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Choosing Us: Black Girls' Refusals, Consent, and the Possibilities of Chosen Spaces

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Abstract

Black Girls' Refusals, Consent, and the Possibilities of Chosen Spaces

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This study explores how the refusals Black girls make disrupt the ways they are framed as illegible (i.e., invisible, hyper visible, invalid, and dehumanized) in the context of U.S. schools and society, due to the ontological position of Black girls and women in the U.S. Refusals are a method Black girls use to navigate compulsory school learning environments that frame them as always and already deficient. This study highlights how Black girls render themselves and each other legible (i.e., seen, valid, and humanized) through their agentic refusals that occur when they participate in chosen, consent-based learning spaces that they also help co-create. Through a multigenerational approach, this qualitative study centers the lives of three groups of Black girls and women while examining the roles consent and refusal have played throughout their learning experiences. Throughout this study, each of the three groups worked collaboratively to co-construct a Black girl chosen space in which they reflected on their learning experiences, practiced acts of collective care, and engaged in arts-based activities that positioned them to imagine and create (poetry, collages, videos, and more) beyond anti-blackness and the cisheteropatriarchy. In turn, this study highlights the creative potential of Black girlhood (Brown, 2013), deepens understandings of Black Girls’ navigational practices across learning settings (Butler, 2018), and discusses nuanced ways that Black girls engage in meaning making in chosen spaces via the refusals they enact.

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Dedication

For my Granny (Cozetta) and her sisters, Aunt Lucy, Bony, Snowrene, Everlene, and Nanny

For my Mama (Paula) and my Auntie Pam, the embodiment of Black girl bonds

For all my Seattle, Chicago, and Lansing Black girls who made this project possible

For every Black girl who’s ever dared to love their fellow Black girls fiercely

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements 1

Dedication 5

Table of Contents 6

Chapter 1: Creating the Spaces We Need: An Introduction 7

Chapter 2: Mapping the Terrain of Black Girls' Refusals: Research & Theory 18

Chapter 3: Black Girl Choosing: Methodology as Praxis 46

Chapter 4: Charting Our Chosen Spaces 72

Chapter 5: Choosing Each Other: Acts of Care and Refusal to Imagine an Otherwise 109

Chapter 6: Already Worthy 144

Chapter 7: In Pursuit of Saturn: Discussion & Conclusion 197

References 219

Chapter 1. Creating the Spaces We Need: An Introduction

"She made herself, her world, from all that she came from" - Ntozake Shange
(Sassafras, Cypress, & Indigo)

Grounding: How We Enter

This is an invitation to travel back in time. To assess our present realities. To imagine forward.

> *Rewind. 20-25 years back. We are right outside of our Granny's house playing with our childhood friends, Courtney and Amoni. Our summer days are filled with hand games, jump rope, and the sun endlessly shining on our skin. We know the words to all of the jump rope rhymes and hand games as well as we know each other. It is a deep familiarity. Our feet bounce off the sidewalk in expert rhythm and our hands clap together in perfect synch as we sing jump rope songs or hand game rhymes in unison, a chorus of Black girl joy and infinite knowledge. We return to these practices frequently, like the home base in a game of tag.*

This grounding flashback is a hundred different memories combined into one. It is about the boundlessness of Black girlhood as much as it is about me, my cousins, and our countless Black girl friends. In the moments that made up these memories, I felt bountiful and abundant. There was so much possible in our becoming. The world was vast and so was I. Although my life largely existed along one neighborhood block on the Westside of Lansing, Michigan, I still felt that expansiveness there. During that time, the things I was most curious about, each wondering and imagining I dreamed up, every story I longed to tell, each article of jewelry I fixed my hands to create, every friendship I hoped to cultivate all felt possible and well within reach. That expansiveness and those feelings of deep possibility are what this project aims to return to now in order to imagine and enact more liberating futures for Black girls and women across the broad terrain of spaces that we engage learning in, including schools.

I am a Black girl from the Midwest. A grandchild of the Great Migration. A girl who grew up in Michigan, and Mississippi. Daughter of Paula. Granddaughter of Cozetta. Niece of Pamela. I am a Black girl who grew up in the loving presence of other Black girls in our neighborhoods, at church, at school, and at summer camps. I am a Black girl who learned early the necessity of Black girl bonds and what it meant to feel whole and to be legible in each other's presence. I am a Black girl who was raised by Black women who modeled for me what it means to love other Black women fiercely. This kind of love is a verb; it requires doing (hooks, 2001). I witnessed this love in action as a practice of holding space for the Black women in your life to show up and to bring their gifts and passions with them, whether the collective readily identified those as being artistic practices or not. The way we made sense of the whole and were able to better love on one another was by showing up to share whatever we had created (e.g., a new jump rope rhyme, a pound cake, a poem, a baby, a beaded bracelet, a story to tell).

I am a Black girl who was raised by Black women who nurtured in me a spirit of inquiry and creativity. My mama, granny, and auntie, all alchemists, turning assortments of household items into school projects and holiday crafts; calling forth plants to spring from the Earth each year; transforming family potlucks into magical celebrations. It is through their practice of creativity and vision for what can become out of what currently exists or what is missing, that helped my own imaginings and creative endeavors feel possible and that made me feel legible in the spaces they cultivated and allowed me to grow up in. This influence has led me to become an artist, educator, and educational researcher. I now exist as all of these things, as well as a Black girl who grew up in the loving presence of other Black girls, and who learned early the necessity of Black girl bonds and what it means to feel whole and made legible (Spillers, 1987) in each other's presence. As a result, this dissertation centers the agency, navigational practices, and experiences of Black girls and Black girlhood across the various learning settings that we navigate, refuse, imagine, and/or co-create throughout our lives.

At the heart of this work is an acknowledgement of how Black girls render each other whole, even in learning spaces that are committed to our fragmentation via their anti-Black and cis-heteropatriarchal practices, policies, and norms. Across the landscape of our shared histories, including those told via our oral storytelling traditions and in literature (Fisher, 2009), there exists a pattern of Black girls bearing witness to each other's humanity, "pulling up" for each other's needs, and advocating for changes they want to see in their lives and their learning experiences by way of their refusals. Although we can trace the existence of these practices of care and connection for one another that Black girls and women have sustained across time, in the context of enduring antiblackness and cis-heteropatriarchy, these practices can go unacknowledged as the vital learning sources that they are by schools. Similarly, in light of these intersecting oppressions, the possibility of Black girlhood—a girlhood that is shared and participated in collectively amongst Black girls—is framed as a far-fetched notion. Nikki Giovanni speaks to this in her conversation with Claudia Tate in *Black Women Writers at Work* (2023) when describing literary critics' response to Toni Morrison's novel, *Sula* (1974).

> Sula disturbed the critics because in the beginning there are two women and at the end there is Nel who remarks that "they were girls together." That's a hell of a statement because black women have never been allowed to say they were girls together in print. (p. 105)

Giovanni addresses how even in fiction, Black women were expected to deny the existence of their girlhood and any possibility that they had experienced a girlhood in the company of other Black girls.

Giovanni's statement resonates with the work of Black Girlhood Studies scholars like Monique Morris (2016) and their examination of the ways Black girls are "adulitified" and how this can strip them of the innocence of childhood and contribute to them being pushed out of schools and into the judicial system (yet another site of the afterlife of slavery [Hartman, 1997]). Across school settings and other institutions in the U.S. that continue to exist as sites of the wake (Sharpe, 2016), Black girls are surveilled, separated, and met with violence when behaving in age appropriate ways and when seeking to protect and affirm the dignity of their fellow Black girls (Winn, 2010; Blake et al, 2011; Morris, 2016; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020). Yet, despite the ways that schools and related compulsory learning settings seek to render Black girl illegible (Spillers, 1987) due to their race and gender, Black girls continue to disrupt this notion and to negate the belief in the impossibility of shared Black girlhoods. Black girls negate this belief through the ongoing practice of their relational bonds and use their relationships with each other as a space in which to render each other legible. Further, these Black girl bonds also exist as a refusal of the deficit frameworks schools choose to perceive them through (i.e., as adult-like, impervious to pain, unworthy of care and protection, undeserving of a quality education). Building with the work of Morrison, Giovanni, Lorde, and countless other Black women writers, educators, and community members, this study challenges us to see Black girl's and women's bonds as a meaning making practice, a way of knowing, an exercise in legibility, and a refusal.

Based on my review of literature in Black Girlhood Studies and theorizing in Indigenous Studies (Simpson, 2007; Grande, 2018), Black Studies, and critical anthropology (Shange, 2019), refusal(s), and Black girls' refusals in particular, can be understood as a practice of enacting an oppositional stance to a given entity, precedent, institution, and/or norm. Some Black girls' refusals are artistic in form, manifested as poetry (Moore & Paris, 2021) and/or dramatized performance (Winn, 2011). Some refusals take on the shape of activism/organizing efforts like school walkouts or community petitions. Still, other refusals may be mistakenly labeled as Black girls displaying “attitude” (Morris, 2016) or being insubordinate (Shange, 2019), but are actually deliberate acts of Black girls refusing to be perceived, judged, or punished in the context of learning spaces (or otherwise) that were not designed with them or the fullness of their being in mind.

I have witnessed the possibilities of Black girl refusals in the form of spoken word poetry and other modes of activism in my roles as a teaching artist and high school teacher. As a teaching artist in Seattle, I have led youth-centered poetry and performance workshops with a local community organization, the E. Park Project. As a humanities teacher, I taught in and around Chicago for five years and served as a spoken word club coordinator. In both of these roles, my work was with BIPOC youth, and with Black girls playing a significant role in each space. This living, being, teaching, and learning about education, Black girls, and Black girlhood throughout my life has required me to think about my research as a vehicle for better understanding how Black girls enact refusals as a way to navigate compulsory school learning environments that frame them in deficit ways, and what refusals become possible when Black girls participate in chosen, consent-based learning spaces.

As will be detailed throughout this dissertation, it was revealed to me through my preliminary research that Black girls’ refusals include relationships of care and trust that Black girls cultivate with one another. These relationships, or Black girl bonds, are not only a refusal, but also a navigational practice and a model for imagining alternate ways of living and being in relation with others across learning contexts. My ideas about how teaching, learning, and schooling might be reimagined have been transformed by these lessons I have learned about Black girls’ refusals. Throughout this dissertation project I further explored what this approach to reimagining, via the lens of Black girls’ refusals, offers. Through my collaborative work with the three groups of Black girls and women whom I learned from throughout this project, I witnessed what becomes possible when Black girlhood is able to exist expansively and to extend beyond the few years dedicated to childhood. Or, more importantly, beyond the limited dimensions allowed for a joyful, abundant, and protected Black girlhood, in a country that has a centuries-long investment in rendering Black girls (and their joys, needs, desires, and possibilities) illegible (Spillers, 1987). In this dissertation I invite you to engage with the stories and the art shared by Black girls and women across multiple age groups and regions about their lived educational experiences and the liberation based and justice-centered educational spaces and experiences they are imagining for Black girls moving forward.

Why Study Black Girl Chosen Spaces?

This study explores how the refusals Black girls make disrupt the ways they are framed as illegible (i.e., invisible, hyper visible, invalid, and dehumanized) in the context of U.S. schools and society, due to the ontological position of Black girls and women in the U.S. Refusals are a method Black girls use to navigate compulsory school learning environments that frame them as always and already deficient. This study highlights how Black girls render themselves and each other legible (i.e., seen, valid, and humanized) through their agentic refusals that occur when they participate in chosen, consent-based learning spaces that they also help co-create. Through a multigenerational approach, this qualitative study centers the lives of three groups of Black girls and women while examining the roles consent and refusal have played throughout their learning experiences.

Throughout this project, I spent seven months working and learning with Black girls and women who are based in and/or originally from Lansing, MI; Chicago, IL; and Seattle, WA. As I will share, the learning in this dissertation actually stretches across many years. For the seven-month qualitative study that I center in this dissertation, I met with each group weekly or biweekly to check in, engage in discussions, create, and hold space for each other's needs and concerns. Across these seven months I came to know the educational dreams and hopes for the future of Bethel, Lavancia, Jala, Abriana, Mariah, Asha, Ashley, Mikaila, and Keiondra. Throughout our time together, the study collaborators/co-researchers and I engaged in one-on-one interview dialogues and collective group dialogues and arts-based practices, including poetry writing and collage making, among others. Together, we engaged in these practices while also co-creating chosen learning space (CLS) where each group spent time together reflecting on our educational journeys and imagining more justice-based learning experiences for Black girls moving forward.

Building in the lineage of critical Black spaces, such as bell hooks' (2015) conception of "homeplace," kihana miraya ross' (2021) Black educational fugitive space, and Rae Paris' (2017) work with Black Spaces, my collaborators and I co-constructed our Black girl chosen spaces through a shared Black girl practice (Butler, 2018) of carving out the spaces that we need to gather, care for, and support one another when related spaces may not readily be available to us otherwise. Through the co-creation of our CLS, the Black girls and women in this study modeled how consent-based learning practices positioned each of us to imagine and create (poetry, self-portraits, multimedia pieces, organizing practices, etc.) beyond antiblackness and cis-heteropatriarchy. In turn, this study deepened understandings of the intergenerational navigational practices of Black girls and this dissertation will discuss the nuanced ways meaning is made by Black girls and women in CLSs. The central goal of this study is to explore how to foster spaces for, with, and where Black girls choose each other, to engage with the concepts of consent and refusal, and to consider how these concepts impact Black girls' learning experiences.

The research questions that guide this dissertation are:

1) What does it mean for Black girls and women to choose each other?
2) How do the concepts and/or enactments of consent, refusal, and illegibility shape and influence the learning experiences of Black girls across learning settings?
3) What conditions must exist in a (learning) space to support Black girls in the work/practice of imagining and creating beyond anti-blackness and sexism/patriarchy?
4) What is the role of arts-based practices in designing and co-creating chosen Black girl spaces?
5) How do the understandings built from engaging in questions 1-4 help with creating more caring, loving, and justice-based educational spaces for Black girls?

Across the seven months of this overarching project, my project collaborators from each of the three groups were active in co-constructing our shared chosen Black girl spaces which became a context in which we could collectively share and discuss our schooling experiences, create art that reflected a dreams for the future of schooling, and ultimately, that allowed for us to show up in ways that the schools we'd attended had not.

Black Girl Chosen Spaces Matter

In her book *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* Aimee Cox (2015) describes how Black girls "remain illegible" in social science research, media attention, and nationally funded initiatives that claim to focus on Black youth, but that primarily center Black boys and men. Additionally, in Evans-Winters and Esposito's 2010 article they address the ways in which Black girls are often forgotten from feminist epistemologies that "tend to be concerned with the education of White girls and women," as well as from race-based epistemologies that overwhelmingly "tend to be consumed with the educational barriers negatively affecting Black boys" (p. 12). As a result, the research on Black girls and Black girlhood that has proliferated social science fields in recent years is an indication of researchers (many of whom are Black women), community members, and Black girl participant-researchers recognizing a need to disrupt the silences that exist in the social sciences around the unique experiences, ways of knowing, and sensemaking methods of Black girls.

The goals of this qualitative dissertation study include learning from Black girls and Black women and their chosen/consent-based learning spaces, building with the existing work of Black Girlhood Studies (BGS), and developing and theorizing deeper understandings of the creative potential of Black girlhood (Brown, 2013). This study was done with the intention of exploring the power and possibilities of Black girl refusals when enacted in chosen learning spaces, and what these refusals make possible. This study was methodologically built with existing work in BGS by offering an extension of understandings of refusals that Black girls make in various learning settings. This helps demonstrate how Black girls' refusals disrupt the ways Black girls are framed as illegible (i.e. invisible, invalid, and not worthy of humanity), based on the ontological position Black girls and women have within the U.S. as a result of the unending effects of slavery and the particular implications it has had for Black women and girls on account of the intersections of race and gender. Additionally, this study was methodologically built around ethnographic methods, Arts Based Research (ABR) designs, and Participatory Action Research (PAR) in order to highlight the creative potential of Black girlhood and how Black girls enact refusals in their learning spaces, especially through their artistic and creative practices.

Further, it is my aim that the findings of this study will contribute to the creation and ongoing existence of chosen Black girl spaces across school and community contexts. An additional goal is that the findings of this study will contribute to discussions about ways to adapt and implement features and practices of consent-based learning (that are present in chosen-learning spaces) within schools to make them less oppressive compulsory learning settings that Black girls do not have to constantly negotiate their survival within. Overall, my intention is that the findings and implications of this study will add to the growing body of asset-based research about Black girls and their unique sensemaking and navigational practices and ultimately used to help bring about more justice-based learning experiences and learning settings for Black girls in which they can thrive.

Roadmap of the Dissertation

In chapter two, “Mapping the Terrain of Black Girls’ Refusals: Research & Theory,” I offer an overview of salient literature from the major fields and theories this dissertation builds from and alongside. I also outline the major theories and concepts that form my conceptual framework and provide lenses through which to understand how consent, refusal, and legibility impact Black girls’ learning experiences. In chapter three, “Black Girl Choosing: Methodology as Praxis,” I describe the methodological framework of this study and how it is a practice in Black girl charting (Butler, 2018). Chapter four, “Charting Our Chosen Spaces,” focuses on the Seattle Group and engages with Butler’s work on “Black girl charting” to examine ways that space and place influenced the schooling and learning experiences of the group collaborators. In chapter six, I also draw upon Butler's (2018) work to explore how the Seattle Group collaborators and I carved out a Black girl chosen space for ourselves and what the conditions were of this space. Chapter five, “Choosing Each Other: Acts of Care and Refusal to Imagine an Otherwise,” focuses on the Chicago Group and the overarching themes that emerged during our time learning together and co-creating a Black girl chosen space. I explore the ways the Chicago Group collaborators and I used the practices of check-ins, discussion, journaling, guided breathing, and collaging, among others, to create a Black girl chosen space. Further, I explore how our time spent in our co-created Black girl space became a site where we could reflect on the intergenerational experience of schools representing a "generational curse" for the older and younger generations of Black girls and women in our families, and how, through our art and our commitment to our relationships with each other, we imagined and designed schools that would intentionally centered and sustain Black girls and throughout their learning experiences. In chapter six, "Already Worthy" I center the understandings and experiences generated during my time learning with and from "Chapter 517" a group of five Black women in their early thirties who engaged in this project as a practice of return. The major themes I discuss in chapter four include Black girl bonds as an act of choosing and space for collective care, Black girl worthiness and legibility as associated with school performance, and chosen spaces as a site for reimagining. Chapter seven provides a discussion of the overarching themes that emerged throughout the study, across the "Chapter 517," Chicago, and Seattle groups about Black girls' refusals, their learning experiences across contexts, and the chosen spaces they imagine, design, and co-construct. Chapter seven concludes by offering implications for schools, educators, community members, and all those looking to be in deep solidarity with Black girls and women who are actively imagining and enacting the justice-based and liberation centered spaces (for learning, care, and belonging) that Black girls are deserving of.

Chapter 2. Mapping the Terrain of Black Girls' Refusals: Research & Theory

"come celebrate/ with me that everyday/ something has tried to kill me/ and has failed."
-Lucille Clifton

In this chapter, I offer an overview of salient literature from the major fields, theories, and concepts this dissertation builds from and alongside. In particular, I provide a review of relevant literature from the field of Black girlhood studies (BGS) that attends to the learning experiences of Black girls in schools and out-of-school spaces. Here, I also provide a review of literature from the fields of anthropology and education on Black and Indigenous theories of refusal, and from the fields of education, Black studies, and Black feminist studies about chosen spaces as a form of homeplace (hooks, 2015), Black Space (Paris, 2017), and Black educational fugitive space (ross, 2019). Furthermore, this chapter outlines the major theories and concepts that form my conceptual framework and provide lenses through which to understand how consent, refusal, and legibility impact Black girls' learning experiences. These theories and concepts include Saidiya Hartman's (1997) work on the "afterlife of slavery," Hortense Spillers' (1987) theory on Black women and girls' "illegibility" in the context of the U.S., Leanne Simpson's (2014) concept of educational consent, and Christina Sharpe's (2016) work on "the wake."

Black Girlhood as a Site of Possibility

In her pivotal work, *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*, Ruth Nicole Brown (2013) describes Black girlhood as an organizing construct, a spatial intervention, and as an organizing practice of resistance and wellness. As an organizing construct, Brown describes Black girlhood as something that, "makes possible the affirmation of Black girls' lives and, if necessary, their liberation" (p. 1). Here, Brown alludes to Black girlhood as something much more than a particular stretch of years that govern Black girls' childhoods. Instead, Black girlhood is a space, a possibility, an entity that affirms the fullness of Black girls' lives and their freedoms. As a spatial intervention, Brown describes Black girlhood as being "useful for making our daily lives better and therefore changing the world as we currently know it" (p. 1). In this regard, Brown posits that Black girlhood is an act or practice that can significantly shift and change the world in which we live and ultimately benefit the lives of all, regardless of whether we identify ourselves as Black girls. As an organizing practice of resistance and wellness, Brown describes Black girlhood as a practice that does not "collude with white-supremacist sentimentalities of saving someone presumably less human for the purpose of conquest" (p. 2). Here, Brown illustrates her understanding of Black girlhood as a practice that rejects anti-Black, white supremacist, colonial logics that frame Black girls as subhuman and in need of saving. Instead, Black girlhood as an organizing practice of resistance and wellness is about Black girls being in deep community with one another and allowing the relationships they foster with each other to be a space of liberation, and an act of saving oneself and each other (p. 3).

In regard to this project, what resonates most about Brown's descriptions of Black girlhood is her theorization of it as something that exists beyond time and space and as something that functions as a construct, intervention, and practice through which to imagine otherwise worlds and possibilities by way of the creative genius, sensemaking skills, and navigational practices of Black girls. Through this dissertation study, I have advocated for the idea of an expansive Black girlhood; a girlhood that is rooted in Black girls' liberation and that is free of the harm and violence that schools, as sites of the afterlife of slavery, too often employ. This idea of an expansive Black girlhood is aligned with Brown's larger vision for Black girlhood: "Black girlhood is freedom, and Black girls are free" (p. 1). Brown challenges us to understand Black girlhood as a site of liberation where Black girls have the freedom to show up wholly. This involves Black girls never having to leave parts of themselves outside of the classroom because each element of their identity is vital to the learning, sensemaking, and creativity their learning experiences require.

Building with Brown's description of Black girlhood, Kwakye, Hill, and Dallier (2017) offer an essential understanding of Black girlhood as a field of study. When discussing the inception of BGS, they describe it as being "...birthed out of love. Birthed out of scholars seeing Black girls being posed as the problem instead of the question and the answer" (p. 2). Here, Kwakye, Hill, and Dallier identify the study of Black girlhood as a space for subverting deficit frameworks, language, and assumptions that have abounded about Black girls. This speaks to the understanding of Black girlhood being a site of possibility for envisioning futurities. By posing Black girls as the "question and the answer" as opposed to the problem, it then becomes possible to "...imagine a field in which infinite possibilities for Black girlhood celebration are realized" (p. 5). This positioning of Black girls as the inquiry and the answers also connects deeply to the nature of this project and its focus on Black girls' engagement with consent and refusal in chosen learning spaces. Instead of blaming Black girls for the injustices they face within compulsory learning environments or framing them as perpetually disadvantaged because of them, this study centers Black girls' sensemaking and navigational practices as vital ways-of-knowing and, in doing so, frames Black girls in a strength-based way. Through a process of learning collaboratively with groups of Black girls and women about their/our refusals as sensemaking tools and navigational practices, this study also offers insight on reimagined teaching and learning practices that become possible when these tools and practices are sustained across learning contexts. This becomes possible and has the potential to benefit the learning experiences of all students in chosen and compulsory learning spaces when Black girl creativity, sensemaking tools, and navigational practices are centered, when consent is a cornerstone of the design of the learning space, and when Black girls' refusals are welcomed.

Black Girl Navigational Practices

Drawing from research in Black geographies, education, and Black girlhood studies, Tamara Butler (2018) offers the framework of Black Girl Cartography which is, “the study of how and where Black girls are physically and sociopolitically mapped in education” (p. 29). With this framework, Butler contextualizes the roles space and place have in shaping Black girls’ learning experiences and the importance of scholars who use this framework to “consider how Black Girlhood is informed, reformed, or stifled by the geopolitical space of school” (p. 30). In this dissertation study, I engaged in research as a Black girl cartographer in order to interrogate the ways race, gender, and location, among other factors and facets of identity influence the educational experiences Black girls have across contexts. As a Black girl cartographer, in this project I also explored the multigenerational stories Black girls and women tell about learning spaces that have sustained them and those that have been designed to do the opposite. Building with Butler’s construction of a “Black girl cartographer,” across this study I also worked collaboratively with three groups of Black girls and women to chart new spaces for us to learn, connect, and care for each other.

The collective work my research collaborators and I engaged in while co-creating chosen Black girl spaces became an enactment of a “Black girl practice,” which Butler describes by stating: “Through their work, Black girl practices emerge as temporal and spatial acts of intentional resistances, innovative productions, and creative engagements” (Butler, p. 38). Through our group discussions, art making, and space making, my collaborators and I imagined what justice-based learning settings and experiences might look like for Black girls and women, while simultaneously co-creating them for ourselves as “spatial acts of resistance.” Further, Butler describes “Black girl navigational practices” as a major finding of her research and defines these as practices that are “connected to the ways that girls work together in the face of individual meritocracy, choose movement over stagnation, and choose to bring their whole selves when schools demand fragmentation" (p. 35). Throughout this dissertation study, I used this definition of Black girl navigational practices as a lens through which to understand the ways Black girls' refusals and Black girl's bonds with one another were discussed as navigational practices that Black girls used to survive the often anti-Black and patriarchal schools they attended. Simultaneously, this lens helped me to understand how my collaborators used these same Black girl navigational practices to imagine new worlds and to map out spaces of liberation and care for each other when schools and other institutions refused to do so. In turn, across spaces and learning settings, Black girl navigational practices also represented sensemaking tools, ways of knowing, and ways of being for the Black girls and women in the three groups I collaborated with for this project.

Additionally, Butler (2018) builds with Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) pivotal work on intersectionality, which she describes as "build[ing] on Black feminism's interest in mapping and analyzing Black women sociopolitical locations" (Butler, 2018, p. 31). Butler takes up Crenshaw's work to discuss the intersections of Black girlhood, disability, and sexuality by describing how BGS primarily attends to the existence and creation of Black girl spaces, whereas girlhood cartography studies "interrogate the intersections of race, gender, dis/ability, sexuality, and location" (p. 36). Butler advocates for putting BGS and cartographies of girlhood into conversation in order to "craft a framework to understand how schools function as geopolitical spaces and how Black girls navigate said spaces" (p. 36). In doing so, researchers, like me, are better able to examine the ways that Black girls are creating and using navigational practices within schools to maneuver their survival within these geopolitical spaces that function according to logics of heteronormativity, ableism, racism, and sexism (p. 36).

Refusals: A Black Girl Practice of Knowing, Being, and Navigating

In schools/compulsory learning settings, Black girls enact refusals as a means of survival (Love, 2019) in response to the assaults on their character, the hyper-policing of their bodies and modes of expression, and the silencing of their concerns and critiques. Black girls also enact refusals in these spaces in order to disrupt the deficit ways they, their families, and their communities are framed in these learning settings. Black girl refusals range in their design and can take the shape of artistic productions like poems or collages published in a school literary magazine (Kelly, 2020), or adamant petitions to speak with a school administrator about the way a dress code unfairly targets Black girls (Morris, 2016). Based on my review of literature in the field of Black Girlhood Studies, Black girls' refusal(s) can be understood as a practice of enacting an oppositional stance to a given entity, precedent, institution, and/or norm.

I've also turned to scholars in other fields who have theorized around refusal, such as the work of Quechua scholar, Sandy Grande. In her article "Refusing the University," Grande (2018) contextualizes understandings of refusal that have emerged in Critical Indigenous Studies and as a part of the Black radical tradition. Building with Audra Simpson's (2007) work on ethnographic refusal, along with the work of countless other Black and Indigenous scholars, Grande discusses refusal as a path toward collective liberation and Indigenous sovereignty. In pursuit of these goals, Grande impresses upon readers the necessity of, "working simultaneously beyond resistance and through the enactment of refusal" (Grande, 2018, p. 60). As I seek to learn from Black girls' refusals, especially those enacted within the context of compulsory learning settings, it will be vital to understand them in a way that aligns with Grande's directive, and as a critical move beyond liberal notions of resistance that will not lead to the kind of liberation in education spaces and beyond that Black girls deserve.

In alignment with Grande's work and building from Simpson's (2007) work on ethnographic refusal, Savannah Shange (2019) offers an anthropological lens through which to learn from Black girl refusals. When discussing one of the youth participants in her study, Shange describes the students' practice of Black girlhood as, "an epistemic refusal as well as an ethnographic one: she does not concede to the terms by which we seek to know her" (p. 16). Shange avoids liberal notions of resistance in understanding the choices made by her student participant, and instead reads her actions and her embodiment of Black girlhood as an epistemic and ethnographic refusal. Building with Shange's work, this dissertation study was designed in such a way to learn from Black girls about their refusals and how those enacted in compulsory learning settings are not only made in singular cases (e.g., Black girls speaking out against an oppressive school rule), but how, on a broader scale, they are enacted as a refusal of being known, perceived, and/or read via the constructs of an American grammar that will not understand the fullness of their being.

When conducting a pilot research project that would ultimately influence the design of this dissertation study, an initial seed of inquiry was planted about the types of refusals Black girls enact across settings. As I learned from the Black girl collaborators/participants in my pilot project, they revealed that the types of refusals they were invited to make in consent-based learning environments allowed them to advocate for and work toward more justice centered realities for them and their communities. These refusals stood in stark contrast to the types of refusals they felt compelled to enact as a means of survival at their high school due to how that learning environment was structured around anti-Black logics and cisheteropatriarchal norms. As will become clear in the following chapters, I continued to explore this idea of the types of refusals Black girls engage in across learning settings and whether these have been refusals that Black girls have been invited to make or felt it necessary to make in order to protect themselves and their Black girl peers. To further assess the ways Black girls enact refusals across settings and the types of refusals they are positioned to enact based on the context of their learning settings, I turned to existing literature in Black girlhood studies to identify examples. Across the existing literature from Black girlhood studies that focuses on Black girls' educational experiences, I identified examples of refusals that Black girls have enacted in settings ranging from compulsory K-12 schools, to chosen learning spaces such as community-based, out-of-school, and extra-curricular settings.

Refusals in Compulsory Learning Spaces

Across the literature that focused on Black girls' educational experiences in compulsory K-12 settings, these studies detailed the ways Black girls have enacted refusals in response to their school's targeted disciplinary practices (Shange, 2019, 2020), biased dress codes (Morris, 2016), and lack of response to incidents of anti-Black racism in the school (Kelly, 2020). Additionally, these studies highlighted refusals that Black girls made in response to how the concerns they raised about their schooling experiences were ignored and/or dismissed (Butler, 2018), and to negative perceptions and deficit framings of Black girls within the school and curriculum (Sutherland, 2005; Young et al., 2020). In response, the Black girls in these studies enacted refusals that they initiated and facilitated themselves, along with others that were introduced and guided by teachers.

Curriculum Design. In the studies by Sutherland (2005), and Young, Foster, and Hines (2018), Black girl students engaged in acts of refusal that were facilitated through learning experiences in English Language Arts (ELA) classes. In both studies, curriculum design played a significant role in how Black girls were positioned to enact refusals through the use of literacy practices. Sutherland's 2005 study focuses on a group of Black girl students in a high school English class throughout their study of an "identity" themed unit in which they read Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970). The curriculum design of this unit prompted the use of dialogic and written literacy practices that supported student discussions of identity, and specifically, about the intersections of racism and gender bias and the implications this has for Black girls. Throughout the unit, Black girl students leveraged the literacy practices they were engaging with and their analysis of *The Bluest Eye* to critique school and societal norms that held limiting expectations of how Black girls were allowed to show up in society and exact agency over their lives. The curriculum design of the unit created space for Black girls to "negotiate boundaries" (Sutherland, 2005, p. 367) around their own identities, which positioned them to refuse any possible acceptance of labels and expectations of their being (as Black girls) that did not align with their identities and the visions of Black girlhood they determined for themselves.

Similar to Sutherland's work, in the study by Young et al. (2018), Black girls were also presented with opportunities to engage in acts of refusal through literacy practices, but through the use of a model called Counter Fairy Tales (CFT). CFT derives from Critical Race Feminism and the Critical Race Theory methodology of counter-stories (Young, et al., 2018). CFT was created to "leverage Black girls' experiential and communal funds of knowledge" (p. 106) and the model "encourages [Black] girls to take traditional fairy tales and rewrite the narrative from their perspective" (p. 106). In this study, a fifth-grade teacher engaged a group of Black girl students in a CFT based lesson in which they read the story "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" and were then prompted to reimagine Goldilocks as a Black girl and to determine how the story would change. Young, et al. (2018) describe the many different creative directions the students' reimagined Black girl version of Goldilocks took and how CFT was employed in this learning activity as a "resistive literary strategy to reclaim Black girls' narratives and to be reflective of their experiences" (p. 107). The Black girl students' reimaginings of the "Goldilocks" story can also be read as literary acts of refusal that were created not only in response to the original story, but also in response to how Black girls are largely missing from the mostly White literary canon taught in schools. This literacy-based act of refusal also negates the few singular depictions of

Black women and girls within the literary canon as enslaved, dehumanized subjects. Through the practice of reimagining that CFT necessitates, Black girls are able to refuse the single stories of invisibility, deficit, and dehumanization that are told about them in the assigned texts in school, as well as throughout other dimensions of society.

The Sutherland (2005) and Young, et al. (2018) studies reflect the significant role curriculum design can play in supporting the facilitation of refusals that Black girls can enact in any learning space, but especially within compulsory settings. These examples connect to Muhammad and Haddix's (2016) work on Black Girl Literacies and affirm how Black girls' literacy practices are not only valid, but also critical for disrupting the silences of Black girls that are missing from school curriculum, and for negating the damage-centered narratives (Tuck, 2009) of Black women and girls that do appear in school curriculum. These examples show the power of Black Girl Literacies as a navigational practice (Butler, 2018) that helps Black girls refuse deficit framings of themselves in schools and beyond. This navigational practice also helps Black girls to write themselves whole in compulsory learning settings that function via anti-Black logics which are often more invested in their fragmentation (Butler, 2018).

The Risk in Refusals. Black girls' enactments of refusal in compulsory learning spaces are a disruption of the non-consent they have been framed with in the context of the U.S., and more specifically, in the context of their schools, where the afterlife of slavery continues to play out. However, when enacting these refusals, it is not uncommon for Black girls to face major consequences (suspension, expulsion, etc.) for doing so (Morris, 2016; Shange, 2019). There is much that can be learned from Black girls' enactments of refusals in compulsory spaces, but I also want to err on the side of caution and clarify that I am not painting a picture of Black girls' refusals as some progressive-based endeavor that comes with no risks. When enacting refusals in response to the anti-Black and misogynoir-based violence perpetuated in schools, Black girls are taking risks that could significantly impact their schooling experiences in negative ways.

The examples of Black girls' refusals displayed in studies like those by Morris (2016), Kelly (2020), and Shange (2019, 2020) reveal the risks that come with Black girls choosing to enact refusals in compulsory learning spaces. In her book *Pushout* (2016), Morris details the experience of a Black teen girl named Deja who described being unfairly punished for a perceived violation of her school's dress code. Deja refused to accept this punishment, especially when observing that one of her White girl peers whose shorts were far shorter than hers was not reprimanded for her attire or subsequently met with the kind of body policing Deja experienced. Upon being sent to speak with the principal, Deja informed them of her objections to the way the school dress code was being enforced. The principal opted to give Deja a one-time "pass" and a warning to not let the boys "feel all on you and stuff" (p. 127). Deja's refusal in this scenario is an acknowledgement of the ways her school dress code targeted Black girls and how her school staff's enforcement of the code framed Black girls' bodies as something in need of being controlled, as well as something at risk. The principal's decision to give Deja a one-time pass instead of addressing the problematic nature of the dress code and its enforcement shows the risk Deja took by speaking up about this. This also reveals the threat of future punishment Deja could face if a similar situation were to happen again. Further, this sheds light on how Deja's practice of surviving her school involved her having to contemplate such risks, which is an undue responsibility for any teenager.

In her article "Exploring Black Girls' Subversive Literacies as Acts of Freedom," Lauren Leigh Kelly (2020) describes an experience of a Black teen girl who also enacted refusals as a mechanism to ensure her survival within a compulsory school setting that did not sustain the lives, literacies, cultures, or ways of knowing (Paris & Alim, 2017) of Black girls. In the article, Kelly details the experience of Layla, a teenage Black girl who sought to “challenge racial oppression and foster racial literacy” in her school, but who was met with harsh pushback from her peers and ultimately punished by her school administrators for doing so (Kelly, 2020, p. 471). Prompted partially by her school’s insufficient approach to addressing Black History Month, Layla chose to address this by sharing Black History Month content via her social media accounts. Layla turned to Snapchat to, “post a Snapchat ‘story’ for each day of Black History Month that featured her discussing particular issues related to Black culture and racial oppression” (p. 470). Instead of her peers thoughtfully engaging with her “stories,” Layla was met with cyberbullying and an onslaught of racist responses to her content. Layla refused to accept this harmful and racist treatment and attempted to bring her concerns regarding these incidents to her school administrators. Unfortunately, Layla was also met with pushback from the administrators and ultimately became the only student punished following what occurred via Snapchat. After this series of events and the unjust consequences Layla faced for refusing to accept her school’s lack of attention to and celebration of Black History Month, Layla felt that the best way she could safely navigate her school experience was to remain silent and abstain from speaking up about injustice in her school.

Similar to Deja’s story (Morris, 2016), Layla’s narrative highlights the risks Black girls take when enacting refusals in compulsory school spaces that exist as sites of the “wake,” or the afterlife of slavery (Sharpe, 2016; Hartman, 1997), and that frame Black girls as illegible (Spillers, 1987). Layla’s school existed as a space where she had to negotiate what moves she would make and practices she would employ to ensure her survival. Although Layla’s initial act of refusal and the subsequent backlash she was met with led her to believe that the best navigational tool (Butler, 2018) to ensure her survival in school was silence, she later found alternative ways to ensure her survival that would not foreclose her practices of resistance and refusal. Layla ultimately used “subversive literacies" (Kelly, 2020) to affirm her identity as a Black girl, to support the ongoing growth of her critical consciousness, and to enact a necessary refusal in response to her racially oppressive school environment. Kelly defines subversive literacies as practices that, “stem from this history of Black women utilizing their literacy practices to resist oppression and assert their freedom while circumventing surveillance structures that would otherwise attempt to erase and punish their resistance” (p. 458). Layla enacted subversive literacies as a refusal by writing and sharing her poetry that focused on Black identity and her sociopolitical views in a schoolwide literary magazine. Layla’s poetry being published in the school literary magazine subverted her school’s previous attempts to render her silent and illegible, thus positioning her with another way to speak out against injustice.

