

Black Storytellers and Everyday Liberation: At the Nexus of Home, School, and Hip Hop

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Abstract

Black Storytellers and Everyday Liberation addresses the question, “How do Black folx cultivate everyday practices of liberation?” This article details the inception of an ethnographic Black Storytelling research project between 2021 and 2022 that centers the lived experiences of 18 people around the United States. The participants, including myself, collectively explore how various institutions have shaped individual and family identities. As an outcome of this work, I provide analysis that disrupts institutional anti-Black racism (specifically naming schools) and identify ways that we can heal and affirm ourselves through everyday practices. I conclude with a data excerpt in the form of poetic transcription.

Keywords

critical race theory, ethnicity and race, critical ethnography, ethnographies, methodologies, Afrocentric feminist epistemologies, feminist methodologies

Black Storytelling

How do Black folx cultivate everyday practices of liberation? To address this, I center the voices of 18 folx (interviewed between September 2021 and October 2022). Each person was born within the critical influence of Hip Hop across the Deep South, Southern California, NY, and the Midwest. I identify these folx as Black Storytellers. We pivot away from Du Bois’s musings regarding the white gaze in 1903, “what does it feel like to be a problem,” and pivot toward #BlackFolxAreRich. This project was designed for Black folx, those who love Black folx, and folx interested in ways to document and honor their own family stories.

Black Storytellers “(re) member our spiritualities as Black people and our legacies of resistance, persistence, and responsibility” (Dillard, 2022, Introduction, para 8). I employ Black Storytelling as my theory and method. It is rooted in critical race theory, several denominations of Black feminism (because Black feminism is for *everybody*) fugitivity, art/music and indigenous, and critical ethnography. I name three forms – firsthand, hand-me-down, and kaleidoscope stories – as reflections and practices of intersectional identities. As a reflection of art and scholarship, I call Black Storytellers such as James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Zora Neal Hurston, Nikki Giovanni, Cynthia Dillard, Robin Boylorn, Septima Clark, Bisa Butler, D. Soyini Madison, bell hooks, Joan Morgan, Ms. Lauryn Hill, Mama,

and Daddy. As a practice/method, I name four movements for Black Storytelling: (a) Record (focus on how Black folx foster wonderment and create history through our respective Village), (b) Reconnect (critically understand our individual stories within a broad American context), (c) Reward (exercise agency by embracing the Inner Child, the Erotic, the Land, the Body), and (d) Repeat (build cultural wealth with the Village).

I understand Chilisa’s (2011) call that researchers must act as provocateurs and transformative healers. “Postcolonial indigenous research methodologies must be informed by the resistance to Euro-Western thought and the further appropriation of their knowledge” (p. 8). Robin D. G. Kelley (2018) tells us, “Resistance is our heritage. And resistance is our healing” (p. 161). Therefore, I assert that Black Storytelling is a praxis of reclamation and healing.

Home

Of all the institutions that shape us – especially school and church, which were consistently noted across all of the

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cyphers – home is the first. I name *home* as ground zero, however any person defines it. A couple folx in this project shared that they moved 24 times in the first 25 years of life, or 12 times before 18, while others have the same house on the same land, with the same neighbors from the 80s. But home is more than physical place. It's the rules of the neighborhood(s), the weather and dictations of nature, the travel between houses that provided comfort, and things we only share in journals or therapy sessions. I take the time here to explore home through everyday stories and experiences that we often take for granted as well as those we cross oceans for.

Cities Across the United States

In this project, we don't just share the stories of our folx, but of our cities and towns, across multiple generations. Each storyteller names two to three places they call home. Street names and common phrases roll off of folx' tongues. I even had to have quick pronunciation lessons for what was unfamiliar. "It's Lewey-ville, Lewul-vl, but NEVER LouiS-ville"—thank you, Fatz. Pop and soda, tennis shoes and gym shoes. These nuances hold place and time for each of us, and much room for family debate. "I can't believe you call it stuffin! Where you from??" So, it was relatively easy for me to drop pins in places where folx grew up, found themselves, and freed themselves; however, what is not dropped are our elders' and ancestors' homes. Some of us know their migration stories, but most do not. Therefore, the Black Storytellers' Map is bound by our generation. My work is to expand it—with more stories and archives.

Let Grandma 'Nem Breathe

So, what creates home? A house? DNA? A griot's record? Sure, all of these can hold true. For Black folx in America, this is a complicated question. But home is not far; roots are directly beneath our feet. In 2015, I began the journey to research my African ancestry and ultimately had to address this panging voice that persisted: What about Kentucky? What about Texas? Months before I traveled to Africa, even before I did the DNA test, Kahn asked why I thought the test was necessary. Why wouldn't I dig deeper into the family I had right here? My response has always been: I can do both. One doesn't negate the other. However, I became keenly aware of the incredible privilege to (a) get the initial test, (b) form substantial relationships with folx in the respective African country, (c) travel to said country, and (d) maintain those relationships. Because I didn't want to be one of those people who got the token African certificate and tossed out my tribe's name as an elitist, ethnic parlor trick. I wanted to know and name all the roots. But I also realized that in some of our efforts to heal the Transatlantic Massacre, we jump over all the blood and sweat of our folx on American soil to pan for DNA gold in Africa.

Most of us will never do that test, for many valid reasons, much less travel and develop deep relationships. But at the same time, we forget to remember our stories here. Too many of us keep our "gold" tucked away in boxes and books with broken spines that get discarded when the matriarch/patriarch passes. And the most telling experiences that stay with me from my travels through Foumban, Cameroon and the Cape Coast, Ghana are that our history is *everywhere*. The walls, the ceilings, murals that can be seen from long distances, the clothes, the songs, the artwork, the textbooks, the drums, the hips, and the lips. As our Ghanaian guide Kofi said, "we eat our history, we wear our history, we *are* our history." Tikar stories are documented through in what looks like hieroglyphs across Foumban, reminding us of who we are from 1390, when two brothers and one sister (NGuonso, Morunta, and NChare) crossed the Noun River after the death of their chief and continued into three different directions, establishing kingdoms/states across Cameroon (Fomine, 2009, p. 71). Histories told to us at the River of No Return in Cape Coast are that of both the Mother (Africa) and the children she lost who are still longing for us (the Diaspora siblings.)

And this is what I want for Black folx in America—to see our history from great distances and great intersections. To be present and to return. Because Black folx have DNA all over this planet. We have range that is not hierarchical nor determinist. And there is always gold at our feet. Quite literally. We have to lift up Mama and Daddy and Nana and Pop Pop and Aunt Essie. We have to say the names of the folx that pour/ed into us, touched us, and soothed us with palms and hearts. And *sometimes* even the names of the folx that hurt us. Because yes, we *do* have some terrible stories, which is a *human* experience. Black folx do not have a patent on shame. Nor should we. Furthermore, what other folx have done to us is not *our* shame, individually nor collectively. Even folx that *look like* us. I love how Robin Boylorn (2013) says, "my secrets are someone else's secrets" (p. xx). Oftentimes we store those mutually traumatic secrets on a shelf of canning jars like we're preserving feces; we keep ourselves bound to someone else's iniquity. And yea. Grandma sometimes *chose* to keep her mouth shut for her survival. For our survival. But none of that sullies *Black*. What our generation needs to know is that telling our stories engenders healing.

