

# Where We Live and Be: (Re)Turning to Black Girlhood for Project-Praxes of Otherworld-Making in Educational Research

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## Abstract

In this article, we argue that the humanity and mattering of Black people have always lived in Black girlhood, but the potentiality of Black girlhood as a creative space for designing Black approaches in educational research has yet to be fully realized. Therefore, we (re)turn to Black girlhood frameworks and theories in our contribution to Black approaches in educational research. Looking to where Black girls live and be (re)defines notions of human, humanity, humanness, and living for it begins at Black girl epistemes. Following Wynter's call for a new humanness, one that promises liberatory futures, we offer Project-Praxes of Black Girl Otherworld-Making to scholars and researchers occupying educational space, considering their/our responsibility and answerability firstly to Black people, and secondly, to the fields of Black Studies, Black Girlhood Studies, and education in a transdisciplinary sense. Project-Praxes of Black Girl Otherworld-Making includes the following seven pursuits: (1) humanness outside the white gaze and after Man; (2) remembering where Black girlhoods lived; (3) ethical engagements with Black girl(s)/hoods; (4) Black girlhood approaches in educational research; (5) reflexivity in doing freedom work in unfree places/spaces; (6) transdisciplinary intellectual rendezvous that seriously read and cite Black women; and (7) writing with regard for the spectrum of legibility. Through Project-Praxes of Otherworld-Making, Black girls can show up as their most authentic selves and fully expect the same of us as researchers. This framework is not invested in projects of changing, fixing, or colonizing young Black girls. We instead acknowledge that they already have the language to express how they feel and what they know. We hold their descriptions as truth and learn from them to honor their/our lives in the work. Project-Praxes of Otherworld-Making makes possible Black girls' humanity and freedom dreaming.

## Keywords

black girlhood, research approaches, methods, methodologies

## The Human Project within Black Girlhood

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dr Anna Julia Cooper (1892/2016), teacher, activist, and scholar, proclaimed that without a

fuller image of Black women and girls—as opposed to the limiting controlling images (Collins, 1991) discursively circulated then and now—a fuller image of humanity is impossible. Black girlhood, specifically, offers alternative and

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“multiple/co-existential/relational modes” (Baszile, 2019, p. 9) or genres of being human, those after Man, as Wynter (2003) implored. In fact, the humanity and mattering of Black people have always lived in Black girlhood. When a different human project is left unconsidered, ignored are “alternative modes of being human” (Wynter, 2003, p. 282). Looking to where Black girls live and be (re)defines notions of human, humanity, humanness, and living for it begins at Black girl epistemes. Furthermore, as a point of departure from Wynter (2006), we, the authors of this article, do not believe that attending to the unique oppressions of Black girls and women—sometimes at the hands of Black people—distracts from the goals of Blackness as a human project; we believe Black girl epistemes, in fact, sharpen genres of humanness, being, and living. As Garner et al. (2019) noted, “Black girlhood forces the field [of Black Studies] to at least name its commitments to and hopefully divest in patriarchy, homogeneous narratives, and compartmentalized storying of Blackness void specifically of gender, sexuality, and youthfulness” (p. 196). Therefore, we (re)turn to Black girlhood frameworks and theories in our contribution to Black approaches in educational research. The potentiality of Black girlhood as a creative space for designing Black approaches in educational research has yet to be fully realized. Thus, following Wynter’s call for a new humanness, one that promises liberatory futures (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015), we offer *Project-Praxes of Black Girl Otherworld-Making* to scholars and researchers occupying educational space, considering their/our responsibility and answerability firstly to Black people, and secondly, to the fields of Black Studies, Black Girlhood Studies, and education in a transdisciplinary sense.