What I have learned from these examples that I was also mindful of when conducting this dissertation study is the importance of not painting Black girls’ refusals as practices/enactments that come without consequences. Although there is much to be learned from Black girls and the refusals they enact in compulsory learning spaces about the kind of liberation-centered educational experiences they are deserving of, it would be irresponsible to not also acknowledge the major risks Black girls take when deciding to critique, call out, and speak out against injustices (especially ones that disproportionately affect them in schools). Through a practice of acknowledging the risks that Black girls take when enacting refusals in compulsory learning settings, my dissertation study collaborators and I utilized our discussion, reflection, and art making practices to imagine more justice-based learning settings for Black girls, and ways we might advocate for more just treatment of Black girls within existing compulsory K-12 settings. I lean further into this practice of imagining and advocacy so as to be mindful of not writing about the refusals Black girls make in compulsory learning settings in such a way that it creates divisions between Black girls and possibly frames Black girls who don’t enact refusals as being deficient. It is necessary to avoid this kind of rhetoric so as not to create a body of work or overarching belief that positions Black girls as the ones responsible for disrupting the systems of oppression that their schools are so deeply rooted in. Refusals exist as a practice of survival for Black girls within schools and it is important to not lose sight of the ultimate goal—re-envisioning and recreating schools as learning spaces that Black girls no longer have to survive, but that they can thrive and exist within expansively.

Refusals in Chosen Learning Spaces

Of the sixteen studies in this literature review that discussed Black girls enacting refusals, six took place in a chosen learning space. As described by Moore and Paris (2021), chosen spaces are "community organizations and programs, elective classes, and/or extracurricular clubs that students choose to participate in and have the agency to refuse their membership in" (p. 21). The chosen learning spaces in which the studies in this category take place range from summer programs to school clubs. All of these programs were opt-in, and none were described as spaces that Black girl participants were required to attend for a grade or to fulfill any other academic requirement. Of the chosen spaces described in these studies, three were learning spaces specifically designed with Black girls in mind, while the sites of the additional three studies existed as chosen spaces that Black girl participants still gravitated to and found to be a homeplace (hooks, 2015). Additionally, each of these spaces valued and upheld consent-based learning practices, which honored the agency of Black girl participants. Two major themes that emerged across these studies are the significant role community agreements/norms play in chosen spaces (Fisher/Winn, 2005; Winn, 2010; Brown, 2013), and the function of literacy practices and arts-based learning in chosen spaces (Brown, 2013; Gordon et al., 2019; Johnson, 2017). In the sections below, I explain what these features of chosen spaces reveal about the kinds of refusals that become possible for Black girls when implemented in a learning space that does not require them to constantly negotiate their own survival.

Consent Based Community Agreements. Based on the extant literature on chosen learning spaces where Black girls are enacting forms of refusal, a key feature of these learning spaces are community agreements that youth participants and adult mentors/leaders follow. These community agreements (although named differently in each space) represent a set of norms and commitments that participants and leaders in the space consent to follow because of the ways the agreements help foster a sense of community via the creation and maintenance of healthy relationships in the group. These agreements offer a framework on how to celebrate fellow group members and how to repair harm if it occurs. Additionally, these agreements help shape the ways in which knowledge and community understandings are constructed and valued in chosen spaces. For example, Brown (2013) describes how the youth participants and adult mentors of the program SOLHOT (Saving Our Lives, Hear Our Truths), a chosen learning space for Black girls, all commit to participating in a group check-in at the start of each session. During these check-ins, both youth and adults held space for one another to vulnerably share updates on what was going on in their lives, and how they were feeling. A participant of SOLHOT described the practice of check-ins as, "...the best, because I'm able to talk about how I feel openly and not be judged…" (p. 63). This loving and deeply caring work of holding space for one another in this capacity was made possible in SOLHOT by the ongoing commitment to collective agreements that each participant (all being Black girls and women) are truly heard in the space. This speaks to the value of each person's voice in the learning space, which ultimately supports the work of artistic refusals SOLHOT youth engaged in as a means of affirming their lives and identities and pushing back against oppressive structures that seek to render Black girls illegible (Shange, 2019).

Similarly, Fisher/Winn’s 2005 study discusses the pertinent role community agreements play in chosen learning spaces where Black girls engage in arts-based practices as a means of refusal. During Fisher/Winn’s work with the “Power Writers,” an optional high school poetry and spoken word class/club that served as a chosen space for Black and Brown youth, she observed how group norms like active listening, “singing” one’s poetry, and offering supportive feedback and encouragement to one’s peers deepened youth participants’ commitment to the space and to being in community with each other. The Power Writers’ community agreements also differed drastically from the rules enforced in the broader school community the club was housed within. Fisher/Winn illustrates the contrast between the rules that governed spaces in the school community that were unwelcoming to youth, versus the Power Writers’ community agreements when describing her experience walking to a Power Writers meeting one day: “After passing these restrictive declarations, I make my way to Joe's class where students do not receive a long list of what they cannot do but rather the encouragement to seek a range of possibilities through literacy” (p. 120). Here, Fisher/Winn illustrates the importance of the Power Writers’ community agreements not mirroring the restrictive rules of the broader school community that were laden with “cannots.” Those rules would foreclose opportunities for the writing and performance work that the Power Writers engaged in and the refusals they enacted through their creative work. Ultimately, the community agreements honored in the Power Writers helped to sustain practices of consent-based learning that affirmed the agency its youth participants, and its Black girl participants in particular, had over their lives, bodies, and ways they engaged in the learning in the space.

Literacy Practices and Art-Based Learning. An overlap between the refusals Black girls make in both compulsory and chosen learning spaces is literacy practices. As mentioned in the examples of refusals in compulsory learning spaces, such as the Kelly (2020) study, it is not uncommon to see literacy practices paired with forms of arts-based learning to facilitate opportunities for Black girls to affirm their identities, address injustices, and advocate for change. Many of the studies in this review that took place in chosen spaces implemented literacy practices and arts-based learning in similar ways. However, the major difference is the nature of the refusals Black girls enacted using these methods based on what was at stake for or afforded to them in compulsory versus chosen learning setting. For example, the design of Gordon et al.'s 2019 study is built around the intentionally designed learning space they created for Black girls in their community in the form of an African-American Read-In. This read-in specifically centered books, stories, and poetry by Black girl authors and Black girl participants and their families were able to opt into attending. Gordon et al. (2019) designed this event to "continue with the tradition of Black women throughout history who have resisted the dominant narrative perpetuated by mainstream culture" (p. 3) and they used Black girl literacy practices as a method through which to facilitate Black girls' resistance to and refusal of the negatively constructed dominant narrative of Black women and girls.

In a similar fashion, Gibbs and Jones-Stanbrough (2019) discuss the ways they helped facilitate chosen learning spaces where Black girls engaged in critical literacy practices and arts-based learning. One of these chosen spaces was a summer program called GEMS (Growing and Empowering Minds through Storytelling) that Black girl participants like Lena, were able to opt into. In the context of GEMS, Lena participated in literacy-based learning activities rooted in storytelling that positioned her to create community asset maps and community engagement proposals and presentations. Lena used these projects to "advocate for a safer and more reliable bus system" (p. 9) in her community. Lena's advocacy demonstrated her investment in her community and her rejection of negative messages she and her peers often received about their neighborhood (p. 9). In addition to her advocacy projects, Lena also engaged in literacy practices as a form of arts-based learning and as a "means for healing" through her participation in GEMS when writing original poems like, "Who Will Cry for the Little Girl?" (p. 10). Lena's advocacy work and original poetry represent refusals she made in response to deficit framings of her community and notions that Black girls are not deserving of healing practices. Lena was afforded opportunities to enact these forms of liberation-based refusals in GEMS because of its structure as a chosen learning space that Lena was not forced to survive, but that instead invited the fullness of her being as a Black girl and that welcomed her passion for poetry and community advocacy.

Framing the Possibilities of Consent, Refusal, and Chosen Spaces

While the relationship between previous literature and the conceptual/theoretical framework is reciprocal, as one feeds the other, it's useful for me to share some of the guiding theories that have helped me understand the Black girl chosen spaces I have co-created alongside my collaborators. The theories that inform this study and offer lenses through which to understand how consent, refusal, and legibility impact Black girls' learning experiences are afro-pessimism (Wilderson, 2015), Black feminism's examinations of the intersections of race and gender (Spillers, 1987; Crenshaw, 1991), Indigenous theories of educational consent (Simpson, 2014), and Christina Sharpe's (2016) concept of the wake, or what it means to live in the afterlife of slavery (Hartman, 2007). I have focused on how these theories and concepts offer a clearer understanding of the ways Black girls are afforded the ability to engage in consent-based learning practices, and the forms of refusals Black girls enact based on their learning settings.

Living in the Afterlife of Slavery

Although Black Americans are no longer physically enslaved, we continue to live in the "afterlife of slavery" (Hartman, 2007) which can be seen in the ongoing ways that antiblackness frames Black people as other, subhuman, and not deserving of life. As kihana miraya ross (2021) describes in her work on afro-pessimism and education, “Anti-blackness indexes the structural reality that in the larger society, blackness is inextricably tied to slaveness” and “slavery marks the ontological position of Black people…” (p. 8). This ontological position that Black Americans are marked with is an indication of the unending effects of slavery, despite the 400 years that have passed since slavery was officially abolished.

The history and legacy of Black Americans being rendered more object than human via the “unmaking” of slavery (Spillers, 1987) is also what has prevented Black Americans from being afforded the ability to actively consent or engage in acts of refusal without the threat of violence. This has created a false option of consent (non-consent) that Black Americans still live with. The conditions in which enslaved Africans were forced to either exist or perish in the belly of slave ships, on plantations, etc. reconstituted how consent was understood in the context of slavery. This, in turn, made consent an impossibility for the enslaved because of the ways their subjugation rendered them unable to actually choose or refuse what would happen to them or how they would be treated. Consent has become impossible because it cannot function in any justifiable way when there exist no healthy options to choose from. The remnants of this deeply flawed and inhumane logic governing constructions of consent have trickled down throughout history through the presence of anti-blackness that still positions Black Americans as unable to fully/truly give or revoke consent regarding what happens to our lives and bodies. Thus, we are still read as objects without agency. This drastically impacts the ways we are able to give or revoke consent based on how our lives, bodies, and communities are treated, especially within the context of institutions that persist with this same logic, including US schools (Sharpe, 2016).

The subjecthood that Black people have been made to endure as a result of slavery and its legacy is compounded for Black women because of our combined race and gender and the intersecting oppressions of our racism and the patriarchy. Although Black women's being, like that of Black men's, is marked by slavery, Black women are also rendered "illegible" (Spillers, 1987) and unable to be read as self-possessed human beings because of the implications of the intersections of anti-Black racism and sexism. This further positions Black women as subjects who cannot actively engage in the practice of consent regarding what happens to their lives, bodies, and the language used to describe them. Spillers (1987) discusses the ways that slavery and its legacy have created a particular grammar through which Black people are read (i.e. further dehumanized, framed as deficit, etc.), and through the ways Black women are referred to in language, ranging along a continuum of deficit, including "Sapphire," "Earth Mother," and "Aunty" (p. 65). These labels represent how the power to name negatively is tied back to the violence and dehumanization of slavery.

This grammar of illegibility has contributed to the unmaking of Black women as self-possessed human beings endowed with personal agency over their lives. Instead, Black women have been positioned as subjects to be blamed for the perceived failures of Black families and communities (Moynihan, 1965), and as beings not deserving of protection, care, or concern. The ways Black women and girls' lives exist at the intersection of race and gender has left our needs unsupported by efforts to address sexism (which generally prioritize white women), and efforts to address anti-Black racism (which generally prioritize the concerns of Black men) (Evans-Winters & Esponito, 2010). Black women are further rendered illegible in the context of the U.S. and institutions that replicate its logics, like schools, who do not attend to the needs of Black women because of intersections of sexism and racism (Crenshaw, 1991). Therefore, there is a need for a new "grammar" for Black women and girls, one in which Black women and girls are made legible and that allows for consent to be a true option and no longer presented as an empty, false choice.

Educational Consent

Young people's consent is generally not taken into consideration regarding whether they will attend and participate in K-12 compulsory learning settings and as a result, BIPOC youth are often made to endure the violence of their schooling experiences being shaped by the dismissal or erasure of vital aspects of their identities. These school settings have functioned with the expectation that members of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian and Pacific Islander communities must "lose or deny their languages, literacies, cultures, and histories in order to achieve in schools" (Paris & Alim, 2017). In turn, there continues to be curriculum, instructional approaches, and disciplinary practices at play in U.S. schools that are rooted in assimilationist objectives and that frame the languages, literacies, and ways of knowing and being of BIPOC students as deficit-based (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2000; McCarty et al., 2006; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2017).

Speaking to this point in her discussion of "educational consent," Anishinaabe scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson states, "Within the context of settler colonialism, Indigenous peoples are not seen as worthy recipients of consent, informed or otherwise, and part of being colonized is having to engage in all kinds of processes on a daily basis that, given a choice, we likely wouldn't consent to" (p.15). Simpson's words highlight the inability Indigenous youth have to consent to the educational experiences they encounter within compulsory, colonial K-12 institutions; institutions they are expected to attend and depend on to achieve Western-normed academic success. Simpson furthers this point by explaining the danger that lies in Indigenous youth learning to "normalize non-consent…within the context of education" (p. 15), given that denying youth the ability to consent within educational spaces is antithetical to Nishnaabeg intelligence (p. 15).

Although Simpson's discussion of education, intelligence, and consent specifically address the realities of Indigenous youth (and more specifically, Anishinaabe youth), the points she raises also offer a model on how to question the ways that consent is constituted for Black youth within schools. When examined through the lens of educational consent, Black youth's experiences in compulsory schools are also shaped by a form of non-consent that serves to dispossess them of their agency, identities, languages, literacies, and ways of knowing. This being similar to the ways non-consent for Indigenous youth is present within most compulsory K-12 learning settings that seek to strip them of the same vital elements of their identities.

The Wake

For Black youth in particular, schools exist as yet another social institution in the U.S. that "is fashioned to accommodate and preserve our subordination, or to otherwise compromise the humanity of Black people…" (Woodson, 2021, p. 19). This understanding of American schools being inherently anti-Black is also deeply tied to the legacy of slavery. K-12 schools exist as sites of the wake (Sharpe, 2016), or of the afterlife of slavery (Hartman, 1997). In Sharpe's book, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), one way in which she defines a wake is as the hold of a ship, often where cargo is kept. When considering the space of the wake in relation to the transatlantic slave trade, Sharpe further describes the wake as a place of confinement and captivity that stripped African people of their agency and humanity as it held African people against their will in the belly of slave ships. In this regard, the wake is also a place where consent becomes a non-factor for all those being held captive within it and subjugated by it. In discussing the wake and what it means to live in the afterlife of slavery, Sharpe addresses institutions that continue to carry on the legacy of slavery and its aftereffects in contemporary times. One of those institutions being education.

In her 2016 book Sharpe states, “Education is the belly of the ship” (p. 92). Here, she makes a direct connection between the inhumane unbecoming of captured African peoples that took place in the hold of slave ships, and the institution and practice of contemporary education that holds Black students captive and outside of their own will in seemingly less overt ways, but with related dehumanizing effects. The conditions under which enslaved Africans were forced to either exist or perish in the belly of slave ships reconstituted how consent was understood in that context, and to what extent enslaved Africans were able to actively give or refuse consent without facing the threat of death or other detrimental outcomes. Sharpe argues that as we continue to live in the afterlife of slavery, and how it is within the institution of education, or the “belly of the ship,” that Black youth are traumatized, retraumatized, and unmade. Noting this as a cycle and/or pattern, Sharpe also states, “The hold repeats and repeats and repeats in and into the present, into the classroom & the hospital” (p. 90). Therefore, it is also within this space of education, as the hold, that consent becomes a non-factor. As the institution of education transforms Black youth into subjects, it strips them of agency to determine for themselves what their learning experiences should look like and how their lives, minds, bodies, and cultures should be sustained within educational spaces they are expected to attend.

Sharpe’s work offers an indictment of education for its role in further carrying out the legacy of slavery through anti-Black practices and frameworks within schools. However, in I*n the Wake* (2016), Sharpe also introduces the concept of “wake work,” or one way that we can “attend to physical, social, and figurative death and also to the largeness that is Black life, Black life insisted from Black death” (p. 17). Wake work then becomes one way that we might imagine otherwise ways to live in the afterlife of slavery (p. 18). One method of engaging in wake work, which Sharpe discusses, is through the arts. Relatedly, in education scholar Aja Reynolds’ (2021) article, “In The Wake: Black Girl Lessons on Collective Care,” she centers the lives of Black girls and their pedagogies of care as an enactment of wake work. Building with Sharpe and Reynold's work, in this dissertation study I analyzed the stories and artistic reflections of/on schooling that my project collaborators and I shared with each other within the framework of the wake, and also noting how our relationships with each other and other Black women and girls have been rooted in multigenerational practices of collective care that also represent a form of wake work.

Illegibility

Although Black youth are positioned to navigate the afterlife of slavery in the context of K-12 US schools via the anti-Black logics schools function under, Black girls, in particular, are made "illegible" within these spaces because of the intersection of their race and gender. This form of illegibility can be seen in the ways Black girls are disproportionately pushed out of schools (Morris, 2016), how Black girls are punished for speaking up and advocating for themselves and their peers when faced with unjust treatment in schools (Shange, 2019), and how research on the experiences of Black youth and national initiatives to address their educational outcomes overwhelmingly focus on Black boys with little mention of or consideration for the experiences of Black girls (Cox, 2015). In turn, Black girls enact refusals as a means of negating their illegibility within compulsory schools.

In schools/compulsory learning settings, Black girls enact refusals as a means of survival (Love, 2019) in response to the assaults on their character, the hyper-policing of their bodies and modes of expression, and the silencing of their concerns and critiques. Black girls also enact refusals in these spaces in order to disrupt the deficit ways they, their families, and their communities are framed in these learning settings. Black girl refusals range in their design and can take the shape of artistic productions like poems or collages published in a school literary magazine (Kelly, 2020), or adamant petitions to speak with a school administrator about the way a dress code unfairly targets Black girls (Morris, 2016). As mentioned above, Black girl refusal(s) can be understood as a practice of enacting an oppositional stance to a given entity, precedent, institution, and/or norm. Additionally, Black girl refusals in compulsory learning settings are at times enacted as a refusal of being known, perceived, or read via the constructs of an American grammar that will not understand the fullness of their being (Shange, 2019).

Chosen Spaces

Everything that I have written about in the prior sections of this chapter have informed my understanding of what Black girl chosen spaces are and the possibilities that they hold. Despite the harsh realities that Black girls can face within the context of compulsory learning settings, an alternative to these settings is chosen learning spaces that Black girls consent to participate in. These are learning spaces that also frame consent as a vital factor that shapes the ongoing learning experiences of Black girls who join in these spaces, thus honoring the agency Black girls have over their lives. Maisha Winn's 2005 article "From the Coffee House to the School House: The Promise and Potential of Spoken Word Poetry in School Context" offers an initial introduction to chosen spaces through her discussion of "chosen literacy spaces" (p. 4), which Winn describes as "participatory literacy spaces" (PLCs). Winn describes chosen literacy spaces as settings that are "either organized outside of work and school settings or they are alternative and supplementary spaces for learning" (p. 4). Winn's description of chosen spaces, and PLCs in particular, highlights the importance of these spaces existing outside of the realm of compulsory settings (i.e., school and work) and that are established around norms that emphasize the necessity of consent being a true option for youth participants.

Moore and Paris (2021) build with Winn's concept of "chosen spaces" by describing them as, "community organizations and programs, elective classes, and/or extracurricular clubs that students choose to participate in and have the agency to refuse their membership in" (p. 21).

Moore and Paris also describe them as spaces that "allow us to imagine what could be, especially in moments when our current circumstances are less than sustaining" (p. 21). These definitions of chosen spaces emphasize the importance of both consent and refusal(s) existing as true options for young people who engage in these spaces. Given the anti-Black, sexist, and misogynoir-based (Bailey & Trudy, 2018) logics that schools and other compulsory learning settings often function with, these two factors being prioritized within chosen spaces that are designed specifically with Black girls in mind and/or that directly serve Black girls must prioritize these factors.

Additionally, the concept of chosen spaces is situated in a lineage of work from Black scholars, artists, and organizers about the ways Black folks more broadly, and Black women in particular, conceptualize and create spaces for themselves to gather and exist in in abundant ways. As mentioned above, chosen spaces emerged from Winn's (2005) work on "chosen literacy spaces" and "participatory literacy communities" and builds with ross' (2019) conceptualization of Black educational fugitive spaces. Similarly, Black girl chosen spaces are also an enactment of bell hooks' "homeplace" (2005) and take lead from Rae Paris' work on and enactment of "Black Space." As a cousin, grandchild, niece, or sister to each of these conceptions of space specifically charted and carved out for and by Black women and girls, chosen spaces, and Black girl chosen spaces in particular, exist as a space of and/or a movement toward Black joy, Black art, Black collective care, and Black liberation.

Refusals Reframed

Chosen Black girl spaces that are built around consent-based learning, invite Black girl refusals, and function in such a way that they refute anti-Black and sexist logics that seek to render Black girls illegible can also exist as sites of what kihana miraya ross (2019) calls "Black educational fugitive space.” ross theorizes around Black educational fugitive space in her work with Black girls and describes it as, “both departure and refuge from the gratuitous violence of the afterlife of school segregation, and [that] spawns the possibilities for rebirth and resistance” (p. 3). By examining the types of refusals that become possible within Black girl chosen spaces, there is opportunity to imagine how they represent “possibilities for rebirth” (p. 3) for a more expansive Black girlhood in which Black girls render themselves legible. The intentional design and structure of chosen Black girl spaces that demonstrates their investment in sustaining the lives of Black girls positions these spaces as antithetical to compulsory learning environments, which makes it possible to also view them as sites of “departure and refuge” (p.3).

In learning settings that exist as chosen spaces for Black girls, refusals exist but are contextualized differently than the refusals Black girls make within compulsory learning settings. In chosen spaces, Black girl refusals are not made as a method of surviving the learning setting, because Black girls have agency in chosen spaces and always have the ability to opt out of these settings. In chosen spaces Black girls’ refusals are ways they subvert dominant ways of knowing and being, advocate for change in their lives and communities, and hold space for each other to thrive. Also, in chosen spaces Black girls are not punished or pushed out for their refusals. Instead, their refusals are both welcomed and encouraged. In this regard, Black girl refusals further help Black girls to render themselves and each other legible, even while existing in a society that is persisting in the afterlife of slavery.

In Black girls’ chosen spaces, and through their enactments of refusals, Black girls are afforded the opportunity to define themselves in expansive ways— ways that extend beyond their ability to struggle and endure hardship. As described by Cox in her ethnography, *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* (2015), “Black girls, like all of us, create beautiful and fulfilling lifeworlds that are far more than reactions to the challenges they face” (p. viii). These enactments are examples of what types of refusals become possible when Black girls do not have to primarily focus their attention on survival within the (white, cishetero, patriarchal, ableist) context of K-12 compulsory learning spaces. These refusals and the chosen learning spaces in which they are made possible offer insight into the kind of Black girlhoods that can be cultivated and sustained over time, and that position us to imagine what kind of otherwise world might be possible; one in which Black girls’ legibility is always already existing and fully made known.

Chapter 3. A Practice of Black Girl Choosing: Methodology as Praxis

"She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind."
- Toni Morrison (Beloved)

when black girls go missing

I'm mourning all the Black girls we've lost
which means I'm also mourning myself
we left Michigan for Mississippi
what awaited was
my seven-year-old loneliness
an unwelcome companion
more suffocating than the late August heat
denser than the humidity that was as foreign
to me as friendship was in
a place that was not my home
until Shamara
sandy brown. sharp tongue. one hand locked in mine.
perhaps she'd been just as lonely as me
we were both there but not fully present
like we knew somehow
we were only temporary
only around long enough for our mothers
to return from duty or to their better senses
her mother returned first
and as quickly as she arrived into my life
Shamara was gone.
then came Morgan. also transplant. also new.
our mothers chit-chatted. spoke easily. maybe once were even almost friends.
but then one day I disappeared too.
wonder if my mama ever called Morgan's mama
and told her the news
or maybe all these years I've just been a mystery.
years later I'd mourn
more Black girl friends.
mourn Courtney.

mourn Tia.
eventually I’d become a teacher and
sadly not be fully
surprised when Deaira and De’Maya left
we are always leaving
but at least these two girls were missed
at least enough Black girls remained
to remember their names
to hug them deeply
like long lost kin
when they returned.
later
when I taught in the suburbs
no one noticed when
Tae left
One of only four Black girls in a sea
of nearly fifty freshmen
the least they could have done was ask where she’d gone
but there were no questions
don’t know if they Amys or Abbies have any
recollection of her existence
not sure how many of the Jacks would have
acknowledged her presence if she’d stayed.
we are so easy to forget when no one
bothers to even notice we exist
no one except us
Black girls keep Black girls alive
hold tight to the memories of each other
keep us from disappearing completely
keep our stories from going extinct
make sure they don’t forget our names
even when this world tries to render us invisible
we keep each other’s names on our lips.

I begin this methodology chapter with my poem to orient myself and my readers to the ways that engaging in poetic inquiry (Leavy, 2015) and poetic data analysis in this dissertation study became a way to honor my research collaborators and all I learned from them, and a refusal of traditional qualitative research methods and data analysis practices that devalue arts based research (ABR) design (Barone & Eisner, 2012). More importantly, I start this chapter with a poem I wrote about what happens when Black girls go missing and how we as Black girls "keep our stories from going extinct" as a way to consider what it means methodologically to make sure that Black girls don't go missing in educational research, and in discussions about how schools might be transformed to better serve Black youth. Additionally, I begin with this poem to imagine and chart an understanding of what it means methodologically for Black girls to "keep each other's names on our lips." The design and outcomes of this dissertation study aim to do exactly that: to invite Black girls and women to bring themselves, their learning experiences, and their intergenerational, familial stories of Black girls' schooling experiences to be shared and reflected on through art and discussion and positioned as an entry point to imagining and enacting more justice-based learning settings for Black girls. Throughout this chapter I offer a description of "Black girl choosing," a qualitative methodological approach that emerged throughout this study and from a preliminary study I conducted in 2020 with a group of Black girl organizers and artists, which significantly influenced this dissertation project. Through a methodology of Black girl choosing (MBGC) I attend to critical ways consent and refusal are framed across Black girls' experiences as students/learners and as co-researchers/research collaborators on this project. My engagement in a MBGC also reflects the relationship between the ways that I am theorizing, enacting, and engaging in methodology as a Black girl cartographer (Butler, 2018).

Black girl choosing is a methodological practice of inviting Black girls and women into participatory research as collaborators, co-designers, and co-researchers whose unique knowledge and skills generously influence the trajectory and outcomes of research studies. As a methodological approach, Black girl choosing draws from critical ethnographic methods (Bhattacharya, 2017), participatory action research/PAR (Fals-Borda, 1991), youth participatory action research/YPAR (Caraballo et al., 2017), and arts based research design/ABR (Barone & Eisner, 2012). Through a methodological practice of Black girl choosing, we are also able to observe how Black girls' and women's practices of consent and refusal are influenced by their learning experiences across contexts and help shape the design of research about Black girls and education (including their experiences in schools and chosen spaces). As a methodological approach, Black girl choosing is also a practice of welcoming refusals from project collaborators/co-researchers and understanding consent as a practice of relationality and responsibility (Arviso & Eagle Shield, 2023). In contrast, this understanding of consent differs from the ways consent is framed by the IRB and the limited scope of permissions, protection, and respect it offers. Instead, this relational form of consent significantly guides the research through a process of centering the needs, hopes, and desires of the study collaborators/co-researchers, as opposed to being preoccupied with protecting the university (i.e. the IRB).

Throughout this chapter I will continue to construct a working framework of Black girl choosing as methodology while simultaneously mapping out the ways members of the "Chapter 517" Group, the Chicago Group, and the Seattle Group and I co-designed this broader dissertation study and the specific ways each group chose to construct and spend time together in their Black girl chosen spaces. Throughout this chapter I will also highlight the significant methodological role creative, arts-based practices played throughout this project, as a path toward collective meaning making and data generation, and as a tool for data analysis. This is also reflected in my intentional decision to begin this chapter with a poem, which I will return to periodically throughout this chapter to underscore how this methodology of Black girl choosing is a humanizing approach to qualitative research. This humanizing research practice of Black girl choosing as methodology uses art, memory, and relationships to ensure that Black girls are not forgotten and that as researchers, educators, aunties, mamas, grannies, sisters, and friends, we will continue to "keep each other's names on our lips" as we work toward creating the learning spaces that Black girls need and deserve.

Making the Project: On Design

As mentioned above, this qualitative study that is methodologically framed as an interpretive study was designed using critical ethnographic methods (Bhattacharya, 2017), humanizing ethnographic methods (Paris & Winn, 2013), Arts Based Research/ABR (Barone & Eisner, 2012), Participatory Action Research/PAR (Fals-Borda, 1991), and Youth Participatory Action Research/YPAR (Caraballo et al., 2017). Across seven months (late 2021-mid 2022) I conducted this study alongside my research collaborators/co-researchers—nine Black women and girls who represent three different groups across this project. Each group is representative of a different city, state, and age group, which contributed to this study being multigenerational, as well as occurring across multiple geographical locations.

The three groups represented in this study are Chapter 517, a group of five Black women in their early thirties who grew up in Lansing, Michigan; the Chicago Group, a group of two young Black women in their early twenties who are based in Chicago, Illinois; the Seattle Group, a group of two Black teenage girls who are high school students and recent graduates living in Seattle, Washington. Throughout the course of this study, I worked collaboratively to enact a Black girl chosen space; this being a collective space of care, creativity, and support, and imagining that intentionally centers Black girls and women. Black girl chosen spaces are not brick and mortar buildings and have no set geographical location, but instead occur wherever

Black girls and women choose to be in community with each other in ways that honor their individual and collective knowledge, sense-making skills, joy, and wellbeing. Given this, all the group sessions for the Chapter 517 group were hosted virtually via Zoom, twenty-one of the twenty-three Chicago group sessions were held on Zoom, and nine of the seventeen Seattle Group sessions took place on Zoom. Also, because this study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and because not all of the members of each group live in the same city or regions (including me), it was often safer and more accessible for us to meet on Zoom for our weekly or biweekly group sessions.

The process of co-creating a Black girl chosen space with each group involved us meeting weekly or biweekly to check in, celebrate each other's recent wins, hold space for each other to process recent life challenges, to discuss and reflect on our educational experiences, and to create art to further support our discussions and reflections. In the context of our Black girl chosen spaces, the collective sharing and learning we engaged in was rooted in consent-based practices where co-researchers contributed to the design of our discussions and selection of our research topics and questions, and co-researchers were frequently reminded that they had the choice to refuse and opt out of any of the discussions or art projects. Through the ongoing co-construction of our Black girl chosen spaces throughout this study and the data generated throughout, I was able to engage with the five research questions that guide this study, which are outlined and discussed in chapter one. I share them again here for convenience.

1) What does it mean for Black girls and women to choose each other?
2) How do the concepts and/or enactments of consent, refusal, and illegibility shape and influence the learning experiences of Black girls across learning settings?

3) What conditions must exist in a (learning) space to support Black girls in the work/practice of imagining and creating beyond anti-blackness and sexism/patriarchy?
4) What is the role of arts-based practices in designing and co-creating chosen Black girl spaces?
5) How do the understandings built from engaging in questions 1-4 help with creating more caring, loving, and justice-based educational spaces for Black girls?

The research from this study is based on data generated from December 2021 through June of 2022. The Chicago Group met two to three times per month throughout the entire seven-month period, the Seattle Group met one to two times per month for roughly six months across the entire seven-month stretch, and the Lansing Group/Chapter 517 met biweekly for four months across this seven-month period (March-June). The data generated from this study includes nine one-on-one interview/dialogues with the project collaborators, audio and video recordings with accompanying transcripts from a total of 49 sessions (across all three groups), and field notes based on those sessions. An additional form of data generated throughout this study is a collection of artwork and creative projects created by collaborators/group members, including poems, collages, videos, guided meditations, photographs, and self-portraits.

At the start of our project, my research collaborators/co-researchers and I established "Black girls' and women's learning and educational experiences" as the overarching theme that would shape our time together. From there, we brainstormed ideas of sub-topics related to this theme. For each sub-topic, we would co-create a list of discussion questions and then spend two to three sessions discussing them at a time. Some of these sub-topics included Black girl bonds, Black girls' relationships to/with schools (i.e., with teachers, administrators, etc.), and intergenerational Black girl stories of schooling and learning.

After our discussion of the sub-topics, I would suggest an arts-based activity that would offer us an opportunity to expound on salient ideas, critiques, and/or imaginings that had been raised during our discussions. If the research collaborators agreed to the proposed arts-based activity, then we would dedicate time to creating and sharing our artistic projects with each other. Some of the arts-based projects we engaged in included self-portraits, designs of reimagined schools, and poetic odes. I generally designed these as "choose your own adventure" art projects, creating an opportunity for co-researchers to decide on the artistic medium of their choice to help render their projects. As a result, there were co-researchers who created videos, collages, guided meditations, mixtapes, and more. After we would present our art projects to the group we would reflect on them collectively, while also reflecting on our process of creating the art and what it brought up for us and/or helped us to think more about. After each round of project sharing and reflection, we would start the cycle again by deciding on our next sub-topic. Also, each group would walk away from this cycle when, as a group, we were called to prioritize other practices, such as holding space for fellow members to grieve or process frustrations, shortening the session and only spending time checking in when everyone was exhausted and in need of rest (myself included), and/or to debrief, and rescheduling sessions or pre-planned session activities in order to best accommodate the schedules of collaborators/co-researchers. In turn, our approach to following this cycle or diverging from it became a reflection of our commitment to prioritize supporting each other's wholeness and making sure that our time spent together in our co-constructed Black girl chosen spaces was aligned with our dreams and hopes for each other as fellow Black girls and women. This was one way we worked, methodologically, to render each other visible and to “keep each other’s names on our lips.”

Black Girl Choosing as Invitation

As a qualitative research study, the design of this project, including the methods of collaborator/co-researcher selection, has shifted from traditional models of research that demand a prescribed distance to exist between the “researcher” and the “researched.” Drawing from humanizing ethnographic methods (Paris & Winn, 2014), I enacted a methodological refusal to disrupt incongruent power dynamics within the context of educational research with the ways I engaged in the invitation process for this study, replacing what might otherwise be considered a recruitment process. I designed this project to facilitate collaborations between me and other Black girls and women where we could engage in discussions and create artwork that speaks to our educational experiences as Black girls. I recognized how this could potentially bring up a wide range of memories and emotions for co-researchers and therefore would require a great deal of trust between us and amongst the group as a whole. Given this, it felt both intentional and fitting to invite Black girls and women to be collaborators/co-researchers in this study whom I had already established baseline relationships of trust and care with. Ultimately, this included Asha, Ashley, Coop, Keiondra, and Mikaila (the members of Chapter 517), Abriana and Jala (the members of the Chicago Group), and Bethel and Lavancia (the members of the Seattle Group).

Upon inviting the members of each of the three groups to participate in the study, along with a few other Black girls and women who ultimately were unable to participate in the entirety of the study due to other obligations, I reflected on my pre-existing relationships with the members of each group as peers, friends, mentors/mentees, former teachers, and former teaching-artists, and how they had come to be. The members of Chapter 517 are a group of Black women who I journeyed through girlhood alongside and who I was a student and participant with in compulsory school settings and Black girl centered organizations and learning spaces. The members of the Chicago Group are two young Black women who I taught for multiple years during their high school experience. In the five years since they graduated from high school, we have kept in touch through informal mentorship practices. The members of the Seattle Group are two Black girls/young women who I originally met in 2020 when joining the local organizing project that they were members of as a teaching artist and participant observer. Although my relationships with some of my research collaborators extends across multiple decades, and my relationships with others only stretches across the past few years, these pre-existing relationships created a generative foundation for us to engage collectively in the broader relational work of this project.

This invitation process for co-researchers/collaborators in this project represents a form of choosing. The intentional act of choosing was also a move toward better honoring relationality as a meaningful foundation for engaging in collaborative and justice-centered research partnerships. So, not only did I choose to invite each of my collaborators to join this project, but they also chose me and chose to partake in this collective work of Black girl reflection, dreaming, imagining, and enacting. This process of my research collaborators and I choosing each other highlights the reciprocal relationship existing between us. Additionally, this process of us choosing each other negates power imbalances that too often exist in research relationships where there is an unhealthy delineation between the "researcher" and the "researched." As an intentional move away from harmful research relationship structures and extractive models of conducting research, and to better honor the ways choosing is a core relational practice that sustains "Black girl bonds" (discussed in chapter four), understanding "Black girl choosing" as a methodology was of vital importance throughout this study. By engaging methodologically in Black girl choosing, this study also affirms that choosing is an act of relation and demonstrates how it needs to be better centered in the ways we think about designing research and learning contexts, especially those that specifically involve Black girls and women.

Research Collaborators/Co-Researchers

Here, I offer brief description of each of the nine co-researchers/collaborators who participated in this study, based on their age, race, gender, and which of the three groups in this study they were members of. This is only a snippet of information regarding who each of these Black women and girls are, and the chart below is not at all reflective of the vast ways they each name and self-describe themselves. I hope that as you engage with the rest of this dissertation, you thoughtfully lean into the stories, art, and acts of care that these nine Black women and girls shared throughout our group sessions and the ways their living and being so deeply shaped this study.

Table 1.

Research Collaborators/Co-researchers

Name	Age	Race	Gender	Group Affiliation
Asha	30	Black	Woman	Chapter 517
Ashley	30	Black	Woman	Chapter 517
Coop	30	Black	Nonbinary/Woman	Chapter 517
Keiondra	31	Black	Woman	Chapter 517
Mikaila	31	Black	Woman	Chapter 517
Abriana	22	Black	Woman	Chicago Group
Jala	22	Black	Woman	Chicago Group
Bethel	15	Black	Girl/young woman	Seattle Group
Lavancia	19	Black	Girl/young woman	Seattle Group

Researcher as (Creative) Instrument

"She made herself, her world, from all that she came from."
- Ntozake Shange (Sassafras, Cypress, & Indigo)

I engage in meaning making as a researcher, artist, and educator by prioritizing the literary work of Black women. Through their work I am able to trace the terrain of methodologies that are built upon or deeply aligned with practices that center and sustain the wholeness and creativity of Black women and girls. What brought me to this work as a researcher, artist, and educator are my own creative practices which have sustained me throughout my life, and the worldbuilding I've witnessed Black women writers take up in their literature, which has modeled for me what it means to create the stories, worlds, and spaces that Black girls and women want and need. Since my days as a small chatty girl posted on my Granny's front porch, I have had a deep interest in creative practices and processes of making. This includes crafting, beading, crochet, baking, poetry, acting, spoken word, and fiction writing. As mentioned in the intro chapter, the Black women who raised me supported me delving into each of the practices and in many instances, they were my first teachers. I continue to carry these practices with me now and use them as tools to help process and make sense of my experiences as a Black woman, and to creatively imagine an otherwise world of safety, care, protection, and endless joy for Black girls (which I hope this dissertation project helps bring about).