Let's let Grandma breathe. Secure support and break a jar if you need to. "The wound is the place where the Light enters you" (thank you Rumi) Our stories provide light. Our stories provide strength. Our stories offer roadmaps to find and see one another. Our stories honor God. Our stories build homes.

Three Types of Stories

Knowledge production is a power struggle. But it doesn't have to be. Like the anthologized work of Boylorn and Orbe

(2021), the mission of the narratives gathered in this project “encourage us to better understand and learn from each other while showing the interconnectedness of the human experience” (Introduction, Section 1, para. 6). These methods encourage us to lean into our whole selves. As such,

the term *autoethnography* has multiple meanings (Reed-Danahay, 1997) but largely refers to both the method and product of researching and writing about personal lived experiences and their relationship to culture (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography involves the “turning of the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context wherein self-experiences occur” (Denzin, 1997, p. 227). Autoethnographers research themselves in relation to others. (Introduction, Section 2, para. 1)

This research study is a gathering of three types of stories: firsthand, hand-me-down, and kaleidoscope. Unearthing these stories and their folk memories of freedom *is* fugitive planning (Kelley, 2018).

Firsthand Stories. We take in the world with hands, ears, tongues, noses, eyes, and spirit. What we repeat of this world that we take in is our firsthand story. Time and emotions give different textures to these stories, and sometimes we make sense of them by sharing and receiving them. But our lived experiences are valid—they are the criterion for meaning (Hill Collins, 1990/2009). Each of us is a primary instrument of collection and what we experience through millions of tangible and imperceptible receptors is true and True. The call from Mama Audre Lorde (1978/2007c) to embrace erotic power as the “nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge” (p. 59), and Cynthia Dillard’s canon of (re)membering are central for firsthand stories. Dillard (2008) often talks about an unlimited capacity for all kinds of memories. She goes further to make the claim

Black people have inherently and always existed as brilliant holders of knowledge, culture, and humanity. Thus, (re)membering is not an initial or original (re)cognition of Blackness: it is used to (re)mind us all of what Black people have *always* known about ourselves in contexts that consistently act otherwise. . . (re)membering is a promise to all of the ancestors: touching our spirits is quite literally a covenant we have made with the ancestors who *chose* to survive so that we might have the awesome opportunity to thrive as Black people today. (Dillard, 2022, Introduction, paras. 3 & 4)

We may have less say in how these memories/stories are handed down or where and how we get to pick them up. But we still take pains and joys to give them breath. They are our proof of life.

Hand-Me-Down Stories. These are firsthand stories given to us by our elders, their elders, and their elders. It is shared experiential knowledge. It is our narrative inheritance (Goodall, 2005). These are remembered (and often rehearsed) interactions with parents, neighbors, co-workers, kinfolk, and those who may have just been passing by. Perhaps we literally sat at feet and heard these stories, or while we were cleaning, or cooking, or praising, or playing, or getting our hair pressed/braided, or being nosey, or being cradled, or cuttin up. Some of these stories are Tall Tales or the Passover lessons we practice to remember how God has carried us. They are often the humorous or cautionary stories told to us out of love. The corners may have browned and cracked in places; some spots may even be blurred. Some of these stories may take the form of a 30-s joke or a multi-evening saga. When Kahn’s grandmother showed up as one of the first Black women at her upwardly mobile, white-collar job in 1960 something, her new co-worker said, “the way they talked about you, I expected you to walk in here on water.” She responded, “well, where’s the water?”

Hand-me-down stories also travel far beyond our homes. We can receive them in sermons, poems, speeches, and novels. I’ve told one so often that some folk think it’s my own:

One year during a holiday cooking, all the aunts and daughters were busy in the kitchen. One of them was preparing the ham and cut off both ends before putting it into the roasting pan. A daughter said, “Mama, why you cut the ham like that? That’s good meat in those ends!” The mama said, “girl, that’s how you do it.” Puzzled, the daughter simply asked, “why?” Mama responded, “because that’s the way Big Mama did it.” Another daughter chimed in thoughtfully, “why did Big Mama do it?” Busy with the cooking duties, the aunts continued to move around unbothered and just repeated, “that’s the way *we* do it.” One of the daughters decided to just grab the phone and call Big Mama on speaker. “Hey Big Mama, we preparin the ham, but I want to know, why we cut off the ends?” Big Mama laughed hard and loud. “Chile! Ya’ll still doin that? We had to do that because the pot we was usin was too small! Ya’ll better keep that ham whole!”

The lesson of the ham story is that, more often than not, you need *context* for these hand-me-down stories! A lot of times, we got these stories through *observation* but never asked any questions.

Of my favorite hand-me-down stories that have traveled far are the ones by James Baldwin. His writings predate the formal introduction of Derrick Bell’s writings on critical race theory and painfully name for us the permanence of racism, intersectional oppressions, convergence of white, liberal interests, and the power of our own voice and narrative (Crenshaw et al., 1996). He speaks to us of the “. . . torment and necessity of love and this is the enormous contribution that the Negro has made to this otherwise

shapeless and undiscovered country” (Baldwin, 1962/1993, pp. 85–86) and Nikki Giovanni (1968) reminds of the glory of Black childhood and Black life:

and I really hope no white person ever has cause
to write about me
because they never understand
Black love is Black wealth and they’ll
probably talk about my hard childhood
and never understand that
all the while I was quite happy

They tell the stories of Black and America and home—from our perspectives, not the white gaze (even when that gaze is present). And all these stories can co-exist in brilliantly intentional strokes of pain and beauty. Hand-me-down stories are not *counter* but paramount. They are true for the teller and maps for the listener; they connect us to ourselves.

Kaleidoscope Stories. These stories are the ones you hold up to the light, and hundreds of glorious angles pop out. It’s when you’re in the middle of retelling the story about the time the family was driving to Thanksgiving dinner on a dark country road, and your sister Shanyce was driving so fast that she hit something. She loudly interrupts you to say, “nah, nah, nah, that’s not what happened,” and then 5 min later, your husband jumps in and says, “nah! Ain’t neither one of y’all tellin it right!” Clearly, we were all there—including that thing she hit (FYI, no harm was caused!)—and each one of our angles is true. Even perhaps when *one of us* consistently speaks in hyperbole. The same can be done with events, places, and people. The mama that raised me in the 80s fits an entirely different description from the one that raised my two brothers in the 60s. And the friends who knew her across all those decades have their angles as well. Several different Marys. But then again, all the same Mary. Sometimes we can be so deeply immersed in one angle that we forget to hold it up for another perspective.