## Black Girlhood Studies

Black Girlhood Studies (BGS), as a discipline, was created to (re)define, grapple with, and interrogate the human question as it pertains to Black girls. As an area of study, Black girlhood centers the celebration of Black girls and Black girlhood; thus, requiring new ways of engaging Black girls that begin (and continue) with unlearning and critically examining the/(my) self. BGS makes visible the creative, intellectual, and cultural production of Black girls and Black girlhood while simultaneously illuminating the dearth of attention afforded them (Hill, 2018). BGS also reveals the various ways Black girls and Black girlhood have expanded understandings of how Black girls resist, refuse, and navigate oppressive circumstances and make possible otherworld-making outside of and beyond western European expectations of human existence: what “humans” look like, sound like, and how “humans” must act. Black girls assert their own forms of life and living in their everyday interactions and “beingness” that resist what others say they should be. Black girls have their own embodied sensemaking and creative, life-affirming practices that can only be understood if we listen directly to them. As a result,

the field of BGS was created to center and honor young Black girls’ experiences, specifically from their voices and perspectives, and exists as a creative space that honors their everyday ruptures and refusals (Halliday, 2019; Hill, 2018; Smith, 2019).

According to Hill (2018), BGS “stands as a reliable location and ever developing archive for Black girls” (p. 385) and demands the “celebration of Black girls in all of their complexity” (p. 386). BGS is a site of conversation and inquiry between the lived experiences of Black girls that inspire and generate stories, ideas, and imaginings of Black girlhood: past, present, and future. As such, BGS encompasses historical narratives of Black girls navigating structural oppression and coming of age stories (e.g., Chatlelain, 2015; Hartman, 2019; Ladner, 1995; Simmons, 2015; Wright, 2016), Black girls’ experiences across the diaspora (e.g., Field & Simmons, 2022), the creation of spaces created by and for Black girls to thrive (e.g., R. N. Brown, 2009, 2013; Cox, 2015; Price-Dennis et al., 2017); contemporary narratives of navigating school-based and societal harm (e.g., Cox, 2015; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017; Morris, 2016; Shange, 2019; Smith-Purviance, 2021; Wun, 2016); deep theorizing and interrogations of Black girls’ positioning in their world and the ways they create new modes and methods of describing their daily realities (e.g., Halliday, 2019); the creative and play practices and literacies they employ to affirm their lives (e.g., Gaunt, 2006; Halliday, 2020; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016; Winn, 2011); and honors their imaginations and the stories they craft for their other-world making to become a reality (e.g., Griffin, 2022; Toliver, 2022). To do so, BGS brings together various disciplines, such as Black Studies, arts and humanities, anthropology, education, sociology, and history, to name a few, offering better understandings of the paradoxes and complexities of how they survive and resist systemic violence and simultaneously reimagine new ways to build, live, and co-exist in community (Kwakyee et al., 2017; Reynolds, 2021). BGS furthermore moves away from constraining, jargony languages that can often reinforce harm and oppression, and centers the languages, behaviors, and communal spaces Black girls shape as the necessary frames of Black girl freedom-making to guide our next steps in reimagining policies, projects, and praxes.

## Locating, Theorizing, and Framing Black Girlhood

It is important to first clarify the “who” in “Black girl” not for the sake of being responsive to whiteness’ disregard to the existence of Black children, but rather for a recognition of the expansiveness in how Black girls position themselves and their intersectional identities. Professor Ruth Nicole Brown, scholar-activist and BGS foremother, addressed this “who” in a 2023 virtual talk for *Agitate Journal* stating, “we aren’t leaving behind Black girls as they reinvent themselves and find new ways to name themselves including trans and

