Black Women Researchers’ Path to Breaking Silence: Three Scholars Reflect on Voicing Oppression, Self-reflexive Speech, and Talking Back to Elite Discourses

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Abstract

Using bell hooks’s notions of “coming to voice,” “self-definition,” and “talking back,” (1990) this Black Feminist collaborative autoethnographic essay documents the experiences of three Black women scholars conducting Black girl research. It draws from Black feminist traditions of honoring our lived experiences, truthfully relaying our challenges in the educational pipeline, and redefining the meaning of good research. In so doing, it resists monolithic and Eurocentric notions of research and dispels deficit ideologies about Black girlhood/womanhood prevalent in the academy. In relaying how the authors “made it over,” this work illuminates a path for future researchers interested in counter-hegemonic cultural practice. This essay is significant in both its methodology and implications, honoring the Black Feminist tradition of documenting culturally informed lived experience through storytelling, and presenting a collective sisterhood approach to resisting the marginalization of Black Feminist scholarship.

Introduction

Black women attempting to conduct research on Black girls experience a multitude of issues in the academy. These issues are highlighted in the collection of literature from the Black feminist tradition documenting the struggle to legitimate the field. In reflecting on the work they have done, various critical Black women researchers have discussed challenges including invisibility in the literature on girls, resisting the prevalence of deficit ideologies surrounding Black girlhood/womanhood, creating a space to do nonprescriptive non-Eurocentric work with Black girls, and navigating research hierarchies to honor lived experiences of Black women and girls. The purpose of this paper is to give voice to the lived experiences of researchers attempting to further the Black feminist call to carve out space for authentic Black girl work and expression. For the authors of this article, the call to create, celebrate, and privilege Black girl cartographies is heavily rooted in the authors’ positionalities and experience-informed research on Black girls in the United States. Thus, we self-reflexively disclose that this writing foregrounds the experiences of Black women and girls in the U.S.
South, which does not fully account for our sisters’ experiences in other U.S. regions and transnationally. Still, we offer our work in solidarity with them and see our positioning as similarly related given the common thread of subordination at the hands of white supremacy throughout the African diaspora.

In order to best illustrate our experiences using Black feminist tradition in the academy, we use bell hook’s (1990) “Coming to Voice” to frame the authors’ narratives. Each author wrote one narrative that depicts their “coming to” experience as Black girl researchers, specifically positioned to “speak back” to the academy and “up” for Black women. The narratives reflect both the scholastic experiences that drew them to the work of education and the academic experiences and hardships that continue to shape them as adults. In this endeavor, it was critical to forefront personal experience to 1) uplift lived experience as a valid source for research, 2) combat persistent invisibility; and 3) position Black women as experts on the Black girl experience. It is also our hope that our vulnerability in depicting our experiences assists other Black girls/women navigating academic spaces and encourages them to voice their own experiences.

In the academy, this work is designed to be a resource for those interested in using the Black feminist tradition to guide their work. We offer our reflections on the traditions that have greatly influenced our personal identities and missions in academia. This article, then, is an addition to a catalogue of work written to push back against the notion that increased distance from the work allows for more objectivity and thus valid research. Instead, we argue for a reclaiming of the narrative about Black women and girls by Black women and girls using counter-hegemonic tools, including collaborative or community work and autoethnography, to resist and self-define.

Review of the Literature

In Black Girlhood Celebration Ruth Nicole Brown notes that her work is formed partly from an attempt to make visible the experiences of Black girls, commenting that girls’ studies has “served to reproduce and perpetuate the invisibility of Black Feminism bodies, lived experiences, history, culture and theorizing” (p. x). Black girl researcher, Venus Evans-Winters, reflects on similar experiences in her scant findings of Black girls in the resilience literature. In Teaching Black Girls (2005), she notes:

“most of the literature on African American girls in the resiliency literature presented the opportunity to fill a gap in the educational literature and to implement alternative theoretical approaches to the study of the interaction of race, class, and gender on educational experiences (p. 7).