Muses, Artists, Organic Theorists, & What Does It Mean to Produce Knowledge?

Music has always spoken to my soul. It’s firsthand, hand-me-down, and kaleidoscope tellings that carry historical vibrations and messages—words or not. In music, I can time travel, I can reimagine myself, I can fill my lungs and exhale with my whole body. This is why Whitney Houston was an early inspiration for me: beautiful, gifted, and Black. The way she used her voice helped me belt out my own. Then, I would spend hours alone or with my best friends from school and the block, running through Word

Up! Fresh, and Right On! magazines, over and over and over again. I papered my walls for decades with Whitney, New Edition, The Boys, Jodeci, TLC, Boyz II Men, Al B. Sure!, Heavy D, 2Pac, Wu Tang—this art was different than the Norman Rockwell prints and Dr. King church fans my mother would have around the house. It was much more intimate and inspiring. I memorized their lyrics and hungrily researched stories about their lives sprinkled in magazines or interviews on Video Soul (clearly, this was light-years before Google), and eventually I made scrapbooks so I could carry the pictures and articles around with me. I paid attention to the bylines, the photographer notes, and the locations. From this, I claimed as early as 12 years old that I wanted to be an entertainment journalist. Knowledge production at this stage of my life centered around style, voice, skill, and confidence. As Cynthia Dillard so beautifully notes, my earliest desires to see myself, whole and affirmed took place at home; media gave me glimpses of Black knowledge producers beyond my haven who inevitably became my muses.

Initially, this project focused primarily on on stories told with words. But just as I carried articles and photographs with me as a teenager, I came to understand that we would need to see the handwriting from Cassandra’s great grandmother, the house Ruby’s grandfather built with his hands on a piece of their 150 acres, or the hands of Uncle Eugene, who still fixed cars and roofs at almost 90 years old. The Storytellers have provided a wealth of images, which include intergenerational baptismal photos, family reunions, and folk just chilling. Curating these photos has engendered a whole other methodology for me that I am framing as bricks within indigenous Hip Hop methodology (Dimitriadis, 2015; Marsh, 2012). I liken it to my early days of cutting up photos and the beautiful art that I fell in love with from Romare Bearden and Faith Ringgold. This method of Hip Hoping, collaging, and quilting is timeless. Interdisciplinary quilter (Howard University grad, Smithsonian artist, wife and mama), Bisa Butler reminds us that

African Americans have been quilting since we were brought to this country and needed to keep warm. Enslaved people were not given large pieces of fabric and had to make do with the scraps of cloth that were left after clothing wore out. From these scraps the African American quilt aesthetic came into being. (Sanders, 2021)

And I feel it absolutely necessary to name these ways of knowing and telling—and its creators—beyond a top-tiered, peer-reviewed, academic publication. This knowledge happened on the walls of my home.

From My Classrooms

I was formally introduced to ethnography by my amazing doctoral advisor and mentor, George W. Noblit (who has a highly esteemed international reputation as an educator,

sociologist, and ethnographer, and is also a Bluegrass bass musician, sheep herder, husband, and father). The blend of ethnography and narrative identity resonated with my love and training as a fiction writer and poet. Early on, the work of Septima Poinsette Clark (1898–1987), Sofia Villenas, and D. Soyini Madison were my bible texts.

Septima Clark's second autobiography *Ready From Within* (1986/1990) was introduced as an ethnographic work. While we are brought in to the autobiographic details of her life, we are made witnesses to the Civil Rights Movement; for which she is called its "Mother." We are offered firsthand knowledge of Citizenship Schools (which she established, blueprinting Freedom Schools), her teachings at the Highlander Folk School where the range of folx from Ella Baker and Albert Einstein were both teachers and students, the Voting Rights Act, teachers' pay equalization, and the impactful thread of literacy toward civic engagement and liberation. Her contributions are foundational; however, Black women's names were systemically (and sometimes violently) buried during within this movement, of which she was publicly critical. Her stance was rooted in equipping the community with knowledge rather than depending on legislative equality.

Clark spoke to me as an othermother while I moved through my graduate work; Sofia Villenas spoke to me as a peer researcher. Her dissertation, which she discusses in "The Colonizer/Colonized Chicana Ethnographer" (1996), gave me language to understand my position as an "insider/outsider." She names her position in the very beginning:

While qualitative researchers in the field of education theorize about their own privilege in relation to their research participants, the "native" ethnographer must deal with her own marginalizing experiences and identities in relation to dominant society. This "native" ethnographer is potentially both the colonizer, in her university cloak, and the colonized, as a member of the very community that is made "other" in her research. (p. 712)

Villenas as well as othermothers like Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Barbara Omolade, Mama Toni, and Mama Zora have stuffed wads in academic canons for me to unapologetically name myself as Black, not "of Color," not "African American," just *Black*. And that I write for and with Black folx. As well as telling me to never tame my tongue and to always lift up the names of folx that may be missing or erased.

While Villenas and folx remind us that we are trained to "do no harm" in our work, really, just showing up as a researcher is a disruption. It's a disruption even when we perform the same gender, race, class, religion, sexual orientation, or geographic coded languages (e.g., "what up joe?") as our potential participants. These performances may give us a "pass" but they have also informed our implicit and explicit biases. Moreover, we are introducing equipment (cameras, journals, microphones) in intimate spaces, asking folx to be publicly vulnerable. And many times, they agree.

Because they know us. They trust us. But however much we can align as Village, we also represent an institution—higher education and scientific research—that has benefited from our labor and blood. It has benefited even from our labia and ovaries. We (my participants and self) are always writing Black folx into various canons via our lived experiences; therefore, my research fails if space is not created for my participants to ask questions and to use my projects to their own ends. Villenas (1996) employs ethnography as both the colonized and the colonizer, challenging folx to own their multiple identities, history of complicity, and mark their own points of marginalization. This challenge speaks directly to D. Soyini Madison's career as an activist who conducts research.

D. Soyini Madison (2011) has defined critical ethnography as social justice and risk coupled with truth and translation. She emphasizes reciprocity between the researcher and participant with deep reflexive labor of the researcher. I was introduced to her as a mentor (of one of my mentors, Renée Alexander Craft.) Her warmth is palpable. She is a butterfly educator whose career has spanned several transformations. She is a performer and human rights activist who has brought attention to laborers and local service workers as well as global rights for water and women. She is a professor emeritus invested in indigenous performance tactics, political economy, African studies, and traditional religion. In the 70s, she homeschooled her children in Chicago with a network of amazing folx. Now in its third edition, her book *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance* (2005) is the leading text for folx who research *with* community and hold themselves accountable for the consequences of representation. In the introduction, Madison poses five questions for reflexive consideration:

1. how is the specificity of the local story relevant to the broader meanings and operations of the human condition?
2. how do we create and maintain a dialogue of collaboration in our research projects between ourselves and Others?
3. how do we predict consequences or evaluate our own potential to do harm?
4. how do we reflect upon and evaluate our own purpose, intentions, and frames of analysis as researchers?
5. how—in what location or through what intervention—will your work make the greatest contribution to equity, freedom, and justice?