nonbinary youth to presumably prioritize conceptualizations.” This proclamation is a reminder of the revolutionary mission of Black girlhood that keeps Black girls and their self-determination at the center, and the expectation for the field to evolve and be responsive to the hearts of Black girls. McEachern’s (2017) notion of ratchetness and Shange’s (2019) Black girl ordinary analyze more deeply modes of Black girls disrupting gender binaries and “queered disidentification.” This progression therefore situates Black girlhood as an identity, radical disposition, and framework inclusive of those committed to supporting the liberation of Black girls/femmes/nonbinary youth; “often the people least guaranteed to be centered as valuable in collective work and social movements” (R. N. Brown, 2013, p. 1). Hill (2018) adds, “To see girl as not bound by age but as a political location that Black girls and women, traditionally defined, can claim and reclaim, is to make Black girlhood an unending site of possibility” (p. 400). Although Black girls may have found each other because of their similar experiences with oppression, Black girlhood does not begin from a place of what Black girls are lacking or their exclusion from mainstream society. Black girlhood begins at the celebration of what Black girls have been able to cultivate for themselves and each other.

Notably, the first statement on the first page of Ruth Nicole Brown’s (2013) groundbreaking book, *Hear Our Truths*, is “The Vision: Black girlhood is freedom and Black girls are free.” Profoundly, it does not discuss freedom as a future aspiration for Black girls. It reads as a declaration of what we must believe and be willing to fight to protect for Black girls in the now. According to Dill (2022), “Black girls are present-day maroons in plain sight who resist structural bondage and re-make practices of survivance in the pursuit of freedoms on an everyday basis” (p. 263). In a similar vein, Shange (2019) builds from Aimee Cox’s (2015) concept of social choreography to which she describes Black girls’ genius navigation of the state. She discusses Black girls as fugitives to the state to affirm that “it improvises on social and aesthetic choreographies to disrupt the inherited rhythms of captivity, progressive or otherwise. Regular, degular, schmegular Black girls stay dancing in the face of state sanctioned slow death—ours is flesh made fierce” (p. 99). These theorizations connect to a larger project of mapping the physical/spatial and socio-political sites of Black girls or Black girl cartographies (Butler, 2018). Black girlhood scholars are often learning from the ways Black girls are pushed out/excluded from spaces, or cultivating other homeplaces to heal, explore, and be safe. Therefore, we return to other critical scholarship that merges Black girlhood and Black geographies that suggest Black girls are located as “out of place” (Reynolds et al., 2021, p. 151) or “the place they looked last” (Browne, 2015; McKittrick, 2006) to consider the power of Black girlhood being illegible rather than a problem (Cox, 2015). Black girl fugitivity sits at the center of this discourse in that we must embrace the resistance and refusal observed as Black girls. It recognizes the agency of Black girls as on the run from the state rather than as

possession of the state. Considering how research can operate as surveillance (Browne, 2015; Ferguson, 2012; Reynolds, 2019), or making visible Black girlhood can reproduce threat, or bring more violence; we drew from other Black girlhood scholars and our own experiences to wrestle with the power of invisibility and illegibility.

## Our Methods for (Re)Turning to Black Girlhood to Think Anew

To unlearn and critically engage in the intra- and interpersonal work required to think anew, we, the authors, whose research centralizes Black girlhood in education, engaged in endarkened feminist sista circles (EFSC), a methodological approach that foregrounds the power and spirit of Black women and girlfriend groups, makes space for us to engage in conversations about specific topics or experiences, and connects us across physical and spiritual locations. EFSC is built from the confluence of endarkened feminist epistemologies (Dillard, 2006) and sista circle methodology (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). The distinguishing features of sista circles include a focus on communication dynamics (e.g., the specific patterns of speech and verbal/non-verbal expressions used by Black women), the centrality of empowerment (e.g., how Black women access and create individual and collective power in community), and the researcher as a participant (e.g., researchers share personal experiences) (Johnson, 2015). Further, endarkened feminist epistemologies are guided by six assumptions: (1) self-definition forms one’s participation and responsibility to one’s community; (2) research is both an intellectual and a spiritual pursuit, a pursuit of purpose; (3) only within the context of community does the individual appear, and, through dialogue, continue to become; (4) concrete experiences within everyday life form the criterion of meaning; (5) knowing and research extend both historically in time and outward to the world, to approach them otherwise is to diminish their cultural and empirical meaningfulness; and (6) power relations—manifested as racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.—structure gender, race, and other identity relations within research (Dillard, 2006, pp. 672–678).