Black girl researchers have found that when Black girls or women were mentioned it is often from a deficit perspective, and was not inclusive of the voices of Black girls or women themselves. In Black Feminist Thought, Collins (2000) reflects on her own issues grappling with the views of Black women purported by the academy, and her own identity. She explained that she struggled to self-define and replace the definitions of her life and the life of other Black women from the dominant group. Across disciplines, women researchers have taken up this cause to self-define and call attention to the importance of situated and fluid identities in anthropological work, pushing back against the idea of objectivity in research. In “How Native is a Native Anthropologist?” woman of color feminist anthropologist, Kirin Narayan (1993) proposes that each researcher be considered in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of inter-penetrating communities and power relations versus fixed identities that are used to argue distance from the work, thus heightened objectivity. Her proposal supports the Black feminist pushback on the idea of the objective “outsider” versus the compromised “insider” in research. Similarly, woman of color anthropologist Faye Harrison argues for a reworking of the field of anthropology that is more inclusive of race and gender considerations, noting that historically anthropology has been enacted and used to serve the objectives of those claiming “outsider” status, while negatively affecting or presenting deficit views of participants.

Other Black women researchers have noted this disconnect between what the literature said about Black women, and their own experiences. Evans-Winters (2005) offers “most of the literature on African American female students focused on pathology and deficits, like school dropout and teenage pregnancy rates” (p. 7). For many Black women researchers the combination of invisibility and deficit ideology, meant a devaluing of Black girls. Brown (2011) argues that narratives created around Black girls without their input fail to recognize their worth, value, and power.

Many Black women researchers note their own experiences in school, community and other spaces as a motivator for resisting their devaluation. In a reflection on Black girlhood stories across the United States,
Brown (2013) writes that she’s doing the work for:

the beautiful Black girl in Minneapolis whose teacher turned the lie “you will never amount to anything” into a pedagogical practice; …all of the Black women and girls who died prematurely with the circumstances of their deaths too often unknown and unresolved; …girls, too many to be acceptable, are brilliant yet routinely disciplined into taking up less and less space…” (p. 3)

Similarly, in reflecting on her own experience in school and the academy, Collins (2000) lamented “my world grew larger, but I felt I was growing smaller. I tried to disappear into myself in order to deflect the painful, daily assaults” (p. vii). Out of this need for resistance grew space for methodological approaches that not only included the Black girl, but respected her ways of knowing and being. This is a counterhegemonic space where language, methodology and skills gained from experiencing life as a Black woman, our cultural intuition, is valued. Doing so answers Evans-Winters’ (2005) call to create:

educational and social science philosophies, methods, and methodologies that give voice to and empower urban African American girls (ourselves), and epistemologies and methodologies that invoke discourse centered on agency and resiliency while simultaneously enacting critical practice and urban education reform” (p. 13).

It also develops space for Black women researchers to do work that Collins (2000) describes as activating “epistemologies that criticize prevailing knowledge and that enable us to define our own realities on our own terms…” (p. 292).

However, Black women researchers acknowledge a continuing struggle to excel professionally and live up to the academic power structure, while honoring the collectives built with and for Black girls. In a discussion of her journey to create Save Our Lives Hear Our Truths (SOLHOT), Brown (2013) reflects on her initial work in academic programs developed to support young girls of color, noting:

It was not that I wanted to focus on the negative aspects of the work, but our inability to remain critical meant that we only heard, focused and celebrated what we wanted to see. The meaning made of our actions in such a contradictory context politicized explicit and implicit socialization processes of the program. As a speaking Black woman, I shared my observations and insight with those in charge of making decisions – and was met with resistance” (p. 160).

Here, we Black girl researchers, offer our own stories of Black girlhood and womanhood to continue taking up the mantle set forth by the Black women scholar researchers before us. Our aim is to empower, self-define, complicate, resist, and ultimately be free (Brown, 2013).