Black Storytelling earnestly responds to each of these questions in the research and everyday practices. This is demonstrated through reflexive journaling, extensive notes before, during, and after cyphers (interviews), and transparent conversations with the folx who accepted the invitation for this project. The fifth question is where I work to develop

the implications of this project. These stories are for the Village, told in the Village's voice. I am aware that I have received everything through my own position and lenses and that I am the transmitter. Madison (2005) advises us to be aware of our position as "the skilled interpreter in both presenting and representing the lives and stories of others whom you have come to know and who have given you permission to reveal their stories" (p. 4). For me, this responsibility highlights our interconnectedness. I name Black Storytellers as a critical ethnographic frame because it speaks to the indigenous practices and knowledges familiar and innately understood among us.

As I wrestled with my burgeoning academic voice and the one that I've known from birth, George would *constantly* tell me to never forget that I am an artist. And this is how I should write. It is also significant to note that George was adamant about me choosing Black women for my dissertation committee. He was clear that he would guide me through certain academic gates, but I needed Black women to arm my spirit and maintain the truths of my work. While George has never been comfortable with receiving accolades for his work with/for Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) students, he understands the assignment: leverage the gates and get out of way. I will always love and honor him for that. He and Kristal Moore Clemons helped me to look to Audre Lorde. As a writing and performing artist, Mama Audre also reminded me that I did not need to move away from poetry, but rather much further into it:

These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman's place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep. . . . For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. (Lorde, 1977/2007b, p. 37)

With these exemplars, I began to think of my positionality as less biography and more reflexive examination of purpose, action, and where I sit in the nexus of power. As did Septima Clark. In spaces where my writing would feel stiff, I'd ask myself, are you trying to *sound smart*, or are you writing what's honest? I was academically blessed to have an advisor that allowed for and wholly encouraged the latter. And when I recorded during interviews, Renée would caution me: "never let the devices be more present than you." I learned how to take better notes with both pen and memory. There came a clarity for the range of my own voices. So, by the time I came into Robin Boylorn's *Sweetwater* (2013), I knew that I'd found another homeplace to write from.

I totally fanned out when I first met Crunk feminist and poet Robin Boylorn at a National Women's Studies Association conference in 2014. This was because I'd read her work and found an exquisite mirror; her autoethnographies felt like Mama Toni and Mama Zora and Ms. Lauryn Hill. In the margins of *Sweetwater*, page 18 I wrote,

the way she describes place, I feel like I'm home, and I've never stepped foot in Sweetwater. In fact, I'm from the SS of Chicago, and this work demonstrates the beautiful creases and tears of our lived experiences as U.S. Black women. (Y'all, I wrote notes all up and down that book!)

Place is a voice of racial and class dynamics, especially as a witness to redlining and gentrification; school access and busing; food and play deserts; brownfields, pollution, and job displacement; surveillance, violence, and local government activities. Place is also a voice for coming-of-age wonderment and innovation. It feels forever but is absolutely temperamental. Therefore, we capture snapshots to chart our growth and our interconnected relationship to all of these lands. ". . . To grapple not only the physical and spatial aspects of place in relation to the social, but also more deeply with how places and our orientations to them are informed by, and determinants of, history, empire, and culture" (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). My desire is to meaningfully engage with place because it is just as critical a *participant* and storyteller as Baby Sister, Big Mama, and any of the folk of this project.

After the *Sweetwater* introduction, I scribbled: "This book is about Black women as organic theorists. Their stories sit at the nexus of intersectionality and social justice as everyday community practices." I even scribbled maps of her stories to understand the branches of family trees in relation to the town's layout. She wrote about her own people and her own dirt – literally. None of this is oppression bias or mesearch (McLean, 2014; *This* is true knowledge production. Robin reminded me of what it was to grow up within the nexus of 'what my mama nem say' and 'what Hip Hop (the culture) say.'

Hip Hop, Everywhere

For years, I thought of Hip Hop in really limited terms of underground cassette tapes and (mostly male) rappers. Yea, I knew about the conventional four elements—deejayin, emceeing, breakin, taggin—expanding to claim knowledge of self, fashion, language, and entrepreneurship. However, it wasn't until I started looking *back* at my experiences in grammar school and high school that I realized, Hip Hop was *everywhere*. Berry Gordy's *The Wiz*, Salt n Pepa with *Hot, Cool, & Vicious*, Heavy D and KidnPlay Sprite commercials, the opening of *Do the Right Thing*, *A Different World*, *Living Single*, of course *Rap City* and *Yo! MTV Raps*, and the advent of the backwards, baggy styles of BBD and TLC.

Howard University, end of summer 1998. I was sweating on Georgia Ave in a long line with Toya, Yana, and all the HU and DC folx, outside of Willie's at midnight waiting for *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* to drop (Ms. Lauryn taught me the word "reciprocity"). Stood out there again when The Roots dropped *Things Fall Apart* in 1999. And I loved the knock-down-drag-out battles Toya and I would have over Cannibus, Lil Kim, Jay Z, Wu Tang, Goodie Mob . . . when we hosted our afternoon radio show on WHBC. We didn't know the best was right around the corner with *Black on Both Sides* (Bey, 1999). I wasn't getting a lot of classwork done, but I was definitely writing a lot of poetry during that time (shout out to Droopy and Lee). One of the guys I was dating said that my words read like Ghostface's lyrics. Yo, I was utterly flattered; that was my five mics acknowledgment. *All hail to the Wu.*

But it wasn't until reading *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost* (Morgan, 1999) decades after its release—after becoming a whole wife and mother—that I saw myself as a *full* participant and creator in Hip Hop, not just some girl false flaggin'. Hip Hop always shows up in how I dress, talk, paint, write, and tell stories. And in my earliest ciphers with folx, I heard Hip Hop all up and through their stories too. Even with Journey, who didn't even know what ATCQ stood for until she was 25 years old. We are students, consumers, and architects seamlessly nestled in this exquisite culture. Hip Hop is in our pores, even if it wasn't always in our headphones.

What Does It Mean to Call This Research?

