios. In this way, Black well-being practices are not all fun, cozy, and always to the benefit of getting ahead based upon hegemonic standards; they are intentional choices to defy “rational thinking” and embody a politics of refusal in one's life, even if they come with sacrifices that are oftentimes uncomfortable and make taking care of individual monetary needs more difficult (i.e., housing, food, etc.). Poignantly, taking seriously the interior dimensions of Black women's well-being practices illuminates the markedly metaphysical dimensions of Black women's placemaking practices that defy logical, rational explanations of how the world is supposed to operate. For instance, the creation of affirming spaces of belonging often prioritized fostering places where they felt physically safe, seen, and valued, as well as able to fully withdraw within themselves and connect with Spirit, over financial stability and profitability.

Given that I employ a geographic lens in my analysis of Black feminist and womanist works, my research offers an expansive take on what is often considered geographic research to include explorations of how spatial frameworks are embedded within other disciplines research. For instance, in Chapter 5: Embodiment, my investigation found that Black feminists are

referring to the socio-spatial process of relational placemaking when they discuss how people shaping change helps to create “an alternative humanist vision of societal organization” that reimagines our collective liberation in radical new ways (Collins 2004, 111; brown 2017; Lorde 2020b; Butler 2024). In other words, stepping outside of disciplinary boundaries reinforces how the concept of geographical relationality is fundamental to prominent discussions both within and outside of Geography. Across disciplines, geographical relationality is evoked in various ways, such as the popular concept pairs in Black Feminist Thought: personal and political, unit and whole, individual and collective, self and community, private and public. Intrinsically, geographic relationality underpins them all because at the heart of each of them lies an ethos of interconnectedness and interdependence. Thus, my project drives home that examining placemaking, as knowledge arising from the discursive, cultural and material production of space, is not just a concern of Geography, but of all disciplines interested in making marginalized communities’ spatial imaginaries knowable. In turn, since a key principle of Black feminism is the promotion of a geographic vision for society where, in the words of Fannie Lou Hamer, “Nobody’s free until everybody’s free,” (2013) I argue that Black women theorists are an integral asset to Geography on the matter of relational placemaking as a collective act of worldbuilding beyond colonial geographic struggles.

Since my research examines creative texts by Black women in the United States, further avenues for exploration would be to expand the research scope. This could be done in a number of ways, including analyzing the well-being strategies of people holding different intersectional identities than what I have focused on, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and nation, in response to systemic oppression. Given the saliency of cultural conditioning, it would be interesting to explore similar themes in another geographic context, especially one outside of

Western spatial formations. Finally, given my focus on what would be considered positive outcomes for implementations of refusal politics, in that none of the authors detailed negative consequences like violence for their decision to cater to their well-being, another area for further study would be to look at a broader range of outcomes to Black women's processes of self-recovery.

A real innovation of my work is the constant questioning and critical examination of what conditioning I as a researcher am inadvertently bringing to the table by continually looking back to my emancipatory aims and documenting any type of divergence throughout my process of conducting research. Hence, with the Crossroads chapter, my project demonstrates one example of an in-built mechanism of reflexivity and accountability that pushes you to continually reflect upon how you are engaging with your chosen research questions, methods, theories, epistemologies, and empirics. In offering a behind the scenes look at some of my own divergences and re-corrections made in the creation of my dissertation, I hope to normalize how slipping into patterns that potentially reflect normative, reductive, white empiricist thought is a part of conducting research in the academy as currently configured. However, it is what you choose to do about it that matters. Interestingly, my self-awareness never led me to catch explicit use of anti-black, misogynist, ableist, homophobic, etc., thinking. Instead, returning to my original intentions pushed me towards using language and frameworks that embody more liberatory ways of knowing, which aided in my producing more emancipatory scholarship.

For example, switching to a focus on "vision" as opposed to "gaze" in Chapter 4: Vision pushed me to articulate how the Black women were asserting their embodied ways of knowing and moving through the world, rather than primarily focusing on their actions as a refusal of the white, male gaze. While both statements are true, emphasizing feminist embodied vision is a

more empowering way of framing Black spatial responses, which is more aligned with my goal of fostering a language of livingness within my epistemological framework. Thus, for me, being aware of how I have been conditioned to have “violence implicit in our visualizing practices” made me pay closer attention to agentive assertions of Black ways of knowing themselves that are otherwise rendered unknowable within hegemony (Haraway 1988, 585). Notably, articulations of enoughness and beingness are two expressions of inherent worthiness that came up in the empirical analysis. Above all, this experience showed me how committing to one’s liberatory aims is not a passive, rigid process that is set in stone once you conclude your research design, but rather is a dynamic, active process that follows you throughout the entirety of the research, from inspiration to creation. While I learned this lesson in the process of conducting dissertation research, I believe that it applies to all life spheres and thus is an embodied knowing I will carry with me from this point forward.

Ultimately, while my examination of Black women’s collective standpoint is not representative of all Black women’s experiences of living in the United States, it does illuminate how internal processes of deconditioning from hegemony and self-actualization constitute just one of many possible responses to encountering intersecting oppressions for Black women who are navigating U.S. racial, patriarchal, capitalist landscapes. In particular, my project illustrates how journeys of becoming are an active process that come in waves throughout our lifetime. This interior process is often spurred by something outside of us that nudges us to reflect on who has been granted authority over how we perceive ourselves, and once we confront that answer, what, if anything, we want to do about it. In other words, processes of becoming are invitations to do the internal work to actively refuse to show up as the versions of ourselves the system has dictated us to be and instead choose to become more aligned with who we know ourselves to be

internally. For instance, the Black women authors I have engaged, as well as my own story, demonstrate how there are specific encounters in life that lead to profound awakenings and demand we recognize our own power so that we can more fully embody our innate wisdom and values in our everyday lives. For me, my journey of graduate school has been one of those life-altering experiences that have forced me into many deep encounters with my inner selves. In turn, this internal inquiry is represented in how I have chosen to approach the dissertation as a whole. For me, this work was never about creating a traditional dissertation, but instead about producing a tangible expression that reflects my thinking and experiences at this moment in my life, knowing that they each will evolve over time. I offer this embodied wisdom back into the world as a model of how infusing an interior lens into all aspects of geographic inquiry, including questions, methods, epistemologies, theories, and artifacts, is one concrete way to do social science research differently. Thank you for taking this ride with me.

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