**Theoretical Frame**

Considering the multitude of challenges Black women researchers face in doing work in the Black feminist tradition, the purpose of this piece is two-fold: 1) to document our experiences doing Black girl research; and 2) to illuminate a path for future Black girl researchers interested in non-racist, non-sexist, counter or oppositional work (counter-hegemonic cultural practice). bell hook’s notion of “Coming to Voice” (1990) is used as a theoretical frame for reflecting on our experiences. In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, hooks (1990) presents a framework for radical Black subjectivity making the case for Black women in the academy to: 1) break their silence about oppression 2) develop self-reflexive speech; and 3) confront or talk back to elite discourses. This framework evolves from Linda Alcoff’s (1988) notion of combining identity politics with a conception of the subject as positional and conceiving of the subject as non-essentialized and emergent from historical experience. In the same way, this work presents three narratives that complicate identity “naming” and speak to the intersectional challenges, that is race, class, gender and sexuality, that Black women face in the academy. In Laura Alezandra Harris’s “Queer Black Feminism: The Pleasure Principle” she discusses this feminist practice of talking back, and notes the political implications as she argues that self-identifications hold the power to “provide an antidote to the too often silenced but fierce clash of class and race and sexuality the emergence of these critical theories represents” (p. 3).

This work is situated within the Black feminist tradition, a theory encouraging researchers to begin the work by first giving voice to their own story. In this case, the reclaiming and documenting of our stories works against the Black girl hypervisibility and invisibility duality. The story is couched within the Black feminist tradition through:

1. Recognition of intersecting oppressions in the lives of Black girls (Crenshaw, 1989;

3. The recognition of culturally informed lived experience through storytelling that supports everyday survival (Collins, 2000; Delgado Bernal & Villapando, 2002; Maparyan, 2012).

Methodology: Collaborative Auto-ethnography

This study uses collaborative auto-ethnography to examine our experiences as Black women in the academy who are determined to break silence, work through self-reflexive practice, and talk back to elite discourses (hooks, 1990). Collaborative auto-ethnography is a qualitative approach combining autobiographical and ethnographic methods to investigate self within group culture (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2012). It also allowed us to combine our “autobiographical data to understand social phenomena” (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2012, p. 37) in ways that resist the historical propensity to marginalize Black Feminist scholarship. This approach allowed us to resist the notion that we work alone and allows our experiences to function as a supportive and encouraging pathway for other emerging Black Feminist scholars.

In the sections to follow, the authors reflect upon the ways in which we are committed to breaking silence in the academy. Each reflection describes the journey of a different author as they navigated the academic terrain. The first reflection discusses navigating the racialized and gendered terrain of the PK-12 education system, and acknowledges the significance of voice as a political tool. This narrative tells how, as a Black girl in predominantly White suburban educational settings, the author experienced systemic racism, sexism, and resistance in the education system that she was only able to address and ultimately resist after discovering scholarship from women of color. Resistance here is defined as efforts to self-define and speak back to and within marginalizing and oppressive educational spaces (Collins, 2001; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). The second reflection discusses the significance of self-defining Black girlhood through the voices of Black girls. This narrative defends doing the work of Black girlhood studies and community engaged scholarship against research, or academic critics, who support girlhood studies that are not racially inclusive and race studies that do not reflect the variance in gendered experiences. The third reflection addresses a personal experience with the devaluation of Black Feminist research despite its clear epistemological appropriateness and utilitarian nature. She demonstrates how dominant research frames make unfair assumptions about the credibility of embodied research practices. Thus, the final reflection calls for Black feminist scholars to identify with the tradition of perseverance in the face of adversity that has sustained our frame and field throughout herstory.

Voicing Oppression: LaToya Speaks

My research agenda has been engendered by my own experience coming of age in predominately white neighborhoods and schools as a first-generation American in Charlotte, NC. Upon entering graduate school at New York University, my first research project focused on exploring the reasons high achieving Black students choose HBCUs; I was struggling to understand my own experience and wondered if other students had similar experiences. If other students were having similar experiences in predominantly white or even well integrated spaces I believed something needed to change. Thus, the trauma I experienced in schools served as a catalyst for me doing Black girl research and attempting to make change in education.

My research since entering the academy addresses some key opportunities I feel were missed in my adolescence, including the opportunity to engage in discussions, express my thoughts, and use my voice in discussing my experiences in school. I was also not given the chance to be an active participant in my academic decision-making process.