Our EFSCs met weekly for two hours over the course of four months in the spring and summer of 2023. We wanted to focus our weekly conversations on specific topics and experiences, so our sessions were guided by questions created by two of our sistas, Tiffany and Aja:

- What are the specificities of which you have experienced Black girlhood as a Black girl from (insert spatial/geographical location(s))?
- What are the ways that you negotiate doing humanizing work that doesn’t recognize you or the people at the center of your work as human? What does this look like in doing Black girlhood work?
- In your research, how do you go about accessing Black girl spaces, obtaining consent from Black girls, building

relationships with Black girls, conducting data collection processes, navigating Black girl spaces during fieldwork as Black women researchers, engaging in self-reflexivity while working with Black girls, navigating your own inner Black girl child, OR considering your political commitments and goals for Black girls and Black girlhood? What do you do well? What would you do differently? What are you still thinking through?

For each question, we engaged in endarkened feminist communication dynamics. Sometimes, we finished each other's sentences. Sometimes, we cut each other off to share a story in solidarity. Sometimes, we engaged in call-and-response practices to affirm a *sista's* thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Sometimes, we reiterated a *sista's* point (e.g., "what I'm hearing you say is...") to think through our own lived realities alongside the experiences of our *sista* scholars. Sometimes, we called each other in and forward to engage in gentle accountability. Always, we engaged in laughter, joking, and joy. Always, we included music.

We audio and video recorded each meeting, and we transcribed the audio recordings. As researchers and participants engaging in self-definition and responsibility to each other within community, we included the transcripts (to ensure that we created a permanent record of our conversations for analysis, review, and memory), audio recordings (to hear the lilt of our voices and notice communication dynamics that are stifled in transcription), and video recordings (to note the nonverbal dynamics of our conversations) as data entries. We then individually and collectively (in one of our EFSCs) engaged in a theming process where we analyzed the data both within and across each meeting to note commonalities. From this process, we noticed the following themes: research observations, reflections, methods; humanness and outside the white gaze; specificities of blackness, girlhood, and location/geographies; tensions and challenges doing freedom work in unfree places/spaces; creativity; practicing Black girlhood; spaces and places that affirmed our Black girlhood; how we are with Black girls and conduct research/programs with Black girls; disrupting methods/methodology (moving away from methods not created with us in mind); approach/pedagogy to research with Black girls; dehumanization/harming of Black girls; and theorizing Black girlhood.

As the EFSCs required us to look historically through time and demanded that we acknowledge that we are not alone in this work (Butler, 2018), we knew that keeping our analysis to the present and to our conversations would be a disservice to our process, even if we consistently brought the literature of Black girlhood scholars into the discussion space. So, alongside the analysis of our conversations, we (re)searched, or searched again, the literature on Black girlhood with the aim of exploring how other Black women researchers approached their work with Black girls. More specifically, we searched literature databases using the Boolean search terms "Black girlhood" OR "Black girls" AND "methods" OR

"methodology" to find work that would help us to better understand: how researchers used Black girlhood theories and frameworks to create new methods and methodologies; how these scholars positioned methods, ethics, and research standards in work with Black girls; and how these scholars aligned with and/or disrupted more traditional qualitative approaches.

Upon reading, annotating, and analyzing the literature, we found the following connective threads: methodological risk-taking; images and meaning-making; the influence of performance and Black studies; making space for Black girls to define themselves; methodologies of doing; critical care for Black girls; and Black women needing to identify the self in Black girlhood research. By (re)searching the literature, we mended the histories and experiences of Black girl researchers, showcasing that we are always already thinking alongside one another in this work, suggesting that our findings must hold space to see the collectivity of the pursuit of Black girlhood research.