Since our creation, Black folx have been engaging indigenous and ethnographic practices—rappin, barbequin, quilting, othermotherin, bid whistin, hairbraiding, eulogizin, steppin, signifiyin, stuntin alladat. And passin it from generation to generation. Scientific research takes its lead from us (debases these ways of knowing, disembodies us from the practices, authorship, and then gatekeeps the access—think museums and highly-ranked subscription-based academic journals). Considering the term *indigenous*, my mind initially goes to the international experiences and struggles of First Nation / American Indian / Canadian Brotherhood folx—especially when discussing violent dispossession and colonization. However, in the context of Black Storytellers, I consider the work of Botswanan postcolonial researcher Bagele Chilisa (2011) to focus on Black folx. Our

ways of seeing reality, ways of knowing, and values systems are informed by their indigenous knowledge systems and shaped by the struggle to resist and survive the assault on their culture. That is what makes the methodologies indigenous. (p. 9)

In this way, I am doing the research that "my soul must have" (Walker, 1983, p. 241). Dillard and Okpalaoka (2011)

remind us to "construct and nurture paradigms that encompass and embody our cultural and spiritual understandings and histories and that share our epistemologies and ways of being" (p. 147). Moreover, this standpoint and form of analysis provides a respite from the "death dance of dependence" (Grande, 2004, p. 2) upon the master's tools (Lorde, 1979/2007a). My epistemological standpoint is grown from black-bottomed cooking pots and hot combs on the stove, prayers and Aretha Franklin hymns in the air.

Qualitative inquiry has always been natural for me. It's a method I've spent my entire life engaging with just by always asking questions. Thirsting for vivid and immersive stories and leaning into knowledges not always captured in text. Indeed, I have a deferential appreciation for Zora Neal Hurston's articulation that "research is a formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose" (Walker, 1979, p. 49). One of the things I love about qualitative inquiry, especially ethnography, is that it is not intended to be scalable or generalizable. However, it still speaks so intensely and specifically to culture and systems. From the story of one ($n = 1$), we can learn how a neighborhood developed, crumbled, and reinvented itself; we can travel with three generations of fisherman from the South to the West Coast; we can taste recipes traded from 1879; we can mourn wars and the effects of broken hearts that still make room for grandchildren and butter sandwiches. Ethnographic work allows for deep intimacy and demands reciprocity. It shoulders risk and engenders an erotic/spiritual process of knowing.

So let me tell you about what it means to see and be me in research. I'll back it up a little bit—what it means to *see me, periodt*. I know this is why I loved Rudy Huxtable (Keisha Knight Pulliam) on NBC every Thursday night, why Mama *fought* for the last Black Cabbage Patch doll during Christmas season, and why I always managed my daddy's collection of big *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines. Seeing myself, hearing myself, has always mattered. I never had to ask was I Black or felt like I had to prove myself. Okay, no, that's a lie. I did feel like I had to prove myself when it came to dancing, Double Dutch, or liking watermelon, but I digress. I never felt like I had to prove myself in terms of my *brilliance*. But the absence of brilliant Black folx contributions in conventional Sociology and Cultural Studies courses definitely gave me pause. My introduction to Gloria Ladson-Billings (by way of Eileen Parsons) in 2009 was a Godsend. The quotes Kristal kept around our apartment of Mama Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Anna Julia Cooper were cool, but the term *feminism* still sounded too much like burning bras, penis envy, and middle class white girl tears. Still, Kristal watered a seed. I got my formal introduction to Black feminism in Michele Berger's class and fell in love with Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Patricia Hill Collins, and Paula Giddings (again), on the spot. I found a whole other world of (intellectual) othermothers.

I learned that feminism as I saw it on television or read in waves at school, was *not* the feminism of my blood and

bone. Simply put, it was White. Early in my poetry journey when I fell in love with hiakus, I wrote,

i wont burn my bra.
im not afraid to admit;
i need the support.

When I picked up *Words of Fire* edited by Mama Beverly Guy-Sheftall, I was forever changed. Black feminist Linda La Rue (1970/1995) ardently asserts that “attempt[s] to analogize black oppression with the plight of the American white woman has the validity of comparing the neck of a hanging man with the hands of an amateur mountain climber with rope burns” (p. 164). I thought, “We’ll I’ll be!” I began to lean into several denominations of Black feminism (womanism, hip hop feminism, crunk feminism), which were inclusive of my Black family and free from what a girl *should* look like. I don’t believe in splitting hairs on names *and* our work doesn’t always need to be called feminism. I acknowledge that while the term *feminism* was created in an academic space, Black feminism was created in our proverbial kitchens and I do not shed this epistemological standpoint—or tool—when designing and conducting research (Sankofa Waters, 2016). Because in short, Black women fight for everybody.

Shortly after the formalities of graduate school, I slid into the Crunk Feminists. WHAT?! Brittney (Crunktastic), Chanel (CF Chanel), Eesha (EeshaP), Rachel (Raeone), Sheri (sheridf), Susana (Crunkadelic), Robin (rboylorn), and Crunkista. They looked like me. They talked like me. They were of the same generation as me. They were artists of every discipline. They provided a blueprint. And I recognized that there is always a cost. Especially for those of us working on plantations. Which calls me to the conversation of fugitivity:

Her labor is as necessary as it is unwelcome. The university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings. And on top of all that, she disappears. She disappears into the underground, the downlow lowdown maroon community of the university, into the undercommons of enlightenment, where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong. (Harney & Moten, 2013, pp. 12–13)

And so, I am learning what it means to disappear—particularly to disappear into the strong Blackness and maintain my research agendas. During the onset of my “crunk” season, I found myself nestling deeper into the work of Gwendolyn Pough, Joan Morgan, Tricia Rose, Bettina Love, Treva Lindsey, Ruth Nicole Brown, and Elaine Richardson. And the list has grown exponentially.

Greater Implications

There’s a coffee table book I discovered at Maya and Anita’s house while I was home from college. The cover is filled with the profile of an elder Black woman. The photo is not quite black and white, but silver tone. Her gray hair is braided in narrow plaits alongside her head, which is raised—not haughty, but regal. Her hand is placed under her chin and she is looking beyond whatever is in front of her. Above her, the title reads: “I DREAM A WORLD.” It’s a book that you *must* open. It features 75 portraits of living (at the time) “Black women who changed America” (Lanker, 1989). The woman on the cover is Septima Clark. However, I wouldn’t know her story until Kristal introduced her work to me in graduate school. (Things always move in cycles whether we are aware or not). As you can imagine, this collection is filled with striking photos and snapshot interviews. As I flipped through, the one that held my attention was with Toni Morrison. She said,

I remember myself as surrounded by extraordinary adults who were smarter than me. I was better educated, but I always thought that they had true wisdom and I had merely book learning. It was only when I began to write that I was able to marry those two things: wisdom and education. (p. 36)

Of all the learning I was doing away at Howard University, this quote resonated with me deeply. There are folx in my family who’ve attended various types of schools and trainings at all levels; therefore, for me, a terminal degree was somewhat expected. I was well aware that my mother and father were pouring everything they had into me so that I would receive a formal education that exceeded theirs. But their words, their warmth, their sacrifices, their traumas, and their love were the learnings that created my foundation. And as I writer, I would always be asked to honor that foundation. Home. I would be a bridge between them and the world.

Cynthia Dillard (2022) reminds us that “we are Black on purpose for a purpose” (p. 2). It is a deep-rooted affirmation to speak truth, especially in dark, captive spaces for liberation. In this purpose, it is imperative to speak truth in our own voices. And to hear our voices come back to us. Through first person, hand me down, and kaleidoscope stories. Zora Neal Hurston demonstrated this with such exquisite brilliance, not adhering to conventional English forms but the sounds and tones she received. Toni Morrison gave us visceral imagery to transpose ourselves into beautiful stained-glass windows.