By reading and re-reading the literary works of Octavia Butler, Ntozake Shange, Lucille Clifton, Toni Morrison, June Jordan, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, and Toni Cade Bambara, among others, I am reminded of the long legacy of Black women using their words as a refusal, recipe, and roadmap. Their poems, novels, and short stories have existed as refusals of the racial and gender-based injustices Black women have faced throughout history and that persist into the present. As a recipe and roadmap, their words have given me instructions on how to use the resources in my possession to conjure up and enact spaces of Black girl freedom, justice, and joy. If not for Octavia Butler's work in *Dawn* (1987), *Kindred* (1988)*,* and *Bloodchild* (2005), I would not have begun analyzing the ways consent is too often presented as an impossibility for Black women in the U.S., and the crucial role our refusals play in light of that. If not for Morrison and her texts *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1974), I might have been hesitant to design a research study that specifically centers the lives and experiences of Black girls and women. If not for Shange and her character Indigo in *Sassafras, Cypress, and Indigo* (1996), I might not have considered the ways that Black girls can use the stories of their elders, the spirit of their communities, and their own vast imaginations and creative inclinations to create the worlds they need. The work of these three literary artists, in particular, have also deeply shaped the design of this dissertation study as one which is built around invitations, methodological refusals, consent as a practice of relational responsibility, and the creativity of Black girls as a way of knowing and meaning making practice.

Consent & Refusals in Methodology

In this section, I focus on consent in methodology and refusals in methodology (Simpson, 2007; Shange, 2019). Black and Indigenous theories of consent and refusal are core features of this study's conceptual framework. However, to acknowledge the relationship between theory and methodology in this study, it is important to also attend to the ways that this project was designed with a relational notion of consent in mind, and therefore invited ethnographic, among other, methodological refusals. These refusals emerged during one-on-one interview dialogues, during group check-in conversations and discussions, and in response to the topics and artistic practices co-researchers ultimately decided whether or not to greenlight and have included in the study.

One example of this is a reoccurring ethnographic refusal that the members of the Seattle Group enacted during group sessions in response to how we spent our time and what we spent it on during our sessions. Although the circular co-design model described above in the "Design" section of this chapter offered each group some structure and direction regarding how we would spend our time together from session to session, it was not rigid, and groups would diverge from it as needed and wanted across the span of the study. For the Seattle Group, this occurred more frequently as Bethel and Lavancia would organically direct group check-in conversations or discussions of pre-selected sub-topics toward topics that felt more pressing or relevant to them at the time. Sometimes this would mean shifting away from a discussion about preparing to create self-portrait projects into one of the group members sharing an incident that happened at their job and us holding space for them to process that experience. These occurrences of the Seattle Group members redirecting our group conversations and discussions was an enactment of their own ethnographic refusal (Simpson, 2007; Shange, 2019). In these moments, the co-researchers were also demonstrating the agency that they had in the space to reconfigure how we spent our time together as a group so that it not only served the needs of my dissertation project, but also, or more importantly, benefited them and met their needs, hopes, and goals for the group as a Black girl chosen space.

Another methodological refusal emerged in the study during a one-on-one interview with Coop, a member of Chapter 517. Although I framed each of the one-on-one interview-dialogues I conducted with the co-researchers as a dialogue, I now recognize how simply stating that before I clicked record on my audio recording device did not radically change the fact that I was still positioning myself as the person asking the majority of the questions throughout that process. However, when I met with Coop for her interview-dialogue, she chose not to accept the structure that many of my other interview-dialogues fell into, which involved me primarily asking the questions, guiding the discussion, and listening to my co-researchers' responses. Coop took the "dialogue" portion of the interview-dialogue seriously and lovingly held me accountable for engaging in our session in a more equitable way. This involved Coop frequently asking me to explain the questions I posed, to provide examples, and to answer the questions first before she shared her responses. Through this interaction, Coop refused to let me be a removed subject from our interview-dialogue who was only responsible for taking notes and extracting data. Instead, Coop invited me to join her in a genuine dialogical experience throughout the interview and held me accountable for also practicing reflection and vulnerability throughout the process of us both answering the interview questions.

The refusal Coop made of a power imbalanced model of interviewing and her expectation that I also generously engage with the questions and join her in conversation was supported by the consent-based design of this study, in relation to a methodology of Black girl choosing. Coop chose to participate in this study because of her commitment to contributing to the creation of more justice-based educational experiences for Black girls, but she also consented to participate in the study because of the pre-existing relationship of trust that we have. Therefore, Coop's decision to consent to this study and participate in the interview-dialogue was rooted in an understanding of relationality, and as Arviso and Eagle Shield have stated, "relationality is about responsibility" (D. Arviso & A. Eagle Shield, personal communication, February 26, 2023). This meant that I was responsible for showing up in the interview-dialogue not solely as a researcher, but primarily as one of Coop's friends who she trusted enough to vulnerably share her responses to the interview questions with. Additionally, this meant I was responsible for also answering the questions, sharing examples, and engaging generously with Coop throughout the process, as I would if she was having dinner with me and my mama at our home on the South side of Lansing, or catching up over slices of cake at our nephew's first birthday party. Further, Coop's loving refusal is a reminder of the need for humanizing qualitative research practices that go beyond lip service (shots called at myself), and that genuinely engage and/or reframe qualitative interviews as generative dialogues between P.I.s and research collaborators/co-researchers where the P.I. is responsible for and commits to engaging in the dialogue in all of the ways that they have invited their research collaborators/co-researchers to do so (Paris, 2011; San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017).

Cultivating a Practice of Choosing: (Y)PAR & Humanizing Ethnographic Research

As this study attends to the practice of Black girl refusals as a step toward Black girl legibility (Spillers, 1987), I intentionally designed this study using ABR, PAR, and YPAR. These methodologies represent refusals of and a departure from 'traditional' research methods that create incongruous relationships of power between researchers and the communities they seek to learn from, often causing harm. Through my application of critical ethnographic, ABR, and PAR, and YPAR methods in this study, I have been able to learn from my research collaborators about their experiences, the learning settings they have attended throughout their lives, and the Black girl chosen spaces they have co-created in humanizing ways that push back against the "culture of power in research" (Paris & Winn, 2014). I have also prioritized building these methodologies into this proposed study because of how they afford research collaborators opportunities to enact necessary methodological refusals via their design and implementation and therefore contribute to a methodology of Black girl choosing.

An ethnographic methodological approach was appropriate for this study because it allowed for "descriptive and interpretive accounts" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 117) of the research collaborators' lives and experiences, and of ongoing sensemaking practices they engaged with in a chosen learning space. Further, this study was designed using features of critical ethnography which Bhattacharya describes by stating, “Thus, a critical ethnography would provide descriptive and interpretive accounts of how such inequities creates certain lived experiences for a group of people” (p. 117). As a result, through the method of critical ethnography I was able to learn about patterns of educational injustices and harms that Black girls and women across multiple states, geographic regions, generations, and age groups in this study had experienced in the context of K-12 schools due to the intersections of racial and gender oppression enacted by the schools they had attended.

Working in collaboration with critical ethnography throughout this study is Participatory Action Research, or PAR (Fals-Borda, 1991) and YPAR (Caraballo et al., 2017), which offered a framework for collaborative research that affirms the role research-collaborators/participants in research studies and how they shape the design, among other features of the study. In this dissertation study, this looked like the research-collaborators contributing significantly to the creation of the circular co-design model that often guided how we spent our time in group sessions. Relatedly, building alongside PAR is youth participatory action research, or YPAR. Caraballo et al. (2017) define YPAR as, “…a critical research methodology that carries specific epistemological commitments toward reframing who is “allowed” to conduct and disseminate educational research with/about youth in actionable ways” (p. 3). YPAR recognizes youth participants as being critical to the process of inquiry and the production of knowledge and engages them directly in this work. Youth based participatory methods were ideal for this study because of the nature in which youth participants were positioned as co-researchers throughout the project. As a methodological choice YPAR was appropriate for the research questions at the foundation of this study because of the ways YPAR is aligned with the work of enacting refusals, which is also central to the theories and conceptual framework that guide this study. As this study created opportunities to learn from and about the refusals Black girls enact as moves toward liberation, YPAR functioned as a form of methodological refusal based on the ways it subverts the subject/object relational model of research that disproportionately positions study participants with little to no agency in the context of research studies (p. 3). Further, Caraballo et al. (2017) describe YPAR as being a tool that has been used by youth from historically marginalized communities "to critique, redefine, and overcome the very asymmetries they face in their schools and communities" (p. 3), which is a practice that the youth members of this study engaged in.

Art as Refusal: Arts Based Research Methods

Arts based research (ABR) is defined by Barone and Eisner (2012) as "…an effort to extend beyond the limiting constraints of discursive communication in order to express meanings that otherwise would be ineffable" (p. 1). The way ABR offers researchers a method through which to design opportunities for meaning to be expressed in ways that other methodologies and mediums could not create speaks to its value as a tool for envisioning otherwise ways of knowing through research. Keisha Green (2020) in her discussion of the vital role that arts and imagination can play in designing more humanizing research practices states, "Arts-based research or creative research methods are examples of "otherwise" work; they help us challenge conventional ways of working as we reimagine new or otherwise possible practices" (p. 117). Green's understanding of ABR as an "otherwise" possibility for engaging in research in humanizing ways aligns with how Black girls and women in this study used artistic practices, including poetry and collage, to imagine and design school settings that intentionally centered and sustained Black girls. In turn, these projects represented an otherwise possibility for the future of education and this example is an affirmation of why ABR is a key approach that the methodology of Black girl choosing draws from.

Additionally, the otherwise possibilities ABR allows for and/or invites the otherwise models of schooling, learning, and being that Black girls imagine for themselves and each other through the refusals they enact in response to anti-Black school disciplinary practices (Shange, 2019), lack of response by administrators to racist incidents in school (Kelly, 2020), and to negative depictions of Black girls throughout society (Gordon et al., 2019). Extant literature in Black Girlhood Studies shows that the refusals Black girls enact toward oppressive systems often take shape through artistic mediums ranging from poetry to playwriting (Winn, 2010, 2011; Brown, 2013; Cox, 2014; Kelly, 2020). This pattern of Black girls using art and related creative practices as a medium through which to enact their refusals also further justifies the use of ABR in this study as a methodological practice that invites refusals as a sensemaking practice and an approach to Black girl charting, which Butler (2018) describes as a practice that "focuses on the tools—curricula and digital space—students and facilitators use to carve out spaces for Black girls to thrive" (p. 35). Throughout this study, the collaborators/co-researchers and I used our artistic projects and reflections as a tool to chart, or "carve out" Black girl chosen spaces as sites of collective care and legibility.

Further, I drew upon ABR design in this study as way to honor the "creative potential of Black girlhood" and the ways Ruth Nicole Brown (2013) has conceptualized this as a frame of organizing.

> The creative potential of Black girlhood as a frame of organizing minimizes the distance between Black girls' critical thought, what they know, as a generative force of creativity that when critically engaged reveals how their personal lives, stories, and testimonies are

> structured by governing institutions and larger social, political, metaphysical, ecological, and economic systems. (pp. 188)

Building with Brown's framework, I found it vital to incorporate opportunities for my research collaborators and I to create art during our time together throughout this study. This was a way to invite each of us to use art as an additional form of expression and/or sensemaking tool throughout the study. Additionally, this was a way to acknowledge and create space for the existing artistic and creative practices research collaborators had sustained in their lives, which they already had experience using to help make sense of their lives and stories and how those are influenced and affected by social institutions, systemic inequities, and other related factors.

By creating ongoing opportunities for Chapter 517, the Chicago Group, and the Seattle Group members to engage in arts making throughout this study I also came to recognize this as an invitation for collaborators and myself to revisit creative practices that we were already acquainted with. For example, me and the Chicago Group members' first (re)entry point to creating art together was through poetry. This was a familiar practice for all of us, given how I was Abriana and Jala's high school teacher for two years, during which time I regularly designed and engaged my students in curricular units around poetry and I frequently invited students to write poetry outside of class by joining the Spoken Word club that I facilitated. So, when we wrote odes as a follow-up activity to our discussion on the ways Black girls' friendships influence our educational experiences, us writing poetry together became a practice of return. Alternatively, when we prepared for our next arts-based activity, I invited Abriana and Jala to engage in it as a "choose your own adventure" project where they would select the artistic medium that most resonated with them. Both Abriana and Jala chose to make collages to render and represent their reimagined school projects. When I asked them if there were any resources they might need to create their collages, Jala readily informed me that she was going to use Canva (an online and app-based digital design tool) and described how she used Canva regularly to create vision boards with her cousin, which was a monthly practice for them. Here, Jala named how she had existing artistic and creative practices that she engaged in with other young Black women in her life, which further reflected the importance of having arts-based practices for us to partake in as a way to reflect on our educational experiences and imagine otherwise realities of justice-based school experiences for Black girls.

Also, designing this study in a way that prioritized ABR further supported the overarching methodological structure of this study as a practice in Black girl choosing. Collaborators were invited to participate in arts-based practices and this invitation doubled as a loving call for them to return to their Black girl creative practices that they may have been estranged from over the years because of adult responsibilities and/or due to the ways their creative interests were rarely or never acknowledged in school. This was especially true of Chapter 517 Group members Asha and Coop who, during our group discussions and one-on-one interview/dialogues, reflected on how their educational experiences could have been drastically different if their teachers had known that they were creative and if schools had nurtured their artistic and creative interests. As adults, both Asha and Coop have recovered their relationships with their artistic practices. However, Asha, a pastry chef, had taken the previous three years off from her baking business to focus on transitioning into motherhood and working a full-time job in another field. During our one-on-one and group discussions, Asha shared that our time spent together throughout the project had become an invitation for her to return to her artistic practices and to consider what it might look like for her to shift into teaching and supporting emerging bakers learn the ropes.

What Jala, Coop, and Asha's prior experiences with artistic and creative practices affirms is that Black girls and women are no strangers to art, and that given the opportunity to create and share their artwork in a Black girl space designed to be caring and supportive, their creative potential will be further sustained. Additionally, these examples of my research collaborators' ongoing relationships with artistic practices highlights how these practices are a sensemaking tool and how our creative processes are a source of "sacred knowledge" (Judd, 2023). In Bettina Judd's (2023) *Feelin: Creative Practice, Pleasure, and Black Feminist Thought*, she describes how this "sacred knowledge" is connected to Black women's creative production: "Here, Black women's creative production (as opposed to the products themselves) is Black feminist theorizing" (p. 7). Further, Judd explains what she calls "feelin," which again is not the products Black women's create through their art, but rather, the effort, or process of Black women's creative production. In relation to Judd's theorization, the implementation of ABR as a method in this study was not for the purpose of creating a collection of artwork by my co-researchers and I that I could display as vivid examples throughout this dissertation. Instead, prioritizing opportunities for us to engage in creative production throughout the study was a way to offer us time and space to engage in "feelin" as we leaned into our creative processes and were able to observe what thoughts, ideas, and wonderings emerged for us as we also used these creative practices to reflect on our educational experiences and dreams for the future.

Moreover, I also model the use of arts-based practices throughout this written dissertation, particularly through the use of poetic inquiry (Leavy, 2015) and poetic data analysis (which I will discuss further in the data analysis section below). My use of poetry as a meaning making tool and methodological instrument is in itself a practice of refusal as I work to further normalize artistic approaches to qualitative research in the field of education, in particular.

Although I can also demonstrate the more traditional ways that I have generated and analyzed data through the use of fieldnotes, memos, and color-coded coding schemes, I have prioritized displaying and discussing the poems and vignettes I have written throughout this dissertation. This has been an act of Black girl choosing as I deliberately used these artistic renderings to demonstrate how my theoretical framework has influenced my methodology and my methodology has influenced my praxis as the art of refusals flows through each of these. Again, this can be seen represented in my intentional choice to start this chapter with a poem to model the interconnected relationship between theory, methods, and praxis throughout this study and how, not only did my research collaborators and I engage in arts-based activities throughout the data generation cycle for this study, but I also carried those artistic sensemaking practices into my analysis process.

Data Analysis as Poetic Practice

When analyzing the data we collectively generated across the study, I began by using inductive coding to code the transcripts of audio recording from the weekly/biweekly sessions from each of the three groups. I also used inductive coding to code the transcripts of the one-on-one interview dialogues I had with each of the nine co-researchers in the study. During this process I also reviewed the field notes I took during many of the group sessions that were held on Zoom, and memos I wrote throughout the study (generally written shortly after group sessions). Reviewing these documents also helped me to pinpoint specific moments in the transcripts of the group sessions that represented pivotal moments that occurred during discussions. I also analyzed the artwork my co-researchers created throughout the study, including poems, collages, videos, photos, and guided meditations, to identify emerging themes. Throughout this process of coding and analysis, I would also pause to review the themes emerging from each data source and to consider what themes existed across the data sources and how differing themes across the data sources were related.

While all of the above approaches offered important entries into meaning-making, they also felt somewhat removed from the arts-based, Black girl choosing theories, methods, and enactments at the heart of the study. One particular approach I took that deeply aligned with these foundations was to use poetry writing as an analysis tool. To synthesize the learning across each piece of data and their shared themes, I wrote poetic analysis poems. After reviewing the shared themes across the data sources, I would select two to four of them and use them as brainstorming prompts. After generating some freewriting based on the shared themes, I would review the possible lines and verses that were emerging and begin weaving them into the draft of a poem. After writing each draft of the two poetic analysis poems I created, I would return to the list of shared themes and carefully assess the poem for how present each of those themes appeared in the poem and to what extent the poem felt like a genuine synthesis of the data generated by each group[1].

The Chicago Group was the first group data set I coded and used poetic analysis as a way to reflect how I'd synthesized the data. The poem I wrote based on the data generated by the Chicago group is titled "Collaging Futures," with the title also being a nod to the artistic practice that Jala and Abriana most engaged in throughout the study. This poem also draws inspiration from the artist Bisa Butler's 2021 portrait of Harriet Tubman, titled, "I Go To Prepare A Place For You," after which the first line of my poem is derived. Below, you can find an excerpt of the poem (the full poem is included in chapter five) and a QR code and link that will guide you to the to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture's website where you can view Butler's portrait.

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[1] I am particularly thankful to committee member Professor Rae Paris for inviting me into this practice in my early stages of analysis. This practice was also inspired by a Tweet from Dr. Tao Leigh Goffe from August 5, 2022.

Excerpt of "Collaging Futures"

I go to prepare a place for you
of home and safety
don't worry,
your great granny is here and
your grandma
your mama
your little sister too
they've been working on this tapestry
interwoven with their collective dreams and hopes
but they need yours too
you, intergenerational time traveler
an embodiment of the present and the past

Figure 1.
QR code that will direct you to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture's website where you can view an image of Bisa Butler's portrait, "I Go To Prepare A Place For You."

Direct link that the QR code provides: https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2021.38

This poem invites readers to an area of learning and understanding around Black girls' chosen spaces that emerges from each of the lines in the poem, and how the act of Black girls and women choosing each other and making meaning through our relationships with one another is in itself an act of refusal. The lines in this poem such as "I go to prepare a place for you" represent overarching themes that emerged from the data, such as fugitivity and the practice of Black girls carving out chosen spaces that affirm them in ways that schools rarely did being an act of creating a Black educational fugitive space (ross, 2021). Similarly, the line "you, intergenerational time traveler" speaks to theme of intergenerational Black girlhoods which emerged from the data as a salient theme present across the discussions, artwork, and interviews the Chicago Group members engaged in. This theme also appeared in the context of the activities the Chicago Group members created for us to engage in, including interviewing other Black women in our families about their educational experiences (i.e., great-grannies, grandmas, aunties, moms, little sisters, cousins). Ultimately, the lines from this poem, based on the themes from the data, became a North Star leading toward deeper understandings of Black girls' refusals, chosen spaces, and bonds which also shaped the discussion of my findings and helped to organize the sections and subsections of the chapter. Through this process of poetic analysis, I utilized arts-based research design and analysis as a refusal of traditional or standard qualitative research methodologies and was also able to write a poem that I hope honors Jala, Abriana, and all of the Black women and girls in their family whose stories and brilliance they carried with them throughout this study.

In the chapters that follow I invite you to consider the ways we enacted Black girl choosing as methodology. In particular, the ways refusal, consent, and the arts shaped our time together and the contributions I seek to make to our understandings and enactments of Black girl chosen spaces.

Chapter 4. Charting Our Chosen Spaces

Black girl space

After Jamila Woods

here we are
building from a place of
what could be and what will
co-constructing a reality that
only we could
dream up
sketch out
cook up
place make
poet into existence
may these spaces that we
carve out be nothing if not
north stars leading us to our
own homegrown liberties. we want
spaces that map us back to girlhood
that reroute us from anyone and anywhere that
view us Black girls and don't automatically think — divine.
may these spaces be a compass
always directing us back
to each other
and a tool to chart a path to self-expression.
we breadcrumb our way there with all the
words we've said in classrooms that went ignored —
enough to scale mountains
fill the seas
build new worlds.
may these spaces be the ones we need.

The youth members of the E.'s Park Project Teen Advisory Team (EPPTAT) spent their biweekly meetings with laughter, large servings of lasagna, and a table full of listening ears. Dinners became an ongoing practice that offered sustenance as both meal and ritual to sustain the health of the relationships youth participants had fostered with each other. Here, a group of Black girls, their group coordinator, and me, a Black woman teaching artist, gathered to discuss the community organizing goals of EPPTAT. But, more importantly, we gathered to revisit and honor the sanctity of a chosen Black girl space within the context of broader living and learning communities in Seattle where so few existed. This space represented one in which Black girls could view themselves and each other as whole, and to radically imagine their schools and other anti-black institutions becoming places where this was possible too.

During my time working in partnership with EPPTAT, I learned invaluable lessons about what it means to create chosen Black girl spaces and why these spaces are so vital. Our practice of sharing meals, learning together, advocating for change in local schools and communities, as well as processing our lived experiences as Black girls and creating art that honored one another and our collective dreams significantly shaped my early conception of the idea of chosen spaces. My experiences learning with and from EPPTAT through these shared practices also created a pathway toward what would ultimately become this dissertation project. In this chapter I will frame the need for chosen spaces through an initial discussion of the geopolitical spaces of school and community that the youth participants/co-researchers (members of EPPTAT) in this project had been navigating for most of their lives. Further, in this chapter, I will map out the ways two of the members of EPPAT and I co-created another Black girl chosen space and how our time spent throughout this process led to understandings of what kind of conditions must exist or be created in order to develop and sustain a Black girl chosen space.

In this chapter, I discuss the process of building a Black girl chosen space as a form of Black girl charting, which Tamara Butler (2018) describes as a practice that, “focuses on the tools—curricula and digital space—students and facilitators use to carve out spaces for Black girls to thrive” (p. 35). Moreover, I include a poetic analysis of the poem that begins this chapter. It is a poem I wrote based on the data generated throughout this project, titled “Black girl space,” which offers a framing of the co-creation of the Black girl chosen space I built alongside my youth collaborators, Bethel and Lavancia, as a journey into Black girl charting. This poem also seeks to honor the specific ways that Bethel, Lavancia, and I engaged in the practice of “carving out spaces for Black girls to thrive” through a process of building trust, enacting refusals, and participating in open dialogue and art making that sometimes differed from the Lansing and Chicago Groups. By using the extended metaphor of cartography and charting in “Black girl spaces” and building alongside Butler’s description of “Black girl charting,” may this chapter offer insight on the ways Black girls and women can co-create Black girl chosen spaces and the conditions that must be cultivated and created for these to be spaces in which Black girls thrive.

Charting Origins

I first met Bethel and Lavancia in late 2019 after having first met one-on-one with Kelly[2], the EPPTAT group coordinator. These initial connections came together through a series of introductions made by me and Kelly’s mutual friend, Jamie[3], representing an early example of the way shared connections and relationships would deeply impact this project and ground it in relationality. Through conversations with Jamie, I learned about the work that the EPPTAT youth participants and Kelly were engaged in as they advocated for the rebuild/redesign of a local park in order to make it more accessible and welcoming for/to folks with a broad range of disabilities/abilities from within and beyond their community. Jamie informed me that in addition to their community advocacy, the EPPTAT youth participants were also poets and spent time together writing original poems. Knowing about my experience as a high school teacher and coordinator/coach for a youth spoken word club in Chicago, Jamie introduced Kelly and I with the hopes of us considering ways we might partner.

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[2] Pseudonym

[3] Pseudonym

Upon meeting Kelly, she told me that the EPPTAT youth participants had not only been writing their own poetry, but had also been invited to perform it throughout their community, including at a local high school many of them attended and at city hall. Kelly described how local teaching artists had previously worked with the EPPTAT youth participants to help them collaboratively write their group poem, “When You See Me,” and to prepare them to perform it as a group. When discussing how I might partner with the EPPTAT youth participants and Kelly and make myself useful to the space as a participant-observer, Kelly and I agreed that I would join them as a teaching artist (focusing on poetry and spoken word) and as a mentor. But first, we had to consider how the EPPTAT youth participants would feel about me joining them. To address this, Kelly invited me to meet the EPPTAT members during one of their upcoming meetings.

So, I stopped by Kelly’s house one weekday evening in early December of 2019 and joined her and the EPPTAT members for their biweekly meal and meeting. During dinner I listened intently as the youth participants talked and laughed together with a deep familiarity. When given the opportunity, I introduced myself and shared about my background as a high school teacher and youth spoken word club coordinator and coach, and about my current role as a graduate student at a local university. The group of youth participants, seven Black girls between the ages of fourteen and seventeen, looked at me from around the table as if cautiously studying me. In that moment, I wondered what it would take to earn their trust, especially in a space that they had already worked so diligently to create and to cultivate relationships within. I smiled at them, nervous yet hopeful for a response, but also recognizing that I was not owed one. Then, one of the youth participants at the other end of the table asked what kind of poetry we might do together and if we would be writing any poetry together that night. At that moment, I knew this group of young people would keep me on my toes and hold me accountable for the things I said I would do. So, although I had not come prepared with a poetry activity for us to engage in that evening, I mentally tapped into my ELA teaching and poetry workshopping toolbox and invited the girls to join me in a brief writing exercise that we could hopefully return to and build upon during future sessions.

Although I can barely recall the writing exercise we did that evening, I do remember clearly how, in that first interaction, the EPPTAT youth participants showed me how accountability, the work of establishing trust, and building relationships were all deeply important features in the chosen space they had built, and were continuing to co-construct over time. In that moment I was given permission by the youth to invite them into a creative practice and in doing so, to show them who I was and model how I would enter into their space, engage with, and treat them. Over the next three months, I would continue to learn from the youth participants during the biweekly EPPTAT sessions about how important it was for them to have a space where they "could all be together," and how it was something they had been "waiting on." Through our shared dinners and poetry workshops I learned how many of their relationships with each other predated the formation of EPPTAT, but how their time together in the group had transformed and strengthened those bonds. Through their art, shared laughter over meals, community organizing work, and the critical discussions of the anti-Black racism they faced in schools, the girls also revealed how their relationships with one another had become a source of care and protection and a navigational practice for them when traversing school and community spaces that were unwelcoming and hostile to them as Black girls. Further, the girls' ongoing participation in EPPTAT highlighted the ways they refused to be misrepresented and dehumanized in the context of compulsory learning settings and were intentional about carving out alternate spaces for themselves and other Black youth to thrive within their broader community.

I continued to learn vital lessons from the EPPTAT youth participants about how relationality was a central way of knowing for them as a group and a foundational factor in their placemaking work. This continued even after our biweekly in-person sessions with Kelly were disrupted (like most of our lives were) by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March of 2020. When we all entered into the shelter-in-place lockdown in late March, 2020, our experiences of attending school, work, and community gatherings in-person (like those we would have at Kelly's home) came to an abrupt stop. Although our shared meals and collective laughter were missed, the EPPTAT youth participants, Kelly, and I stayed in touch via the group message that I was honored to have been invited to join not long before the pandemic began. While we acquainted ourselves with the unprecedented times that were the early months of the pandemic, which involved worries about family and community members who contracted covid, the rapid transition to virtual learning, and the uncertainty about how long the pandemic would ultimately last, the messages in the group chat eventually slowed down.

Although our communication with each other has become less frequent, since then I have remained in touch with Kelly and the EPPTAT youth participants. Since 2020, I have also negotiated new ways to stay connected to and be in good relations with the group given the many ways all of our lives have changed since early 2020, including the way EPPTAT no longer meets regularly or formally, due to a wide range of reasons. In light of this, in late 2021, I reached out to the youth participants to ask if they would be interested in participating in my dissertation project. Ultimately, Bethel and Lavancia joined the project and we reentered into a practice of being in community with one another and co-creating another Black girl chosen space. I am so grateful for these two Black girls/young Black women and for the many ways they transformed this project and any initial/previous understandings I had of what a chosen space that centers Black girls and their needs, hopes, and wishes could be. Additionally, before diving into the following sections of this chapter that discuss the central themes of sites of belonging and departure, conditions of a chosen space, and collective dreams for Black girl spaces, I also pause to honor the creativity and intellect of each of the original EPPTAT members for whom this dissertation project would not have been possible. Their contributions to early understandings of chosen spaces are invaluable and my hope is that now, as Black girls navigating young adulthood, college, full time employment, and the ongoing state of the U.S., that they continue to have the spaces that they need to thrive.

Navigating Space: Sites of Belonging and Departure

When Bethel (sixteen) and Lavancia (nineteen) agreed to participate in my dissertation study and expressed interest in how our project would take place, I was excited about the prospect of us learning in community regularly again after the long hiatus since March of 2020. However, because our time together would not be directly EPPTAT related, that meant we would no longer be meeting regularly at Kelly's home for our sessions. So, as we cautiously entered into a time frame of the pandemic where we could begin safely meeting in person again (while taking necessary Covid precautions), a question emerged about where our new meeting place(s) would be. Given the many stories Bethel, Lavancia, and their fellow EPPTAT members had shared previously about how they had to strategically navigate spaces in their schools and communities because of their identity as Black girls, I was reminded of the significance geospatial locations played in their lives and how they would be a factor that required ongoing consideration throughout our project.

In the previous chapters on the Chicago Group and the Lansing Group, chosen spaces are described as spaces not dependent on brick and mortar structures, but rather, as spaces rendered in the context of relationships, which transcend the bounds of physical spaces and concrete geographic locations. Although this remains true, Bethel and Lavancia's stories about their schools and communities that they shared throughout this project echo a reminder of Butler's (2018) assessment of the relationship between Black girl research, space, and place: "...Black girl research relies on the social geography—frequency of movement, entering and exiting, spaces of inclusion and exclusion—of Black girls" (p. 32). In this regard, it is vital that before diving into a discussion of the conditions that make up a chosen space, I first paint a picture of the geopolitical landscape that Bethel and Lavancia navigated in their school and community. In doing so I seek to better understand how, "geopolitical locations compound the social inequities that Black women experience" (p. 32), how this also includes Black girls, and how it contributes to Black girls' commitment to working collaboratively to carve out chosen spaces for themselves where they can exist and thrive expansively.

From the Outside Looking In

Throughout the seven-month span of our project, Lavancia, Bethel, and I met at local parks, social and racial justice-based community lending libraries, neighborhood cafes, and for most of our sessions, at the Center for Educational Justice located on the university campus where I attend school. After initially trying out a few of our options, Lavancia and Bethel decided that they preferred meeting on campus. During each of our group sessions, we would start with a general check-in about how each of us were doing, but these check-ins would often evolve into Bethel and Lavancia discussing updates about mutual friends and peers who lived in their neighborhood and housing community. At the time of our project, Bethel and Lavancia had been living in the same neighborhood for nearly a decade, which was also true of many of their neighbors who they had grown up with and around each other's families. Although Bethel and Lavancia did share occasional critiques of the facility features of the apartments and townhomes their families lived in within their housing community, they frequently discussed their neighborhood and the people who made it what it was in ways that reflected the communal and supportive nature of the community. However, through our conversations, Bethel and Lavancia also described the negative ways others had come to view their neighborhood over time, and by extension, how others had come to view them as well.

When discussing the relationship between their neighborhood and their school, Lavancia and Bethel shared stories of teachers from their elementary and middle schools specifically coming to their neighborhood to bring food and ask their students who lived there if they needed help with anything. Even from a young age, Bethel and Lavancia noticed how this was not something their teachers did for their classmates who lived in the more affluent neighborhoods surrounding their school. Lavancia and Bethel also noted how, as students, they would overhear the teachers who would visit their neighborhood share stories with their colleagues about the good deeds they were doing by visiting the neighborhood the girls grew up in. In real time, as school aged children and youth, Bethel and Lavancia witnessed their community be filtered through a deficit lens and described as a "do-good" project their teachers could pat themselves on the back for entering. This particular form of saviorism those teachers engaged in when visiting Lavancia and Bethel's neighborhood, whose residents are predominantly Black and Brown working class families, did not honor the strengths or assets of their community. These teachers' actions were also discussed by Bethel and Lavancia as something that they and their families were not fond of and that they did not look forward to and thus their experience of being framed in deficit ways became one they were subjected to not only within schools, but also within their neighborhood and homes, places where they should have otherwise had freedom from such treatment.

School as a Site of Departure

When discussing how their school and home lives came into conversation with one another, Bethel and Lavancia shed light on the ways both of these locations affected them. In particular, their stories reveal how their schools became geopolitical sites where they were (mis)read due to the intersections of their race, gender, class, and how, as Black girls living in a community of working class families, some teachers from their schools framed them as neither whole nor humanized. Bethel and Lavancia's stories reflect the need for viewing Black girls' schooling experiences through an intersectional lens that also regards schools as geopolitical locations. When discussing the work of Kristie Dotson (2011, 2013) and Kimberlee Crenshaw (1991), Butler described how through the lenses that both of their work offers, "we see that intersectionality is not just about interlocking identities, but it is also about how those identities interlock with geopolitical locations" (p. 31). In turn, I regard race, gender, class, place of origin, language, and more as interlocking identities that interlocked with the location of school in ways that affected Bethel and Lavancia's learning experiences in schools.

Throughout our sessions and one-on-interview dialogues Bethel discussed her experiences in her schools and communities by also describing her identity as a Black girl who was born in Ethiopia and whose first language is Amharic. In school, these interlocking identities, and language in particular, influenced which classes Bethel took, especially through her sixth-grade year. Up until her sixth-grade year, Bethel was enrolled in English Language Learner (ELL) classes. She described how up until the fifth-grade, she appreciated the support she received from her teachers in these classes as she learned English and how she could relate to her classmates because, “most of the students that were in there were immigrants, and they were also Ethiopian, like me” (6.1.22).

However, once Bethel reached the fifth and sixth grades, she felt that she should have been able to transition out of the ELL classes because of her English language skills. Bethel noted how during those years, she recognized the ways she was separated from her other peers when taking ELL classes, and how the assignments and projects she worked on were sometimes totally different from her peers who were not in ELL. Although she initially appreciated the support she had received in her ELL classes, once she felt she had “gotten good” at English, she wanted to transition out of her ELL courses and ultimately had to advocate for herself in order to do so. When discussing this Bethel stated that, “It was helpful in the beginning, but then I kind of felt like it was taking away from my learning once I actually got good” (6.1.22).

Although Bethel discussed receiving support with her English language learning skills that she appreciated during her early elementary years, she also described how this experience changed for her by the time she reached the fifth grade. Throughout that year, and on into her sixth-grade year, Bethel questioned why she had continued to be placed in English Language Learner (ELL) classes, despite the progress in her English proficiency. Bethel also described how, at this stage, the practice of her teachers constantly asking her if she needed help on every assignment had stopped feeling supportive and more like a questioning of and lack of confidence in her skills and abilities. She described this by stating, “...when the teachers, they would always ask me if I needed help when I didn't. There's like, a certain amount of asking for help. But when you ask for every assignment and I never asked for help, and I would constantly be like, “Oh, I'm good, I'm good.” But they keep asking, it’s like they're sort of doubting me instead of trying to help me” (6.1.22).

Bethel also noted how she was often separated from her peers who had not been designated as ELL students and she began to notice a difference in the learning experiences they were each having, even based on the types of assignments and projects each group were assigned. Bethel also described how many of her peers who were in her ELL classes with her were friends and neighbors from her and Lavancia's neighborhood, and were also immigrants to the U.S. However, Bethel noticed how some friends from her neighborhood were also tracked into ELL classes despite them being fluent in English and having grown up in the U.S. Specifically, Bethel noted how a friend of hers who was Mexican-American was tracked into their school's ELL classes despite being fluent in English, and there being an understanding that the school had decided to automatically place her in ELL classes because she lived in the same neighborhood as Bethel and many of her peers who were also in ELL classes. When seeing decisions like this made, Bethel further questioned if she was being kept in ELL classes because she needed the ongoing support, or if it was because the adults coordinating the program had merely accepted that she needed to remain in ELL classes because of the neighborhood she lived in (instead of assessing whether she demonstrated the growth to transition out of the ELL program). There is a long line of research and theorizing about the connections between race/racism, language, and school placement that supports Bethel's experiences and questioning (for example, Rosa & Flores, 2017; Valdés 2001; Stritikus & Varghese, 2010).

Further, when discussing their schooling experiences, both Lavancia and Bethel described disappointments and frustrations they had with their middle school experience and/or the educators from their middle school. Lavancia described how an administrator from their middle school had often appeared supportive of her and other youth from their neighborhood. Although they kept in touch after Lavancia transitioned to high school, Lavancia ultimately chose to end their mentoring relationship when she learned from other members of her community that the administrator had been telling people that Lavancia had dropped out of high school and wasn't going to graduate. Lavancia was a successful class of 2020 graduate from her local high school, despite the mistruths that were spread about her. When telling the story of this negative rumor her former middle school administrator had told about her, Lavancia was understandably offended and made it absolutely clear that she was no longer open to being in community with the administrator, despite how many times she had reached out to Lavancia since 2020. The administrator's decision to spread a lie about Lavancia that further perpetuated the deficit views members of her staff had held about youth from Lavancia and Bethel's community is especially troubling and further reflective of a pattern of school educators viewing Black girls (and Black girls from communally-care driven, working class neighborhoods, in particular) as illegible and unworthy of dignity, care, or protection.

Having attended the same middle school as Lavancia, although a few years apart given their age difference, Bethel described her middle school experience as one that influenced her decision to ultimately attend a high school in a different area of the city with a more diverse student population. Longing to leave the confines of the predominately White school system that she had been a part of in middle school, Bethel intentionally chose to not attend the feeder high school that most students at her middle school matriculated into after the eighth grade. Bethel had heard the stories and recognized the ways her older sister and other Black girls from her neighborhood, like Lavancia, had encountered acts of anti-Black racism at the feeder high school in their community, which only seemed to grow from the similar experiences they encountered in middle school. Bethel saw this as a cycle and described it as such: "So it all starts there. And then it goes to the same people who went to the middle school, go to the [feeder high school]. And so, that's why it's like a cycle. That's why I didn't really want to go [to the feeder high school] because I knew I was going to be frustrated" (6.1.22).