Combining the threads of our collective literature study with our analysis of EFSC conversations helped us to narrow our findings to seven pursuits of Black Girlhood methodology that could redefine how we work with, for, and about Black girls: (1) humanness outside the white gaze and after Man; (2) remembering where Black girlhoods lived; (3) ethical engagements with Black girl(s)/hoods; (4) Black girlhood approaches in educational research; (5) reflexivity in doing freedom work in unfree places/spaces; (6) transdisciplinary intellectual rendezvouses that seriously read and cite Black women; and (7) writing with regard for the spectrum of legibility. Derived from conversations within our physical and literary EFSCs, these pursuits, or constant strivings, are the foundation for our conceptualization of Black Girl Otherworld-Making in educational research.

## A Rendering of (and Call for) Project-Praxes of Black Girl Otherworld-Making

Building upon understandings of projects of humanization (e.g., Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014) and praxis in education (e.g., Freire, 1970; Stovall, 2011), we conceptualize *Project-Praxes* or reflexivity with action that is guided by the ongoing revisioning, reimagining, redefining, and rebuilding of what already exists. Recognizing the power that has given BGS to be something *else*, the dash represents the necessity of a simultaneous working through and towards liberation. In essence, it is reflective action for the purpose of otherworld-making beckoning us to rebuild and name what we are building. We situate this as otherworld-making specifically because Black women have always recognized that the current world—and how they were understood as nonhuman in it—was not going to work for them. But what good is praxis without clear visions of what we are working towards through an ethic of collective care (Nyachae & Pham, 2024; Reynolds, 2021) by which we engage in reflexivity and responsive

actions? Project-Praxes of Black Girl Otherworld-Making in education considers the research (er)'s political commitments and goals for Black girls/femmes/nonbinary youth and Black girlhood, reflexivity, relationships, navigating one's own inner Black girl child (Smith-Purviance et al., 2022), ethics around accessing and doing fieldwork in Black girl spaces, consent, and data collection processes. Specifically, in the next sections, we weave in excerpts from our EFSCs while describing the following seven pursuits of Project-Praxes of Black Girl Otherworld-Making: (1) humanness outside the white gaze and after Man; (2) remembering where Black girlhoods lived; (3) ethical engagements with Black girl(s)/hoods; (4) Black girlhood approaches in educational research; (5) reflexivity in doing freedom work in unfree places/spaces; (6) transdisciplinary intellectual rendezvouses that seriously read and cite Black women; and (7) writing with regard for the spectrum of legibility.

### *Humanness Outside the White Gaze and after Man*

"We are human because I say so... There's this thing around our praxis of being human, or our praxis of being free and not getting free... We *are* free... y'all didn't catch up that we're free." – Aja

Project-Praxes of Otherworld-Making begin with the foundational assumption that Black girls are human, and their definitions and genres of humanness are outside the white gaze and beyond (and often illegible to) the Western Man. Black girls exist as they exist, they are enough, and as Aja professed, we "gon love them regardless." Because they are free indeed, of ultimate on-going concern is to *whom* Black girls are human, visible, and who is committed to allowing them to just be (Edwards et al., 2016; Garner et al., 2019; Lindsey, 2015). Moreover, we are constantly (re)learning and attending to the Black girl way of being human through "the sisterhoods they cultivate amongst one another and their journey of remembering" (Reynolds, 2021, p. 19). With this, one's humanity is contingent upon welcoming youthfulness, childhoods of past and present, and being childish and embodying childlike wonder and playfulness. Methods and methodologies through the lens of Black girlhood, in fact, offer a "re-articulation of humanity in research" (Taaffe, 2014, p. 193), even though, we are often "too big, too complex, too human for words and theories" (Griffin & Turner, 2024, p. 134).