And lemme keep it a buck. Some of us don’t want to be *just Black*. Perhaps “just Black” feels too tragic and weighted with deficit lenses. It is a social construction, not of our own language or imagination, that has been used to control, deny, and kill us. There are some folx that feel like “Black” erases nuance and whittles us down to a monolith. And some of us

have internalized Du Bois's 1903 question, "what does it feel like to be a *problem* [emphasis added]?" But *I* use "Black" everyday as an inclusive, intersectional, political identity that affirms my connection to the Diaspora. Sure, the problem with the 20th century was the color line (Du Bois, 1903/1989); however, the problem with the 21 century is its permanence (Alexander, 2022). I argue that it is not an issue of whether or not white terrorism exists, just like Keyser Söze, but rather we believe in its permanence so much, that we don't think we are free to claim any cultural wealth outside its grip. I look to James Baldwin when I consider embracing the whole of who I am as a Black American—even when that embrace is not reciprocated. My wholeness does not come from its acceptance—and I make no attempt to downplay the trauma here. We have been forced to examine ourselves through a second and third lens that does not privilege our own lived experiences as valid, but rather as a subculture perpetually subject to the terrorism of whiteness. It is critical to speak and document our stories as first-person, empirical evidence of both our brilliance and humanity; to move from deficit-based approaches to asset-based. We are Black, with a capital "B" and we are American, neither without shame or apology. We must affirm this for ourselves as well as proceeding generations, to disrupt the violent hold of anti-Black racism. These are acts of liberation. Sustaining joy, wonderment, innovation, criticality, agency, memory, and community building are our legacy.

Libations

I take care in this review of literature and methods to (re)member those who teach me: Beverly Guy-Sheftall. Romare Bearden. Faith Ringgold. Toni Morrison. Carter G. Woodson. Mary Temple Rhodes. William Rhodes. Uncle Jerry. Uncle Eugene. Uncle Aaron.

I take particular care to honor Black women. I recognize Black women not just as a social identity, but as a homeplace for us all (hooks, 2015). The greater implications of all our truth telling and (re)membering—in the undercommons and the heavens—are healing. We don't get to define or write prescriptions for this healing. Instead, we meaningfully acknowledge one another as we pass alongside via our respective journeys. Maybe we have capacity to extend a little grace or joy when we do. Maybe a dash of wisdom and a dollop of honey. A couple kernels of corn and a mustard seed or two. We acknowledge our source of Love—the source of our tellings/learnings—and then water each other from full cups.

The Ciphers

Gathering Folx

According to the language of my recruitment, I was looking for *folx* (a) who identified as Black, (b) born in the US (c)

during the onset/critical influence of Hip Hop, (d) and were interested in documenting their personal histories. In addition, I was interested in facilitating these conversations with folx so that *they* are equipped to facilitate conversations with *their own* folx. In this way, the work goes beyond this study and moves through generations without needing me at the helm.

I posted the recruitment information on social media platforms and sent direct emails to folx, who previously expressed interest in documenting. Through general conversation and word of mouth, the list of potential folx quickly swelled to 30+. Folx reached out to me off the strength of our personal relationships, my previous work, or a mutual friend they trusted. From there, I began to take the storytellers first come, first serve in terms of scheduling. I honestly believed I would interview them all. Even considering that each storyteller would yield (at least) two 2-hr ciphers. However, after the very first one, I decided to move in a different—smaller—direction. There was so much richness in those first 2 hr with Fatz Fanon; I knew that I would likely hit a point of saturation—and exhaustion—far before 30. The second cipher overlapped with the first in remarkable ways. From South Carolina to New York, I talked to two folx who had some of the same childhood and community experiences within entirely different families and cities. It was beautiful. The third and fourth ciphers virtually took me to 1980s Mississippi and Southern California. Initially, there were no age parameters. While looking at the pool of folx who were showing up, I decided to focus on one generation (roughly a 15-18 year window) to provide a tighter focus for the collection. However, the first few folx talked heavily and intimately about Hip Hop so that after the third cipher, I absolutely knew that was the frame. Hip Hop as the movement, across generations.

Because I am working with folx' family histories, it's definitely important to consider risks of harm. This is an area of inquiry within the institutional review board (IRB) application; however, it doesn't require much detail because the risk is "minimum"/low. Minimum is relative. Each one of these folx, regardless of how long I've known them, entered our cipher space with so much vulnerability and trust. In casual conversations, before I began conducting the study, I realized something as "simple" as asking someone's name could be a trigger because there are unresolved traumas concerning paternity. There are so many potential bombs in questions that I could be completely unaware of. It was important that (a) I had counselors on call to recommend for folx and (b) the folx I selected to share their stories were genuinely interested in digging through their crates, so to speak. For me, this was a soft indication that they acknowledged spaces of joy and pain before we even got started. What actually surprised me is a large majority of folx were actively in therapy or consistently engaged in healing practices. Several folx paused

during the ciphers to take notes or say, “I’ll need to talk to my therapist about this,” which I thought was beautiful.

Most folx excitedly and thoughtfully chose a pseudonym for themselves to pay homage to a loved one or a character they respected, while the others left the choosing to me. Then, there were a couple folx who dismissed assuming a fabricated identity; therefore, in keeping with the other storytellers’ choices, I simply assigned a name within their family. For some folx, it may be difficult to assume complete anonymity simply because of their proximity to me; however, because my sample spans the entire country, some stories may seem familiar while they could be true across multiple folx and families. Again, Black folx are not a monolith, as demonstrated through this research/text. And we have more things that connect us than divide us.

When I asked folx to fill out the logistics, I didn’t give them “boxes” or parameters because I wasn’t aggregating general census data. The logistics form was still just another conversation piece. I wanted folx to be as open about their identities and demographics as they felt comfortable. So, for prompts like race, sexual orientation, and class, I got: “Black on both sides,” “strickly dickly,” and “check to check,” a rainbow emoji, and “check to check.” From the end of September 2021 through the end of October 2022, I scheduled and completed 39 ciphers with 17 individuals, located in 12 cities, totaling 76 hours of recorded data.

The Day of

Zoom was the primary recording platform used for the ciphers. This allowed me to record video as well as jot basic transcriptions. For a few of the ciphers, I recorded on my phone as well—just as a backup. For in-person ciphers, I rotated between the recording features on my computer, phone, and a Zoom Q2n-4K camera/microphone. I worked from my home office, and all but one of the folx I talked with were at home.