Wanting to avoid the cycle of harm and frustration that existed for Black girls who attended the middle school and high school that were near her home neighborhood, Bethel was intentional in her efforts to attend a different high school when she started the ninth grade. This was also something that her older sister had encouraged her to do and helped to advocate on her behalf for when discussing this possibility with their parents. Bethel described this deliberate choice that she made, along with the support of her family, and how it ultimately affected her when stating:

> I guess my identity changed sorta when I moved schools from my middle school to GHS. I feel like I kind of found myself more instead of being there [middle school], I was someone that only was accepted. And when I go to GHS now, I think I found who I truly was and I'm able to be more open, so I'm more friendly now. (6.1.22)

Bethel noted that her change in schools affected her holistically and that by entering into a different learning environment, she was able to not only engage in academic learning, but also to delve into knowledge of self and discover who she “truly was.” Bethel spoke further to this idea when describing how else she had changed after leaving middle school and begun attending GHS for high school: “I express myself more because I feel more comfortable in my situation” (6.1.22). After leaving a school setting where she felt judged and where she experienced her intellect be doubted by her teachers and peers, Bethel described how transformative it was to now be in a school setting where she could express herself without the looming doubt or judgment she experienced as a Black, Ethiopian, bilingual girl at her middle school. Although no school is perfect, Bethel found a sense of comfort at her high school that supported her developing sense of self.

Although Lavancia did attend the local high school that most students from her and Bethel’s middle school generally matriculated into, when describing her high school experience, she chose to focus her attention on the people in her school who actually supported her. In particular, Lavancia discussed the role one of her teachers had played throughout her high school years and beyond, as an educator and mentor. Lavancia discussed the significance of this teacher being one of few Black educators at her high school and how important the support he offered was in the context of her predominantly White high school. Lavancia described how he continued to be a supportive adult figure in her life even after she graduated high school, and she would often describe him in ways one might discuss a trusted mentor. During one of our group sessions we spent time reflecting on people in our lives who had influenced our educational experiences and helped us to navigate school and life. After reflecting on these influential relationships, we wrote odes, or dedication poems about the people we had chosen to focus on during our reflective discussion and brainstorming activity. Lavancia chose to write her poem about her teacher and an excerpt from it is included below.

Lavancia's Ode

He is a lightbulb brightening and bringing light to me daily.
His bright white smile could be seen from a mile away.
His smiles shows kindness

In Lavancia's ode, she acknowledges the significance of the kindness her teacher showed and how he represented a light in her day. When considering the stories her peers would share about how unwelcoming their high school often felt to them as Black girls, and the lack of representation of critical Black educators working at the school, this ode takes on an even greater significance. In the context of a school that could actively be described as a site of "the wake" (Sharpe, 2016) based on the description of anti-black practices its Black students experienced and would unpack during EPPTAT meetings, Lavancia naming a teacher in that space as someone who humanized her through his ongoing support and advocacy is important. In this regard, I note how the broader school system functioned with the logics of anti-Black racism and misogynoir, but how there were also teachers working within that schooling space who were committed to seeing the legibility of Black girls in that setting.

Community Spaces: Aging Out of Sites of Belonging

Bethel and Lavancia's stories of their schooling experiences reflect a myriad of ways their relationship with and to school changed across time and place. Although the school settings they attended did not represent a "homeplace" (hooks, 2015) for them, they frequently returned to descriptions of the time they had spent in community spaces in their neighborhood that they valued. In particular, one of these spaces was a community center in their neighborhood that was walking distance from their housing community. This center offered ongoing programming for youth and a space for them to gather and be in community with other people their age. When first meeting with Kelly, she informed me that she had initially gotten connected to the youth who would ultimately become the EPPTAT youth participants through this community center. Kelly indicated that when looking to get youth feedback about the Park Project she was advocating for, she reached out to coordinators at the community center and they informed her that there was a group of youth who frequently attended the community center and participated in their programming who might be interested in joining her efforts. It was also at the community center where Kelly first met the youth, including Lavancia and Bethel.

During our time in EPPTAT sessions and group sessions for this project, Lavancia and Bethel would also describe their experiences having visited the community center and participating in the programs they offered. However, these experiences were always told in a form of the past tense that indicated that these experiences had long since passed. When chatting with Lavancia and Bethel about their relationship with the community center, they both indicated how they had outgrown and/or aged-out of the programming offered by the community center.

They also shared that the physical space of the community center was currently under construction and that the programming they hosted was now being held at a local YMCA that was still in their community, but farther away than where the actual community center was located. These factors, coupled with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic halting in-person programming, had affected Lavancia and Bethel's engagement with the community center and disrupted its position in their lives as a space of belonging.

When asked what were spaces or places where she could show up safely and where she felt seen, heard, and cared for, Bethel named the community center as one. She described how she would go there frequently during the school year (pre-Covid) and enjoy the programming they would offer ranging from movie nights to Friday trips to locations around the city like local pools and art museums. Bethel furthered discussed the importance of this space:

> But I feel like that's where all my, I guess not closer friends, but people I felt more comfortable with, because people at school were still my friends, but it was more like school friends. But at the community center it was more of my neighborhood and I could have more fun and be more like myself. (6.1.22)

Here, Bethel describes how she felt able to show up more genuinely as herself at the community center with other members of her neighborhood, which differed from the ways she could show up at school and with her school friends. Bethel's description of experience participating in the community center also speaks to how the connections and engagement she participated in framed her neighborhood in an asset-based way and a space of value, which also differed from the messages she had received about her neighborhood in elementary and middle school from her schools.

Similarly, during group conversations Lavancia would reflect on her experiences participating in the community center's programming when she was younger. However, during our one-on-one interview Lavancia also noted the lack of opportunities and programming made available to young adults/youth in their late teens in her community. “There's not that much to do in the community once you get way older. It's just for the little kids. And it's funny because some of these little kids I’ve known since they were like, three or four, and now they're like, 14” (6.30.22). When sharing this, Lavancia had been a high school graduate for nearly two years and was navigating a period of young adulthood where she may not have considered herself or been considered by the broader society as a full-fledged adult, but where she had also aged out of the seventeen or eighteen-and-under age range generally regarded for school-aged youth.

Lavancia’s description of the lack of activities and/or spaces for older youth and people in her community to engage with leads to questions regarding what are the ramifications of the “aging out” process of youth from spaces that have been a place of belonging for them, and what otherwise outlets might exist or be created for young people like Lavancia who have technically aged out of “youth” based spaces that have offered connection and community, but who don’t see similar spaces existing in adulthood? Although Bethel was under eighteen years old, she also described her experiences participating in the community center in the past tense, reflecting how she too had aged out of their programming, even as a high school student. There are no doubt safety and legal reasons why age limits exist in youth programs and spaces, however the lack of mirroring spaces for connection and community building for people across the lifespan and in a wide range of communities and contexts (i.e. beside college campuses) sends a message that these spaces of belonging are only available to people who fall within a certain age range. This can be considered especially unfair for Black girls, given the ways they already experience adultification (Morris, 2016) and are therefore not always afforded the experience of an expansive childhood or girlhood. Thus, the aging out process Bethel and Lavancia described in relation to their participation in the community center leads to considerations of the types of conditions that must exist in other spaces of belonging that Black girls seek out and consent to participate in, including chosen spaces. This includes opportunities for intergenerational learning and connection, among others. These are conditions that Lavancia, Bethel, and I discovered during our time learning with and from one another over the course of this project as we imagined justice-based learning environments and community centered spaces, while also co-creating our own chosen Black girl space.

Conditions of a Chosen Space

What emerged across the course of the seven months Bethel, Lavancia, and I spent meeting together for this project were three major conditions and/or features of a Black girl chosen space. These include the importance of establishing trust and building relationships, the three-pronged feature of youth agency, consent, and room for refusal, and finally, youth-guided topics and youth driven curriculum. Each of these conditions reflect a necessary feature of the chosen space Lavancia, Bethel, and I carved out and worked to co-construct. These conditions reflect features that would be important in any developing Black girl chosen space, but especially in the context of one where participants (including both youth and adults) are in the early stages of familiarizing themselves with each other (versus the chosen spaces in previous chapters that built with existing relationships). Although Bethel, Lavancia, and I had the gift of initially meeting and starting the process of getting to know each other in early 2020, when we returned to the practice of meeting regularly and being in community with each other again, our time together still felt like a beginning and represented an entry point into something new.

Building Relationships & Co-Constructing Trust

Unlike with the Lansing Group and the Chicago Group, when Lavancia, Bethel, and I embarked upon this project I had only known them for a couple of years (two, to be exact). Similarly, I did not have the experience of getting to know them as students I taught in the context of a K-12 learning setting, as I did with Abriana and Jala, or as fellow classmates and peers, as I did with the members of the Chapter 517 Group. Although neither of those entry points into becoming acquainted with each other were prerequisites for this project, I often wondered how it would affect the project and the girls' long-term interest in it. For example, I was nervous to initially reach out to the girls to ask if they would be interested in participating in the project. Although I was excited about the possibility of getting to learn with and from them again, I considered that they might not be open to joining the project given that I had only been collaborating with EPPTAT as a teaching artist for three months before Covid started, and since then I had only seen the girls at a few Park Project events that had been hosted nearly a year into the pandemic. As a result, I was somewhat surprised by how enthusiastic Bethel and Lavancia were about participating in the project and being open to seeing how it would unfold.

Throughout the course of the project, Bethel, Lavancia and I would continue to build trust with one another through the conversations we would have about our families, frustrations with work and school, and more. The further development of our relationship of care and trust came through the ways we engaged with each other's families and chosen kin. One instance when this was represented was when I proceeded to drop Bethel and Lavancia off at home after one of our group sessions and both girls invited their mothers outside to meet me. Although those interactions were brief, I felt honored to meet each of their mothers, to thank them for allowing their daughters to participate in the project, and to share a bit more about myself and the project in hopes of also earning the mothers' trust. This show of care and concern for family was also modeled by Lavancia and Bethel when they would inquire about my best friend and her baby, who I would sometimes mention during our check-in conversations when sharing my plans to go visit them, especially shortly after the baby was born. By asking how my best friend and her little one were doing, Lavancia and Bethel also reflected their care for the chosen kin in my life outside of Seattle. In turn, we were each involved in a practice of caring for one another and other Black women who were central in our lives. Over time as we continued to engage in these practices of developing trust and building relationships, it became clear that the three of us were active in the relational work of charting a new Black girl chosen space, that was occurring regardless of the length of time we had known each other.

Youth Agency, Consent, and Room for Refusal

In her 2018 article, Butler describes Black girl practices as practices that “emerge as temporal and spatial acts of intentional resistances, innovative productions, and creative engagements” (p. 38). As Bethel, Lavancia, and I learned together throughout the course of this project there were Black girl practices we individually and collectively engaged in that became foundational to the space we were co-creating together. I now understand these practices as conditions of a chosen Black girl space that are vital to ensuring that the space remains one that Black girls continue to opt into because of the agency they have within them, how consent is framed, and the ongoing opportunities they have to enact refusals through their living, being, artmaking, and so on.

In preparation for each of our group sessions I would draft a tentative agenda for how we would spend our time together. Similar to my work with the Chicago and Lansing group, I invited Bethel and Lavancia to share ideas about what topics related to Black girls’ schooling and learning experiences they wanted us to spend time reflecting on and discussing. However, when inviting Lavancia and Bethel to brainstorm and share ideas for related topics they wanted us to focus on, they generally indicated that they were comfortable with us utilizing the same subtopics/themes that the Chicago Group had created. Given this, I would generally create an agenda for our time together that would resemble the agendas Jala, Abri, and I used during our group sessions. However, during our group sessions I realized that Lavancia and Bethel would, whether intentionally or subconsciously, utilize their agency as decision makers in our collective Black girl space to refuse the plans/agenda I created for our sessions. Bethel and Lavancia would demonstrate this by allowing their conversations to guide us in a much different direction during our group dialogues. For example, there were group sessions where we had planned in advance to discuss topics like Black girls' relationships with school employees (i.e. teachers, administrators, etc.), or to do a brainstorming activity to prepare us for creating self-portraits. Instead, our check-in reflections would transform from a brief grounding conversation into a broader discussion of topics that the girls found important and even necessary to explore during our session. When this would occur, these youth-driven discussions would ultimately become the central focus point of our time together. Below is an excerpt from the transcript of the audio recording of our group session on March 9th, 2022. This excerpt is one example of the ways the youth collaborators, and Lavancia in particular, utilized their agency in the group to shift the topic of our conversation towards a subject she wanted to unpack.

[1] Jazmen: You have any go-to songs you've been enjoying recently?
[2] Bethel: I like The Weekend, his new album. That's my favorite right now.
[3] Jazmen: I saw he was going on tour.
[4] Bethel: Yeah, I think he's coming here.
[5] Lavancia: I don't really like him. I used to like him.
[6] Bethel: Yeah, you know, some of his songs.
[7] Jazmen: I'm trying to think, umm —
[8] Lavancia: Oh, I like Harry Styles. Let me see my recent listens. It's mainly Adele. Like Adele. Adele, Adele…
[9] Lavancia: And John Legend. See, [Lavancia shows Bethel and Jazmen her phone so they can see her music streaming app] and mainly Adele.
[10] Jazmen: Nice. I've been listening to some throwback stuff, but there's this artist I really like. Her name is Ravyn Lenae. She's from Chicago. I've been listening to her music a lot more lately.

[11] Lavancia: I'm going to be sad to see the baby go, but this is going to be good cause he's so annoying.

[12] Bethel: What? Oh, he. Oh, he's been staying with you guys the whole time?

[13] Lavancia: For the past two weeks.

[14] Bethel: Where'd she go?

[15] Lavancia: She went out of town…

During this discussion, I was initially trying to guide us through a check-in reflection and then transition us into a follow-up discussion based on the central topic of our previous session, “Relationships Black girls have with school faculty, admin, and employees.” Although we started the check-in by sharing the names of musicians we enjoyed and that we had been listening to lately, there was a clear and fairly abrupt switch in line eleven to a completely different topic. At that point, Lavancia swiftly shifted us into a conversation about her baby cousin and the caretaking work she had been engaged in over the past two weeks during which he had been staying with Lavancia’s family while his mother (Lavancia’s aunt) had been out of town. Although this conversation diverged from our previous discussion of musicians we had recently been streaming frequently, it emerged as a conversation that Lavancia had perhaps been waiting to have in a caring and/or constructive space.

With respect for Lavancia’s family and their privacy (and as a form of my own Black girl research refusal), I will not disclose the full context of the conversation Lavancia ushered us into when she began describing how much she would miss her baby cousin after his two-week stay at her home. However, I can state that Lavancia’s decision to reflect on and discuss this experience she was navigating with her family revealed her willingness to trust Bethel and I with this information and her confidence in our ability to hold space for her to process what she was going through at that time. Additionally, this conversation that Lavancia transitioned us into created a pathway for us to collectively engage in a discussion around the ways race, socioeconomic class, gender, and family dynamics influenced the ways we were expected to engage in caretaking work in our lives as Black girls and women.

In moments like this when Lavancia and Bethel shifted the topics and/or trajectory of our group sessions, they were enacting necessary refusals toward the semi-structured session plans I had created that did not serve their needs or interests during those times. In these moments, Bethel and Lavancia also utilized their agency as co-creators in the space to reconfigure how we prioritized spending our time together and to chart a new path for our group dialogues. In the context of a chosen space, these represent Black girl practices of refusal and agency that are not only welcomed and affirmed, but are ultimately vital conditions of the space which help ensure that Black girl bonds are created and sustained and that the collective work of creating and imagining the justice-based spaces we need for Black girls becomes possible. Similarly, moments like the one discussed above are a testament to Bethel and Lavancia pursuing what they needed during our group sessions: a time and place to check-in and be in community with one another, and a space to reflect on and process things they had experienced at school, work, and/or in their families and how those experiences affected them; all which could be, and frequently were, analyzed and discussed through a lens of race, gender, class, dis/ability, and more.

Similarly, throughout this project Bethel and Lavancia engaged in youth agency and acts of refusal as they chose how they would show up in the context of our group sessions, how frequently they would attend, and what elements of our recorded dialogues they would consent to share or have striked from the record. For example, when we would prepare to meet for our weekly/biweekly group sessions, I would sometimes pick up Lavancia and Bethel from their neighborhood and we would travel together to the center on the local college campus where we would hold our group sessions. Although we would dive into a semi-formal check-in conversation after arriving at the Center and settling into the space, it was also a regular practice for us to engage in an initial, unstructured, and free-flowing group dialogue while we were en route from their neighborhood to campus. The conversations that would take place during this commute offered me an initial opportunity to gauge how Lavancia and Bethel were doing and what was on their minds that day. However, during some of these commutes I would notice that Lavancia would be silent and not engage in the conversation that would volley between me and Bethel.

Regardless of whether it was a deliberate choice by Lavancia to remain silent during those periods, it was a choice nonetheless and one that Bethel and I were committed to respecting. In the chosen Black girl space we were co-constructing, there were no expectations for any of us to perform in a particular way (i.e. nice, friendly, etc.) in order to please or appease others. As Black girls and women, we gave each other permission to show up in whatever ways we needed to, or to not show up at all. Through her silence, Lavancia enacted a refusal that was both ethnographic and epistemic as she "[did] not concede to the terms by which we seek to know her" (Shange, 2019). By enacting these refusals Lavancia also established the use of silence and the foregoing of behaviors associated with respectability politics and people-pleasing as norms for all of us in the group.

Similarly, there were moments during our group sessions when we would be enthralled in a discussion and subjects would come up that Bethel and/or Lavancia would indicate that they did not want included in the audio transcript. For example, during one of our group sessions in March of 2022, we were deep into a conversation that involved Lavancia and Bethel describing a shared memory that had occurred a few years prior when Lavancia paused before sharing further and said, "You can take this out," (3.9.22). In that moment, Lavancia made it clear that what she would share next was only for those of us in the room. When related instances like this would occur during our group sessions, Bethel and Lavancia were indicating which of their ideas, conversations, and/or reflections they did and did not consent to having included as “data” for this project. These practices of refusal were also reflective of Tuck & Yang’s (2014) discussion of refusals (in research) being more than just a “no,” and the reminder that there are some stories that the academy does not deserve. In the context of the chosen Black girl space Lavancia, Bethel, and I were co-creating, honoring consent and respecting each other’s refusals in regard to the ways we shared stories and engaged in collective meaning making was a necessary practice and a foundational condition of the space.

In discussing how Black girl practices come to be Butler (2018) states, “Through their work, Black girl practices emerge as temporal and spatial acts of intentional resistances, innovative productions, and creative engagements” (p. 38). Building with this definition throughout this project, youth agency, refusals, and consent-based learning and community building emerged as Black girl practices that Bethel, Lavancia, and I used to resist deficit views of ourselves and our communities, to innovatively co-create a chosen space where we could show up authentically, and where we could create together (poetry, imagined learning and community spaces, etc.). However, youth agency, refusal, and consent being foundational conditions of a Black girl chosen space differs drastically from the ways these Black girl practices are received within compulsory, anti-black learning settings. In those contexts, it is not uncommon for Black girls’ refusals to be viewed as a threat and/or a challenge to the status quo. In schools and related compulsory school settings that function within the logics of anti-blackness and the cis-heteropatriarchy, Black girls use their artwork, writing, social media presence, relationships with one another, and clapbacks at harmful school norms and racist/sexist educators as ways to refuse the acceptance of the how those learning settings dehumanize and frame them as illegible (Morris, 2016; Kelly, 2020). In the context of chosen Black girl spaces, such as the one Bethel, Lavancia, and I co-constructed, we are able to affirm Black girl practices like consent and youth agency as necessary conditions of the space, which further ground these spaces are chosen settings that Black girls consent to participate in and be members of.

Youth-Guided Topics and Youth Driven Curriculum

As mentioned above, in the context of our co-constructed chosen Black girl space, Bethel and Lavancia would actively influence the selection of topics we would discuss during our group sessions by utilizing their agency as co-creators of the space to shift our group discussions in the direction they felt they should go. Early in the course of our project and across our group sessions, I also asked Lavancia and Bethel what topics or themes they wanted us to focus on and activities they wanted to engage in. In regard to activities, both members described wanting to write poetry and to have outings around the city. Although they offered some initial ideas about what topics they both wanted us to cover, they also reiterated that they were generally open about engaging in whatever discussion topics I thought up. What I learned over the course of our group sessions is that Lavancia and Bethel may have been less decisive about identifying topics in advance of our meetings to discuss, but once we actually got settled into our conversations during our check-in reflection at the start of our sessions, they would organically guide us into discussions of topics that were of interest or concern to them. These topics ranged from current events and politics to TikTok trends and personal school and/or work experiences (as well as topics that intersected across each of these categories).

During a one-on-one interview dialogue, Bethel described how she felt about the time we had spent together as a group throughout this project. In her response, Bethel highlighted specific topics we had discussed throughout our time together and the significance of us discussing these topics in community with one another.

> I felt a lot more comfortable with you and Lavancia and I feel like I could express myself even more. Like the topics that we talked about, the things about Jiffy Mart[4], like when she's [Lavancia's] working there, about her coworker and stuff like that. Different topics about Tick Tock. There's some things, even Will Smith, like just those things where I can't really talk about—well I can, but I think I feel like I can express it a lot more with you guys because I'm in that group and I feel like I could, I can see your guys' perspectives and I feel like your opinions and like I can learn from that too, because I could hear what you guys think and I could be like, "Oh yeah, I should think like that too." And sometimes I might change my mind and sometimes I could just have learning opportunities with the activities that we're doing. (6.1.22)

In Bethel's response, she acknowledges the wide array of topics we discussed during our group sessions over the course of the project. Bethel notes how our ability to discuss these topics with one another became a learning experience as she was presented with opportunities to hear the perspectives of others and to consider how those new perspectives might shift her own. When describing the range of topics we would discuss as a group, Bethel mentions conversations we collectively had with Lavancia about the Will Smith "incident" at the 2022 Oscars, Lavancia's stories of the racist, sexist, and transphobic occurrences she would witness at her job, and how TikTok functions as a place where young people like Bethel and Lavancia are documenting how they see others participating in popular trends, as well as engaging in and perpetuating anti-black racism. Bethel notes that these were topics that she could discuss with our group that she might not have been able to in other contexts. Although Bethel does not explicitly state it in this quote, throughout her interview and during group sessions she alludes to our shared identity as Black girls and women (although we each represent our own unique forms of Black girlhood), and the relationships we have built with each other as a reason why we were able to engage generously in discussions of these topics. Bethel's response also nods to an understanding of how our discussion of these topics normalized and legitimized them as subject matter that could contribute to genuine learning opportunities. Our discussion of pop-culture topics, like the incident at the 2022 Oscar's involving Will Smith and Chris Rock (and the media's response to it), generated reflections about respectability politics and misogynoir—anti-Black sexism that specifically affects Black women (Bailey, 2014). Moreover, Bethel's response reflects her appreciation of our group's ability to select and discuss topics that were relevant to us and the learning experiences we were cultivating in our chosen Black girl space. This further highlights the importance of youth guided topics as a core condition of a chosen Black girl space.

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[4] Pseudonym

In regard to curriculum, Butler (2018) describes "Black girl charting" as something that "focuses on the tools— curricula and digital space—students and facilitators use to carve out spaces for Black girls to thrive" (p. 35). Although the chosen Black girl space Bethel, Lavancia, and I co-created was not designed around a formal curriculum, we did co-design the structure of how we spent our time together based on the topics we would discuss and the learning activities we engaged in. Through the organic method that Bethel and Lavancia would use to guide our discussions towards topics they wanted and/or needed to unpack as well as their consent to or refusal of participation in the semi-structured agendas I would create for our group sessions, we were actively creating our shared learning experiences. In doing so, we were also charting out the chosen Black girl space we are co-creating for ourselves to connect with and to learn with and from each other. As a result, our time together throughout this project also shed further light on the importance of designing the learning activities, experiences, and curriculum of a Black girl chosen spaces alongside the Black girl participants in the space and in a way that centers their interests, concerns, and passions. Identifying this as necessary condition of a Black girl chosen space also honors the long tradition of this practice of "Black girl charting" being modeled in other Black girl spaces as described in the work of Maisha Winn, Ruth Nicole Brown, Aimee Cox, and Ashley Smith-Purviance, among other Black girlhood studies scholars.

Collective Dreams for Chosen Black Girl Spaces

As Lavancia, Bethel, and I engaged in the practice of enacting a chosen space, we also spent time dreaming up and imagining ideal community spaces and learning spaces for youth more broadly, and for Black girls in particular. Although the section above outlines three major conditions of a chosen space, this section will offer insight into how having ongoing opportunities to engage in individual and collective dreaming, imagining, and designing the otherwise spaces we long to see in our communities and this world is a fourth condition of chosen Black girl spaces. This practice of individual and collective imagining and designing of community spaces and learning environments that intentionally center the lives, brilliance, and creativity of Black girls is also a practice that we engaged in early on in this project, as well as towards the end of the data generation period of this project.

Toward the start of this project, Bethel, Lavancia, and I participated in a community outing by attending the grand opening of a local social justice community library called Estalita's. There, we heard stories from the family that co-founded Estalita's, explored the library's books, and witnessed how many people from the surrounding community showed up to celebrate the grand opening of this new location of the library. During our next group session, we reflected on our experience attending Estalita's grand opening and how we felt in the library space. I asked Bethel and Lavancia the following question: "If you were to design a community-based space like Estalita's, what would it be like?" After taking time to write and/or draw a response to this question, we shared with each other descriptions of the community spaces we had each imagined and begun mentally designing.

Bethel described her imagined community space as a community center with a pool that would offer classes on hair care and other topics, and that would help connect community members with local resources:

> One big thing that I would like is if they had a hair class where they teach you how to take care of your hair or teach you how to braid…And also if they had someone that would connect you to the community if you needed something about schools and just anything. They would connect you with someone that can help you, and they would have classes for everyone, like everything, anything that you needed, like language classes. Yeah and it'd be people volunteering in the community would go help. (11.24.21)

Bethel's vision for her community space reflects the value she sees in community learning settings that are open to all people, and not limited to a specific age group. Her description of the way her community space would help connect people with needed resources related to schools and other spaces in their community highlights how the space she'd design would be committed to helping people beyond the walls of the building the space would occupy. Also, Bethel's specificity in describing her community space offering classes on hair care and language reflects stories she would share throughout the project about her experiences learning English after immigrating to the U.S. as a young child, and the pressures Black girls would feel at school to constantly have their hair done, or to face ridicule from their peers. Bethel's designed community space speaks to her goals of creating a communal space for people to learn and for Black girls to learn creative skills that also help them to care for and celebrate themselves.

When sharing the imagined community space she had designed, Lavancia described it as a teen space that offered a game room, lessons on skills needed to navigate young adulthood, and opportunities for connection:

> I want to create a game room or a teen space or somewhere for teens, where they'll have fun. I feel like, if there's something that they actually like doing it will keep them coming to like the room. So some activities I would want to do is preparing them for their future — doing job training, how to write checks, and how to do basic things they will need to know when they get to the adult world, basically. (11.24.21)

Lavancia's designed space speaks to the importance she finds in creating spaces specifically for teens, which is a critique she shared of her own community about there only being community programming in her area that was geared toward young kids. Lavancia's design plans for her community space also speak to the knowledge that she feels should be taught to/shared with more teenagers before they transition into adulthood and are required to navigate things like job training and to master related life skills. Lavancia also provided an image of the design of her imagined community space, which can be accessed by using the QR code included below. This image depicts a possible game room that appears to have a fun and comforting atmosphere. This represents the teen game room Lavancia described including in her community space, which would be designed in such a way that it would keep youth coming back again, and again to participate in it.

Figure 2.

QR code that will direct you to an image of Lavancia's Imagined Teen Game Room

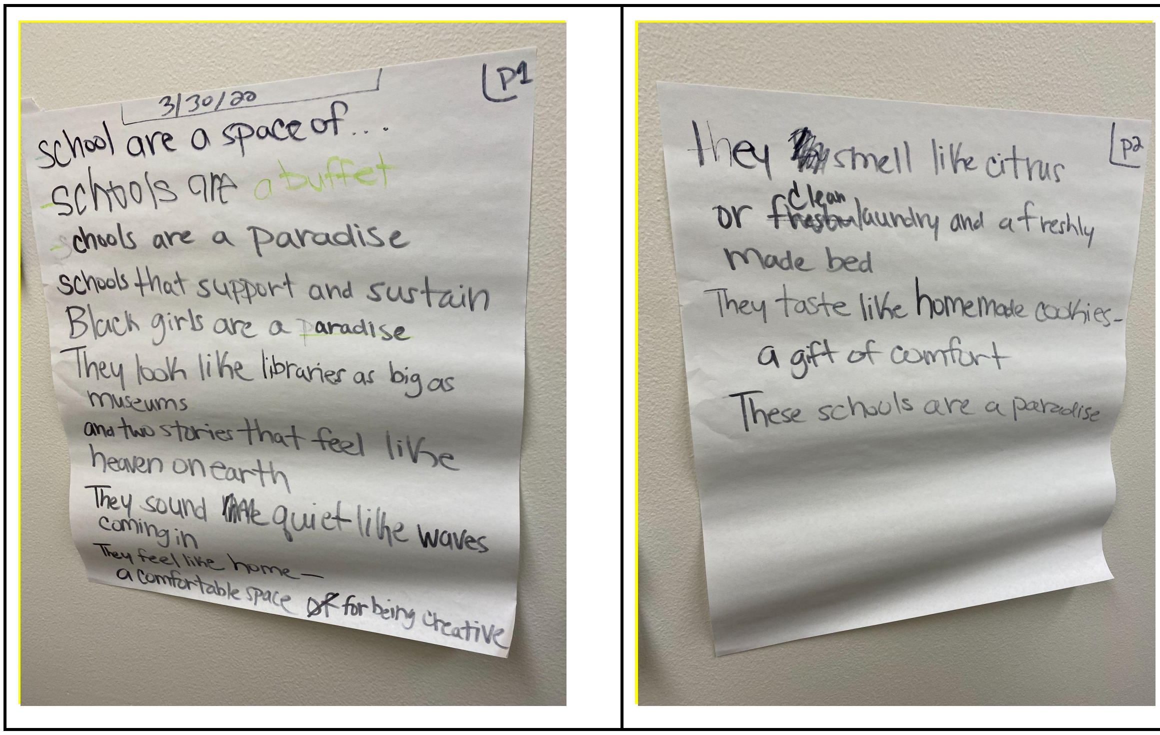
For my own project, I described my imagined design of a community-based space like Estalita's that would be a community cafe/reading room/collective space. I would name this space after my Granny by calling it "Cozy's Corner" and it would be a gathering space especially for Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and Pacific Islander folks, queer, trans, and nonbinary folks, disabled folks, folks from varying class backgrounds (recognizing that people's identities will intersect across these dimensions). Cozy's Corner would offer tea, coffee, and baked goods and a percentage of the proceeds from all cafe sales would go toward supporting community initiatives that the space supported and were in partnership with. This would also be a creative hub for local artists, a space for local organizing and mutual aid efforts, and a community lending library. I also shared with Bethel and Lavancia that I had been dreaming up my ideas for a space like this for a number of years and that it was also something I enjoyed discussing with my close friends who also want to create a similar community space.

With each of the community spaces we imagined and designed, we were centering community care and offering resources in the forms of classes, teen gathering spaces, and an artistic hub for local artists and organizers that each of us possibly wished to see offered in our current communities and that also would have sustained us as Black girls and women. By imagining these spaces and their design, we actively engaged in a practice of freedom dreaming as we sketched out plans for an elsewhere or otherwise space that may not currently exist, but that we could work collaboratively to help bring into fruition. With this initial practice of imagining and designing a chosen community-based space, Bethel, Lavancia, and I became grounded in our collective work of co-creating our chosen Black girl space through establishing trust-based relationships and participating in our weekly/biweekly group sessions.

During these sessions, as we reflected on our schooling experiences as Black girls and women and discussed current events, TikTok, workplace experiences, and more, we also engaged in arts-based practices where, through poetry and collage we imagined our justice-based learning settings for Black girls. During a series of our group sessions in March of 2022, Bethel, Lavancia, and I spent time doing a similar project as the Chicago and Lansing Groups as we also reimagined schools as a space that centered and sustained Black girls. Before we began creating collages of our reimagined schools, we first engaged in a sensory brainstorming activity where we identified what our reimagined schools would smell, sound, look, taste, and feel like. From there, we wrote a collective poem about this reimagined school space. Images of our poem that we wrote on large sheets of poster paper in the Center on campus are below, along with a typed version of the poem.

Figure 3.

Group Reimagined School Poem: "Paradise"



LP1

3/30/20

School are a space of...
Schools are a buffet
Schools are a paradise
Schools that support and sustain
Black girls are a paradise
They look like libraries as big as
museums
and two stories that feel like
heaven on earth
They sound ~~like~~ quiet like waves
coming in
They feel like home—
a comfortable space ~~of~~ for being creative

They smell like citrus
LP2
or ~~fresh~~ clean laundry and a freshly
made bed
They taste like homemade cookies-
a gift of comfort
These schools are a paradise

Group Reimagined Schools Poem: "Paradise"

Schools are a buffet
Schools are a paradise
Schools that support and sustain
Black girls are a paradise
They look like libraries as big as museums
And two stories that feel like heaven on earth
They sound quiet like waves coming in
They feel like home —
A comfortable space for being creative
They smell like citrus
Or clean laundry and a freshly made bed
They taste like homemade cookies — a gift of comfort
These schools are a paradise

In this poem, Bethel, Lavancia, and I imagined schools much differently than they currently exist for Black girls, if not most students. Using the refrain "schools are a paradise" we imagined schools as an ideal or optimal space containing spacious libraries, quiet settings, and that feel like a homeplace. In this reimagined school setting, Black girls are also humanized and made legible which is seen represented in the way the extended metaphor is also applied to them in the line, "Black girls are a paradise." In this poem, Black girls are not framed through a lens of deficit due to the intersecting oppressions of racism and sexism. Instead, in this poem where schools are defined as a heavenly, ideal space where Black girls can learn and thrive, Black girls are also described as a mirroring space or site. As Bethel, Lavancia, and I used the sensory elements from our brainstorming activity to write our reimagined schools poem, we deliberately defined Black girls as ideal, or a site of the divine, further reflecting the ways in which Black girls become sites of the spaces we need through our individual and collective dreaming and our relationships with one another. Through this poem, we imagined learning environments as spaces where Black girls can thrive and live expansively.

Through our collective poetry writing, group reflections and discussions, and imagining more justice-based spaces for Black girls and others in our communities, we embarked upon a practice of charting our own chosen Black girl space. We did this while simultaneously imagining future spaces that could support and sustain Black girls and fellow community members looking for homeplaces (hooks, 2015), chosen spaces (Moore & Paris, 2021), and fugitive educational spaces (Givens, 2021; ross, 2021). Moving forward, as youth, educators, community members, and scholars engage in the work of advocating for more justice-based learning spaces and experiences for Black girls, the collective dreaming, imagining, and artistic creation that Lavancia and Bethel partook in throughout this project offers a model in the long legacy of freedom dreaming (Kelley, 2002). As we imagine and enact the spaces that Black girls need to thrive, we open up opportunities for others to do the same through the co-creation of chosen spaces that embody related conditions as those Bethel and Lavancia helped represent throughout this project.

***

Dear Bethel and Lavancia,

Thank you for your curiosity, critical thinking skills, analysis, and creativity. I have learned so much from both of you about the ways Black girlhood is not a single story narrative and how "Black girls are a paradise." You have taught me over the past three years about what it means to dream, imagine, and enact the spaces we need for Black girls and others in our communities. You have also shown me how important it is that I listen and learn from the young people I have the gift of being in community with, regardless of whether I have been their teacher in a formalized classroom space. Thank you for transforming this project with each of your stories, your laughter, critiques, and care for one another. I hope to continue to learn with and from each of you in the days and years to come as I am committed to always being in your corner.

With appreciation,

Jazmen

Chapter 5. Choosing Each Other: Acts of Care and Refusal to Imagine an Otherwise

Collaging Futures

After Bisa Butler

I go and prepare a place for you
Of home and safety
Don't worry,
Your great granny is here and
your grandma
Your mama
Your litter sister too
They've been working on this tapestry
Interwoven with their collective dreams and hopes
But they need yours too
You, intergenerational time traveler
An embodiment of the present and the past
Collaging your futures
through affirmations of laughter
Nursing fellow Black girls back to health
With the medicine of your chosen kinship
Your every step a celebration
When it leads you back to each other

Dear Abri and Jala,

Thank you for your brilliance, your creativity, and the hope you constantly offer about the possibility of a better world and future. It has been a gift to know you across the past seven years and to witness the ways you have each developed into your unique selves, and how your friendship has blossomed over time. Thank you for reaching out and staying in touch over the years—reminding me of the power of Black girl bonds to extend across time and space. Thank you for also allowing me to be your teacher, mentor, and chosen kin. I am constantly in awe of each of you and so grateful for the time we spent learning and dreaming together throughout this project. None of this would have been possible without you two. I am so excited to see the ways

Black girls' learning experiences will be transformed and how schools and community learning spaces will be reimagined to better care for and sustain Black girls because of your willingness to share your stories, offer your critiques, and to imagine things anew.

Much love,
Ms. Moore

Jala, Abriana (Abri), and I laugh about our latest hairstyle stories as we settle into one of our weekly Zoom sessions in February of 2022. Our laughter feels like a portal that's transported us and the relationships we have cultivated with each other over the past seven years. The joy we foster by being in each other's presence is not new. Similarly, our practice of coming together to learn and create through the process of sharing stories and reflecting on our learning experiences is a return to our early years of being Black girls and women navigating shared learning spaces.

In the late August heat of 2016, Jala and Abriana returned to school on the North side of Chicago for their sophomore year of high school. Both of these young women entered into my English 10 class as I greeted them and their peers at the door with a wide smile and nervous energy, as I myself entered into my third year of teaching. Little did any of us know then that Abri and Jala would enter into my classroom again countless times over the next two years for homeroom, English 10, English 11, Sociology & Gender Studies class, Spoken Word Club meetings, Black History Month celebration prep, and lunch period breathers. What I also did not imagine at that time were the ways my relationship with the girls and their families, as a teacher and mentor, would stretch beyond my years as a secondary teacher, the girls' high school graduation, and deep into their undergraduate years and my own journey as a Ph.D. student.

Much of this I owe to Jala and Abri's persistence with staying in touch with me, even after I said a reluctant goodbye to Chicago in 2018 and relocated to Seattle for graduate school.

Over time, this looked like periodic text messages from Abri, updating me on how college was going and thanking me for being a supportive teacher throughout her high school years. This also looked like Jala reaching out to ask if I would be a job reference for her, or asking if she could interview me for one of her college courses on education. Ultimately, these enduring relationships also presented themselves as an entry point for me to enact this collaborative, arts-based, and Black girl-centered dissertation study along with Abri and Jala, whose vision and passion for creating more justice-based learning experiences for Black girls would deeply influence the design and trajectory of this study.