Unquestionably, otherworld-making also requires intense vigilant negotiation in our consumption/rejection of the images, rhetoric, and discourses throughout popular culture and society around Black women and girls. It demands life-giving, complex, loving, full viewings, and critiquing narrow nonhuman representations. Humanness through a Black girl lens centers their meaning-making around images and the images they create for themselves, inviting Black girls to recover their own images (R.N. Brown, 2014; Griffin & Turner, 2024; Lewis, 2019). Although, vigilant negotiation begins with our engagements and

careful readings of the Black women and girls in our lives, those we can touch. Aja remembered during one EFSC that so many Black women *were* taking up space in our communities; spaces that did not position Black women as inferior, spaces that allowed Black women to move and exist in their power.

### *Remembering Where Black Girlhoods Lived*

"I could breathe out there and just be... I could be the most childlike with her." – Ashley

"I was able to engage in play and childhood in ways that I know is stripped away from young Black girls so early." – Aja

"It was a place of reprieve, at home, just to be amongst Black women and girls." – Tiffany

"I was able to see that there are multiple possibilities for what Black girlhood could be." – Stephanie

Whether it's the garden of Ashley's grandmother, the small town where Aja played, the house filled solely with Black women and girls of Tiffany's childhood, or the intergenerational extended family that reared Stephanie, these are the spaces/places that shaped how we came to know Blackness and girlhood. Project-Praxes of Black Girl Otherworld-Making asks researchers whether they identify as/with Black girls (K. Brown et al., 2022; Butler, 2018; Hill, 2018) and to recall where they came to know Black girlhood. They then draw from those spaces/places (e.g., skating, gardening, family) that affirmed and nurtured it, those that allowed freedom in/with/through the body, those where Black girls could be whole. For Aja, the music and artistry of rap girllies, Eve, Foxy Brown, and Lil' Kim, presented "this space that I can have rage, but also be exploring and naming my sexuality." When we remember these spaces of living and being, and our bodily knowing (Hill, 2018) there, we replicate them in our work with Black girls/femmes/nonbinary youth.

While the specificities of our Blackness and girlhood is location and geographically bound, researchers must interrogate the interaction between these places and social class to better understand how we engaged Black girlhood and the nuances of the affirmation and nurturing of our Black girlhood. For instance, Aja's small town of Steelton, Pennsylvania (PA) outside of Harrisburg, PA provided a sense of safety that allowed her to tap into the innocence of being a Black child. As another example of growing up in a small Pennsylvania town, Stephanie attested, "I had so much family around me" and this rendered a free Black girlhood as well as multiple iterations of it. For Ashley, it is the historical and prominent Chicago skating culture that offered a space where Black girlhood could thrive. For Tiffany, it is the working-class Black church community in Buffalo, New York that offered forms of anti-respectability as a lifegiving, otherworld-making space.

## Ethical Engagements with Black Girl(s)/Hoods

“Because of how they showed up for me when I was younger—is the same way that I try to show up when I’m working with Black girls” – Stephanie

“When I’m around young people, I’m like what type of auntie do I want to be?” – Aja

“I’m trying to really follow Black girls, let them guide me. Guide me in what they need from me, or what they want or don’t want.” – Tiffany

“I think about how much in my practice with Black girls I think about agency and consent because I know so much is taken from us.” – Ashley

Ethical engagements with Black girl(s)/hoods in educational research begin with how we *be* with Black girls. We are not just researchers taking fieldnotes “on” or “about” them, we are fully present and engaged. For instance, in our real lives, most of us would never engage with Black girls or women in such an extractive way—we hope. So, why would we do that as researchers? We do, however, “show up and give [our] gifts” (Kwakyee et al., 2017, p. 9), bringing ourselves into the space and our vulnerabilities too (R. N. Brown, 2013). In like manner, Tiffany disclosed “I wouldn’t ask Black girls to share anything that I wouldn’t share” and Aja confirmed that we cannot ask Black girls to “go deep in ways that we ourselves won’t go.” Furthermore, if/when Black girls question us, we answer them as vulnerably and truthfully as possible, rejecting rigid researcher-participant/child-adult hierarchies (Price-Dennis et al., 2017; Toliver, 2022). However, Black girl spaces should not be overtaken by Black womanhood perspectives and voices. In essence, we cannot engage these spaces selfishly to heal ourselves, recovering our own girlhoods at the expense of Black girls, for example. Instead, we learn from/with Black girls (Edwards et al., 2016; Hill, 2018) through the making of purposeful and intentional space for their voices (Edwards et al., 2016; Hill, 2018; Lindsay-Dennis, 2015; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016; Price-Dennis et al., 2017). We then meditate on what Black girls are saying in the moment without judgment. As Stephanie imparted, “I often sit silent in those spaces to just listen...to be like who are y’all before I try to enter in...a lot of times I wait for them to bring me in.”