Though structural and social barriers were present throughout my academic experience, I persisted both academically and socially throughout my K-12 matriculation. However, there were psychological repercussions to my time in those spaces. I feel that my parents were not aware of my need for Black peer support to help me navigate the predominantly White environment. While my mother modeled certain behaviors that I emulated to challenge oppression, there were various incidents when I feel I would have been better served by a peer support system. My K-12 experience, much like the documented experiences of other Black girls, reflects consistent incidents of being overlooked for positive recognition, being unfairly penalized for misunderstandings, and internalizing the traumatic experiences of Black peers (Evans-Winters, 2005; Morris,
As a graduate student, I realized the negative effects of being precluded from speaking to these issues. A child, I did not have the language to express my feelings about my early educational experience, and I was left with anger and a mistrust of educators. It is this intuition that I have gained from my childhood educational experiences that I used to support the Black girls that I work with as they find their voice and use the platforms provided to speak their truths. However, I have found that attempting to do this work within the academy has come with its own set of difficulties and feelings of isolation.

Upon entering my PhD program, one of my first challenges was the championing of or a reliance on a more positivist notion of science for credibility. This posed an issue for the work that I had planned as the perspective contends that doing research that involves yourself or your perspective presents a conflict of interest, ultimately undercutting the credibility of your work. This notion carried the belief that white men were better situated to do research on, rarely with, Black girls because they were most distanced from the research “subjects.” Those of us that wanted to do research with Black girls, treating them as full participants in their own experience with a voice that could benefit the research were seen as making “alternative” agendas that resisted the normative academic agenda or standards. Eventually, I came to embrace the Black Feminist and Womanist notion of pushing back or resisting as I became more familiar with the work of Black feminists and the Womanists, who note that Black girls’ stories specifically challenge theories rooted in multiple oppressions by drawing on their own intersectional experiences in the education system reconstituting the meaning of intellectual discourse (hooks, 1989). Thus, I recognized my own need to address subjectivity and center participant voice as part of the Black Feminist and Womanist agenda. In dialogue, womanists use a method called recovery to reclaim the validity and importance of personal experiences. Phillips (2006) explains the womanist way of knowing further stating:

“Part of what Womanism is out to prove (often through the scholarship of recovery but sometimes simply through personal practice) is that everyday women of color (and similar people of all genders and colors) who do this labor are not backward; rather, they are incredibly forward-thinking and integral to humanity’s survival, despite their compromised visibility on the world stage and in the academy” (p. 12).

However, as I began to embrace the Black feminist and Womanist theory, though I was participating in a social foundations and Women and Gender Studies program, there was no clear “place” for my work or interests (Collins 2001; Maparyan 2012). In my social foundations program, I found that because less Black feminist work had been done in the education space, most of the knowledge I gained that supported any cultural understanding or application of education or research did not focus on or failed to consider the nuances of gender and sexuality, focusing largely on normative notions of girlhood and womanhood, thus not inclusive of myself or my peers at many points. Similarly, my gender studies program was not inclusive. The program, like feminism, was rooted in the experience of white women, so while the program addressed issues of gender and sexuality, the intersectional complications of race and class were missing. When Black feminism or Womanism was brought into the conversation or issues of race within feminism were addressed, they were not heavily resisted but always seemed like an aside. They were sidestepped for the normative conversation, and I personally also struggled with not fitting the feminist mold. Several programs failed to address the intersectional experience or what Wade-Gayles (1984) noted as the “triple jeopardy of Black woman” (p. 117). Crenshaw (1989) spoke to the exclusion experienced in efforts to find the voice of Black women in work or address Black girls’ experiences, arguing that the “problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure. Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism, classism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (p. 58).

Routinely, I felt excluded from feminist work as my experience and goals for my future work were often not in line with feminist’s notions of empowerment. This search for a “place” to do the work pushed me to seek out sisters and mentors doing similar work, versus an entire division. Once I found Black academic women also struggling to do similar work we formed a community sharing in research, reflections, and other pertinent information supporting each others’ success in the realm of academia (Brown, 2009; Evans-Winters & Esposito 2010). In terms of mentors and existing literature, it was pertinent to study the work and theories...
developed from the struggles of women of color across the world in order to build a platform for my work. My institution, like many other institutions of higher education, do not offer a plethora of scholars of color. Thus, there were not a variety of academic women of color versed in critical feminist theories. However, the few academics who introduced me to critical feminist theories made a significant impact on my trajectory and overall academic experience.