In the fall of 2021, after recently hearing from both Abri and Jala, I pondered the idea of asking each of them if they would be willing to offer me feedback on my dissertation study. At that time, I was designing the project as a single site study that would involve me learning collaboratively with and from a group of Black teen girls in Seattle I'd worked with as a teaching artist in 2020 (more on this in chapter six). However, when mentioning this idea to Django Paris (my advisor and longtime mentor and chosen kin) he encouraged me to imagine what my project might look like if I invited two additional groups to join, and if I'd consider asking Jala and Abri if they would be interested in participating. Worried about the girls' schedules and possible reluctance to wanting to engage in a research project with their former high school teacher, I was initially hesitant to ask them. However, when I did eventually share details with Jala and Abri about the project and invite them to collaborate with me on it, they both happily agreed; even showing genuine interest and enthusiasm in doing so.

Over the course of seven months (December 2021 - June 2022), the girls and I met two to four times per month via Zoom for 60-90 minute group sessions. (As I mentioned in chapter three on methodology, our study together took place across the Covid-19 pandemic, so across much of our work, Zoom was a safe way to meet). Although I created the meeting agendas for our early sessions, over time we would co-create and/or collectively agree on how we spent our sessions together. Each session included a check-in (often times an inform check-in, later followed by a formal check-in question or prompt), discussion based on a topic related to Black girls' educational/learning experiences that both Abri and Jala introduced and agreed on, and/or time spent working on or presenting arts-based projects we created to further build with the reflections from our group dialogues. Jala and Abri also took initiative in leading sections of our sessions that reflected their own interests and grounding practices. For Jala, this was leading us regularly in a journal prompt and reflection. For Abri, this was leading us in a brief guided breathing exercise. Both of these were examples of the girls bringing their gifts into our shared space we were co-constructing, and offering them as a way for us to care for ourselves individually and show up for each other collectively.

By leading us in these grounding rituals at the beginning of our sessions, Abri and Jala helped lay the framework for how we could enter into our brainstorming sessions, dialogues, and art making in ways that first centered our wholeness. These were ways of cultivating a chosen space (Moore & Paris, 2021), in this case a space we had long chosen, but made anew. This being especially true given the ways the topics we would discuss often involved us remembering and contending with the violent antiblackness and misogynoir that shaped a range of their learning experiences. Collectively, we would brainstorm ideas about subtopics to focus our various "units" on that were connected to our umbrella/overarching theme of Black girls' learning and schooling experiences. Many of the themes Jala, Abri, and I proposed and agreed upon would also influence the discussions and arts-based practices that the co-researchers/participants in the Lansing and Seattle groups would also participate in. While analyzing the data, these collectively identified and agreed upon subtopics also stood out at as central themes that inspired the poem that leads this chapter and which I also have constructed this chapter around. Indeed, as I described in the methods chapter, the relationship between the participants and my co-construction of our sessions and my own poetic meaning making served as a map for my analysis and writing. In the following sections of this chapter, these subtopics/themes will shed light on the ways Jala, Abri, and I were co-creating a chosen space (Moore & Paris, 2021) for ourselves as Black girls, engaging in sensemaking practices, reflecting on and enacting refusals, imagining more just realities for Black girls through our art, and rendering each other legible (i.e., whole, humanized, worthy of protection and care) through our relational bonds and how we "pulled up" for each other's needs.

***I Go and Prepare a Place for You /* Schools as the Generational Curse**

During one of our early sessions throughout the project, I invited Abriana and Jala to share their initial thoughts on our overarching theme of Black girls' learning and educational experiences. During this initial dialogue and brainstorming session where we worked to identify subtopics for our future sessions, the floodgates opened and the girls shared their thoughts and perspectives on their educational experiences, what education looked like in their neighborhood and city, and historical realities of their elders and other Black folks who had pursued an education. Reflecting on long legacies of anti-blackness in U.S. schools, Abri stated, "Schools are like a generational curse" (11.12.21). Thinking back to my youth poetry organizing years as a high school teacher, I thought of Abri's statement as a "striking line" (Abdurraqib et al, 2022), or a verse from a poem that stands out and requires your full attention. Abri’s statement was particularly striking given the understanding of “generational curses” in the context of Black communities, especially Black spiritual and religious communities. The discussion of generational curses also invites conversation around generational trauma, generational healing, and generational care.

When reflecting on education as the generational curse, I can consider how this curse is not equivalent with generational trauma, but instead is a manifestation of the ongoing effects of slavery, Jim Crow, and ongoing antiblackness. Black literary and cultural scholar Christina Sharpe’s (2016) conception of “the wake” is useful in understanding Abri’s contention about the relationship between schools and black communities. Sharpe describes the wake as what it means to live in the aftermath or afterlife of slavery. In doing so, she offers various examinations of metaphorical representations of this theory, including “the wake,” “the ship,” “the hold,” and “the weather” and discusses how “the sign of the slave ship marks and haunts contemporary Black life in the diaspora…” (p. 7). Building with Sharpe’s work, I can understand the generational curse is woven into societal institutions like schools and they then become sites of the wake. Sharpe even goes so far as to describe U.S. schools as the “belly of the slave ship” (p. 92) based on the ways antiblackness functions within them and the resulting harm and violence Black children and youth are met with in these settings. As a site of the wake, schools also do not allow for educational consent (Simpson, 2016), ultimately leading to the refusals Black girls often have to make within these spaces to survive, which Jala and Abri offered multiple examples of throughout their own educational journeys.

When reflecting on their experiences in schools over time, Jala and Abri discussed a wide range of ups and downs they had with receiving support and care over time. One of these stories in particular was told by Jala about an incident that took place during her junior year of high school. Jala boldly interrupted a moment of injustice she witnessed a group of her friends and peers, all Black boys, experiencing. The dean of the high school had decided to search the boys' lockers during the passing period. Although locker searches (unfortunately) were not uncommon at the school, they were generally conducted in a more private manner. Jala felt that the dean was making an example of her friends and seeking to embarrass them in front of their peers by conducting the search during the passing period when the hallways were packed for other students to see. Jala also commented on the ways the dean was carelessly tossing her friends' belongings from their lockers with little regard, and as if their items were trash. In addition to her observation of the disrespectful way in which her friends' items were being handled by the dean, Jala also recognized how the search of her friends' lockers in this way was also a violation of the student handbook. When attempting to show up for her appears and to protect their dignity in the midst of such injustice, Jala was threatened with disciplinary consequences. As Jala attempted to pick up her friends' belongings that had been tossed out of their lockers by the dean for other students to step on in the crowded hallway during the passing period, the dean told Jala that she would face suspension if she continued to pick up her friends/peers' belongings.

When telling this story, Jala commented on the lack of care for her friends' dignity and how frustrating it was to be faced with disciplinary action for trying to pull up, or show up, for her friends' needs in a time when they were being treated as if they were nothing and as if they had no rights. In sharing this story with us, Jala also commented on the bias and unfairness she felt in this moment, noting how Black students at the school were the student demographic most often met with this level of dehumanizing treatment. Although the school was 98% students of color, demographically, Black students were still in the minority and anti-blackness remained a present factor in the enforcement of the school's disciplinary practices, as well as other structures within the school. In turn, school became a place Black students had to strategically navigate, or as Jala put it: "to survive in this little school we have to be on our toes 24/7." (3.12.22).

Jala's story reflects the surveillance and non-consent she and her Black friends and peers were faced with at the school. They were expected to dutifully attend school and follow the rules, but the rules were applied to them in ways that denied them justice and that gave little regard for their humanity. Additionally, Jala's attempt to pull up for her friends/peers in their time of need was an act of refusal. Jala refused to stand by and watch her peers be humiliated in front of the rest of the student body by an administrator who was intent on using shame and humiliation as a disciplinary tactic. Jala's enactment of this refusal and the threat of suspension she was faced with offers a reminder that the refusals Black girls make in compulsory school settings often come with consequences. Although there is much to be learned from this story Jala offered and how it relates to the power and potential of Black girls' refusals, it is necessary to also acknowledge the risk in refusal. As Black girls in schools and related compulsory learning spaces around the U.S. and beyond enact refusals to being misunderstood and mistreated by individuals and institutions that are invested in a deficit belief of who they are and their potential, the threat for further harm and punishment also becomes present. I believe in the power that Black girls' refusals have to ultimately transform the way we understand consent in the context of schooling and learning, and that they can be a portal for us to reimagine more justice-based learning environments and experiences for Black girls. However, Jala's story also reminds me to not sing of the joy of Black girls' refusals in such a way that it does not also account for the risk involved, and the urgency and heightened need for learning spaces in which Black girls can thrive and flourish, as opposed to constantly worrying about how they will survive them[5].

Across our group sessions Jala recounted multiple experiences of being let down by school administrators throughout her high school years. In retelling these stories Jala reflected not only on the unfair treatment she had faced and the lack of care she had received from adults who were supposed to protect her and have her best interest in mind, but also how this affected a crucial time in her life where she was developing her "sense of self." Jala recounted to us a particular incident during her eleventh-grade year when another one of the school deans, who had previously been one of Jala's middle school teachers, had chosen to ridicule her in front of her parents and blame her for the harassment she was facing from another student. In response to the harassment Jala had faced the dean told her parents, "Maybe if your daughter didn't walk around with her head so high in the sky this wouldn't happen to her" (3.12.22). Jala described how this moment affected her growing "sense of self." Jala interpreted the dean's treatment of her as an attempt to "put out her spark" (3.12.22). Further, she commented on how she was barely beginning to know and understand who she was as a person and how in that moment, her process of coming into understanding of herself and her growing self-acceptance took a hit.

Similarly, Abri shared related stories of her educational experiences that led her to question the extent to which educators were actually invested in supporting and protecting students. One particular memory she recounted was from her middle school years when a friend of hers, "M," was bullied for months, but the teachers did nothing about it. Despite M reaching out for help from teachers and even substitutes, her concerns went unattended to. In a tragic turn of events, M died by suicide. As they grieved the loss of their friend and schoolmate, Abri and her peers were also adamant about holding their teachers accountable for their inaction and being complicit in the bullying M had endured. Abri said: “Those teachers failed her” (3.12.22). Abri also expressed that the trauma she experienced from this experience is why she doesn’t open up and talk to people about a lot of things. As she recounted this story and the ways this experience had affected her over time, I could hear the pain in Abri’s voice and see the sadness etched across her face. Following this moment, we paused to check in and assess what each of us needed after processing heavy memories and experiences. We also shared ideas of what we might do to care of ourselves after our session ended. Although care was often a missing component in the stories Abri and Jala shared that reflected education as the generational curse, we chose to intentionally center care for self and each other in the learning we engaged in together.

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[5] Jala's experiences are in conversation with Carter-Andrews' (2020) work on the hyper policing of Black girls in schools, Winn's (2010) work on the "celling" of Black girls, and Morris' (2016) work on the pushout of Black girls from schools via unjust disciplinary practices.

Commonalities Abri and Jala identified across their schooling experiences that warranted their necessary critiques of schools, educators, and administrators was how schools neglected Black girls and their potential, dismissed their concerns, and treated them as unworthy of care, protection and support. Jala pinpointed one of her earliest memories of her recognition of this occurring when she was only in elementary school. She told us a story of being in the second grade and being eager to learn and answer questions that would be posed to her and her classmates. Jala described for us the ways her White teacher at her suburban elementary school would see Jala with her hand raised and easily pass over her, preferring instead to call on her White classmates. Abri also shared related stories of being passed over and disregarded by her teachers, but during her early years of undergrad. Abri described the numerous attempts she made to seek out her White math professor for help after class sessions and during office hours, but how reluctant he was to engage with her. She also noted the ways in which the professor’s demeanor would change when approached by one his White students, who he would greet warmly, inquire as to how they were doing, and offer his support willingly when they sought him out for the same help Abri was requesting.

Through the telling of these stories, Abri and Jala did not shy away from sharing their critiques of educators and the institution of schooling more broadly. Building with anti-capitalist critiques of schooling, Jala and Abri described schools as a business and pointed out the flaws in schools functioning under this model (i.e., treating students as disposable products). Abri and Jala also extended their critique to educators and offered questions such as, “Why should students commit to doing well and showing up [to school] if they know teachers and administrators don’t actually care about them?” (3.12.22). A throughline across Jala and Abri’s critiques was the concept of “care.” They identified it as a necessary component in the practice of teaching and schooling. For Jala and Abri, care was not a secondary element that teachers and administrators could choose to opt into engaging in if and when they felt up to. Instead, Abri and Jala recognized care for students as a humanizing practice of educators. Jala and Abri also questioned how well educators could reasonably do their jobs if they did not care for their students, and what can justifiably be expected of students being taught by educators who do not see them as worthy of care.

Abri and Jala’s critiques and identification of care as a critical feature of justice-based schools and educators were rooted both in their previous experiences as students in the K-12 school system, and in their current role as community educators. During our group sessions Jala and Abri would frequently discuss their jobs as educators at their local YMCA’s after school and summer learning program. This also felt like a full circle moment, given that two or three years prior Jala had asked me to be a reference for her when applying to this job. In their positions, Jala and Abri taught classes of kindergarten and first grade students. This was very much aligned with Jala's goal of becoming an elementary school teacher and her corresponding undergraduate studies. Jala also spoke to the importance of her being a Black teacher for her Black students and being a mirror for them. Abri is pursuing a career in nursing, but her commitments to teaching mirrored her reasons for pursuing nursing, which were rooted in supporting her community and aiding in the wellness of Black people. When reflecting on their work experiences Abri and Jala offered racial, gender, and class-based analyses of the education system and how this played out for the students and families they worked with and the educational opportunities (both in and out of school) that were/were not made available to them[6]. In listening to their stories, I could see the many ways Jala and Abri were thinking critically about the educational experiences they wanted to create for their students and how those intersected and at times contrasted with their own experiences. I could also imagine the ways Jala and Abri were moving with a deep sense of care for their students and treating each of them as worthy of support, attention, and respect.

Throughout Abri and Jala's stories of schooling and learning and their various critiques, they acknowledged the need for schools to radically change and they advocated for an end to the cycle of unhealthy relationships schools create with Black girls. Ultimately, this is also a call to break the generational curse that is schools and their entanglements with white supremacy, anti-blackness, and the cisheteropatriarchy. This was also deeply reflected in the goals Abri and Jala had for this project. During our early group sessions, Jala and Abri asked me what the purpose of the project was and what I hoped to accomplish. In answering their question ("to create better, more just learning experiences for Black girls"), I also invited them to share their hopes and goals for this project and explained that our collective goals would lead us throughout our time and work together. Both Abri and Jala shared that their goals for the project were to share our stories (Black girls' and women's stories) and to create opportunities for them to be heard and valued in genuine ways. Their goal was to share these stories with educators and administrators, but to "not stop with schools," and to carry this message to district leaders, superintendents, and more. "Sharing our stories can help other girls out here and help them feel brave enough to share their stories," Abri said (11.12.21). By believing in the power of storytelling and the intentional centering of Black girls' voices and reflections on our educational experiences, Abri and Jala viewed our collective work as a way to advocate for more justice-based learning experiences for Black girls.

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[6] Abriana and Jala's decision to pursue their career goals in education and nursing also represents a refusal of how these systems (education and healthcare) have historically treated their communities, and a reimagining of the ways these systems can care for and support Black people.

The Medicine of Your Chosen Kinship: **Generational Care and Healing**

Figure 9.

QR code that will direct you to Abriana's "Reimagining Schools" Collage

Figure 10.

QR code that will direct you to Jala's "Reimagining Schools" Collage

Black girls' reimagining of schools is an artistic practice that is in itself a refusal of the systemic harm, violence, and neglect Black girls are often met with in state sanctioned schools.

Black girls’ artistic reimaginings of what schools can become presents itself as a portal for us to reconsider what is valued in the context of education and what must change in order to create justice-based learning experiences for Black girls and in turn, for all, if not most students. One of the major creative projects Abri, Jala, and I engaged in during our time together was choosing a creative medium (i.e., choose your own adventure style) through which to reimagine how they would design a school that intentionally centered and sustained Black girls and offered them justice-based learning experiences. This project followed our discussion of the girls’ self-selected topic, “Black girls’ relationships with schools (i.e., teachers, administrators, etc.) and felt particularly important given the multiple stories of negative educational experiences that Jala and Abri had shared. This project allowed for individual and collective dreaming and ultimately, each of us created collages in which we were rejecting deficit framing while affirming and embodying asset-based visions of Black girlhood and the learning experiences we’re all deserving of.

In their collages (featured above), Abri and Jala included affirmations (a running practice in our time together), images of Black art, spacious and bright classroom and learning spaces, fresh and tasty looking meals, and more. In the middle of Jala’s collage she includes a graphic that states, “Not Today, Satan.” Jala brings this image center stage and makes it clear what is not welcome in the educational space she is imagining for Black girls. This statement also reflects how the collages are a direct refusal and disruption of the generational curse of education with deep roots in anti-blackness and misogynoir (Bailey, 2018). The designs of Abri and Jala’s reimagined schools are also a way for Black girls to be made legible, given the ways that current schools fail to do this. As co-researchers on this project, Abri and Jala imagined the design of their schools as embodied spaces where they are rejecting the cursed space that is compulsory schools, where Black girls' flesh and spirits are nourished, and where their legibility is affirmed through cultivated spaces of care and humanization.

In their collages, the girls also inserted their dreams for their futures, including their career goals. At the bottom of Abri's collage is an image of Black nurses, reflecting her professional goals. When discussing our collages, Abri reminded us of the way her reimagined school would also affirm Black girls' dreams and hopes for their future and provide them with the resources and support to help them achieve their goals. This idea also resonated across our collective and familial understandings of Black girls' intergenerational learning experiences. In response to Abri's discussion of her nursing pursuits, Jala informed Abri that she is the legacy of Black women like her grandma, noting how Abri is entering into the field of nursing but will be able to dive fully into the work she sets out to do for her community. Jala shared a story of her grandma's experience navigating nursing school during the 1960s and the discrimination she faced while trying to earn a degree that would support her dreams of helping members of her community. Ultimately, Jala's grandma enacted a refusal to the racist mistreatment she experienced in nursing school by dropping out. Although she enacted this refusal, it came with a consequence. In contemporary times, Black girls in schools continue to face consequences for the refusals they enact, despite their refusals being a necessary disruption of the harm they face in schools due to the intersection oppressive forces of antiblack racism and the patriarchy. Jala sharing this story with us was also an invitation for Abri to use Jala's grandma's refusal as a portal. Instead of viewing Jala's grandma's refusal as a great thing that Black girls and women should have to face and do (as a response to anti-Black racism and cisheteropatriarchy), her refusal becomes a highlight of a long legacy of resistance and a legacy of kinship as medicine.

***Your every step a celebration*: Black Girl Bonds**

“Our Friendship Was Like a Seed”

In the years since Abriana and Jala entered into my English 10 class and walked across the same stage at high school graduation, their relationship has flourished and become a homeplace (hooks, 2015) for each other. Throughout the seven months of our weekly to biweekly group sessions, I observed the ways their friendship was not a secondary element in our study, but a central factor that transformed the totality of this project. Their friendship speaks to the necessary ways meaning is made through our relations with others. Their friendship also highlights the significance of Black girl bonds as a vital learning factor. Black girl bonds, as relationships, are sustained even as they transform over time and exist as an expression of care, a navigational tool for surviving schools and their anti-Black practices, and as a structure and space in which to imagine schools and learning relationships differently, in more humanizing, and critically supportive ways.

During our first group-selected theme discussions sessions, we focused on the theme of “Black Girl Relationships/Bonds.” This session created opportunities for us to share friendship origin stories, to discuss the ups and downs we have experienced within our friendships, and to reflect on ways our relationships with other Black girls and women have sustained us across our educational experiences and beyond. During this session, the girls discussed their friendship and how it had transformed over time. As their former high school teacher, I remember Jala and Abri being friendly with one another and interacting in positive ways as classmates and members of the girls’ basketball team. However, I did not remember them being “best friends.” During our discussion, Jala gifted us with an extended metaphor to describe the growth of their friendship over time. In high school, she said, “Our friendship was like a seed” (2.5.22).

> …in high school, me and Abri were close, but we weren't *close*. We were still learning each other, understanding each other, things like that…But now I feel like the seed has been planted and the pretty little flower has grown up and out sprouted and bloomed. (2.5.22)

Building on this metaphor, Jala described how their friendship would need water and fertilizer to help it grow, which came in the form of shared experiences, conversations, time spent being integrated into each other's families, and sustained instances of showing up for each other's needs. These things came into place more and more in the years following their junior year and into their early years of college. Now, their friendship is what Jala described as a flower that has blossomed over time.

During our Zoom sessions (generally held from our homes) it was not unusual for one of Jala's parents to ask who she was talking to and inform Jala to, "tell my girl Abri I said hi!" and to ask when Abri would be coming over next. Abri's father who would occasionally pop into our Zoom sessions would also greet Jala with the same sense of familiarity and warmth, displaying how their friendships had deeply extended into their relationship as chosen kin through the integration into each other's families. By working together as community educators at their local YMCA, the girls also spent a considerable amount of time together and were able to lean on each other for professional assistance. Knowing that they were both in undergrad, they also regularly affirmed each other's academic and career goals, encouraged one another, and spoke life into their dreams and hopes. At times this looked like Abri calling Jala, "Ms. Johnson," claiming her future teacher title and affirming that this reality would be coming to pass. This also looked like Jala telling Abri that her application to the nursing program at her university would indeed be accepted and that we would be celebrating her soon (which we absolutely did when she received her acceptance in the summer of 2022!).

Teacher. Mentor. Chosen Kin.

During one of our weekly/biweekly sessions, Jala asked me to be her educational mentor after I finished my PhD. When I told her I was on board to do this now, she responded with concern for my time and availability. I told her I would always make time for her. She told me then that I'd "just adopted a new daughter" (2.11.22). "I thought I did that 6 years go," I said, referring to when I was her high school teacher (probably her junior year, my second year teaching Jala, when we had established more of a mentor/mentee bond). I also want to acknowledge here Jala's concern for my time, availability, and health. This is something she did throughout the project and would even check in with me about my wellness as a high schooler. I view this as an example of reciprocal care. Although I would often see myself (as a teacher and mentor) as being the person responsible for extending this kind of care to my students/mentees, Jala exemplifies how this care goes both ways and is/was often extended from her as a student as well.

Additionally, Jala's sentiment about me having just "adopted a new daughter" reflects the familial relationships developed via our bonds. Jala and Abri both take family (i.e., the love of and responsibility to their families) very seriously. Jala identifying as my adopted daughter reflects the depth she sees in our relationship, and I'm humbled and honored by it. It also reminds me of the importance Jala sees in building/forging these kinds of relationships with other Black women in her life, given the ways she would often describe the relationships with her mom, sister, grandma, and Granny. Jala is accustomed to being in their presence, spending time with them, and learning with/from them. Jala's Grandma and Granny's house, (her grandmother and great-grandmother) which she spent time at regularly, is a chosen space for her. This is similar to Abri, who would often visit her grandma's house and described her time there as visiting her "vacation home." Intergenerational relationships continue to show up with the Chicago group as a place of sustenance, care, and belonging. Jala's request for me to be her mentor and her affirmation that I had gained an adopted daughter by doing so is also reflective of the ways I have been invited into her intergenerational family and network of Black women and girls she is learning from and with. This is also something I am deeply honored by.

This discussion/interaction also leads me to reflect on the ways our relationships with one another were transforming throughout our work on this project. Jala felt comfortable enough to ask me to be her educational mentor at this session. At this point we had met for six sessions for the project. During this time, we were likely reorienting ourselves with each other and what it meant to share space and learn from each other in this context. During this process I tried to remain mindful of how I was showing up as a mentor and not as Jala and Abri's teacher. I never want them to feel pressured or obliged to engage in anything for the project that they didn't want to, were uninterested in, and/or did not have the time for. The girls were generally transparent with me in sharing how they felt comfortable voicing their agreements/disagreements to how we spent our time together and when they could/couldn't attend and participate. Now, I'm also thinking of how this was all true because their investment in the project and their relationship with me, but now I'm considering how they may have also been processing how our relationship could and was transforming throughout this project, leading us to learn anew how we could engage with one another and do things like ask for more of a mentor role.

You, intergenerational time traveler: **Intergenerational Black Girlhoods**

Intergenerational Black girl relationships and stories of education and learning experiences have become a portal through which to analyze and address the changes and lack thereof to Black girls' learning experiences across generations. They also exist as a way to uphold these stories as ancestral practices, and thus vital knowledge as we collectively imagine more just educational futures for Black girls in schools and for their learning experiences across contexts. Again, our focus on this particular area of our learning and reflection regarding Black girls' educational and broader learning experiences came from an idea that the girls developed. During one of our sessions, Jala asked if we could interview the Black women in our lives from different generations about their learning experiences. She was especially interested in the possibility of interviewing her grandma and Granny (great-grandma) about their experiences. I had not imagined us going in this direction with our collective work at the onset of the project, but it became one of the most significant learning experiences for us. This also reflects the participatory nature of our project and how Jala and Abri's ideas deeply shaped the design of the overall study in major ways through their desire to center the voices and stories of Black girls and women, especially as it pertains to their experiences as thinkers and learners.

Jala's suggestion that we dedicate one of our sub-topics to learning with and from Black girls and women of other generations in our family also was a move toward honoring traditions of knowledge sharing and meaning making that were vital to each of us, and that we had a shared awareness of. Beyond the context of our project, intergenerational relationships play a huge role in Jala and Abri lives, as well as my own. As previously mentioned, Abri and Jala would frequently join our group Zoom meetings from their grandmas' houses and would comment on the importance of regularly visiting and spending time with their grandmas. This reminded me of the tight-knit relationship I share with my maternal grandmother, Cozetta, who helped raise me.

Some of the most crucial learning experiences throughout my life have come from my time spent with her in the kitchen and the garden, at church and family gatherings, on her front porch, and across countless other settings where her love and care for me, our family, and community have flowed. It became evident through the reflections that Abri, Jala, and I shared that the elder Black women knowledge we have all been privy to throughout our lives deserved to be honored in the context of this project. It also became apparent that we were viewing this project as an opportunity to invite our great-grandmothers, grandmas, mothers, aunties, sisters, and cousins to share the stories of their educational experiences in ways they may have never been encouraged to do so before. In doing so, we were working to weave together an intergenerational tapestry of Black girlhood that would allow us to dream up and imagine more justice-based learning experiences for Black girls moving forward.

A pattern that existed across the stories Abri and Jala's grandmothers and great-grandmothers shared with them about their educational experiences was the presence of overt acts of racism that they experienced either in schools or their surrounding communities. As mentioned in the "*I Go and Prepare a Place for You* / Schools as the Generational Curse" section, Jala's grandmother experienced anti-Back racism in school in the 1960s while pursuing her nursing degree. Unlike her White peers, she was not allowed to engage in hands on learning activities that aligned with her studies, and instead was expected to do what Jala described as "slum work," such as fetch coffee for doctors. Relatedly, Abri shared how her great-grandparents told her about their experiences with "the civil rights movement, and segregation, and integrating schools" (5.21.29). Abri's great-grandmother described attending predominately Black schools and not experiencing racism in those spaces, but that racism was present in so many other facets of her life, which ultimately affected her experiences growing up as a student and young adult.

For example, Abri's great-grandmother expressed to her how traumatizing it was when one of her friends was lynched after driving through a sundown neighborhood when simply trying to navigate his way home one evening. In response to the deadly and overt acts of racism she witnessed and experienced, Abri's great-grandmother was also active in resisting and refusing these realities. This involved her participating in marches with Dr. MLK Jr. and also attending the wake of Emmett Till to bear witness to the deep violence of antiblack racism and how it had affected the Till family and Black communities more broadly. Great-grandmother offered Abri a description of the kind of learning she was engaging in outside of school; a community based and action-oriented education that involved advocating for justice, civil rights, and human dignity and respect for Black people and communities within a country that was hellbent on reminding her and her loved ones of the brutal realities of living in the afterlife of slavery (Harman, 1997).

In our practice of collectively imagining and dreaming through the honoring of intergenerational Black girlhoods, Jala and Abri also honored stories of educational resistance and refusal that their mothers, cousins, and younger sisters shared with them. Here, it is especially vital to highlight the relationships Abri and Jala have with their younger sisters and the collective learning they engaged in with them. Abri and Jala frequently spoke to the value they placed on family and how seriously they took their role as the oldest sibling in their families. Sometimes, this involved them offering critiques of the caretaking work they were responsible for as older siblings and the gendered expectations their families had of them as girls. Overwhelming though, Jala and Abri spoke to the love they had for their younger siblings and their fierce commitment to protecting and supporting them as they navigated life and school as teens and young adults (given that their younger siblings were all between 13-19 years old). In particular, in their role as older sisters to younger sisters, they discussed the responsibilities they had in paving a way for their sisters to be cared for and to excel throughout their educational experiences.

For Abri, this involved attending the same university as her younger sister and modeling for her what it meant to balance school, work, and family. Also, by being the eldest daughter of a father who was a former education professor, Abri was carving an educational path for herself and her sister with the support of their parents, but that reflected their individual educational goals and aspirations and their unique pathways to and through higher education. In Jala's role as an older sister, she was also active in being a mirror and a window (Bishop, 1990) for her younger sister, as well as an advocate for her sister when she faced unjust treatment in school. Throughout the project, Jala's younger sister, Jhene[7], was an eighth grader and rising high school freshman at Abri and Jala's former 6-12th grade academy. During one of our early group sessions, Jala mentioned how she felt that the school was covertly trying to push her younger sister out. Despite Jhene being a "high performing" student at the academy and a convenient model of the school's racial diversity, the school had conveniently sent Jhene's high school registration and matriculation information to another high school, despite her family having already submitted the documentation to maintain her enrollment in the academy for her transition to high school. Although this situation was ultimately resolved, it could have posed a much larger issue given that the academy is a charter school with a lottery-style enrollment system. Tactics like this, amongst others, had been used in the past to push out students who had been enrolled at the academy for years in order to bring in new students, especially those with a record of strong academic success and high standardized test scores. Given the ways Jala was nearly pushed out of this same school due to unjust disciplinary practices, she was justifiably concerned about the way Jhene was possibly experiencing a related form of pushout from the academy. The bitter irony in this story also lies in the fact that during this time, the academy was actively using Jhene's photo and likeness on promotional materials for the school, including a banner hanging outside of the school that was visible for the surrounding community to see. In this regard, the academy mimicked the practice of countless other institutions and the media by using a Black girl for her aesthetics and as a ploy at gaining diversity points, while not bothering to offer her care, support, or the ideal quality education they had conveniently made her a poster child for. This is also an example of what Smith-Purviance (2020) describes as the "commodification of Black girls." These examples offer insight to a pattern of the academy's disregard for the educational futures of Black girls in Jala's family and reflects a broader practice of Black girls being devalued, dehumanized, and regarded as easily disposable in the context of U.S. schools.

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[7] Pseudonym

Further, Jala interviewed Jhene for our intergenerational Black girlhood interview project, which we all worked on during the latter half of our group sessions. Jala revealed that although she and Jhene talked about school frequently, she didn't realize Jhene "had so much to say" (5.21.22) when given the opportunity to speak more on the topic. In listening to Jala's reflections, Abri described the interview process as having offered Jhene and Jala a chance to get "down to the nitty gritty." For Jhene, this looked like opening up the most in response to questions Jala posed about how she felt in school and whether she was comfortable there. In response, Jhene said "that she feels attacked every day because of her race and she's always being profiled by teachers and some of the teachers can be racist at times, especially the dean." As Jala recounted to us her interview with Jhene, she described how her little sister also discussed feeling "comfortable at times when around people that look like her and her friends," and in spaces like the lunchroom where they could “sit around and talk and hangout.” This stood in contrast to the discomfort Jhene felt in the classroom, which she attributed to teachers who “can’t relate to her and don’t understand her or her views on things.” Jala discussed this with a sense of familiarity, regarding the ways teachers may have a wildly different worldview than their students, and display a lack of attention to and/or interest in learning about how their students’ lived experiences and personal views differ drastically from their own. Jala described this as, “You know, some teachers are like ‘the world is great, it’s magical,’ and it’s like, well, here’s my views about that” (5.21.22).

As Jala continued to share takeaways with us from her interview/conversation with Jhene, she noted how Jhene also addressed the unfair disciplinary practices the deans implemented. These details resonated deeply with Jala’s high school stories and critiques of the academy’s disciplinary models, despite them having occurred over five years ago. In additions to the deans, Jhene discussed the lack of experience and cultural competency of the teachers at the academy who she described as being, “younger, fresh out of college teachers who don’t really know anything.” In response to the teachers’ practice of singling out Black students and expecting them to educate their peers about notable Black figures when discussing them in class, and how to treat their (predominately Black and Brown) students with dignity, Jhene stated, “So we kind of have to teach them, but it’s irritating ‘cuz y’all went to school for this” (5.21.22). Jhene’s statements indicate that she and her peers were being yoked with the responsibility of teaching their teachers how to see and respect their humanity, and how to teach in ways that centered and sustained their identities; something she reasonably expected the teachers to have learned in school. So, in addition to carrying their own academic workload, Jhene and her peers (as *middle schoolers*) were also tasked with making themselves legible to their teachers.

Similarly, this came up in Jhene’s discussion of the lack of school-wide acknowledgment of and programming for Black History Month (BHM) at the academy. Jala described how Jhene had attended a predominately Black private school with all Black teachers during her elementary years. There, celebrating BHM was a foundational practice and regular experience; it was something Jhene had learned to expect to see honored across all of her learning experiences. Therefore, it came as a shock when she transferred to the academy for middle school and no longer saw an emphasis placed on honoring BHM at school. Jhene informed Jala that in 2022, the academy did nothing to acknowledge BHM until the last two weeks of February and that his likely would not have happened without her and a group of her peers calling attention to the absence of BHM programming. Jala informed us that, “She [Jhene] actually had to get a group of kids together and advocate that they celebrate BHM for the last two weeks of February. No teachers wanted to help, nothing” (5.21.22). When sharing this with us, I could hear the disappointment and frustration in Jala’s voice.

Although Jhene displayed strong leadership skills by taking the initiative to hold the academy accountable for honoring BHM, this is a responsibility that an eight-grade student should not have been tasked with. When describing Jhene’s reaction to this Jala said, “She doesn’t know how to feel about it, but she cares that when she goes to high school she’s like, ‘I can advocate for myself and what I believe in, even if other folks won’t advocate or help…” (5.21.22). Although it can be argued that self-advocacy is a valuable skill for young adults, this example is also situated in the context of anti-Black racism and the legacy of schools maintaining anti-Black logics in their policies and practices; something white middle schoolers are rarely, if ever required to advocate against. By advocating for BHM to be honored at her school, Jhene was also advocating for Black life, Black culture, and Black youth to be deemed worthy of being honored within the context of her school. Jhene was refusing to allow herself, her Black peers, or her community be deemed invaluable and unworthy of study and celebration during a month that has been explicitly designated as a time to honor our histories and futurities.

As we collectively reflected on what we'd learned from the Black women and girls in our lives across multiple generations, Jala described her assessment of the stories Jhene had told her and stated, "So you can see there's underlying racism, but they're not throwing it in her face, but she can see it" (5.21.22). Jala and Abri also recognized the presence of racism having affected the educational experiences of every generation of the Black women and girls in their families. When offering my reflections on the stories my mom and auntie shared with me when I engaged them in conversation for the intergenerational interview project, I also noted connections between their educational experiences and that of Jala's mother, who is a generation younger than my mom and aunt. From the West side of Lansing, Michigan to the West side of Chicago, Illinois and across multiple generations, there existed a common practice of Black youth being pushed through school systems by educators who had little regard for whether they learned anything. Similar to Jhene's sentiments about where she felt most comfortable in school, Jala's mother and my mother both offered us stories of school and community spaces outside of the classroom being the spaces they preferred to be, because of their ability to be with their friends. Whether that space was the school cafeteria (Jhene), outside of the school in the beat-boxing cypher (Jala's mother), or on "the block" with neighborhood friends (my mother), across three generations, each of these Black women and girls identified a space of belonging, freedom, and possibility that existed for them and their friends throughout their schooling experiences. In these spaces, a different style of learning took place; one that was communal and that invited Black youth to show up authentically with the parts of their identities they were often expected to check at the classroom door. Unlike in the classroom, in these spaces the Black girls who populated them were able to exist expansively and to render each other legible and worthy of humanity through their shared laughter, creativity and performance, and collective care for one another. In these spaces, Black girls refused the deficit views that were projected onto them in the classroom and co-created chosen spaces in which they wrote a new grammar of Black girl legibility.

Through our collective work together over the seven months of this project, Abri, Jala, and I carried on this legacy of co-creating Black girl chosen spaces. In doing so, we also acknowledged the multigenerational history of harm that Black girls have faced in U.S. schools as a result of our ontological position and the intersecting oppressions of anti-Black racism and the cisheteropatriarchy. "Nothing has changed from my great grandmother all the way down to my sister," said Jala, noting, "It's still the same, same story. Nothing is going to change…It goes from terrible, to just bad. It's still terrible all together" (5.21.22). Abri agreed with Jala by stating, "It's like a cycle; it just keeps coming back around" (5.21.22). Although these might be read as words of despair and defeat, they're actually quite the opposite. Through their analyses of the cyclical harm Black girls experience in schools across generations, Abri and Jala condemned the system of education and addressed how it is functioning in the exact ways it was designed to, as a generational curse and manifestation of "the wake" (Sharpe, 2016). Through their condemnation of the educational system, Abri and Jala are also calling for something different and new; a reimagining of what liberatory and justice-based learning spaces and experiences can exist as for Black girls. Through ongoing acts of fugitivity, Abri and Jala continue to contribute to the legacy of Black girls and women co-creating the spaces they need to learn and thrive, while also refusing to be misread and deemed unworthy in the context of K-12 classrooms and beyond.

Together, Jala, Abri, and I have created a chosen space and invited other Black girls and women in our lives to share their wisdom and knowledge of resistance, refusal, and imagining. Our mothers, grandmas, and great-grandmas have been active in imagining a world for us and working to enact it in their own ways (often in our home space and communities). Similarly, our younger siblings, like Jhene, are currently working to enact these realities in their schools through relentless advocacy for the centering and sustaining of Black history and the just treatment of Black youth. Abri, Jala, and I have been imagining a Black girl chosen space that we can return to and where we can continue to build upon our relationships of care with one another as we reflect, discuss, and create more just educational experiences for Black girls, while enacting such a space in real time.

Self-Portraits: ***Dreams for Ourselves and Each Other***

"If I didn't define myself for my myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies of me and eaten alive" – Audre Lorde

One of the central questions of this research study asks, "What conditions must exist in a (learning) space to support Black girls in the work/practice of imagining and creating beyond anti-blackness and the cisheteropatriarchy?" Through the co-creation of our chosen Black girl space throughout this project, Abri, Jala, and I focused less on the "how" of this question and instead focused on what we were imagining and creating and the ways these dreams we envisioned for ourselves and each other were not bound by antiblack racism and sexism/patriarchy. Through our practice of meeting together to discuss, create, imagine, and enact, we were able to engage in individual and collective dreaming about the justice-based educational futures we want all Black girls to have. As we engaged in arts-based projects where we designed schools in which Black girls were free, able to exist expansively, and viewed as inherently worthy, Jala, Abri, and I also leaned into a practice of (further) naming ourselves as inherently worthy of care, protection, and a quality education as well.