Unquestionably, the needs of Black girls must be prioritized over our research agendas and methodologies (Edwards et al., 2016; Lewis, 2019) as we consider Tiffany’s mediating concern when conducting research with Black girls: “How do I show up for what you feel you need in this moment?” Black girl feelings are legit at any age; therefore, we must make space for their love, joy, grief, anger, excitement, and pain (Reynolds, 2021). We give Black girls a moment when and if they need it which may include listening to music, dancing, or gaming—a space for entertainment and happiness. Moreover,

we honor their friendships and sisterhoods, and offer them space to continue to learn, see, care, and show up for one another (K. Brown et al., 2022; Butler, 2018; Mims et al., 2023; Reynolds, 2021). Essentially, we are flexible with our research agendas and protocols because that may not be what they need in the moment. Thus, we take care to follow what matters to them even if it does not align with what we are after in terms of research. To illustrate, Ashley asks the Black girls participating in her research projects to consider several questions: “Do you *actually* have a voice here? Do you get your say-so about what happens in this day? How we engage with you? Where you go? When you eat?” Let Black girls be the creators of the space. Let Black girls set the agenda. Furthermore, Project-Praxes of Black Girl Otherworld-Making require creative approaches to researcher reciprocity, specifically in our offerings of stipends or incentives for study participation. For instance, Aja suggested “maybe the incentive is free therapy sessions with a dope Black woman counselor that we know, or options to tap into some healing services.” In essence, we need to consider offering services that folx may need, but cannot access.

## Black Girlhood Approaches in Educational Research

“Black girls deserve good research.” – Aja

“We create methods, utilize theories, that tend to Black girls versus trying to make Black girls fit into white-centric theories and methods. And that, I think, is a powerful thing.” –Stephanie

“We reify whiteness and white supremacy when we hold ourselves accountable to doing ‘studies’ versus accountable to the young people we work with and what they want to see, what this research looks like for them, if they even call it research in the first place.” – Ashley

“What does it mean to be a researcher, but being okay with just being in space with Black girls in the midst of data collection?” – Tiffany

The study of and with Black girls is complex (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016), not to be presumed an easy task simply because we were once Black girls (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015). It requires that we take risks methodologically and pedagogically, make decisions, and bend/dismantle “rules” for the liberatory futures we desire (Kwakyee et al., 2017; Lewis, 2019; Taaffe, 2014). What is missed when methods and methodologies are guided by whiteness, objectivity, and uninventiveness because, as Stephanie put it, “no one had Black girls in mind?” Professor Ruth Nicole Brown (2014) reminds us that research “is a ‘live’ thing and subject to all that happens in the present” (p. 37). Therefore, be bold in creating, naming, and trusting the methods and methodologies that are responsive to Black girls and used to analyze and interpret their renderings (Garner et al., 2019). Additionally, employ the paradigms, ethics, methodologies, and methods that other