These experiences navigating educational spaces, along with the research literature on Black girls, has influenced me to further research Black girls’ educational experiences. My personal experience navigating intersecting oppressions in the education system has equipped me with both the theoretical sensitivity and cultural intuition needed to interpret and analyze the experience of similar students and become a Black girl researcher (Delgado Bernal 1998, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso 2002; Strauss & Corbin 1990). Delgado Bernal (2001) explains the notion of cultural intuition, highlighting the importance of the researcher’s ability to interpret the research with particular sensitivities. The author adds that personal experience includes both historical and ancestral wisdom; thus, cultural intuition includes collective and personal experience as well as community memory. For my work, cultural intuition created a space where both the researcher and participants could openly communicate, critically resist dominant scripts, and be empowered through the research process, all of which advance the strength of Black girls in the face of systemic barriers.

This writing process and giving voice to my experience has been therapeutic and offered healing. In the same way, reading research studies on Black women with similar experiences (Tatum, 2003) and having discussions with colleagues has confirmed the consistency of these experiences for other Black women, and the need for us to tell our stories and serve as guides for young Black girls and women facing similar challenges in the education pipeline. This journey to my own voice, reaffirms my work to provide a platform for Black girls to discuss their own educational experiences. Documenting lived experiences and “remembering the pain” of living in the margins serves as an act of resistance as we are confronting pain and using it as a catalyst for the change that we would like to see (hooks, 1990, p. 215).

Self-Reflexive Speech: Sherell Speaks

My community-engaged scholarship is informed by the gender socialization I received through my family and my observations as a classroom teacher. While there are many different experiences that aided in my self-definition, the following example illustrates how my own gender socialization fueled my passion for the equitable treatment of Black girls. I was raised in Atlanta with a brother, four years my senior. While he, my mother, and I were extremely close, what we were allowed to do, specifically outside of the home, was based on gender. I assumed that the curfew and parties and ability to regulate his social schedule through adolescence would be the same for me when I became his age, but it was not. My social life was situated in the context that I was a girl and it was relatively unsafe for girls to live as boys do. I had to be more careful partying because I could be taken advantage of. I had to be home sooner because there was only so much available for a young lady at a certain time of night. On one occasion, having grown tired of the double standard, I asked my mother if we could talk and I expressed my needs and wants based on my experiences and maturity. This conversation revealed some hard truths for us both, but is a pivotal point in defining myself. What was most significant about our talk was how empowered I became being able to define my own Black girlhood, separate from my brother’s Black boyhood and separate from my mother’s Black girlhood decades prior. What became powerful for my mother was the realization that I had the ability to define myself for myself and I believe, in that, she knew I could not only survive but could thrive in a world that may not see me the way she does or the way she wants them to but that I would not allow the world to circumscribe meaning to me without my approval.

In my experiences as an elementary school educator, I witnessed many opportunities and activities specifically for the boys in the school, including chess and mentorship. Opportunities for girls were almost exclusively relegated to after-school dance programs. When I began my doctorate studies I saw a similar trend; urban studies favored scholarship related to Black and Latino boys. For two years my courses did not include literature on or related to Black girls, so I began to search for texts on Black girlhood. From my readings and experiences, I pursued a research agenda centering and honoring the unique and complex lived experiences of Black girls. In this work I focused on the intersectionality of gender, race and class in the lives of girls of color in and out of school settings, and the role of parents and teachers in their identity construction and academic successes. While I greatly enjoyed the work with the girls and their expressions of self and sisterhood, I began to be confronted with pushback in
my choice to work with Black girls. The question: Why Black girls? was articulated on more than one occasion.

Black women and girls have long had no say in the public definitions of Black womanhood and girlhood. These self-definitions have always been in opposition to movements positioned to, in many ways, be inclusive of their experiences. As women of color in feminist movements and as women in Black movements, their unique racialized-gendered oppressions maintained the rigid oppressive structures in place around them. Elite discourses (discussed in the next section) work to maintain power relations that sustain racist and patriarchal ideology. Thus, it has always been important for Black women to resist. Part of that resistance is defining themselves for themselves. According to Collins (1998), “elite discourses present a view of social reality that elevates the ideas and actions of highly educated White men as normative and superior” (p. 45). Thereby it becomes important, as McArthur (2016) says, to “connect students’ histories, stories, and lived experiences” in and out of school spaces “so they can identify, deconstruct, and problematize the complexity of power relations operating in society. . .” (p. 362). Black people and women are left out of elite discourses, but this further impacts Black women and girls as they are not seen in the Whiteness or maleness of the dominant society.