Before each cipher, I asked folx what they wanted to eat. Breaking bread is an act of communion, honor, and joy. The menus ranged across sushi and miso, Popeyes, and tacos and most of them ate at the beginning of our time together. On the recording of Journey and I, you can almost hear the chipotle aioli sliding from our vegan burgers as we excitedly chomped down. It was critical for me to make sure folx were/are fed. And this was not a research compensation or gift—but an act of community. If you can’t break bread with folx, what are you really even talking about?

Food was pretty consistent across the majority of the ciphers; however, my approach before I ordered the food differed. There were times I prayed or meditated to shift my headspace. Sometimes, I was running into the house from a meeting and had to catch my breath simultaneously while

we caught up on each other’s lives. I kept flower agate, carnelian, and copal crystals near me for clearing and grounding. I opened most of the ciphers with music, which led to developing a Black Storytellers playlist based on the songs and album folx listed during their warm-ups. Immediately following each cipher, I either meditated or journaled. This was absolutely necessary. There were two exceptions where I did not do this, and I could definitely feel the difference in how I carried the weight of our time together.

The Movements

I opened the ciphers with four sets of warm-up questions. The first focused on identity, and the second asked them to describe Black, Village, and Hip Hop. The third asked them to order institutions that helped shaped them, and the fourth was round-robins of favorites from their childhood: foods, movies, songs, books, celebrities, yada, yada, yada. I designed the warm-ups so folx could let their eyes and ears roll around. I asked them to focus on childhood and growing up (somewhere between third grade and sophomore year of high school), so their memories could stretch back. This usually took about 45 min. We were then able to dig into the four movements: Record, Re/Connect Reward, and Repeat.

The first set of questions/prompts is guided by this movement, which I introduce to folx before we continue:

Record the Story of Home. Focus on how Black folx foster wonderment and create history through our respective Village. Name the people connected to me, my home(s), neighborhood and community. What do Black families look / feel / sound / smell / taste like?

“Record” typically has the most pauses and moments of reflection, which is why it takes the longest. Therefore, the first cipher is entirely dedicated to this one movement. Both the storyteller and I are usually depleted after 2 hr. In the second cipher, we cover the remaining three movements:

Re/Connect the Black Diaspora. Critically understand our individual stories within a broad American context. Consider the work of *home* through an inter-generational / sectional lens of the Black Diaspora. What are the alignments and tensions of our stories? How have institutions impacted our connections to self and one another?

Reward the Self. Cultivate agency by embracing the Inner Child, the Erotic, the Land, the Body. How do Black folx feel protected (individually and collectively?)

Repeat. Build cultural wealth with the Village. What traditions do we continue and/or create? How do we mark time, and who do we tell we are/were here?

Trust

The ciphers generally lasted about 2 hr each; however, I've spent years and exquisite moments with most of these folx. I am able to provide details in their profiles and context for their head tilts and pauses because I have backstories. Therefore, the interview protocol—the script—was necessary to keep me focused. As you can imagine, the script actually tripped me up a few times. So much data had already been collected through everyday immersion, which means there had to be room for flexibility. As church folx say, we had to “put the program aside and let the Spirit move as it wants to.”

When the recorders and pens come out, there is always a reaction. And when you know you're about to talk about your family, not just to the person sitting in front of you, but to an unknown public—even with a pseudonym—that space carries a weight. Both folx on either side of the recorder have to allow for time to move past the performance and tensions. For Journey and I, it was subtle. But I noticed myself not probing in areas that may have opened delicious opportunities for conversation because I wanted to “stay on track.” Because she and I are close friends, I leaned more heavily on the protocol to convince myself I was mitigating bias. However, at some point during our cipher, I had to reset myself. And *remind* myself that I was talking with a friend. I am an insider/outsider (Villenas, 1996). And Journey (as well as everyone else) invited me in as an *involved* observer (K. B. Clark, 1989/1965). I was part of her story, and attempting to bifurcate our relationship invalidated the entire interaction. I began to move past questions that felt redundant or superficial. In spaces where our stories overlapped, I shared and agreed. I asked questions for clarity, curiosity, sometimes a small challenge. Sometimes I wrote; other times, I moved everything aside, laid on my belly and just listened. I probed where it felt like there was more meat on the bones. And sometimes I knew where the meat was because I know *her*, which is a gift. She trusted me enough to tell me her story, so I needed to *let her tell it*.

The ciphers that followed gave even more opportunities/lessons for flexibility. Yajira is such an amazing, thoughtful, and detailed storyteller that during our warm-up, she pretty much addressed half the questions that I hadn't even gotten to for the *Record the Story of Home* movement. Simply asking her about the Bronx set her off into a historical ethnographic tale of Hip Hop; project apartments that constantly flooded and destroyed property; block parties; women that fed folx who fed other folx; emancipation and finding peace in a vortex. She continually stopped herself and said, “I'm sorry Sissy, I'll let you ask the questions.” And I would fire back, “you good! Stop apologizing and keep going! We'll get to where we need to go.” My conversation with Marshall, also born the same year as Yajira, was by far the most

unorthodox and flexible. I pretty much had to throw out the script altogether! They collectively taught me so much more about being present with folx and how to value the space more than the script. Interviewing is an humbling process.

Threading

Retelling folx' stories takes on various shapes. Osofo often spoke in short answer form, while Marshall constantly walked around the room as if he were gathering new stories out of ceiling to hand over to me. Sometimes I don't think he was even responding to something I said but rather thoughts he was already playing with. Big Mama Diahann put honey on most of her words and smiled with her pauses to let you know there were things she was simply not going to share. All this meant that completing transcriptions would be a beast! (Which lends itself to a whole other conversation about how transcribing must be a culturally responsive process). But I enjoyed combing through them. Laying them out like puzzles and maps. I enjoyed capturing nuances within their narrative blocks. Crafting their stories aligns with the rhythms and colors and sounds as I heard and felt them.

I listened back to each the ciphers a few times. Across all of them, I'd taken notes on things that caught my attention, phrases I thought would be great subheadings. I drew circles for things I wanted to revisit and made large asterisks with wide markers for places I knew I would have to listen to multiple times because the passages were so thick and rich. There was a lot of *in vivo* coding happening. I revisited these journals along with the recordings and nestled myself in each telling, each voice. This is typically my process before I begin transcribing to keep the contexts fresh and hear the places that overlap. I can see phrases and paragraphs in my head that lend themselves to themes. I remember responses that caught me off guard.

In one of my graduate qualitative classes with George, he dragged out several large sheets of construction paper with cut out sentences pasted in different areas. This is how he did part of his coding *back in the day*. And the little girl in me who loves Legos and collages appreciated every single thing about that presentation. There's something about *feeling* the words. This is why I still write with a ballpoint pen in my journal; sometimes a felt pen if I'm feeling fancy. (And now, I also wear arthritis gloves. Yikes). So there are times I arrange chunks of conversations on colored papers and look at what they build, take a look at what hangs on the outside (from the margins I've created). It's my puzzle. And from here, I'm ready to visit coding software such as MaxQDA.