As we examined the ways in which U.S. schools continue to function as the “belly of the ship” for Black youth (Sharpe, 2016) and the gendered ways they seek to dispossess Black girls of their humanity, we designed a space where we did not have to constantly escape and survive those violences. In our collective Black girl space, we refused to accept the deficit lenses society, teachers, and schools have tried to project onto us, and on the Black women elders and Black girls in our lives. Instead, we returned to the multigeneration and ancestral knowledge we have always held regarding our worth, which has been reflected back to us in the relationships of care that we know as Black girl bonds. So, not only do we hold our shared knowledge of schools as a manifestation of the generational curse, but we also recognize generational healing and care as our birthright. We enact these projects of generational care through our refusals, our valuing of the learning and literacy traditions that have long sustained our families and communities, and through our loving relationships with ourselves and each other that make it possible for us to render ourselves and each other legible in an American society that lacks the proper grammar to see us in the fullness of our humanity.

One way we worked toward rendering ourselves legible was through the practice of self-definition. Jala, Abri, and I approached this through the creation of self-portraits that allowed us to create a representation of how we currently viewed ourselves, and how that relates to our past selves and honors our future selves. To prepare us for creating our self-portraits we began with a creative writing exercise to help us describe how we viewed and defined ourselves currently, and how this was also influenced by our previous experiences. This writing exercise involved us writing poems modeled after Patricia Smith’s (2018) poem, “What it Feels Like to Be a Black

Girl, For Those Who Aren't." In writing our original poem, we addressed parts of ourselves and identities that we felt it were vital to share. Below are excerpts of Abri, Jala, and my poems, along with their titles.

Abriana – ***Brown skin girl***

i'm comfortable with my skin.
i'm sweet light brown sugar.
i'm self-driven and the mother hen of my family.
i'm a future nurse.
i'm part of my family's nursing legacy.
i'm loyal.
i'm honest.
always be you and nobody else.
I love me some me.
I am brave, I am powerful but, most importantly, I am me.

Jala - ***What it's like to be the first of many, for those who aren't***

it's being the first black woman in your family to go to college
it's being a black educator in a world that does not truly care for you
and it's being brave for those who may be scared

Jazmen - ***What it's like to be Jazmen, for those who aren't***

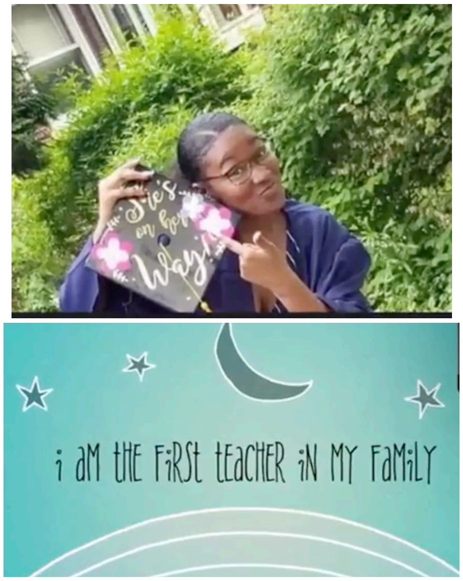
it's me and cousin playing make believe
forbidden adventures into Granny and Pawpaw's attic
us imagining a future we'd someday need
it's poems scribbled in the back of notebooks

What is reflected in Abri's self-definition poem is an unwavering acceptance of, comfort with, and love for self. What is also present in her poem is a reiteration of her career aspirations but accompanied with an acknowledgement that her goal of becoming a nurse is also an act of continuing in her family's legacy of Black women nurses. In Jala's poem, she foregrounds her identify as being the "first," a role she has held in her family (i.e. the first grandchild, eldest sibling, first to attend college in her family) and a responsibility that she does not take lightly. In her poem, she also describes her plans of entering into the teaching profession and becoming a Black teacher in an uncaring, anti-Black world. Even in the context of her poem, Jala is enacting refusals as she considers her current and future self. In my poem, I focus on my relationships to other Black girls and women, and how these relations have been a meaning making tool and form of sustenance over time. What each of these poems reveal is that the ways that we view and define ourselves are rooted in pockets of self and community love, care, and resistance.

Figure 11.

QR code that will direct you to
Abriana's Self-Portrait
(collage)

Figure 12.


i AM THE FiRSt tEaCHER iN MY FaMiLY

Screenshots from Jala's Self-Portrait
(video)

After writing our self-definition poems, we used them as a creative resource to support the creation of our self-portraits. As with previous projects we'd engaged in throughout this study, Jala and Abri were invited to select whatever creative medium most resonated with them in order to create their self-portrait (i.e., photos, poetry, collage, videos, etc.). In Abri's portrait (included above), she speaks to her future self and who she is becoming and her commitment to carrying on the legacy of becoming a Black nurse, like so many other women in her family who have come before her. What is also reflected in Abri’s self-portrait are her core values, such as her desire to influence her community in positive ways by advocating for quality mental health care resources for Black people, and other accessible health care resources for Black communities. For Jala’s self-portrait, she created a video in which she represented her younger self, her current self, and identities that she found vital to share, including her identity as a Black woman, as someone who is educated, and as someone who will be the first teacher in her family. In both Abri and Jala’s self-portraits, they honored their family histories and younger selves, while also calling their future self into existence via the love and deep belief they have in themselves and their future goals.

Across Jala and Abri’s self-definition poems and their self-portraits, they described and creatively represented themselves in asset-based ways. When Abri proclaimed, “I love me some me” in her poem, there was no hesitation around whether or not that was something she could or should do as a Black woman. Their self-portraits and poems also reflect the asset-based ways they view their communities, their ancestral and elder knowledge, and the brilliance of young Black girls across contexts and generations. Although Jala and Abri had encountered teachers and professors throughout their educational journeys who had tried to “put out their spark,” through their relationships with each other, and through their unwavering belief in their own worth, their sparks stayed aflame. This is an outcome of what happens when Black girls choose each other, and a testament to how their choosing of each other holds promise for how we might reimagine formalized educational spaces moving forward.

To clarify, this is not a recipe for resilience or another tired message about the "superpower" and strength of Black girls and women. This work will never be about celebrating resilience or honoring Black girls and women for how much pain they can endure (hampton, 2013). This collective work is about Black girls and women choosing each other. I'm choosing Jala and Abri, as they have chosen me. I do not want them to do the labor of being superwomen and resilient for the rest of their lives, especially not at the detriment of their wellbeing (Morgan, 2000). That's why this practice of choosing each other allows us to care for and uplift one another, while also condemning institutions like education that that we are made to survive. It is not enough to praise Black girl's refusals as a reflection of their perceived resilience without actively working to dismantle the systems that create conditions under which Black girls need to be resilient. So, as we "define ourselves for ourselves" in the context of our Black girl bonds and co-created learning spaces, we as Black girls are also offering insight into a possible otherwise.

In this otherwise, Black girls define themselves as "brave and powerful" through their art, they have the agency to co-design their learning experiences because the knowledge and wisdom they bring with them into the learning space is recognized as having inherent value, they live out the legacy of the Black women and girls who came before them, and they celebrate each other every chance they get. For Abri, this looked like her pursuing a career in nursing and taking the steps to apply for the nursing program at her university during this project. Shortly before we concluded our biweekly sessions for the summer, Abri announced to us that she'd been invited to interview for the nursing program and we celebrated this milestone in the journey she was traversing, as carved out for her by her grandmother, aunties, and cousins. For Jala, this looked like us celebrating her when she shared that she had been promoted to the summer camp supervisor for the community education organization she had been teaching with for multiple years.

Across our group sessions, it was not uncommon for us to celebrate one another and speak life into each other's dreams and goals. This practice of affirming each other and ourselves was something Jala would encourage us to do with the journal prompts she provided us during our sessions, and it was something that would often occur organically. As we forge forth and continue in the work of imagining and enacting Black girl chosen spaces and justice-based learning experiences that center, sustain, and affirm Black girls, I leave you with affirmations that Abri, Jala, and I shared with one another throughout the course of this project. May these affirmations guide other Black girls and women in the shared work of dreaming, imagining, and enacting chosen Black girl spaces. May they also inform the work of transforming compulsory learning spaces into ones of consent-based learning that center and sustain the brilliance, creativity, and endless assets of Black girls.

i am comfortable in the skin i'm in

i am worthy of respect and kindness

I want to be free and expansive, so I will be

i am worthy of kindness

i am the best version of myself

my potential is infinite

i love myself

Chapter 6. Already Worthy

Dear Asha, Ashley, Coop, Kei, and Mikaila,

At Everett High School (EHS), where we all grew up, there is an art installation in the central hallway on the first floor between the main office and the cafeteria. Familiarly known as "the mural," this six- or seven-feet tall zig zag mosaic wall was created and gifted to the school by one of the graduating classes that predated us. In the middle of our school stood this piece of art that reflected the light that would stream in from the front entrance facing windows during the spring, summer, and fall. As I think back on our EHS years, the mural returns as a focal point, reflecting countless memories of Black girlhood as shaped by our educational experiences at a local public school on the Southside of Lansing, MI. The mural became the backdrop for so many of our high school memories—impromptu lunch time gatherings with our backs propped against the mural, lining up in front of it to buy $1 slices of Hungry Howie's pizza, posing around the mural in semi-formal gowns as a part of our induction into the "Sisterhood Network," the sound of our Payless heels reverberating off of the cold hallway floors and then bouncing off of the mural during step practice, and endless photos snapped of us with the mural as our signature backdrop.

As we navigated Everett in the best ways we knew how and turned our everyday adolescence and emergence into young adulthood into its own unique work of art, the mural remained a fixture in our lives. We could always meet-up at the mural to return to each other, despite the myriad of ups and downs we experienced within and beyond the walls of EHS. I hope that this chapter represents a standing mosaic of all we have learned individually and collectively about our Black girlhoods, education, and the futures and spaces we continue to imagine and enact that embody free and expansive Black girlhoods.

Each of you have offered your brilliance, creativity, critical thought, and endless care for one another throughout this project. You have made this more important than a mere dissertation study; your willing and eager participation in this project and your ideas that helped shape the design and trajectory of our time spent together transformed this into a practice of return.

Although we did not physically return to EHS for a nostalgic meet-up at the mural throughout this project, during our time together we co-constructed a new homeplace (hooks, 2015) and space of return through our familial check-ins, shared reflections, and artistic renderings. Each of these practices created a portal for us to return to the friendships that sustained us throughout our teenage years as we navigated a school system that was never designed to care for or support Black girls. Similar to the ways we intentionally chose each other in the early years of our friendships, this project reflects how we can also collectively create new spaces of our own choosing; spaces where our Black girl bonds and relational practices of care aid us in designing the spaces we need. As described by Mikaila during one of our early sessions, as Black girls and women, we are always ever building the places we need for ourselves, despite them not being made available to us otherwise. I am so grateful for each of you and hope that we will continue to choose each other, and that our collective work contributes to the creation of more justice-based learning experiences and settings for other Black girls from Lansing, Michigan and beyond.

Much love,

Jazz

Chapter 517: How We Came to Be

For this study, I chose to invite (versus recruit) possible collaborators/co-researchers to participate in and help design our collective learning experiences. Engaging in this as a practice of invitation felt especially important as I reached out to the five Black women I mention above who would become the “Chapter 517” group. The invitation process I engaged in when asking if the co-researchers/participants would join this project represents a form of choosing. The act of choosing is something that the Chapter 517 members and I discussed during our time together regarding the ways they intentionally sought out and formed friendships with other Black girls throughout their teenage years (more on this in the section *Black Girl Bonds: The Choosing*). I returned to this practice of choosing when inviting Black women from my hometown of Lansing, Michigan to participate in this project. The intentional act of choosing was also a move toward better honoring relationality as a meaningful foundation for engaging in collaborative and justice-centered research partnerships. As a project rooted in relationality, my time spent with the Chapter 517 group also demonstrates how our group sessions represented a return to the Black girl bonds that so deeply shaped our educational experiences and that became a portal for us to imagine more justice-based learning experiences and settings for Black girls moving forward.

As the oldest generational group in this dissertation project, the Lansing Group was composed of six Black women (including myself) in their early thirties. Now as photographers, Ph.Ds., mothers, pastry chefs, DEI directors, social workers, aunties, educators, and more, we gathered as Black women to reflect on our Black girlhoods and the wide array of individual and collective learning experiences we had as Black girls in compulsory and chosen learning settings. Throughout this project we gathered together via Zoom and met twice per month between March and June of 2022, for a total of eight sessions. Meeting virtually allowed us to reconnect despite the geographical distance that physically separated us. Although we all grew up in Lansing, Michigan, and graduated together from the same high school (EHS), the six of us are now spread out across the U.S., living in four different cities, three regions, and two time zones. Our Black girl bonds continue to persist and to extend across time and space. To further honor these bonds and the significant role they played as a methodological refusal and a meaning making practice, the vignettes below offer origin stories of my relationships with each of the Black women in this project and insight on the pieces of our girlhoods we each brought to this project.

***How We Came to Be*: Ashley**

I (Jazmen) entered the sixth grade cautiously. It was new terrain, and I was unsure of everything. I was eleven years old and couldn't even open my locker on my own for the first month of the school year.

Throughout my sixth-grade year I constantly heard stories from my elementary school friends who attended my rival middle school, Gardner, that they had a classmate who looked just like me. I was curious about this other me, but in 2002 with no smart phones or mass social media, I could only imagine what she looked like or what it might mean for our paths to cross at a game or community event.

The summer following my sixth-grade year, my mom and I moved to the southside and were suddenly walking distance from Gardner. After begging my mom to be reunited with my elementary school homies, she agreed to let me switch schools and enrolled me at Gardner Middle School. During my first week of seventh grade things hit the fan for me in record time as a new student at Gardner. In the process of trying to make new friends, one of my old friends became upset with me. Somehow, a rumor generated that I'd been talking badly about her, and before the first Friday of the school year hit, she was giving me a cold shoulder more frigid than the Upper Peninsula in Mid-February and instructing the rest of our friend group to do the same. So, in the midst of my pre-teen insecurity, fear, and loneliness after being systematically excommunicated from the elementary school friend group I had begged my mom to let me switch schools in order to be reunited with, I'd nearly forgotten about my supposed twin who I was now peers with.

So, it caught me off guard one day in the lunch line when two of our peers stopped us to say, "That's her! That's the girl I've been telling you looks just like you!"

Ashley and I proceeded to glance at each other for an awkward moment, perhaps both of us assessing this supposed doppelganger we had heard so much about. We shared the same skin complexion, full lips, slim prepubescent figure, and dark hair, but twins, we were not. Ashley had a confidence and ease to her that I would come to deeply admire, but in that moment, it also made me feel starkly different than her because of the general sense of uncertainty I felt about my lil' middle school self.

The feeling of also being assessed and given the once over made me anxious and I can't quite remember if I mumbled a nervous hello or extended an overly-chipper, "Hi!" Whatever pleasantries were or were not exchanged, I remember the awkwardness of the encounter causing for the moment to dissolve quickly and us both returning our attention to the crispy, nearly dried-out, chicken patties we were no doubt being served and the keypad at the end of the lunch line where we would both enter our student ID numbers to receive our free or reduced lunch.

I laugh when recounting this moment to Ashley now, who I had no idea at the time was genuinely my other me and who would, years later, become my god-sister and forever chosen kin. As Jala (Chicago Group) would describe it, at that time our friendship was just a seed fallen on unfamiliar terrain. Who knew how deeply it would ultimately take root and grow into something we would both need and nurture.

How We Came to Be: **Mikaila**

We are the great grandchildren of Ether Mitchell.

Our grandmothers are the daughters of Ether; Cozetta and Yvonne if you're being formal, Cozy and Bony for those who are familiar. Two Mitchell women from Curtis, Arkansas who migrated to Michigan in search of something new. I wonder if they ever imagined during their childhoods, under the Arkansas sun, surrounded by their other eight siblings, that one day they would have granddaughters who would be as thick as thieves.

You made it earth-side six months prior to me; both of our mothers comfortably in their thirties and in a state of mild shock and disbelief when the doctors confirmed their pregnancies. These origin stories our own inside joke like our shared language of obscure lines from TV shows and movies, random song lyrics, and memes that date back to our Tumblr years.

It's been like this for most of our lives, but I reflect back on our early years under Aunt Susie's less than watchful eye. You, upstairs in the bathroom trying to make "potions" and getting us both in trouble for letting the sink overflow. Meanwhile, I was downstairs folding paper fans and storing them in a recycled shoe box to try to turn a profit on later. We tell this story in all its nonsensical humor to friends now but know that our intended audience is honestly each other.

As we grew older your mom would bring you over for playdates and we would take out every toy I had and construct new worlds together. Then, as soon as my mom would announce that your mom was on her way to pick you up, I would start sulking; missing your absence before you'd even departed. You, my second-cousin and the closest thing I had to a sibling in Lansing.

Then there were our adventures at my Granny's house, us begging her and Pawpaw to let us visit the attic and explore that vast and unfamiliar land that was generally closed up and off-limits to us. Upon the occasion that we would be granted permission to visit that far off land, we would walk up the narrow staircase to the attic in a state of wonder, imagining it a portal leading us to another world. Up there in the attic (which had once served as a bedroom but had long since become a storage space) you and I marveled at the shelves of dusty books, cassette-player boxes neatly stacked with old photos, rusty twin-sized bed frames, Stetson hats hanging from the tall wooden coat hanger, and everything else there was to be explored there above the rest of the house.

As we grew older, we continued to dream up and sometimes even create these otherwise worlds, whether in the form of playlists, imagined fashion lines, after-school announcement "shows," podcast ideas, networks of friends and chosen kin across the various cities we would call home, and our interwoven stories of home and dreams for the future. As the great granddaughters of Ether, the granddaughters of Bony and Cozy, the daughters of Jackie and Paula, and as cousins, we have and will always create the space(s) we need for ourselves.

How We Came to Be**: Coop**

My earliest memory of you is at age nine or ten at the basketball courts in Georgetown near your grandpa's house. You in your red t-shirt with a Spalding tucked between your left arm and your side. It was a grey and gloomy day but that didn't stop you from returning to your shot and practicing the guided release of the ball from your fingertips, traveling en route toward the hoop. You were quiet with kind eyes. We didn't talk much that first day, but there would be years ahead for us to catch up.

Basketball would reunite us over the years. As we both entered the ninth-grade, we found ourselves on the freshman girls' basketball team. I couldn't hoop to save my life, but that didn't stop me or any of our other teammates who didn't quite have the skills or fundamentals to play much more than the bench. Coach Peatross was an Everett alumnus, went to school with my mama and auntie, and was our freshman hoop coach. When we weren't running ladders or practicing drills for "Coach" we would all crack up when his cell phone would ring during practice to the tune of "Juicy" and he'd put on his dad or business voice, shifting slightly out of coach mode.

Although we entered the sport at different skill levels, we each showed up regardless of whether we (i.e., I) would be playing the bench or actively pivoting from offense to defense during a full court press. Coach helped to cultivate a space for us to be together and to grow in whatever ways needed. Then, through our collective belief in ourselves and each other, we carved out space in our friendships to do the same. Even after we'd both turned in our jerseys and waved goodbye to the court, our friendship persisted.

Across our parallel years of you entering the Air Force and me entering undergrad, we continued to hold space for each other to grow as we remained connected through letter writing, phone calls, and your visits to see my mom even when I was away. As we tread farther along the path of adulthood, I continue to be grateful for the gift that is your friendship. Your kind eyes remain and bear witness to the beauty and the struggle that exists around us. As you pick up your camera, spin your turntables, and use each of your artistic mediums, you demonstrate the wonder that exists in this world and contribute to the creation of the otherwise we all need.

How We Came to Be: **Asha**

We sat near each other in Ms. Leroy's tenth-grade honors ELA class. That year we were supposed to read the *Autobiography of Frederick Douglass* and *The Scarlet Letter*. I only remember reading excerpts of both and completing a personal narrative project we wrote and presented in class. I don't recall concrete details of those formal components of the class, but I do remember it being a space where I first became acquainted with you and how that class offered an entry point into our friendship.

Throughout our junior year, we grew closer through our participation in the Sisterhood Network and the organization's step team. You, Ashley, and Mikaila, among others, were my respite in Sisterhood. Although the organization brought us together as a diverse group of Black girls from EHS, it still felt like another space I had to navigate strategically within high school, and not one where I could show up as 100 percent myself 100 percent of the time. But you gave me permission to do so in your presence.

You, with all of your soft-spoken creative brilliance. Leading us in steps like "Precise" and breaking down the performance moves in guided, step-by-step increments for folks like me who needed more assistance. You and the secret of your melodic singing voice. You in the kitchen baking up a storm, our future pastry chef in the making. You in your red Toyota coming to swoop me and Ashley on Saturday evenings as we bounced around to whatever kickbacks, parties, and open houses we could roll to. You and your mom hosting sleepovers for a zillion girls, us all piled on top of each other in your living room eating snacks, sharing secrets, listening to New Orleans Bounce, and rehearsing dance routines to Beyoncé's latest.

Your friendship and your home became a place of rest, recovery, and dreaming when school and the broader world was too heavy a burden to carry for our lil' Black girl selves. I remember countless times throughout college where I'd stop by and instead of studying, we'd chat softly, having long conversations about our creative dreams and plans and all of the ways we would collaborate to bring them to life. I am grateful that we still have time. That the dreams we imagined in our late teens and early twenties weren't half baked but have just been taking time to rise.

***How We Came to Be*: Keiondra**

When I reflect of the origins of our friendship, I think of roller coasters and middle school angst. Not because the early years of our friendship were defined by a series of ups and downs, but because the most significant time I remember us bonding in our early teen years was during our eighth-grade end-of-year trip to Cedar Point. Despite us having been peers for two years and members of similar student organizations like the National Junior Honor Society, we did not know each other well. Not until our teachers and adult chaperones ushered us off the school buses when we arrived in Sandusky and I realized that I didn't have a group of friends to break off with to explore the amusement park. So, I stuck with my older cousin, Myra, who had agreed to chaperone for the day. She seemingly had more homies on the trip than me, as she connected with another classmate's mom who she had known for years. So, it was thirteen-year-old me, afraid of roller coasters, shadowing behind my older cousin and Ms. H., as they strategically made their ride-warrior plans for all of the roller coasters they would ride throughout the day.

After sitting out the first roller coaster on their list and then heading to the next, I ran into you. Maybe it was that you were with an odd-numbered group of friends and needed a ride partner or some other reason I can't quite remember. What I do recall is that after that, we rode nearly every other roller coaster and park attraction together that was on Myra and Ms. H's list. Your friendship that day made me feel brave and seen. That day, for the first time in ages, I laughed hard, took risks, and genuinely had fun. I wasn't alone in what felt like so long. That day also represented me taking a needed break from trying so hard to be a "good kid" or golden child. In your laid-back and accepting presence, you extended me the freedom to exist outside of the unrealistic pressures to outrun and outperform any and all damaging perspectives that existed of me and my lil' Black girl flesh. I didn't realize it then that we would come to resonate so deeply over the years about similar pressures to perform respectability.

When we began high school in the fall we were tracked into the same set of honors classes and spent at least half of our school days together. Along with a small group of our peers of other Black girls who were and weren't tracked into those honors classes with us, we formed what we came to call the "The Crew." Together we laughed, made meaning, and pulled up for each other's needs whenever we could. We shared in rides home from games, movie outings, and other shenanigans that made our high school years an ongoing adventure. In each of these spaces that you showed up as yourself, the rest of us were given permission to do the same.

In the years since we graduated from high school, I've witnessed you earn degree after advanced degree while remaining actively committed to work that honors your justice-centered values and that benefits Black folks and the communities you hold dear. Across this time, I have also seen you care for your family, your friends, and yourself. You continue to model what it means to turn down the noise of white supremacy in order to listen deeply to yourself and your people, and to create the spaces we all need when they don't currently exist.

Black Girl Bonds: The Choosing

Some of us entered into the Zoom meeting room with easy smiles, and others a bit bleary eyed, depending on which time zones we were joining the call from. As we gathered virtually for the first of our eight group sessions we would spend together throughout this project, we greeted each other with a warm familiarity, considering the decades-long relationships many of us had with one another. In turn, this familiarity felt like the kind that blossoms after seeing your favorite cousin at the family reunion after months or years apart. Although many of us remain friends and keep in touch periodically if not regularly, as a group, the six of us had not shared space like this in nearly fifteen years, not since our time as high school students at EHS. So, although we were collectively embarking on the journey of this new project, us coming together and holding space for our ideas, reflections, laughter, and imagining was a reunion. Fellow Chapter 517 group members like Keiondra would remark during our group sessions how our time together felt nostalgic—our return to each other a gift that provided an opportunity for us to reflect fondly on the ways our friendships had sustained us over time, and opportunities to critique the systems we were made to survive. Relatedly, our sessions together— built from the bonds/relationships we had established with each other over time—became a site of return.

In the context of Eurocentric, state-sanctioned schools that do not see the value in learning as a practice of relationality, friendships can be considered frivolous, meaningless connections, and Black girls' friendships can even be perceived as dangerous. In this regard, the bonds our group shared, which we had cultivated throughout our formal learning experiences, also represented a refusal of these limited and deficit views of the role of friendships in education, and in Black girls' learning experiences in particular. As an educator and as a student I witnessed the perceived "need" to separate student friendships via classroom seating arrangements and class schedules given more attention than consideration made regarding the ways friendships, as supportive relational bonds, can sustain students throughout their learning experiences. Across my learning with each of the three groups in this dissertation project, but especially with the Lansing group, Black Girl Bonds (BGBs) emerged as a factor that deeply shapes Black girls' learning experiences and that have the power and potential to help us reframe the goals and purpose of education through a lens of relationality. In the subsections that follow, I will discuss Black Girl Bonds (BGBs) in relation to the practice of choosing and being chosen in friendship, as sites of collective care, and spaces for learning and meaning making.

Choosing & Being Chosen in Friendship

Inspired by the Chicago Group and the subtopics they co-created to guide their time together, the first discussion topic we agreed to dive into in the Lansing group was "Black girl bonds and connections to schooling and learning." We also engaged with the questions that the Chicago Group had created based on this subtopic, electing to discuss five of their seven questions, listed below.

1) In high school, how did you decide to make friends? What qualities in a person led me to seek them out as a friend?
    a) How did this connect to how people were inside and outside of school?
2) What are big lessons we learned about friendship throughout high school?
3) How did our friendships sustain and/or support us throughout high school?
4) How do we approach friendships differently now?
5) How do friendships influence our learning experiences? Now and in high school?

What surfaced from our discussion of these questions was an acknowledgement of the deep significance of our friendships, as well as an understanding that they did not occur coincidentally. Rather, our relational bonds had emerged from us intentionally choosing and being chosen in friendship and committing to these relationships that we would actively grow in over time.

As we discussed question number one, multiple members of the Lansing Group shared the specificity that went into the ways they sought out and became friends with others. It was common that many of the friendships that the Lansing Group members had cultivated throughout middle and high school originally stemmed from them being in/on similar classes, athletic teams, or related spaces as the folks who they would become friends with. However, they also mentioned that being in those common spaces was just a starting point. As Ashley described, "In my experience…friendships started from being in common spaces and shared spaces, but they remained friends by their good character, values, and common interests" (3.19.22). Similarly, Keiondra described reasons beyond common spaces that led her to seek out and maintain friendships with her peers based on their qualities and characteristics: "So, I think it's just also admiring qualities that folks had that maybe you didn't have or that you aspired to have. I think that also for me was something that kept me with certain people" (Keiondra, 3.19.22). Keiondra also noted how this practice of forging friendships was significant for her because she took honors classes and was often tracked with the same group of students. Therefore, it was important to her that she made and maintained relationships with friends who took different classes and had different experiences.

In this regard, both Ashley and Keiondra's approaches to developing friendships and the qualities that they valued in the peers they sought to build and maintain friendships with stood in contrast to the normative values of success and achievement that our schools prioritized. It likely comes as no surprise that classes at EHS were heavily tracked (like those at many high schools throughout the U.S.), which largely separated students who were labeled "high performing" from the rest of their peers. However, the practices that the Lansing Group members engaged in when developing friendships rejected systems that measured students by their perceived intellect; and instead honored and made legible their peers' qualities such as their interests, passions, and creativity, which generally could not be assessed via a scantron and that largely were not valued within the school. As a result, Black girls at EHS humanized each other through the act of choosing each other (with all of their uniqueness and complexities) in friendship, despite the ways that EHS and the broader school system was designed to render them, as Black youth, "substudents" (ross et al, 2016).

For Keiondra, Ashley, and the other members of the Chapter 517 group (myself included), the act of choosing and being chosen in friendship represented an intentional practice of connecting with other Black girls who would actively view us in our full humanity and who would allow us to show up in all of our complexity, which was something that our high school and broader school system often refused to. The choice involved in this practice also functions as a form of consent. Within the compulsory learning setting that was EHS, consent was a non-factor for us when it came to the curriculum we were taught, ways we were disciplined and policed within the school, and how we were treated by educators who held deficit perspectives of us. However, in the context of our friendships we were able to establish practices of consent, which originated in how we entered into our friendships, or Black girl bonds. Ultimately, these practices influenced our learning experiences as we navigated a school that overwhelmingly regarded us Black teenage girls as not worthy of consent.

BGBs and Collective Care

What also emerged from our group sessions is an understanding of Black girl bonds as a form of collective care. Collective care can be understood in relation to mutual aid (Spade, 2020) and is concerned with securing the collective wellbeing of a community. Collective care also exists in relation to "squad care," which Melissa Harris-Perry (2017) describes as an ideology and practice that "reminds us there is no shame in reaching for each other and insists the imperative rests not with the individual, but with the community. Our job is to have each other's back." The Black women in Chapter 517 shared stories of ways they pulled up for each other's needs by utilizing the resources within their possession to aid one another with things ranging from meals, to car rides, to a listening ear. In this regard, they engaged in practices of collective care that mirrored squad care which helped them to survive the "afterlife of school segregation" (ross, 2021) and to imagine and enact otherwise spaces for them to exist more expansively than the narrow conceptions of Black girlhood that were presented to them within compulsory schools.

During the Lansing Group's discussion of the role of friendships across our learning experiences, the conversation organically led to examples of ways we made our individual resources shared assets. One example of this was the common practice of sharing student IDs/lunch numbers to ensure that everyone had access to a meal during our lunch period. Mikaila described this practice:

> And it's like…sharing the wealth. Like, whose number can I use? Because I didn't bring my ID and I'm not on free or reduced [lunch]. It's just like, 'aye, pass your number down and let me see your ID.' I feel like it's these little small things that build community. It's like no one talks about the fact that we was hustling student I.D. numbers, trying to feed our friends and ourselves. (3.19.22)

Here, Mikaila explains how if one person needed to eat lunch and hadn't packed a meal and/or didn't have the money to pay for their lunch out of pocket, friends who had free or reduced lunch (but were eating something else for the day) would share their student ID cards and lunch numbers so that their friend could eat. This example reflects the ways we were active in caring for each other's physical needs within school. By ensuring that our bodies (i.e., our flesh) were well nourished within the context of the compulsory learning setting that was EHS, we refused to accept and/or identify with the idea that we were subhuman in that space or any other that framed us as unworthy of the sustenance our bodies and our spirits needed.

Relatedly, during a one-on-one interview, Ashley described how her mom would often give our friends and peers rides to school and/or practice (for sports teams). Her mom used to drive a red Chevy Venture, and as youth we knew that when we saw that red minivan pull up, we could hop in and Ms. Brenda would give us a ride if and when needed. Throughout our conversations, Ashley and I located this as a lesson her mother taught us about how to look out for each other. What Ms. Brenda also offered us was a pertinent model of community care.

Additionally, another resource that the Lansing Group members shared with each other that deeply aided us throughout our educational journeys was friendship. Although not typically regarded as a resource, the Lansing Group members discussed friendship and the bonds they developed with one another as a shared tool, practice, and space that helped them to survive their compulsory school learning experiences. Keiondra spoke to this reality: "And those [friends] are the people that kind of sustained my ability to navigate those formal school spaces because those are people in the background like, 'You could do it! But you can also go to this party, you know'" (5.18.22). Here, Keiondra acknowledges that her friendships with other Black girls functioned as a compass for her to traverse the landscape of formal school spaces. As Keiondra discussed during multiple group sessions and one-on-one interviews, she often felt the pressure to over-perform academically in school because she was labeled a high achieving student, which for her as a Black girl came coupled with expectations related to respectability. Instead of further pressuring Keiondra to conform to the limiting models of respectable Black girlhood that school expected of her, Keiondra's friends affirmed her intelligence and simultaneously granted her the radical permission to also enjoy herself and to exist outside of/beyond the one-dimensional ways schools expected her to.

Keiondra's words offer us an understanding of how Black girl bonds, as a form of collective care, also represent one way that Black girls navigate the afterlife of slavery (Hartman, 1997) and the gross presence of anti-blackness in U.S. schools. The stories shared by the Black women in the Lansing group and by the Black girls and young women in the other two groups in this research study reflect how the public schools they attended/attend function under white supremacist logics and continue to uphold anti-Black practices that dispossess Black children and youth of their personhood and humanity. While aiming to survive those learning settings, they engage in these acts of collective care that help sustain each other's humanity. Through these acts of collective care, Black girls also help render each other legible (i.e., seen, heard, humanized, and worthy of protection) in ways that schools too often neglected to.

It is also important to note that these forms of collective care are not new for Black people navigating life in an actively anti-Black society; they are multigenerational. Ashley acknowledged this during a one-on-one interview when she related the acts of collective care, we engaged in throughout our school years as related to "What our grandparents did during the Great Migration when coming to the Midwest" (2.4.22). Here, Ashley offers a reminder that the practices we engaged in as Black girls to support one another and contribute toward our collective wellbeing are ancestral. She cites the moves our grandparents made from Arkansas, Mississippi, Georgia, and other southern states to the Midwest in the 1940s and '50s and the ways they shared resources and looked out for one another as they forged new communities of care in a region far from their hometowns and families and where anti-Black racism wasn't nonexistent, but reconfigured in different ways. With this connection, Ashley highlighted how our acts of caring for and supporting one another as Black girls navigating the afterlife of slavery within our schools and communities was a part of a long legacy of Black people pulling up for each other's needs and providing the resources and supports that societal institutions (the government, schools, etc.) failed to. Here, our multigenerational acts of collective care are reflective of Gwendolyn Brooks' 1976 poem titled "Paul Robeson": "we are each other's/ harvest:/ we are each other's/ business:/ we are each other's/ magnitude and bond."

Spaces for Learning: Black Girl Bonds as a Context for Meaning Making

As a space for learning and meaning making, our relationships/bonds exist in opposition to the normative ways learning is expected to take place in compulsory learning settings that do not value relationality as a key feature in the learning process. In schools where our friendships might have been viewed as little more than a nuisance and contrasted sharply with the white, patriarchal, classed norms forwarded in schools, the Lansing Group members described their bonds with their fellow Black girls as a significant context in their life for learning and meaning making. In Keiondra's experience, the BGBs she was a part of represented not only a chosen space in which she could show up authentically (in ways she was not always welcomed to in the classroom), but also as a context for learning and meaning making. Keiondra stated, "I've had these strong friendships that are very much my biggest sites of learning, I think. Yeah. And I felt like my identity was always supported there and like my friends would also like call me out on stuff" (5.18.22). Despite Keiondra having been a "high achieving" student academically, she still noted that it was not school or specific classes that were her most important sites of learning, but her friendships. Keiondra also speaks to her friendships as a site where she was constructively challenged and "called out" by her friends. Instead of this being a practice of shaming or ridicule, Keiondra frames this as a practice that opened up opportunities for self-reflection, unlearning, and growth. Keiondra’s experience offers insight into the kind of holistic learning that can take place when relational learning practices are prioritized and when BGBs in particular, and friendships more broadly, are viewed as core sites for teaching and learning.

Further, members of the Lansing Group expounded on the idea of Black Girl Bonds as a space for meaning making through their discussions of the multiple expressions of learning and connectedness that are allowed for and prioritized in the context of Black girls’ relationships and the spaces they carve out for one another. Mikaila addressed this:

> I don't think I was cognizant of it at the time at all, but there's something about being around Black women and like laughing together and being able to share and like, kicking it and having a good time, but also talking about something serious or venting.
> That was so normalized for us at that point because, that’s who all of the homies was.
> You know, we could all relate on some level to each other…” (3.19.22)

Mikaila highlights the significance of being in an all-Black girl space that was shaped by our bonds with one another as a collective group of Black girl friends. In this context, we held space for our laughter, silliness, and joy, as well as space for each other to process our experiences and emotions that felt more serious. In the context of BGBs, both were prioritized and considered vital pieces of our collective learning process. Our ability to relate to one another based on the intersections of our related race, gender, and class, among other shared features of identity and connected experiences, we were able to make meaning of the world around us without fear, pressure, or restraint. These points raised by Keiondra and Mikaila, as well as by the other members of the Lansing group further reflect BGBs as a site for more expansive learning and sensemaking. These points also help negate the idea that friendships are an irrelevant factor in regard to our academic trajectory. Additionally, they challenge educators and schools at large to reevaluate what standards of success should be based upon, and the need to take relational learning into consideration as a vital factor.

The Impossibility of Black Girl "Worthiness"/The Thin Line of Legibility

Worthy of Care, or Nah?

Across the Lansing group sessions, worthiness emerged as a prominent theme. As the Lansing group members reflected on their experiences navigating K-12 school settings, their communities, and society at large during our group discussions and one-on-one interview/dialogues, all five co-researchers addressed ways notions of worthiness had appeared throughout their lives. These notions of worthiness were specific to their experiences as Black girls and the ways in which institutions (i.e., schools), adults (i.e., teachers, administrators, etc.), and norms (i.e., school rules), among other factors, determined who was worthy of humanization, care, protection, just treatment, and a quality education. Given the ontological position of Black girls and women within the context of the U.S., as shaped by the intersecting oppressions of anti-Black racism, the cisheteropatriarchy, and the ever-enduring afterlife of slavery, worthiness is also tied to legibility (Spillers, 1987). As a result, the co-researchers described the pressure they felt to try to achieve worthiness and legibility through academic success and respectable behavior, and/or their dawning understanding as Black teen girls that they would need to be especially skilled and/or talented for them to even be considered as *possibly* worthy of attention and care within schools.