Johnson (2017) encourages us to consider what happens to the self when it does not recognize its own absence. Black girls are experts on their individual experiences. Listening to and opening space for their voices significantly advances the tapestry of girlhood and Blackness. In a time of profound social and political climate change, youth are constantly renegotiating a sense of identity and agency. It is critical to their identity construction to have more say, the most say, in what Black girlhood is. So, why Black girls? My agency and activism as a Black woman is to create spaces and open place for Black girls. Why Black girls? Because just as Black women are often excluded from racialized and gendered movements, as are Black girls and as long as I have a platform I will advocate that we listen to the unique lived realities they experience in inner cities, in suburban places, and in rural towns.

Collins (1998) says that “for Black women as a collectivity, emancipation, liberation, or empowerment as a group rests on two interrelated goals. One is the goal of self-definition, or the power to name one’s own reality” (p. 45). Society has essentialized the identities of Black girls into one homogenous, false universal. The Black girl narrative is exclusionary, typically highlighting inner-city African American girls. Black girlhood requires a complex analysis because they are not a monolith. Their identity formation is multidimensional and diverse. Collins (1998) goes onto say that “Within the framework provided by their historically constituted group identity, individuals take up and perform their classification in diverse ways” (p. 204). Within the after-school collective I co-created and facilitate, Beyond Your Perception (BYP), I have found that many of the Black girls I work with have been performing their classification; that is, living within the definitions of Black girlhood prescribed for them from society and the media.

Beyond Your Perception is a culturally relevant and responsive pedagogical intervention that focuses on the racialized-gender identities of Black girls. BYP creates the space for Black girls to think through, articulate, and question their multi-faceted identities. Like all children and youth, Black girls are working to construct their identities informed by their social contexts, race, class, and gender, among other aspects of their identities (McArthur & Muhammad, 2017). They deserve to see themselves reflected, authentically, in school curricula, on television and other media in order to “counter the stereotypes that haunt society’s collective consciousness about Black women and girls with genuine stories of Black girlhood” (McArthur, 2016, p. 365). I serve to disrupt that collective consciousness one iteration of Beyond Your Perception at a time; in working with Black girls to define themselves, for themselves, their lives will provide authentic reflections of Black girlhood. In breaking silence, coming to voice, and developing self-reflexive speech, it is important that Black girls “claim authority of experience” (Collins, 1998, p. 48); fostering dialogue with and among Black girls is significant to their identity construction. Mae Henderson (1989) stated that “It is not that Black women. . . have had nothing to say, but rather that they have had no say” (p. 24). Black girls are holders of knowledge and experts on their own stories. What becomes most significant in the exploration of Black girlhood is recognizing what we stand to gain by understanding the contexts of their lived experiences. hooks (1989) expounds on the importance of voices of the silenced in saying:

When we dare to speak in a liberatory voice, we threaten even those who may initially claim to want our words. In the act of overcoming our fear of speech, of being seen as threatening, in the process of learning to speak as subjects, we participate in the global struggle to end domination. When we end our silence, when we speak in a liberated voice,
Historically, Black women have been part of race and women’s movements that have aided in advancing society forward for everyone. Black girl work—providing space for their self-reflexive and self-defining practice—stands to engender more resistors to speak truth to power and liberate us all. Coming to voice, as stated by hooks (1989), “is a gesture of resistance, an affirmation of struggle” (p. 18). My gesture of resistance is to respond to the oft asked question: Why Black girls? with intentional and deliberate community engaged scholarship that provides opportunities and platforms for Black girls to break silence; space for us to define ourselves for ourselves and, in so, finding our own liberation.