Sitting with the voices and words helped me craft the profiles—to paint a picture of each storyteller. When I started writing the one for Big Mama Diahann, the first words I typed organically fell out: “Oooh, chile!” And the

next time I spoke with her, that was the first thing she said. I didn't even realize how attached that phrase was to her, but it clearly felt right. Whenever Layla came to mind, I saw her younger self jumping rope. And when I thought of Ruby, I saw her whole Village. When I thought about Marshall, I saw fire. From the riots he referenced to the anger he felt being bused to a White school to the phoenix who sat comfortably in front of me sharing all the evolutions and reinventions of his life. Each storyteller evoked a different emotion and sketch, and I sat with them long after the ciphers concluded. I reflected on the wholeness of our times together, no matter how long or short. I used to write profiles uniform; that wasn't natural here—nothing uniform about any of these folx.

And to narrate my own story, I had to cipher with myself. Yo! I thought that was going to be easy. Obviously, I was familiar with the protocol. Not just because I'd designed it and vetted it with folx, but I'd run through it about 10 times at that point. Still, my gut reactions to some of the questions surprised me. Particularly: "What does it look like when you show up for yourself?" I responded,

Damn. I'm asking folx questions that I'm realizing I *really* hadn't examined deeply for myself. Some of these things I just took for granted that I *knew*. But having to make a clear articulation hits different. So, let me think. . .

This exercise made me slow down in the next sets of ciphers since I wasn't even halfway done.

And ultimately, each one of the storytellers for this work is who I am accountable to. I hear Dean Cynthia Dillard when I read, "research from an endarkened feminist epistemological stance is *research as responsibility*, answerable and obligated to the very people and communities being engaged in the inquiry" (Dillard & Okpalaoka, 2011, p. 148). Ruby, Fatz Fanon, Journey, Malari Kahn, Cassandra, Osofo, Hector, Yajira, Layla, Big Mama Diahann, Juanita, Denise, Leroy, Chris, Nia, Akua, and Marshall are the first readers. To hear their richness. And to share the quilt with other folx in our respective Villages.

I am clear that I write for Black folx. And I offer the invitation for other folx to listen in; this invitation is a gift (Kinouani, 2021). The audience includes Black folx, those who love Black folx, and folx interested in ways to document and honor their own family stories. I imagine an audience of folx who are committed to reflecting, dismantling, and healing.

Everyday Liberation

I was talking with Cassandra shortly after our second cipher and she was in deep thought about how to lean into honoring her ancestors. Taking up this honoring feels like an incredibly heavy charge. Do we create alters in our

homes with pictures, personal objects, and favorite foods? Do we sacrifice a goat? Do we create gatherings where we perform libations? Do we take a DNA test and fly "home?" Do we take baths in honey and meditate? Do we pilgrimage to West Africa and lay at the Doors of No Return and ports from Senegal to Cameroon? While yes, all of these honors can be valid; no, they are not necessary for each one of us to take on. (Remember, "the top of our mother's dressers were alters, too." —@cynfinite [2021]). Aligning with our own individual spirit *first* is critical—so that these honors are not simply external and performative. It is critical to start with the self; we are each a whole universe of deoxyribonucleic mappings, wisdoms, and desires. So, when Cassandra said that she felt the need to simply find recipes of folx and cook those meals, or to sit her at her kitchen table like her grandpa did and read the newspaper, I exclaimed, "YES!" That is the everyday practice of liberation: remembering and practicing. Black Storytelling is the vehicle for a Radical Identity Praxis.

I close and open with a poetic transcription—Black Is—across the 18 Black Storytellers; these are our responses to "what is Black? What is Village?"

Black Is

In this body I occupy,
 Black is a subject position
 in relation to other subject positions
 a color
 in a box,
 a numerical value #000000
 a series of cyphers
 that envelopes all other colors.
Black is the one the rainbow forgot to mention.
 When my eyes are closed in the
 Darkness
 I create
 a compilation of experiences
 draw in everything and don't spit out the bones.

Robust.
 Rich.
 Gold chains, grills, and rims.
 Wicker Park pawn shops
 with old Hip Hop records still in plastic.
 Paw Paw ridin through Gulfport
 with a shotgun to let you know
 he ain't scared.
 Grandma make the laws.

Cookouts, block parties, and reunions
 with Frankie Beverly, EW&Fire, Chaka Khan, shuffle/
 slide
 on repeat.
 Uncle Fresh
 with the gold medallion and Cadillac
 drivin from up North
 to give us the EPMD tapes.
 All in yo business,
 “you ain’t got no business!”
 Porches full
 kitchens full
 with the Black bottoms
 of Cousin Baby’s pots and pans
 that hold the secrets of the dressing,
 no stuffing.
 (no) sugar in the grits. “Closed mouths don’t get fed.”
 Abandoned lot mattresses
 are trampolines and
 we sleep on cots with cousins
 wake up to Anita Baker and
 the smell of bleach on Saturday mornings.
 Play outside til streetlights come on
 with honeysuckle still on fingers
 grabbing the avocados that fell
 from the trees in our yard.
 All that good shit.
 We’ve been ugly
 And had to rediscover our humanity
 Bound by trauma joy and pain.
 We shift.
 We shape.

Black is my name.

*capital B

Moved from Afro/can American Negro
 we exist beyond this little bitty country
 ancestral identity
 global identity
 ghetto
 mixed income
 sprawls of redlined cul-de-sac
 shanty towns
 to work sleep eat repeat scream love dance retreat

connected to Black folx throughout the world
 generational wealth
 infinite
 the first
 the last
 survived the day
 we gon be here.
 been here.
 We are the market.
 Creator of 10 things you used just today
 humble genius.

Create beauty with nothing
 no thing.
 The color is the signifier,
 but the body is
 absolute joy and absolute heartbreak –
 a divine humanity
 an experience that you can only know
 from the insides,
 from the marrow.
 We share
 phenotype
 and curl patterns.
 We know and
 see the world with clear eyes.
 We are bibles.
 we are
 I am
 we are
 “salt of the Earth”
 African *ascendants*
 writing ourselves out of enslavement
 with righteous indignation political protesters
 unapologetic
 punch you in the mouth
 wil’in
 dreamin’
 things we never talk about
 but feel and taste
 an embodiment
 more than melanin
 All the expressions.
 Even the *less* melanated

that have to be brought back into the family.
 Y'all still generations young and
 "we don't let the kids run the house."
 Black is
 where *we from*
 the center of humanity
 the core of our strength
 the reminder of love.
 the future of the world is in our hands.

For all the folk
 who think Black is
 deficient
 monolithic
 inconvenient
 who have grown
 from Grandmama and Paw Paw's prayers
even if they never heard their voices
 whose hands have labored
 in red brown black dirt
 in search of mama's gardens
 in search of self
 and intellectualize Black
 on corners
 in basements
 under pyramids
 between sheets
 around school yards
 from pulpits
 beyond talking heads.

we create
 compilations of experiences
 draw in everything
 and never spit out the bones.

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