When discussing their learning experiences, Lansing Group members also noted how their experiences navigating schools and society more broadly taught them tough lessons about the disposability of Black girls. Despite the love they received form their families in their homes and kinship networks, when they left the context of those spaces, they received alternative messages about who was worthy of care and protection—with Black girls often being left out of those groups. When discussing significant learning experiences throughout her life, Mikaila described a memory of being a prepubescent sixth grader and being cat-called by grown men during her walk home from school:

> And I do think, like I said, being a Black woman specifically, because of how people treat you, because of how disposable you might be or because of how you might be sexualized or, you know, people project aggression or anger or whatever on you, that then impacts how they treat you or what they think you are deserving of. Yeah. And so, I think as far as learning experiences go, understanding how to navigate the world as a Black woman was like the biggest thing, whether it's in those personal relationships, familial relationships, academic environments, all of that stuff. (7.1.22)

Here, Mikaila challenges normative understandings of what "learning experiences" can look like and the shape they can take. Her sentiments reflect how Black girls are not only responsible for learning school subjects like Algebra and U.S. Government, but more importantly, they are required to learn how to "navigate the world as a Black woman" as a means of survival. Part of this learning involves recognizing how Black girls and women, without their consent, can become an object for others to project their negative emotions onto and in turn, this reflects what forms of care, protection, etc. Black girls and women are or are not considered worthy and deserving of. Mikaila's words reflect how these lessons around worthiness translate to Black girls' experiences across multiple areas of their lives, including schooling. This is a vital learning because Black girls' survival and wellbeing are dependent on this within the context of institutions that continue to function as sites of the afterlife of slavery, including schools.

Relatedly, when reflecting on her experiences of girlhood, Coop described the discomfort she felt based on the ways some of her teachers discussed gender and the snide comments and asides they would make about how she dressed. Coop discussed not knowing a lot about different identities at that time, but noted that she did have a clear understanding of herself as a tomboy and she dressed in ways that reflected that. Coop stated,

> But you know at the very least I knew that I was a tomboy. I loved to, you know, dress how I felt more comfortable in, in masculine presenting clothing. And so, I felt like there were certain teachers who would, if not directly say anything to me, but comments may have been made…in general, you know, to suggests certain things.

Coop's words reflect how even as a young girl in elementary and middle school she encountered teachers who disagreed with how she dressed and showed up in the world and in turn took issue with her gender expression. From an early age, Coop found comfort in dressing in more masculine presenting ways that reflected her tomboy sense of style, comfort, and identity. Coop also noted how her desire and decision to dress in more masculine presenting ways was something her mother supported and that was not an issue in her home. However, when entering various classrooms and school spaces, Coop observed how her bodily autonomy and gender expression was not respected or even viewed as acceptable by some of her educators. She also recognized how she was not protected from her teacher's judgment and how that judgment may have influenced the ways her teachers taught, assessed, and engaged with her as a student. Coop's experience also reflects the layers of dehumanization that Black girls can experience in schools when these institutions frame their race, gender, and gender performance as unacceptable and therefore illegible and unworthy of care and protection in these spaces.

These early lessons that Mikaila and Coop were taught about their Black girl bodies and existence were also lessons in worthiness and who it was limited to. These lessons also taught them that they would need to protect themselves in order to survive (i.e. street harassment, unsafe classrooms, society at large). These lessons would carry over into their learning experiences throughout high school and would collide with similar considerations about the near impossibility of Black girl worthiness. Similarly, ideas about the ongoing illegibility of Black girls in schools was also reflected in the stories, ideas, and critiques of other Lansing Group members.

School Performance and Legibility

In the context of schools, the Lansing Group members encountered various pressures and expectations about what it might mean to strive for legibility within schools and to be considered worthy of humanizing care and support throughout their academic journeys. The intersecting oppressions of enduring antiblackness and the cis-heteropatriarchy create the basis of illegibility for Black girls in schools, and this becomes manifest in the unrealistic expectations Black girls face regarding ways they must perform in order to achieve some notion of worthiness. The stories of the Lansing Group members reveal that these unrealistic expectations and pursuits of worthiness are merely a catch-22.

This was mirrored in Ashley's experience as an honor roll student, high achieving student athlete, and student leader who, despite these accolades felt unseen and unworthy at school. During multiple one-on-one interview-dialogues and Lansing Group sessions, Ashley expressed that the classroom was not a space where she had felt safe. During these dialogues, Ashley described her desire to have a schooling experience like the ones she saw on television sitcoms where students had close relationships with their teachers and were regarded as "good students."

However, Ashley's academic experiences throughout high school did not reflect those "Boy Meets World" or "Lizzie McGuire" narratives. Instead, Ashley noted how she did not have any favorite teachers in high school or teachers whom she felt particularly seen by or cared for, despite her academic success and her deep investment in being a person with "good character."

One specific example Ashley shared of the disconnect she felt between herself and her teachers was her experience in her twelfth-grade AP Literature class. Ashley described herself as entering this class at the start of her senior year excited to learn and excel in this course, and initially liking her teacher. However, as the school year proceeded, her perception of the course changed as her AP Literature teacher constantly corrected her English because of her use of Black English/AAVE (African American Vernacular English) and assigned her seats in the back of the classroom where she couldn't see well and that made her feel removed and disconnected from the learning taking place. When reflecting on this, Ashley expressed how across her schooling experiences, English classes had not always felt like welcoming spaces because of the way she spoke and it sometimes being framed as "broken English." This became amplified for Ashely in the context of her AP Literature class, where one of the few ways her teacher engaged with her was in the form of corrections of her speech. Despite her attempts to perform well in AP Literature and as a student overall, Ashley's description of her experience in that class reflect a sense of feeling dismissed and disregarded in that class as a Black girl who spoke Black English and who therefore was not considered worthy of being invested in as a student. Scholars like April Baker Bell (2020) and Lamar Johnson (2018) have documented the harmful and violent experiences that Black students have faced in schools, similar to Ashley, when speaking and living in AAVE/Black English. Both scholars call for a needed change in English education and across disciplines to affirm rather than shame Black students for being bidialectal and bringing all of their languages and literacies with them to the classroom.

Further, Ashley further reflected on the frustrations she felt while trying to achieve a sense of worthiness in schools and the catch-22 nature of this endeavor during one of our Lansing Group sessions.

> …even through high school, for me in so many spaces, I didn't really feel seen…And, you know, academically…my grades was good, but I wasn't nobody's teacher's pet. And for some reason that bothered me to go through a high school. It sounds a little silly, but, you know, that's kind of where my thought process was. So being able to have my friends where I can just be myself, I can be unique, I can be about my grades, my interests, be extra silly. And, you know, just talk about things that I want to talk about at the time. I don't have to fit into a box that this world wants for me. So, I feel like I'm a good person because that's really what it translated to me for so long was like I have to perform in this way because that makes me be a good person. And that's the only way. And it was really stressful, like really stressful to the point where, by the time I got to college, I was like, I'm burned out…So, I just think that can be very toxic when you have people that you're looking up to, people that you're looking to guide you who are kind of shaping you to fit into this norm. And it strips you of your creativity, it strips you of your power if you really think about it, because the people who are outside of the box, those are the people who are shifting change.

Ashley’s reflections shed light on how deeply school performance and the constant pursuit of academic worthiness (as a goal that is systematically positioned out of reach) for Black girls can be damaging on their psyche and lead to burnout. Despite Ashley working tirelessly to earn good grades and to be seen as worthy of care and positive attention from her teachers, her efforts continued to prove futile. Ashley's experience may lead to questions of, what must Black girls do, what must they give, what parts of themselves must they sacrifice in order to be genuinely humanized as students? However, these questions must be revised to address schools and related institutions of education to hold them accountable for changing their conditions to humanize Black girls and to cultivate learning experiences that regard Black girls as always already worthy of care and protection. Ashley's experience also represents an indictment of educational systems that are unsustainable for Black girls mental and physical wellbeing because of what it requires them to sacrifice (so many parts of themselves) in order to conform to their unrealistic standards.

Similar to Ashley, Keiondra had a long history of academic achievement. For her, school represented a double edge sword for her as a "high achieving" Black girl. Although Keiondra graduated from EHS as a valedictorian and now holds a Doctor of Philosophy in sociology, she noted that during her middle and high school years, school was not a sustaining space for her. During a one-on-one interview Keiondra said, "So…if I'm thinking about formal spaces, not very well has my identity been supported outside of being like good at school" (5.18.22). Further, Keiondra described how, as a student, she knew how to "do" school well. Although Keiondra had mastered the skill of performing school well, she also recognized that schools would only value her as long as she was able to perform to their standards of academic and behavioral success.

Keiondra's experiences in mainstream public schools (like those she had attended in middle and high school) revealed to her that those learning settings were not interested in demonstrating to her through their curriculum, teacher demographics, or school norms that they also valued her history and culture. Keiondra described the significant shift she experienced in her academic journey when she began attending public schools in middle school after attending an Afrocentric elementary school where her Black identity was affirmed through the curriculum and programming and where her intellectual interests were piqued. When transitioning to mainstream public schools during middle school, Keiondra recognized a shift in how she was regarded as a student and how she was judged based on a measure of respectability. In mainstream public schools she received praise for being good at school and suddenly found herself having been pigeonholed as an *exceptional* Black girl.

Keiondra described the effect this had on her: "But I felt like I was very like pigeonholed into one specific identity as like the good student" (5.18.22). Schools became a learning setting that only valued Keiondra for her ability to perform to their expectations. Alternatively, schools did not honor any expectations Keiondra had of them to discuss her history (Black history) in asset-based ways, embrace and celebrate Black culture through curriculum and instructional models, and to support her living an expansive Black girlhood in which she could learn about herself holistically and grow into a version of herself that was so much more than the narrow definition of a "good student." Keiondra further expounded on this:

> Part of that in my youth was that school was a great place for me because I felt like I was doing it well. But looking back, it's because of the praise that I was given in that space. But it didn't allow me to grow and figure out really who I was. It was just like, "oh, you're good at this, we will praise you for this." (5.18.22)

Keiondra acknowledges that although she was praised for knowing how to do school well, that praise did nothing to sustain her as a Black girl in school. Throughout adolescence, the singular part of Keiondra that was identified as worthy of praise within schools was her ability to do or perform school well, which often required that she conform to the narrow expectations of what it meant to be a “good student.” This conception of a “good student” is mired in respectability politics, which has deeply gendered expectations and can require Black girls to dull and even sacrifice parts of themselves to achieve this.

These pursuits of being a “good student” and respectable Black girl represent yet another catch-22/ “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” framework in which worthiness is always out of reach for Black girls. In this regard, to attempt worthiness in schools requires that Black girls sacrifice some part of themselves in the hopes of possibly receiving praise, humanization, protection, and the ability to exist in the full complexity of their being. Keiondra described how being praised for performing school well kept her on a narrow path toward perceived academic excellence and prevented her from figuring out who she really was. There is a recognition here by Keiondra that she knew she was always so much more than the limiting identities she was being pigeonholed into. As I reflect on the burnout that Ashley experienced after years of pursuing scholastic worthiness, the opportunities that Keiondra was not granted in schools to learn about herself outside of the “exceptional Black girl” identity schools tried to pigeonhole her into, and the similar experiences I faced as a classmate who was often tracked into the same classes as them and yoked with similar pressures, I am reminded of the narrow possibilities that exist for how Black girls can show up in schools and how harmful this is. Ashley and Keiondra’s experiences also offered us a necessary launching place for critiquing the systems of education that perpetuate these harms against Black girl students, and an entry point toward envisioning how schools can be reimagined in ways that support Black girls’ ability to exist expansively and that sustain their lives, languages, and cultural ways of knowing. Our stories of schooling and those that have followed and now come from the current generation of Black girls suggest that it is urgent for us to begin or return to this practice of reimagining schools. In doing so, we can dream up and co-create spaces in which Black girls can give their energy to learning and creating beyond white supremacy, antiblackness, and sexism, instead of focusing their time and attention on surviving unhealthy schooling environments that require them to sacrifice vital parts of themselves in the pursuit of worthiness.

Illegibility & Creativity: What Schools Won't See

As adults, all of the members of the Lansing Group maintain creative interests that show up in their lives as artistic pastimes, creative rituals, and professional practices that they hold degrees and certifications in. Their creative and artistic mediums range from photography, to music curation, to baking, to creative writing. Throughout their childhood and adolescence, the seeds of these creative interests were present, but unfortunately, not watered in schools. Despite the creative brilliance that the Black women, once Black girls, in this group possess, their stories of schooling reflect how their positioning as "substudents" (due to their Blackness) and their framing as illegible in schools due to the intersections of their race and gender influenced the lack of attention or consideration their creative interests and inclinations were given throughout their educational journeys. In this section I explore how "the creative potential of Black girlhood" (Brown, 2013) can go unacknowledged in the context of schools that contribute to the dehumanization of Black girls and subsequently regard their artistic interests and creative sensemaking skills as further impossibilities and/or as creative outlets that they must show great promise in before schools decide that they are worthy of investing in.

During their one-on-one interview/dialogues, both Asha and Coop expressed how they wondered what their schooling experiences would have been like if their teachers had taken the time to learn about, acknowledge, and help foster their creative interests and passions. These wonderings also came up again for both co-researchers during their one-on-one interview/dialogues. When describing themselves, both Asha and Coop named themselves as "creatives." Throughout this project, both members also discussed how their creativity and artistic practices have deeply influenced how they exist in the world and continue to shape their interests and imaginings.

Asha described the ways her creative interests were cultivated throughout her childhood by her parents. Growing up she was in ballet, kept drawing journals, explored clay-making, and baking. As a trained pastry chef and small-business owner of a home-based baking company that specializes in cookies and cakes, Asha also noted how her parents' encouragement of her creative pursuits helped her to ultimately earn her culinary degree and start her own business. However, this came after years of Asha pursuing more formalized educational paths, including multiple years of undergrad at a state university. During our group and one-on-one dialogues, Asha noted how schools were structured in ways that did not support her creativity. The schools Asha attended did not offer classes or programs that might have cultivated her creative interests and honed her artistic skills, beyond general visual art classes[8]. Also, teachers did not acknowledge or invest in Asha's creative interests because it was good enough that she was a quiet and well-behaved student who earned good grades. Asha explained this further during one of our Lansing Group sessions:

> In high school, I felt like because I was quiet and had good grades and didn't really get in any trouble, people kind of put me in this category of loving academics. And I told you how I

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[8] This was particularly frustrating given that EHS was a performance arts magnet school. The effects of ongoing budget cuts that the school district experienced could often be seen in the arts departments and also by the lack of robust arts-course offerings available at EHS. EHS and the district it is a part of has largely served Black, Latinx, and Southeast Asian youth living in the city, many of whom (myself included) have come from working class or lower-middle class families. This leads to further considerations of the ways Black and Brown youth are fed messages of their worthiness as students and how deserving they are or are not of receiving a quality education when they bear witness to financial divestment from their schools.

> knew how to do school. It's not that I literally liked my classes or anything. I just knew how to get through, get good grades, stay quiet type of thing…because people thought I was a certain way, they just assumed that I like certain things, and nobody really knew that I was creative. And just think, if even my teachers really knew that I was a creative person, how different my experience might have been. So, it was interesting to see how schooling can be for certain people…Yes, I know there's a lot of students, so not every teacher's going to know everything about you. But just think of how many students don't really hone in on what their gifts really are because everybody goes off assumption. (3.19.22)

Here, Asha's reflections connect to Keiondra's discussion of knowing how to "do school" well and that being enough to satisfy her teachers and school administrators, but also how that foreclosed opportunities for her to learn more about herself outside of the "good student" identity she'd been pigeonholed into. Although Asha does not describe bearing the weight of that particular identity, her words illuminate how easy it was for her teachers, and the school structure more broadly, to dismiss any parts of her that extended beyond what made her an easily manageable Black girl student. Asha, as a multidimensional Black woman with artistic interests and a long history of creative practices, was not made legible (i.e. seen, cared for, and humanized) in the context of school. Again, the narrow possibilities for how Black girls can show up in schools becomes apparent and in Asha's case, it worked to render her creativity another illegible feature of her identity in schools. Although Asha was able to reject and refuse this narrow, restrictive box schools tried to place her in after she graduated high school and ultimately pursued an artistic education, Asha also describes the cost this required. Asha addressed the years and money she and her family spent investing in "formalized" educational pursuits that did not actually align with her artistic goals and desired career path. As noted in the quote above, Asha reflected on how her life might have been different had she had access to high school classes that could have introduced her to the culinary arts and/or related artistic mediums and if she had been supported by teachers who saw and invested in her creativity. Asha's words are not lined with regret, but rather, they challenge us to imagine schools differently—in ways that support this vision of Black girl creativity and prowess that could be nurtured and supported in and across school settings.

Related to Asha's experience is Coop's. Coop is a photographer, owns a t-shirt business that offers designs celebrating Black, queer women, and has also dabbled in DJing, among other creative pursuits. Similar to Asha, the threads of these artistic interests were present throughout Coop's life, but as a K-12 student, there were not available and/or accessible programs and classes to help weave these interests into more pronounced practices. Also, throughout our group sessions and one-on-one dialogues, Coop shared that she did not have educators throughout her educational journey who recognized or affirmed her creative interests.

When discussing her educational experiences, Coop described how her creative interests, along with her passion for Black history, racial justice, and addressing economic inequality were supported by her family members, but in schooling contexts, her interests and passions were neither encouraged nor discouraged by educators. When further reflecting on her schooling experiences, Coop described feeling uncomfortable in classes when she didn't know certain things and how she was made to feel like something was wrong with her if she didn't quickly grasp the topics being taught. Coop described how she would respond to this: "I may not have raised my hand or, you know, attempted more clarification or anything like that and [I] just fell back on it. So, those were definitely things that I was never comfortable with and that really shaped my learning experience throughout the grades" (7.1.22). Here, Coop notes how these negative experiences she encountered in the classroom were not isolated incidents that held no merit, but rather, were ongoing ways she was made to question her legitimacy as a student, which ultimately shaped her learning experiences throughout her educational journey.

Coops words offer further insight to the impossible standards of Black girl academic achievement and the judgment and dismissive treatment that occurs when Black girls do not perform school in “normative” ways. When Black girls are framed as “substudents” and are therefore not humanized in classrooms, there becomes zero room for them to make mistakes and they are denied learning supports (i.e. the re-teaching of concepts, clarifications, one-on-one student/teacher conferencing, and/or other accommodations and modifications to lessons). When Black girls do not perform school in “normative” ways, it can also affect their future trajectory. When reflecting on her high school experience, Coop acknowledged that she felt like she didn’t have alternatives to college because that was the only thing that was pushed at EHS, but this was not a path she wanted to take. This lack of choice and options became a central factor why she joined the military. A question lingers here: How might Coop’s educational and professional trajectory have differed if she’d had the resources, opportunity, and permission to learn in arts-based ways that honored her sensemaking skills and creative interests? How might her learning across contexts have been transformed? However, when schools that uphold white supremacy and antiblackness preclude Black girls from being made legible in their contexts based on the intersections of Black girls’ race and gender, their artistic skills and creative interests can also be rendered illegible in these contexts that are barely tolerant of Black girls who perform school in the sterile, Eurocentric ways these types of schools demand.

Coop would go on to describe the negative treatment she experienced throughout her learning experiences and the feelings of discomfort it created as something she internally rejected. As the two of us dialogued about her internal rejection of this treatment, we also paused to imagine how our learning experiences might have been different if there were school-based opportunities and/or community programs that supported our creative interests. In this space of collective imagining, our laughter became interwoven with our shared interest in music and the consideration of what our learning experiences might have been like if there had been a beat making class we could have participated in (especially given the ways we were all so skilled at recreating The Clipse's "Grinding" beat on our desks with nothing more than our hands a #2 Ticonderoga). Our collective imagining and laughter throughout is, in itself, a decade-plus refusal of accepting the narrow conceptions of Black girlhood that our schools sought to limit us to and the treatment we each received in light of this. The art that Coop now makes further punctuates this refusal and I imagine it as a way that she also nurtures and affirms her younger self.

Asha and Coop's experiences offer considerations for the need for school spaces and learning practices that support Black girls as creative beings. This first starts with the creation of opportunities for students to display their creative and artistic interests and sensemaking practices and also integrating learning opportunities across disciplines every academic year for Black girls to utilize their creative sensemaking skills as a way to engage in the learning process. Additionally, the ways Asha and Coop imagined how their educational experiences might have been different if their creativity and artistic interests had been made legible and supported has positioned us to also imagine and work toward enacting justice-based learning spaces and experiences that center Black girls and their creative potential.

Chosen Spaces

In Moore and Paris' 2021 article, we define chosen spaces as "community organizations and programs, elective classes, and/or extracurricular clubs that students choose to participate in and have the agency to refuse their membership in" (p. 21). Building with Maisha Winn's concept of Participatory Literacy Communities (Winn/Fisher, 2005), chosen spaces represent an alternative model of what schools/compulsory learning settings could become, especially when they center the humanity of Black girls. As I learned with and from the Lansing Group throughout this project, what emerged during our time together was an ongoing practice of us working collaboratively to build a learning space that could serve as a site of return for us, and a space for collectively imagining more just learning settings and experiences for Black girls. Chosen spaces, as spaces that are designed around consent-based learning experiences, often stand in contrast to compulsory school settings that uphold white supremacy and that function with the logics of antiblackness. The findings in this section offer insight into the ways chosen spaces allow for a critical reimagining of formal/compulsory education spaces. Additionally, this section addresses the ways in which Black girls and women co-create chosen spaces as a homeplace (hooks, 2015) and space of belonging; how our friendships and Black Girl Bonds can represent chosen spaces that we can always choose to return to; and chosen spaces as contexts in which Black girl render each other legible and whole—spaces where we become humanized through our relationships with one another. Another significant understanding that emerged from the Lansing Group regarding the possibilities that chosen spaces create for Black girls is how these spaces offer opportunities to imagine what other learning spaces could look like/become. This was an especially salient point for the Lansing group given our many years of practice of imagining and enacting the spaces that we need when they are/have been missing from our lives, schools, and communities.

Chosen Spaces as a Site for Reimagining: Imagining Schools Anew Through Art and Story

Although much of the previous section in this chapter, "The Impossibility of Black Girl "Worthiness"/The Thin Line of Legibility," discussed ways that Lansing Group members encountered dehumanizing experiences throughout their K-12 educational journeys, during our group sessions and one-on-one dialogues we also spent time reminiscing and reflecting fondly on positive memories of our time together in school. This could be seen reflected in statements made by Lansing Group members like Keiondra who acknowledged the nostalgia she felt after our first group session where we shared countless stories of the ways our friendships had deeply influenced our schooling experiences. Similarly, during a later group session, Mikaila offered a description of her high school experience by stating, "I would consider it whimsical and quirky and very coming of age" (3.19.22). Mikaila also noted how her description stands in stark contrast to the deficit perspectives those not affiliated with EHS often had of our school and of us as mostly Black and Brown and largely working-class students at EHS.

Although the formal school structure at EHS and what it demanded of us as Black girls was often unfair and limiting, throughout the time we spent together in high school as peers, friends, and chosen kin, we created networks of support, systems of care, and chosen spaces of belonging for each other through our relationships with one another. When the school failed to humanize us Black girls, we imagined and enacted an otherwise space of safety, care, protection, and worthiness for each other in the context of our friendships. This was a space of our own choosing, and one that we could leave and/or refuse participation in at any time, which is something that schools did not permit us to do without consequences. Throughout adolescence, we built these spaces that we needed for each other as Black teen girls within the contexts of our friendships, and often without a deep awareness of the power that existed in this radical act of collective co-creation. Given our long history of engaging in this practice, it felt appropriate and even necessary to carve out time for us to intentionally imagine what we would like schools that center and sustain Black girls to be like. We engaged in this individual and collective act of imagining through the creation of our "Reimagining Schools" projects.

The "Reimagining Schools" project is an arts-based activity that the Lansing Group engaged in following our initial group discussions about Black girls' relationships with each other and to schools. This project was introduced as an opportunity for us to both imagine and design a school setting that intentionally centers and sustains Black girls and all of our creativity and brilliance. Group members were welcomed to choose whatever artistic medium they desired and preferred to render their designs of a learning setting that would prioritize creating justice-based learning experiences for Black girls. To jumpstart our thinking about this project, we began by collectively working on a sensory-based brainstorming activity that involved us identifying the ways we wanted our reimagined schools to look, sound, smell, taste, and feel. Our experience working through the brainstorming activity generated laughter, detailed ideas, and affirmations from Lansing Group members about the ideas their fellow group members shared. This context created a space of joy for us to (re)enter in the practice of reimagining the educational and schooling spaces we desired for current and future generations of Black girls to have.

When discussing what we wanted our reimagined schools to look like, Lansing Group members offered ideas like spacious, filled with Black art, modern architectural designs, filled with updated resources, including plenty of books by Black authors. Additionally, group members described how there would be a huge emphasis in their school on teacher selection and curriculum design and cited the need for the educators in their schools to be critical and for the curriculum to reflect Black and POC history that is culturally relevant and sustaining. When considering what we wanted our schools to sound like, four of the Lansing Group members mentioned laughter, others offered cited joy, there were discussions of changing the class period bells to something more comforting and less shrill, and to incorporating the sound of affirmations to replace the pledge of allegiance. As we imagined what we wanted our reimagined schools to smell and taste like, Lansing Group members offered ideas like food and accessibility to food, home cooked meals, fresh ingredients, and fresh air. To sum up their expectations for desired smells and tastes, Coop stated, “Make it smell good up in that mug,” and I couldn’t agree more.

Finally, when we imagined what we wanted our reimagined schools to feel like, folks shared ideas like excited, loved, and wanted purely because of your existence and not because of what you could do or how you could perform as a student. Additionally, Lansing Group members said that they wanted their schools to feel like going to your grandma’s house and being safe and protected, and for students at school to feel rested and in control their bodies and what they need, and for there to also be care and support for mental health and neurodivergence. Also, group members shared that they wanted their schools to feel like quality, to feel safe (for students to not have to be on guard all the time), and for the space to feel welcoming and to make students feel like their presence is wanted. Lansing Group members contrasted this last feeling with EHS and the ways students would be kicked out of the school in the afternoons and there would be literal locks and chains placed on the doors to keep kids out. In additional to these sensory elements we discussed incorporating into our schools, Keiondra also described the importance of centering youth voice in this process. She noted that although we were partaking in this project for our time together, if this was a real process of designing a school to be built for Black girls, it would be vital to have Black girls deeply involved in the design and decision-making process.

Below are the reimagining school projects that Ashley, Coop, Mikaila, Keiondra, and I created. Each of them were created in ways that reflect the ideas and commitments we had to the design of our vision of a school that intentionally centers and sustains Black girls. Ashley's project is a guided meditation of affirmations and grounding practices for Black girls and women. Some the affirmations included in the guided meditation address the theme of worthiness: "Repeat, I am worthy of all things." Other affirmations called on the wisdom of Black, queer, feminist writer, Audre Lorde: "There is no one like you. Don't sleep on yourself. Taking care of yourself is not selfish but necessary" (4.16.22). Ashley's project led us as a group to reflect on the ways she was transforming the role of silence, calmness, and stillness into a healing and affirmative practice. This stands in contrast to the ways silence is used in some schools as a punishment and way to police students.

Coop's project is a video collage of images that represent the feelings and features of her imagined school, all set to the sound of Solange's song, "Dreams." Some of the images Coop included were photos she had taken of murals around metro-Atlanta depicting Black women and girls. Coop described how she would have murals inside and outside of her school, and how she would have some of the students at the school, "who have those gifts like actually paint murals outside the school" (4.16.22).

Keiondra's project is a collage of images that represent the art, feelings of Black joy, leadership, and more that she would have embodied and implemented in her school. Keiondra described how she wanted her school to have pro-black administrators and board of directors like Issa Rae and for the sounds, visuals, and tastes in the school to feel like, "You know they're the shit." Keiondra also highlighted a picture she'd included in the center of the collage of two Black girls hugging and stated, "No matter what they're doing in this space I want there to be so much black joy. like this picture here just brings me so much joy. Like friendship and laughter and just good times for them" (4.16.22).

Mikaila's project is a mixtape titled, "the art of the kickback." Mikaila described how she chose to take a different approach to the project and instead of designing a reimagined school, she created a piece of art to honor how "transformative and unique" her high school experience was and how she now has a deep appreciation for that time period (although she didn't necessarily at the time). The artwork for the mixtape is designed to feel vintage and spark a sense of nostalgia through the incorporated images of EHS. The mixtape includes an A-side and B-side list of songs that she described as holding value to her experience and some which she explained as offering messages that resonated with what it meant to be self-determined Black girls. In describing the significance of the title of the mixtape Mikaila stated, "The kickback was everywhere, or that you're always invited to one or one would just randomly sprout up because a bunch of homies was just like hanging out together" (4.16.22). In this light, "the kickback" becomes a metaphor for chosen spaces and honors our younger selves and the spaces we co-created with and for each other to exist wholly.

("Reimagined School" projects featured below)

Figure 4.

Ashley’s “Reimagined School” Project

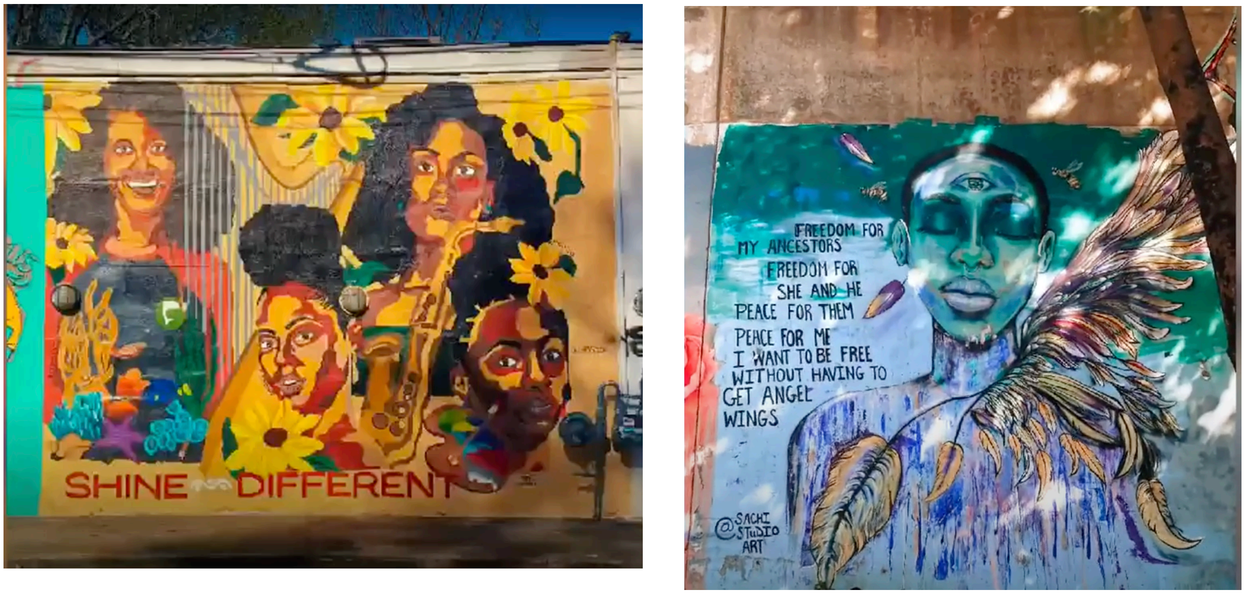

SHINE DIFFERENT
FREEDOM FOR MY ANCESTORS
FREEDOM FOR SHE AND HE
PEACE FOR THEM
PEACE FOR ME
I WANT TO BE FREE WITHOUT HAVING TO GET ANGEL WINGS
@SACHI STUDIO ART

Figure 5.

Coop’s “Reimagined School” Project

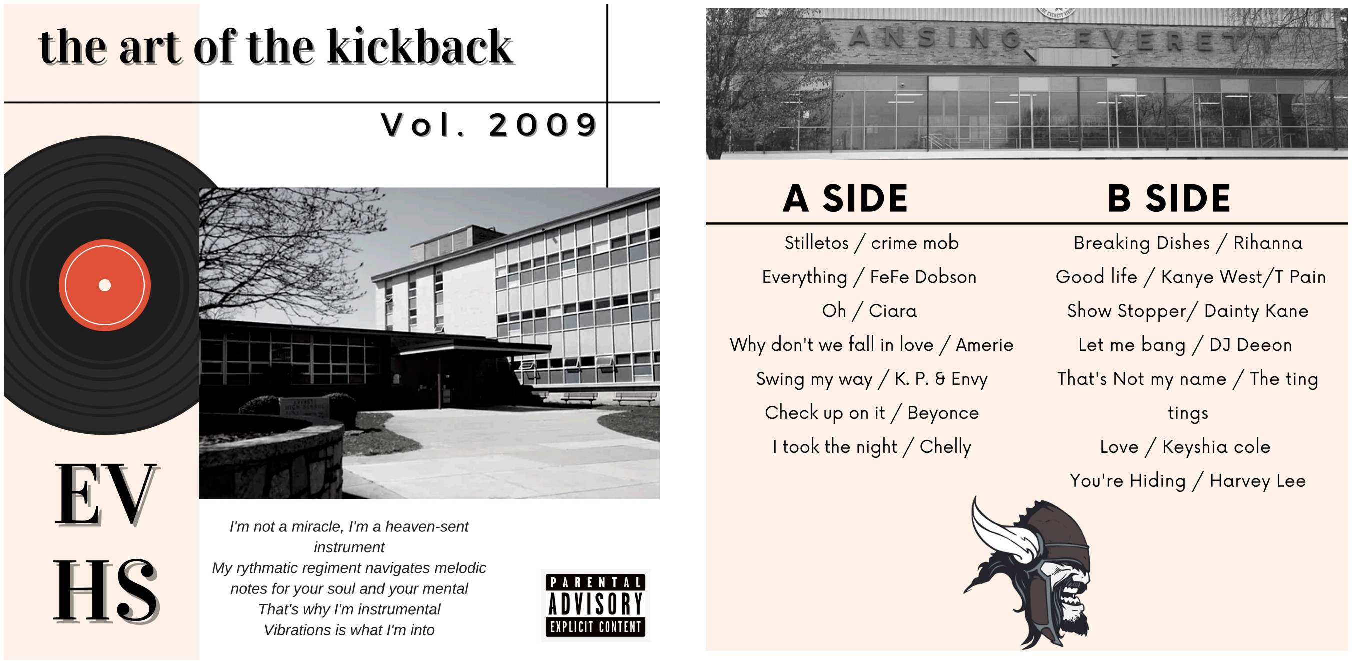
(2 images from the video collage)

Figure 6.

QR code that will direct you to Jazmen’s “Reimagined School” Project

Figure 7.

QR code that will direct you to Keiondra’s “Reimagined School” Project



the art of the kickback

Vol. 2009

EV
HS

I'm not a miracle, I'm a heaven-sent instrument
My rythmatic regiment navigates melodic notes for your soul and your mental
That's why I'm instrumental
Vibrations is what I'm into

PARENTAL ADVISORY EXPLICIT CONTENT

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Check up on it / Beyonce
I took the night / Chelly

B SIDE

Breaking Dishes / Rihanna
Good life / Kanye West/T Pain
Show Stopper/ Dainty Kane
Let me bang / DJ Deeon
That's Not my name / The ting tings
Love / Keyshia cole
You're Hiding / Harvey Lee

Figure 8.

Mikaila’s “Reimagined School” Project

When reflecting on our experience of creating and sharing our "reimagined schools" projects with each other, Ashley noted how our imagining and design process involved us identifying the resources, programs, and supports that were not available to us throughout our K-12 school experiences and intentionally incorporating those that Black girls need. Mikaila discussed how the creation and sharing of our projects positioned her to think about the ways she can advocate for making education more liberation based within her position of leadership in higher education. Also, after Coop shared her "reimagining school project" and told us that it was titled "Black Girl Magic School Bus" the rest of us immediately reacted in excitement and began sharing ideas and brainstorming ways we could, with Coop's permission, transform "Black Girl Magic School Bus" into a program for Black teen girls where we could all share our stories about our schooling experiences, or transform it into a social media page where Black girls from around the world can share their ideas and art about their learning experiences and their creativity. In this moment of us celebrating and affirming Coop's creative rendering of her reimagined school, we were also returning to our practice of dreaming up and imaging future spaces for Black girls to come and be in community with each other in. This in itself is an act of freedom dreaming (Kelley, 2022) and us creating an alternate world or different path. Through the creation of this path, we also tap into our Black girl navigational practices (Butler, 2018) and contribute to the act of we're mapping a different world and imagining what it could be for Black girls moving forward.

Chosen Spaces: Girlhood/Then

Throughout our bimonthly Lansing Group sessions and one-on-one dialogues, it became clear that the creation of our reimagined school projects were influenced by the chosen spaces of Black girlhood that we had participated in and/or carved out for ourselves. Across our time together throughout this project, Asha, Ashley, Coop, Keiondra, Mikaila, and I reflected on how the chosen space of our friendships gave us permission to show up as ourselves without pretense, and without the need to perform a limiting version of Black girlhood. In this section, I will touch on some of the chosen spaces of our teen years and discuss what they represented for us then, and the promise the memory and legacy of these spaces still holds for us now.

The chosen space of our friendships. Although the language of "chosen space" may imply that a brick-and-mortar setting must be involved, that is by no means the case. In the context of "chosen spaces" a physical space is not a prerequisite. The spaces of our choosing can be virtual, found within the structure of familial relationships, and or in the case of the Lansing Group, these sites are made real in the context of our friendships. Keiondra noted during one of our Lansing group sessions that when we first began discussing the idea of chosen spaces and spaces of belonging during our group sessions, she initially thought that she was not a part of any during her teen years. This was due to her inability to participate in many after school extra-curriculars because of her responsibilities as an older sibling. However, Keiondra mentioned that after she heard the rest of the Lansing Group discussing our chosen spaces as each other, she identified with this as well and realized that she did indeed have chosen spaces throughout her teenage years.

Keiondra's epiphany also offers us a reminder that when it comes to chosen spaces, what is more important than the presence of a physical setting are the conditions that create a chosen space and what those conditions allow for/make possible. For example, in the context of the chosen space of our friendships, we did not have to withstand any pressure to achieve standards of success that required that we sacrifice ourselves and our wellbeing in the process. Unlike the experiences many of us described having across our time in K-12 schools, in the chosen space of our friendships we were always, already worthy of care, love, and support, and this was not something we ever had to prove ourselves deserving of. This was represented in the stories we told of the ways we as Black teen girls pulled up for each other's needs, shared resources through practices of collective care, laughed with and celebrated each other, and humanized each other through the broad expanse of each of these practices.

As a chosen space, the friendships of our Black girlhood affirmed our multitudes, or the many varying parts of ourselves that we may have come to understand as pieces of our identity that we were required to leave outside of schools or specific classrooms before we entered in. As we consented to be in community with one another in the chosen space of our friendships, our relationships with another also supported us in becoming something greater than the expectations and/or limitations that white supremacist systems had for/of us. Keiondra described this when stating: This is reflected in Keiondra's discussion of her friendships as a place where she could be her full self:

> So they [my friends] kind of saw and affirmed all the things that I wanted to do. And I think it very much helped me be a more well-rounded person. Yeah. Because I think if I didn't have those spaces outside of education, I think about what I could have become with these very white systems telling me what I should be good at. (5.21.22)

Similarly, Asha discussed how her friendships with other close friends and cousins who were also creative represented spaces where she could also show up as her creative self while growing up. Here, Asha described how it felt to show up as her creative self in the context of the chosen space of those friendships:

> In those spaces I was seen. Because like I said, I feel like I wasn't seen in literal educational settings. So I guess I found freedom with them. A part of happiness with

> them. Because, you know, it’s good to have like-minded people around you. And then bouncing off ideas. You know, having someone that understands your passions. (5.17.22)

Asha’s reflections offer insight into the ways chosen spaces of friendship can also represent sites of liberation. Asha’s considerations of how she did not feel seen in formalized school settings connects directly to the illegibility of Black girls in schools. As this continues to ring true across the schooling experiences of the Lansing Group members, what has also emerged as a through line across their experiences is the presence of friendships throughout their teen years with other Black girls who held space for them to show up as their complete selves and created opportunities for them to experience feelings of freedom that were not generally available to them in the context of the compulsory schools they attended.