**Talking Back to Elite Discourses: Erica Speaks**

I, too, cannot separate who I am from the work that I do. I was raised through an open adoption by a White woman which meant that on the weekends and for periods in the summer, I also lived with my working-class Black biological parents and siblings in Detroit. Though I was highly resilient and viewed my non-traditional, multi-racial family as “normal,” the imprint of the experience is marked indelibly upon me. I am acutely aware of the ways in which social inequality is produced and maintained in the intersections of multiple overlapping oppressions (Crenshaw, 1989) in large part because I have never been able to untangle all of the “beings” that constitute my life. For example, I was raised in a Black and a White family, in class privileged and economically marginalized communities, by educated and under-educated parents, in the city and the class “haven” of an incorporated township. I also experienced within-group tension as I often struggled to identify fully with both my Black wealthy and working-class friends.

To separate any of these truths about myself would be intensely violent. The struggle I experienced to make whole the disparate places and identities I called home inspired me to pursue a career toward racial justice. I want to create a world where people are free to be human, where the over-representation of Man (Wynter, 2003) is brought to heel, and we live in the liberation that is difference (Lorde, 1984).

In other words, my own experience with Black girl liminality compelled me to be of service to the generations after me. Such is the creed of the Black Feminist tradition (B. Cooper, 2017). And, indeed, my experience as an educator and community activist made clear to me the many ways in which navigating urban Black girlhood in America remains a fragile experience (Miller, 2008; Morris, 2016). When I started graduate school, I knew that I wanted to commit myself to writing about and advocating for the needs of multiply marginalized Black girls. Their experiences are situated in contexts of identity, place and socio-historical processes and as so, my coursework led me to explore scholarship principally concerned with intersectional experiences and neoliberalism. As my thinking began to coalesce into a dissertation, my intention was to design a study that would add to the literature on Black girls’ strengths – even in the midst of situations that are replete with structural and personal challenges. Also, considering that my subjectivities as a researcher cannot be separated from my research, I knew that I needed a theoretical frame that resisted both fragmenting myself as a researcher and relying on pathology as the basis of my argument. As so, Black Feminist Theory was the most appropriate paradigm to situate my work both because it is the frame that articulates my truth as a human being and because its liberatory conceptions fully accounts for the complexity of Black girls’ needs.

However, it admittedly took courage and the support of my advisor to delve deeply into Black Feminist Theory. Learning about the “paradigm wars” (Gage, 1989) made clear that there are certain approaches to theory and research that are more valuable in academia than others (Brown, Carducci & Kuby, 2014). Out of fear that my choices in design would impact my prospects on the academic job market, I questioned myself about staying too true to my calling as a Black Feminist – even as doing so was theoretically sound for the argument I wanted to advance.

Critical race scholars and Black feminists have made explicit the ways in which critical and feminist theorists have disregarded the centrality of intersectional markers of identity in human experience (Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1984). This scholarship has done much to create a theoretical home for researchers like myself, whose work is rooted in the Black experience and as so, cannot decontextualize the materiality of social constructions. Still, despite decades of solid research produced in Black feminist and critical race perspectives, we experience an unspoken tension in mixed company when we discuss the theory we use. On several occasions, I was made to feel that my work with multiply marginalized Black girls was “noble” or “heart-warming,” but not serious.
One particular experience illustrating this point stands out: after sharing my dissertation topic with a graduate student from another department, she responded by saying that I should consider becoming a journalist when I finish my degree because my work would never land me an academic job. She explained that in her department, doctoral students were trained in applied methods offering “tangible” results to schools and school districts – primarily because it is the frame in power (National Research Council, 2002; American Educational Research Association, 2006; Baez & Boyles, 2009). Grants, contracts, and jobs are most plentiful for those operating from positivist and other “objective” paradigms. Her training assumes that my ideas and theoretical frame are too subjective to be useful in urban classrooms. What she, and her department fail to realize is that one of the core premises of Black Feminist Theory is utilitarianism (Collins, 2000). My dissertation was designed with the expressed intent to be applicable in the contemporary educational policy-scape. However, because it does not erase me or my participants as beings who know in the context of multiple systems of domination, it is dismissed.

I studied the school re-entry experiences Black girls have after exclusionary discipline – a key experience in school-to-confinement processes illuminating the on-going role schools have in Black girls’ marginalization. It was a comparative study using narrative inquiry, which is a methodological approach compatible with diasporic Black epistemologies (Fournillier & Lewis, 2010; Amoah, 2013). The in-depth experiences of five Black girls were compared to the perspectives of administrators in the school district most had attended. The narratives elicited from the two groups were in contradistinction to one another and demonstrated the ways in which educators’ perceptions of Black girls’ disciplinary experiences are markedly different from the ways in which the girls’ (re)member them (Dillard, 2012). By centering the girls’ voices, my study articulates the ineffective and harmful effects of disciplinary approaches that educators take for granted as “caring.”

The significance of this study and, indeed, its usefulness is clear. It adds compelling evidence to the body of scholarship calling for restorative and even abolitionist approaches to ending punitive exclusionary discipline. My colleague’s training, however, suggests that my study is somehow futile.

Black Feminist Research is part of a school of thought marked by the National Research Council (2002) as carrying “extreme epistemological positions” (p. 25). They frame large-scale, quasi-experimental research as the best frame to use without probing the ways in which certain questions do not lend themselves to this paradigm. How, for example, would a quasi-experimental design make sense of my intersectional life experience? How does it account for the nuance and complexity characterizing the multiple ways in which Black girls are regularly mistreated, indeed, marginalized in certain school settings? Black Feminist Theory disrupts methodological elitism by making room for the researcher as an embodied subject and by relaying the assumptions, principles and procedures that fully account for the social, political, and economic phenomena Black women and girls live. We are the experts of our own experience (Collins, 2000) and within contexts that do not hear or see the ways in which we resist oppression, our voices are critically needed.

As I enter the academic job market, it is very clear how difficult it will be to find a place for me, both as a Black woman and Black girl researcher. A number of edited volumes document the significant obstacles women of color face in successfully navigating the professional standards of academia (Matthew, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2016); and a cursory search reveals that the number of assistant professorships available for scholars using positivist paradigms far outnumber those operating from different traditions. I, along with my sisters doing Black girl work, am up against a giant. Still, I will stay true to the frame because, as our foremother Anna Julia Cooper (1892) asserted “I constantly felt (as I suppose many an ambitious girl has felt) a thumping from within unanswered by any beckoning from without” (p.34). If we do not do the work, who will? We will and must persist.

Vivian May (2015) asserts that: “When one accounts for historical Black feminist writings that introduce matrix thinking, and examines their reception, what becomes clear is that, whether presently or historically, intersectional ideas have repeatedly been misconstrued or treated reductively” (p.11). I take heart, however, in the fact that our scholarship continues despite being marginalized under historical circumstances that linger, but were certainly more arduous than those we face today (Stewart, 1987; Wells, 1970, 1997, 2014; B. Cooper, 2017). In the neoliberal educational landscape where profit renders Black youth superfluous (Duncan, 2000), it is imperative to the survival of the public institutions we depend upon to tell our stories in ways that fully account for the complexity of Black experiences. Elite discourses created in historical processes that were wholly dependent upon Black subjugation do not always offer the epistemological or theoretical insight to do this.
For this reason, I am reminded to heed the encouraging words of Maria Stewart. Speaking publicly in 1832, her call rings true today: “Many have desired to hear those things which we hear, and have not heard them; and to see those things that we see, and have not seen them” (Stewart in Richardson, 1987, p. 43). Whether in this time or another, we speak truth to power, for certainly there are those along with us who are working to realize Black girl justice. Because of this, I will and must keep talking back.

Conclusion

In the Black Feminist tradition, experience is honed as a way of knowing and learning. In this work, our endeavor is not to attempt to provide an outline for how to do Black girl work or become a Black girl researcher. This autoethnographic reflection of our experiences is to highlight the support offered through the use and understanding of Black feminist literature, so that aspiring Black girl researchers can maintain hope for their own development and be encouraged. Additionally, this writing is the work of Black feminism as honoring our lived experiences, truthfully relaying our challenges in the educational pipeline and academia, redefining the meaning of good research, resisting monolithic and Eurocentric notions of research, and dispelling deficit myths of Black girlhood/womanhood prevalent in academia.

References

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