When reflecting on the chosen, consent-based spaces that shaped her educational and life experiences, Coop also discussed the value she placed on her friendships that became rooted and then grew throughout her teenage years as a high school student at EHS. Coop noted how she was made worthy in the eyes and presence of our friends and how this juxtaposed with how school often made her feel.

> For me. It was so huge, like our friendship, in a way that I don't think y'all even realize for me. Because, not to get too deep or whatever, but I didn't do that well in high school and I had some issues with learning things and, you know, things of that nature. And so, academically, school was a bit challenging for me...So, getting through high school academically was pretty challenging. But being around y'all and seeing how great you all were academically and just as people—like sticking with you all, y'all inspired me so much. I feel like there were times I could have, you know, dropped out or, you know, been hanging with the kids who was around the corner…smoking or doing whatever and

> all of that. But the friendship that I had with you all, like, really helped sustain me and get me through life. And I really deeply appreciate you. (3.19.22)

Coop's offering or testimony demonstrates the ways her friendships humanized her throughout school and made her legible in a context that judged her worthiness based on her academic success, despite the ways it did not holistically support her learning experiences. Coop's words also reflect the power that chosen spaces of Black girl friendships have to support Black girls in navigating the deficit perspectives others may have of them, the ways in which their parents' schooling experiences have affected theirs, and also remaining in and graduating from high school. More importantly, Coop's words highlight the deep significance of Black girls' friendships as a space of care and belonging that can sustain us throughout not only school, but life. Coop's words also humble me, make me ever-grateful for her friendship, and remind me that this project is much bigger than a dissertation study; it's about naming the ways, again and again, that Black girls see each other, care for one another, render each other legible and whole, and create the spaces we need in order to continue this practice of sustaining one another in schools and a society that is hell bent on doing the opposite.

Chosen space in our communities. Although the Lansing Group acknowledged how the chosen spaces in our lives have existed in the context of our friendships and Black girl bonds, during our sessions together we also identified informal spaces in our communities that became chosen spaces for many members of the group. During a group session where we had organically landed on a discussion of the ways we shared our resources with one another to attend to each other's needs, I light-heartedly mentioned how I would sometimes bring friends to the apartment my mom and I lived in during our lunch hour to eat when the school lunch looked unappealing and/or when one of us may not have had the money to afford lunch. There we would make turkey sandwiches and devour whatever snacks my mom had picked up for us, some of which my mom would specifically buy for certain friends because she knew they would enjoy them. In describing this I stated:

> I know my mom and I didn't have a lot like, and people might have looked down on us because we lived in them apartments, but a lot of that just did not cross my mind because a lot of homies would come kick it or would come over there and eat...I’m just thinking about how we may not have had a lot, but we had enough to sustain us or take care of us. (3.19.22)

After offering this description, my fellow Chapter 517 members quickly jumped in to reframe this for me. Memories were shared about some of us walking together on the first day of high school from me and my mom’s apartment, of hangouts we would have there before football and basketball games, of the long conversations we had with each other while kicking it there, and how it was a big part of their experience. One response that deeply cemented the shift in framing my memories of me and my mom’s old home from one of deficit to one of asset and deep significance came from Ashley.

> Going off of what you are said, some could look at it and be like, oh, this is a deficit and things like that. And it just speaks to what Black folks do all the time, turning lemons to lemonade. Because it was actually the opposite. It was a safe space for all of us. You know, at one point in time, whether lunch, having a bad day, mom running late to pick you up from school, so whatever it was, even if you're not feeling good. So now it's convenient to go to Ms. Duncan’s and she’s going to make you some tea. It was really just a safe community space, you know? So, I think that's important because when we think about other girls who are going to hear our stories, they may have other spaces that they're creating. You can

> literally create your own space, you know, create your own community and define it on your own terms. And that's really what we all did in regards to Ms. Duncan's house. (3.19.22)

Ashely's reframing of the apartment that I'd called home for seven years, throughout most of my middle school and high school years was one that challenged ideas of what can count as a community space. Ashley's explanation also offers insights into the features of a chosen space that invite us to return and that lead to us choosing, willingly to come back again and again. At my house, or "Ms. Duncan's house," as my fellow Lansing Group members referred to it, my friends could come and feel safe, protected, and cared for. When in need of a meal, a healing cup of tea, or a space to be without the fear of being policed or harassed when the security guards would be locking up EHS for the day, Ms. Duncan's house provided those things. Ashley's reframing of this space in my memory is also necessary because of what this means for the work moving forward. As Ashley mentioned, my fellow Lansing Group members' ability to name Ms. Duncan's house as a chosen space that was created and that we could define on our own terms helps grant other Black girls the permission and the encouragement to do the same.

Although as a group many of us named Ms. Duncan's house as a chosen space throughout our teenage years, member also offered other examples of places like the parking lot of a local movie theater or the parking lot of a local Target. What became clear in these descriptions is that, again, the physical location of the space was not as important as the people who were there. The relationships we had with one another is what made our chosen spaces ones of belonging and sites of fugitivity in the context of the ongoing afterlife of slavery. Coop described our time together in the parking lots after a weekend movie outing or following a Friday night game as being reflective of Black women had always done when savoring our time together.

> It's just what Black Women do, and what Black folks do...It reminds me of being in church and church is over. And we stood in a parking lot for like, a good hour just kicking it. Just wanting to still be around each other and share those laughs and share what's going on with each other and share those laughs. (3.19.22)

Coop makes the connection that our Black girl practice of carving out spaces to be in each other's presence, catch up with each other, and to share in each other's laughter is not new, but a long-standing tradition of Black women across time. Relatedly, Asha offered insight on how our reflections of the time that we all spent together throughout our teenage years in spaces like Ms. Duncan's house or the local Target made her think of the innocence of our childhood. Although the violence that this country inflicts on Black girls has led to necessary questioning of the ways Black girls are at times denied the innocence of childhood (due to adultification, and more), Asha located the chosen spaces of Black girl friendships as a site that makes Black girlhood and Black girl innocence possible.

The Legacy and Future of Our Chosen Spaces

Our engagement in these chosen spaces was also a way that we survived living in the enduring afterlife of slavery. When the schools we attended mirrored the anti-Black realities of the larger U.S. social structure and framed us as illegible based on our ontological position as both Black and girls in this white supremacist, anti-Black, and cisheteropatriarchal nation state, we held each other closely, celebrated each other's wins, listened actively to each other's concerns, and protected one another. In this way, we humanized each other and gestured to each other's wholeness. When schools framed us as illegible, we made libraries of each other and read each page of every book, our friendship (and the enduring Black girl bonds they became) existing as a refusal to accept the dehumanization we faced and as a practice of rendering each other whole.

Returning

As Asha, Ashley, Coop, Keiondra, Mikaila, and I gathered together for this project, we returned to each other, to our decades-old friendships, and to sites of our Black girlhood. In doing so, we also returned to a practice that is not new to Black girls and women, one that Mikaila described during one of our group sessions as, “doing what Black girls and women have always done, we’re creating the things and spaces we need when they do not exist.” Through our time together, we listened deeply, laughed heartily, critiqued lovingly, celebrated each other fiercely, and were constantly ready to pull up for each other’s needs. This is how we co-created a space of return for ourselves. By being in relation with one another we were able to hold space for each other to reflect on the past and the series of injustices we each faced in compulsory school learning environments. Through our practice of return we cared for each other through the telling of these stories and found that our storytelling, dialoging, and art making offered us opportunities to imagine education anew—as learning settings and practices that would ultimately center and sustain Black girls. As we imagined learning settings and experiences that would create more justice-based learning experiences for Black girls, we were also active in (re)creating a space like this for ourselves where Black women, once Black girls were always already worthy. Together, through our participation in the Lansing Group and in this overarching project, we helped render each other legible and worthy of care, protection, and humanization. As we continue to return to each other and the Black abundance (Laymon, 2018) that is our relationships with one another, may the chosen space of our Black girl bonds live on as its own unique form of wake work (Sharpe, 2016; Reynolds, 2022), as we continue to survive white supremacy and anti-blackness, while simultaneously manifesting an otherwise for ourselves.

Chapter 7. In Pursuit of Saturn: Discussion & Conclusion

In his 1976 song, “Saturn,” Stevie Wonder envisions a world where Black people choose to abandon war-torn and destructive life on Earth for life on Saturn where Black people experience longevity, ever-present joy, and a “natural high” just by virtue of living. At the end of the song, Wonder’s voice fades out and is replaced by the melody of Black girls’ voices, accompanied by the rhythmic sound of jump ropes repeatedly cycling and hitting the ground. Wonder’s choice to conclude the song with a recording of Black girls playing double-dutch, negotiating who will participate in the game and when, and exuding a joy that they cultivated for themselves is a reminder that we may not have found our “Saturn” yet, but that it is within reach. “Saturn” calls us to question, what might it mean to imagine a more just world, and in the “meantime in between time” (ross, 2021), how we might create fugitive sites of justice and joy by thinking through the lens of Black girls and their meaning making practices. In this dissertation study, I collaborated with Black girls and women to co-construct chosen spaces and co-design learning experiences in an effort to engage with the questions this study is built around, as well as with the questions that Wonder’s song, “Saturn,” invites us to consider. Throughout this discussion I will revisit the major themes that occurred across the Seattle, Chicago, and Chapter 517 groups and the insights they offer about Black Girl Bonds, Black girls’ practices of consent and refusal across learning settings, cultivating expansive Black girlhoods, and the qualities or features of Black girl chosen spaces. Following the discussion of these central themes, I will engage in inward critiques, share implications, describe future research directions, and offer a conclusion. Through each of these sections I will also highlight the ways this work engages with practices of imagining an otherwise and charting a path towards “Saturn” via Black girls’ practices of knowing and being.

Black Girl Bonds

Across my learning with the Seattle Group, Chicago Group, and Chapter 517 group, a major theme that emerged was “Black Girl Bonds” (BGBs), or the relationships Black girls have with each other and the significant roles these relationships play throughout their educational experiences. The connections across these findings and the ways they are supported by literature in Black girlhood studies and Black feminist studies has led me to theorize BGBs as a form of refusal, a navigational tool, and as a sensemaking tool/meaning making practice. In the subsections that follow, I will expound on each of these shapes that BGBs take.

BGBs: A Form of Refusal

As a form of refusal, BGBs are one way that Black girls disrupt the normalization of dehumanization they experience in anti-Black and cisheteropatriarchal schools and the ways that school policies and the educators who enforce them choose to misread Black girls as illegible (i.e. invisible, invalid, hyper-visible, and not worthy of humanity). Across this study, the members of the Chicago Group, Seattle Group, and Chapter 517 demonstrated how Black girls’ friendships are a portal through which to see each other as whole, humanized, and worthy of care and protection. As a result, Black girls help render each other legible through their/our bonds in ways that schools too often neglect.

As described in chapter four, in the context of schools, Black girls’ friendships with one another can be seen as frivolous or even dangerous, but rarely as a vital factor that contributes to Black girls’ learning experiences. When schools neglect to see the importance of this, while simultaneously punishing Black girls for sticking up for each other when experiencing harm in schools (Shange, 2019), the reasons why Black girls choose each other as sites of refuge and care in the context of schools and beyond becomes amplified. When Black girls show up for each other at school in times of need or moments of celebration, they refuse the dehumanizing ways they are framed in schools as “substudents” (ross et al, 2016) and unworthy of care and protection by engaging in forms of collective care (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018) and squad care (Harris-Perry, 2017). This practice of caring for the collective, as a significant feature of BGBs, stands in opposition to, and exists as a refusal of the capitalistic, individualistic goals and expectations regarding academic success and appropriate behavior that Eurocentric schools have of youth. As Bethel and Lavancia, Jala and Abriana, and Ashley, Asha, Mikaila, Keiondra, and Coop shared in their reflections on their educational experiences and demonstrated through the familiarity, care, and attentiveness they showed toward one another during group sessions, it also became evident that the bonds they had cultivated with each other throughout their school years and beyond were a refusal of the limited and deficit views of the role of friendships in Black girls’ educations.

Understanding Black girl bonds as a form of refusal is also connected to Black feminist theorizations about the relationship between Black women’s love for one another and resistance. In her pivotal book, *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill-Collins (2009) discusses this relationship and the critical conclusions it leads to.

> …African-American women learn to see expressing love for one another as fundamental to resisting oppression…If members of the group on the bottom love one another and affirm one another’s worth, then the entire system that assigns that group the bottom becomes suspect.” (pp. 182)

Here, Hill-Collins describes how the love that Black women have for one another, which is often indicative of the relationships and bonds they have with each other, is essential to “resisting oppression.” This understanding of Black women’s love for one another further affirms how vital our relationships with each other are and the power these relationships of love, care, and protection have to affirm our worth in ways that negate the vile notions and beliefs that Black women are subhuman and the systems of oppression that seek to relegate us to the bottom of society. As was demonstrated by the Black girls and women involved with this study, Black girls' bonds with one another are radical expression of love and act of refusal that shed light on how "suspect" the intersecting oppressions of anti-Black racism and the cisheteropatriarchy are, and in turn, how questionable the institutions that uphold them (i.e., education) are as well.

BGBs: A Navigational tool

Through our friendships we learned how to navigate schools in ways that helped us to survive the at times harmful practices and protocols that did not support or sustain us as Black girls. Building with Tamara Butler's (2018) work on Black girl cartographies and Black girl navigational practices, I have analyzed the BGBs formed and discussed by each of the three groups in this study and have come to understand these Black girl friendships as a soft place to land and as a tool used to navigate the learning contexts we traversed both in and outside of schools. As mentioned above, our Black girl bonds were also grounded in practices of collective care. As a navigational tool, our BGBs and our practices of care for one another that helped to sustain these bonds (i.e. sharing lunch numbers, giving rides home from practice, helping each other get jobs, etc.) became roadmaps of care that we also used to navigate the rocky terrain of anti-blackness and the cisheteropatriarchy in schools.

Across each of the three groups, the Black women and girls shared stories describing how their relationships, or bonds, with their fellow Black girls helped them to survive the "afterlife of school segregation" (ross, 2021). For Bethel, this involved her listening to the stories her older sister and other older Black girls in her neighborhood would share about their experience attending their predominately White local high school where they had to navigate ongoing acts of anti-Black racism coming from students and teachers. Those stories became cautionary tales for Bethel as she listened on as a middle school student observing similar acts of racism occur at her school, which was the feeder school for the high school her older sister and neighborhood friends attended. When the time came for Bethel to select which high school she would attend, she used the knowledge shared with her by her older sister and the other Black girls in her neighborhood to help her navigate her decision-making process. With the help of her older sister, Bethel was able to encourage her parents to allow her to attend another high school in her district that had a more diverse student population and a strong presence of teachers who have actively advocated for more justice-based and anti-racist teaching and learning practices in their school and district. Bethel's story reflects the ways that Black girls' bonds not only help them to navigate individual schools, but also school systems.

BGBs: A Sensemaking Tool/Meaning Making Practice

As described in chapter four, Black girl bonds also exist as a space for learning and meaning making and thereby exist in opposition to the normative ways learning is expected to take place in compulsory learning settings that do not value relationality as a key feature in the learning process. Through the process of being in community with each other, the Black girls and women in each group in this study spent time reflecting on their educational experiences and reimagining how schools could be transformed to better center and sustain Black girls. Through our collective participation in arts-based practices, discussion, storytelling, and many moments of levity and laughter, we shared our ideas and perspectives with one another in ways that prompted new lines of thinking about how we understood our relationships with schools. Our ability to dive deeply into this kind of reflection and learning was largely rooted in the pre-established relationships of trust that we returned to and continued to cultivate throughout our time together in the study. Our relationships, or Black girl bonds, helped to facilitate our collaborative meaning making practices and created opportunities for us to imagine more justice-based learning spaces and experiences for Black girls; ones in which our shared sensemaking skills and meaning making practices would be valued.

Across the three groups, our engagement with meaning making practices took on different forms but were all influenced by the relationships of care we had with one another. In the Chicago Group, this looked like Jala and Abriana regularly leading us in journaling exercises and guided breathing practices during our biweekly group sessions. Jala would invite us to respond to journal prompts that asked us to do things like write affirmations for ourselves, and Abriana would help ground us at the start of each session with deep breathing and visualizations. By participating in these routines during our group sessions, we engaged in relational meaning making practices that also supported our holistic wellness. In the Seattle Group, we regularly spent our commute to campus (where we met for our biweekly group sessions) having informal conversations about relevant U.S. or world news stories or pop culture trends. During these informal conversations, Bethel and Lavancia would bring up these topics and it would lead to us discussing related topics like colorism, respectability politics, and global anti-blackness. So regardless of where we were physically, we would engage in collective meaning making practices about what was going on in the world around us through our conversations with each other. In the Chapter 517 group, we engaged in meaning making practices using Black Girl Literacies (Haddix & Muhammad, 2016). At times this looked like co-researchers in the group like Mikaila giving us an analysis of songs that had defined our teenage years that were both "turn up" songs and "feminist anthems," such as Crime Mob's "Stilettos (Pumps)." Although this song was generally regarded as more of a party anthem than a feminist anthem, Mikaila explained how the song was about Black girls carving out spaces for themselves and how it could also be analyzed as an example of what it means to queer a space.

Across all three groups the co-researchers demonstrated the immense value of learning in community with each another using their relationships with one another as a sensemaking tool. This was reflective of the stories we told about the ways we took similar approaches in high school. In this regard, the Black girls and women in this study also refused to reproduce the harms that their schools' academic tracking systems created in the context of their friendship. Regardless of what grades the co-researchers had received in high school or whether they had taken AP classes or not, they each brought their own brilliance, creativity, and unique perspectives to their friendships that supported the groups in the collective making meaning of their experiences navigating school and society as Black girls.

Consent & Refusal

Throughout this study, consent and refusal were taken up as deeply humanizing and relational methodological and pedagogical practices. As a methodological practice, consent was not merely associated with the IRB instituted consent forms I created (although with great care) that each of my research collaborators/co-researchers agreed to sign. Consent was not a one-time event at the start of the study, but an ongoing practice that embodied an ethics of "Black girl choosing." Black girl choosing emerged as a theoretical understanding and budding methodological practice throughout this study based on the reciprocal ways that Black girls and women build relationships with one another. In the broader U.S. society and in institutions like education which have ontologically situated Black girls and women as subhuman, and unable to give consent in the ways that normative liberal subjects can, Black girls' and women's ability to choose and be chosen in friendship by other Black girls and women is a liberatory act.

When discussing the practice of Black girl choosing, members of the Chapter 517 group shared that during their adolescence, they sought out and chose to enter into friendships with people whom they admired and had shared values and interests with. By deciding to participate in this study they again engaged in a practice of Black girl choosing as they consented to reconnect with a group of Black women that they had not been in shared learning spaces with in ten to fifteen years. In this context, we would consider what it meant to choose each other in adulthood while no longer navigating a compulsory school space where we were all required to be. For this project, us choosing each other came with a new form of freedom and agency which also helped guide us in our individual and collective reimagining of schools as justice-based and liberatory settings for Black girls. In those imagined settings, choice, consent, and refusal would also exist for Black girls in much more agentic ways.

As described in chapter six, the Seattle Group was active in their practice of enacting ethnographic refusals (Simpson, 2007). Through their use of silence and by organically redirecting group discussions toward topics more closely related to the things they were experiencing in their lives at that moment, Lavancia and Bethel enacted ethnographic refusals that also transformed into pedagogical refusals. When I first began recognizing a pattern of our group sessions diverging from our previously agreed on session plans and transforming into extended check-ins or conversations about the latest happenings concerning their friends and peers in their neighborhood, I worried that the discussions and activities I had planned with the girls' input were not interesting or engaging. However, as I continued to observe this pattern and discussed it with my mentors, I reframed my understanding of this and also reckoned with my possible discomfort with agendas not going as planned the ways a derailed lesson plan might make a teacher uncomfortable during an important lesson. As a reframing, I acknowledged that

Bethel and Lavancia were using their agency as co-creators of the group and their practice of refusals to diverge from the original meeting plans and toward a more informal way of checking in and conversing that honored how they wanted to spend their time during those sessions.

For the Chicago Group, consent looked like us working collaboratively to select the topics we would discuss at our group sessions and to decide on the types of arts-based activities we would engage in to help us further process our discussions. Although each group participated in this collaborative design process to co-determine what we would spend our weekly sessions discussing and/or creating, the ways this group engaged with choice and refusal were particularly interesting given my former relationship to Jala and Abriana as their high school teacher. I was very mindful of the previous power imbalance that existed in our relationship, and I would remind Abriana and Jala throughout the study that I was no longer their teacher and that none of the projects or discussions we engaged it were mandatory, none would be graded, and they could always opt out. I would remind them frequently of their ability to say no or refuse to participate in a discussion or activity in fear that they would feel obligated to do either because of our previous teacher/student dynamics. However, on two occasions Abriana responded to my opt out reminders by assuring me that her and Jala really wanted to participate in the discussions and activities we had planned and alluded to the notion that I didn’t need to keep checking in with that reminder. In those moments, I realized that my constant reminders about their ability to opt out had likely become a bit annoying. Although I wanted consent to be an ongoing practice throughout the study, I thought that was an effective method. Instead, Abriana’s feedback challenged me to reexamine my approach and to remember that through our reciprocal act of Black girl choosing, Abriana and Jala had chosen without coercion or obligation to participate in the study. Also, because of the ways our relationship had evolved over the years from student/teacher to mentor/mentee, we had also reconfigured what it looked like to invite versus require each other to show up for us in particular ways, whether that involved participating in a research study or writing a letter of recommendation. Because our relationships were rooted in care and trust, I had to also trust that Abriana and Jala would tell me (which indeed they did) whenever they didn't want to or were simply choosing not to participate in a particular element of the study, and that they weren't engaging under a premise of obligation.

Black Girl Chosen Learning Spaces

All three groups in the study participated in the practice of co-constructing a Black girl chosen space, although it wasn't always discussed explicitly that we were actively designing a space of refuge, retreat, and care for us to be in collectively. However, as each group met for their/our weekly or biweekly sessions, the ways we chose to gather and decide how we would spend our time together (i.e., discussions, art making, venting, etc.) became a practice of us co-designing and building a space that was quite unlike many of the school settings we had attended and would discuss during our group sessions. By learning in community with the Black girls and women in this project across the three groups, and by working alongside Django Paris' (2021) conception of the features of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, I came to understand the contours of Black girl chosen spaces as represented by six central features. I share these features below in a way that also contrasts them with predominate features of the compulsory school settings that co-researchers attended and discussed throughout our sessions.

Table 2.

Features of a Black Girl Chosen Space

Features: **Black Girl Chosen Space**
Recognition of the inherent worthiness of Black girls and Black girlhood
Valuing and cultivating Black girl bonds
Intentionally centering Black girls and their ways of knowing
Consent based learning practices
Welcomed refusals
Opportunities for intergenerational Black girl learning
Arts-based engagement and making
Practices of collective care prioritized

Of course, each Black girl chosen space will be different based on who the collaborators/participants are, what their goals are for the space, and where they choose to meet (i.e., online, at a local Black owned café, etc.). However, the eight features I highlight above were present across all three groups in this study and I am proposing that these features may also be present in other learning, organizing, arts-based, and community spaces that intentionally center and sustain Black girls, although they will no doubt look different across contexts. Lastly, this is also a living list of features that can and likely will evolve and change over time. I foresee this happening in the future when I revisit the data generated throughout this study and possibly see new patterns emerge about the three groups' chosen spaces, and in future projects and partnerships with other Black girls and women about the spaces they have designed to care for, celebrate, and support one another.

Expansive Black Girlhood

Engaging in this project with the Seattle Group, Chicago Group, and Chapter 517 collaborators helped me to understand the features of a Black girl chosen space. However, our time together also invited me to think more expansively around gender, disability, migration, language and more and how do, or how might Black girl chosen spaces ensure that they invite all of these elements of Black girls' identities to be present and have value in these spaces. In particular, the practice of Black girl "choosing" helped create an opening to engage more deeply in notions of an expansive Black girlhood and what it means for Black girls to already be choosing each other in ways that affirm and sustain each other's identities in relation to gender, disability, migration, language, and class.

When considering girlhood in this dissertation and in the broader work of caring for, supporting, and sustaining the lives of Black girls, it is necessary to acknowledge the ways in which girlhood is expansive. In The Global History of Black Girlhood, SA Smythe describes this:

> Thus, the object of girlhood cannot be said always to be or always to have been a girl. So, too, must it be acknowledged that "girl" does not necessarily presume a female, femme, or feminine referent. Girlhood is a multi-referential container that holds a dynamic range of traits, qualities, skills, perceptions, embodiments, and yes, genders—as does boyhood" (p. 99).

Smythe describes how girlhood is gender expansive and offers a necessary reminder that girlhood is not exclusionary to cisgender girls. As I have used "girls" and "girlhood" throughout this dissertation, it has been with this gender expansiveness in mind. In this work of creating justice-based learning experiences and settings for Black girls, it remains ever necessary to affirm the experiences of Black girlhood that trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming

Black children and youth have had and continue to have. Given that antiblackness and "normative" ideas of girlhood (p. 99) seek to challenge understandings and experiences of Black girlhood in delegitimatizing ways, Black girl chosen spaces must also disrupt and refuse to be complicit in rendering Black girls or Black youth illegible whose experiences with Black girlhood do not conform to cis-hetero, normative frameworks.

What consistently rang true throughout this project was an understanding that Black girls are not a monolith. Although not foregrounded in the chapters of this dissertation, my time spent learning with and from the Black girls and women in this project challenged me to think about intersections of Black girlhood and disability. There were moments during our time together in our Black girl chosen spaces where conversations organically emerged about labels of learning disabilities, special education, and a critical questioning of learning spaces and who they are and are not designed for. As I continue to learn from the work of scholars, organizers, and advocates like Subini Annamma and Vilissa Thompson about DisCrit (2018) and the experiences of Black girls, women, and femmes with disabilities, I recognize the importance of being more intentional with centering discussions around Black girlhood and disability justice in my work moving forward. This is especially vital as I reflect further on illegibility and how compulsory schools render Black girls illegible along the lines of race, gender, and disability; and how disabled Black girls also deeply engage in the practice of Black girl choosing and co-creating the chosen spaces that they need.

The practice of Black girl choosing has helped me to see how Black girls can invite their fellow Black girls to show up in/with all of their identities in ways that formalized school spaces may not welcome them. Further, this confirms the need to affirm Black girl chosen spaces as a homeplace (hooks, 2015) and site of belonging for all Black girls and not just a select few; this includes Black trans girls, disabled Black girls, working class Black girls, immigrant Black girls, queer Black girls, neurodivergent Black girls, bilingual Black girls, fat Black girls, ghetto Black girls, and countless others. As a framework, Black girl chosen spaces negate the idea of Black girlhood being a monolith or only being accessible to a select few. As I'm sharing this, it is also pushing me to go further in my future projects to engage with expansive and sustaining notions of Black girls' identities more explicitly in relation to gender, disability, sexuality, migration, and language.

Confronting the Inward Gaze within Colonial Institutions

How to Be in but Not of the University?

I entered this project with a commitment to working towards deconstructing research-based power hierarchies throughout this study. I also began this study having healthy relationships with all of my collaborators, with four or five of them having even stated that they had been willing to participate in this study because of our pre-existing relationships of trust. However, I find it important to acknowledge that while working to deconstruct research-based power hierarchies throughout this study, I was still a researcher associated with a university that, like all historically and predominantly white, settler, land theft institutions, has caused harm to Black people and communities. This also led me to think of the ways this study was theoretically and methodologically designed around consent-based practices. In this context consent was framed as a practice of Black girls choosing each other, of invitation versus required participation, of having ongoing opportunities to enact refusals (methodological and otherwise), and those refusals being welcomed and considered an essential part of our learning process and ways to continue being in good relation with one another. However, these notions of consent contended with those of the university's, which were more concerned with protecting the university than caring for and protecting the collaborators/co-researchers in this study. As a result, I leave this study still reckoning with what it means to be a Black woman educator, mentor, and friend advocating for more just educational futures for Black girls, but who is also still a researcher entangled with protocols and policies of the university that do not always align directly with my commitment to doing justice-based work with and for Black girls and women.

The Role of Educators

Although I am a former secondary educator and my life was transformed by my work with youth and communities as a classroom teacher, throughout this study I have grappled with the question, “Are schools redeemable?” In *The Future Is Black*, ross (2021) discusses how schools as they currently exist are irredeemable for Black students because of enduring anti-blackness and what it means for us to be living in the “afterlife of school segregation.” However, ross also challenges us to consider what we must do in the “meantime in between time” to help “mitigate the suffering of Black students” in schools (2021). One approach to mitigating this harm is having teachers who are committed to addressing anti-blackness in their curriculum and teaching practices, and adamantly working to center and sustain their Black students through asset-based teaching.

I have read the research, observed the classrooms, and taught alongside teachers who demonstrate this commitment, however, that may not have been as apparent throughout this dissertation. Co-researchers across the Chapter 517, Seattle, and Chicago groups did occasionally discuss teachers who had cared for and supported them. However, the most common stories told throughout this study about co-researchers’ interactions with teachers and experiences in schools were ones connected to harm. I share these stories not to demonize teachers or to paint all schools as harmful, damaging places for Black girls. Instead, my hope was to share the stories of the Black girls and women in this study that critique schools and educators who, specifically, perpetuate anti-blackness and the cisheteropatriarchy through their policies, practices, and norms.

As I continue to consider what can be done in the “meantime in between time” to support Black youth in schools and to “mitigate their suffering,” I still understand the classroom as a space of possibility that, through subversive acts can be affirming for Black girls. As discussed in Renée Wilmot’s work on historical Black women educators, there is a long history of Black educators and Black schools that have been intentionally designed to center and support Black girls’ learning experiences. Those are the sites of learning that offer us a model of how to disrupt and dismantle current deficit-based teaching practices and school settings that do the opposite; overwhelmingly the types of learning settings discussed by co-researchers throughout this study.

Refusing Resilience

Lastly, I would be remiss to not offer a reminder that the goal of this study is not to glorify Black girls’ refusals as the end-all be-all solution to the violence and harm that is enacted upon them in the context of schools. The responsibility is on schools, districts, and educators to examine and address their anti-Black and cisheteropatriarchal practices, policies, and norms that make schools places Black girls must survive. In this study, I highlight Black girls’ refusals because there is much that can be learned from them about sense making skills and meaning making practices. However, I also recognize that Black girls face major consequences for enacting refusals in schools as a survival based navigational practice. Therefore, this study aimed to contrast the refusals Black girls make in schools with those they make in chosen spaces to highlight how the purpose and possibilities of Black girls’ refusals transform when enacted in spaces where Black girls’ and their refusals are welcomed and affirmed.

I choose to reclarify my focus on and discussion on Black girls' refusals because I recognize how, as Kris Gutiérrez shared with Paris and Alim (2017), "bad things happen to good ideas" and messages critiquing the harm done to Black youth in educational spaces can be co-opted to serve the settler capitalistic goals of schools and districts instead of centering Black girls in necessary ways[9]. With respect to the people who find important ways to use this in their work, this study is not about Black girls' resilience. By discussing their refusals, I do not aim to celebrate how much suffering Black girls can endure (hampton, 2013), but rather to highlight the ongoing, intergenerational acts of harm Black girls have and are experiencing in schools and the urgency needed to upend, dismantle, and abolish the systems that allow for these harms to persist. In my work, based on the insights of my co-researchers, resilience is not something for Black girls and women to aspire toward. As described by Mikaila from the Chapter 517 group, "Resilience does nothing to check the environments and systems that we have to be resilient to" (7.1.22).

Charting the Path Ahead: Implications of Black girl Chosen Spaces

When asked what their hopes were for this project, co-researchers from across the three groups described a number of ways that they hoped our collective work would improve the educational experiences of Black girls so that they no longer have to survive schools. Co-researchers stated that they wanted for our group findings to be shared with school district leaders like superintendents so that they might implement necessary changes in their districts to better care for and support their Black girl students. Additionally, they described wanting to share this work with members of the broader community so that other Black girls and women might feel encouraged to also share their stories about their educational experiences. The implications I share here build from these hopes and goals the co-researchers had for this project and address other ways that this study might contribute to more justice-based educational futures for Black girls and help “mitigate the harm” that Black girls experience in compulsory schools during the “meantime in between time” (ross, 2021).

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[9] This is related directly to Ashley Smith-Purviance's concept of the "commodification of Black girls" (2020).

An Invitation

Although this study largely focuses on the power and possibilities of chosen spaces and in particular, Black girl chosen spaces, this study is not an invitation to try to create a formalized Black girl chosen space in schools, which are inherently compulsory learning spaces. Instead, this is an invitation to follow the leadership of Black girls and women in their ongoing and future enactments of intergenerational Black girl chosen spaces. These are the chosen spaces that exist in the context of Black girls’ and women’s’ friendships, group chats, Auntie’s homes, community organizations, and in a wide array of digital spaces. In turn, this is an invitation for the Black girls and women for whom our collective work is resonating. I hope that through this work, I am also joining you and the ways that you and the Black girls and women in your life have enacted or are seeking to enact your own Black girl chosen spaces.

Also, although schools remain compulsory learning environments where notions of consent are fraught for Black girls, this study still advocates for educators to strive toward making their schools and classrooms learning environments that Black girls are not constantly forced to survive, but as spaces where they can show up in in more expansive ways. So, I invite the educators, club leaders, community organizers, and others who want to lead or host (learning) settings that Black girls are a part of to engage with the Black Girl Chosen Space Filters (below). By doing so, I invite us to consider how our pedagogical moves and instructional practices relate to the features of a Black girl chosen space.

Black Girl Chosen Space Filters

1) How do you recognize the inherent worthiness of Black girls and Black girlhood in your classroom/learning space and in your curriculum through asset-based practices?
2) How are Black girl bonds being cultivated and valued in the classroom/learning space?
3) In what ways are Black girls and their ways of knowing being intentionally centered in your pedagogy, curriculum, and instructional practices?
4) How are you currently engaging with consent-based learning practices in your classroom/learning setting?
5) In what ways are refusals welcomed in your classroom/learning setting?
6) How are you building in and prioritizing opportunities for intergenerational Black girl learning in your classroom/learning setting?
7) What are ongoing ways that you are engaging your Black girl students in creative practices of making and/or arts-based learning?
8) How are you learning from, centering, and modeling practices of collective care in your classroom/learning space?

Pull Up: Future Research Directions

In considering the future directions of the research I have begun with this dissertation, I plan to revisit the data generated throughout this study and the related findings to propose a framework for "Pull Up" Pedagogy and to build upon the initial framing of a "Methodology of Black Girl Choosing" that I offer in the methods chapter (chapter three). Currently, I define pull up pedagogy as a generative form of teaching, learning, and care when Black women and girls choose each other and show up for each other's needs. In the language of the fellow Black girls I grew up with, to "pull up" is to show up, to come through, and/or to make your presence clear. When telling someone to "pull up," this statement can become an invitation or a warning. However, they are both about showing up to a space where someone is awaiting you. As I return to the data generated throughout this study and as I prepare for future studies with Black girls in chosen learning spaces, I plan to trace the idea of pull up pedagogy across our work together. In particular, I plan to attend to the ways in which Black girls engage in the practice of pulling up as an invitation to support and care for their fellow Black girls, and how even without being asked, Black girls show up for each other's needs in the classroom, the school cafeteria, and in community gathering and learning spaces. Relatedly, I plan to build upon my initial framing of "Black Girl Choosing" as a methodology to further highlight the ways Black girls' practice of choosing each other is a liberatory act, and one that can contribute to the body of work that explores approaches to qualitative research as a relational practice. In turn, I also plan to explore in greater detail how, as a methodological practice, Black girl choosing creates a new context through which to examine how Black girls engage in consent and refusal within their learning experiences and in qualitative research studies that aim to critically center Black girls (through their role as collaborators, co-researchers, and/or participants).

Charting our Own Saturn

After four to seven months of each of the three groups in this study meeting weekly or biweekly, in July of 2022 we all came together for a multigroup session. We gathered on Zoom, with members of the collective group joining from four different cities and three different time zones. We spent time getting acquainted with one another, sharing highlights from the time we spent together in our separate groups, describing the artwork we'd created throughout the study, naming how we wanted to see the schooling and learning experiences of Black girls change, and giving shout-outs to the Black girls and women in our lives that we wanted to celebrate. This gathering was also a time for us to celebrate each other and the gift of being in community together through our learning with and from each other throughout this project.

As co-researchers described how they wanted to see the schooling and learning experiences of Black girls change they named things like creating schools and learning spaces for Black girls where freedom is central and where Black girls can be free, tapping into community connections, and having Black girls be invested in equally instead of only a few Black girls being selected as worthy of care and/or attention. When co-researchers gave shout-outs to the Black girls and women in their lives that they were celebrating, they named their mothers, grandmothers, cousins, and best friends. These shoutouts are a reminder that the work of creating more liberating and justice-based learning environments and learning experiences for Black girls affects the Black women and girls in our lives across generations and becomes a healing balm to help soothe the harmful and violent educational experiences the Black women and girls in our lineage have navigated when attending schools that perpetuate anti-blackness and uphold the cisheteropatriarchy.

Through our collective practice of imagining and enacting spaces where Black girls can live expansively and learn in ways that sustain their identities and ways of knowing, we contribute to the work of “freedom dreaming” (Kelley, 2002), and creating otherwise spaces for Black folks to thrive, to care for each other during the “meantime in between time” (ross, 2021), and an alternate way to live and be as we continue to persist in the “wake” (Sharpe, 2016). By co-creating Black girl chosen spaces during this study, and throughout our lives more broadly, Bethel, Lavancia, Jala, Abriana, Mikaila, Keiondra, Coop, Ashley, Asha, and I used our practices of collective care, the strength of our Black girl bonds, our creative and artistic refusals, and our ongoing acts of choosing each other to co-construct an otherwise space and possibility for us as Black girls and women. Together, we charted our own "Saturn" (Wonder, 1976). I close this dissertation with the words of my research collaborators/co-researchers as an ongoing reminder of the power and possibility of an expansive Black girlhood and our ability to create the spaces that we need for each other even when they don't currently exist.

Excerpts from Co-researcher's/Collaborator's Self-Definition Poems

Modeled after Patricia Smith's "What it's like to be a Black girl for those who aren't"

it's being brave for those who may be scared

It's like taking off your bra after a long day of being held together.

It's always being different

It's being a reader

It's like damn can I have some grace

It's being baptized anew in friendship

It's like I'm resilient and resourceful, but i need help sometimes.

It's being a creative
It's wanting the world to know i'm not impressed.

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