Black girlhood researchers have created and/or explicated through their work with Black girls and the archives. Table 1 provides examples of Black girlhood research approaches, which offer so much more than research, in sociology, education, literacy, psychology, performance studies, and curriculum studies. They are methodologies of doing (K. Brown et al., 2022; Kwakye et al., 2017; Taaffe, 2014) and many were created through the convergence of multiple disciplines, such as, BGS, performance studies, Black studies, and education (e.g., K. Brown et al., 2022; Garner et al., 2019; Hill, 2018; Kwakye et al., 2017; Taaffe, 2014). Black girlhood researchers are otherworld-making; creating new paradigms and methodologies/methods for living in ways that are affirming and healing. As an illustration, Hill (2018) describes reliability in research and what makes “good research” from the purview of Black girls and celebratory Black girl spaces. Additionally, many of the approaches privilege Black girl meaning-making (e.g., Lewis, 2019). In fact, Taaffe (2014) argues that the tools used for data collection, analysis, and representation are automatically made anew when used in Black girl spaces. Ultimately, Black girlhood approaches in educational research disrupt the status quo of “how to” methods because they must; their guiding onto-epistemologies and axiologies challenge or de/reconstruct traditional rules. Through personal responsibility and self-awareness, researchers of Black girlhood attempt to conduct studies that are rigorous, authentic, and accurate; ensuring that Black girls are focal to the analysis (Collins, 1991; Lindsay-Dennis, 2015).

And even when armed with Black girlhood paradigms, ethics, and methodologies/methods, we must be okay with whatever Black girls choose to give or not give throughout data collection. Sometimes the conversation just ends, or they give us very little verbally during interviews, and this is okay (R. N. Brown, 2013; Shange, 2019). Remember Black girls do not owe us anything, even those who consented to participate in our studies. Regardless, we should be checking in periodically to renegotiate their consent where necessary (Bhattacharya, 2007). We must also welcome the ways in which participants disrupt methods. For instance, instead of an interview, they might offer a performance, or instead of bringing artifacts, they might take you to their neighborhood. Additionally, and although not always feasible, be okay with (re)starts and pauses throughout data collection, even long pauses, if they will better serve Black girls. Correspondingly, Lindsay-Dennis’s (2015) Black feminist-womanist research paradigm “invites researchers to view their research on a continuum rather than isolated acts of data collection” (p. 511). Nevertheless, be okay with not getting all the data points you had planned, or participants’ outright refusal of research, even if it happens mid-data collection.

Overall, we hope this section “inspires the proliferation of many more creative methods that disrupt preexisting ways of knowing by starting with altogether different genealogies and privileging different revolutionary thinkers and modes of thought” (Taaffe, 2014, p. 37). In particular, we need more

methods that are intuitive to what Black girls are *not* saying. Given the expansiveness and evolving nature of Black girl literacies (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016; Price-Dennis et al., 2017), interpreting Black girls not only through what they communicate verbally or linguistically, but multimodally (e.g., gazes, gestures, etc.) allows for a fuller picture of their meanings and the “immeasurable” in Black girlhood (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Lindsay-Dennis, 2015).

### *Reflexivity in Doing Freedom Work in Unfree Places/Spaces*

“I’m doing freedom work in the unfree place, and actually a first place that contributed to my subjugation.” – Aja

“I had to create something, but does it count?” – Stephanie

“That’s the thing I absolutely dislike and find disgusting about research...like the limits of where we are and the care that actually can happen beyond our projects which always receives push back.” – Ashley

Aja’s claim above is a strong reminder that when we engage in Black girl research in institutions like schools and universities, we are attempting to make liberatory otherworlds in places/spaces that dehumanize, oppress, and devalue us. Although our research, pedagogies, programs, and support systems attempt to make schools more bearable places—and even though we exist in and survive these institutions—they are indeed unfree. Therefore, we must reflect on how we are implicated in inequitable structures and institutions as researchers (Lewis, 2019). Furthermore, through self-reflexivity researchers consider whether their training, experiences, and/or perspectives have the potential to constrain the study of Black girlhood. Current and future Black girlhood scholars need to learn from their-our truthful raw experiences and our reflexivity through them. Thus, researchers must report the beauties *and* tensions of doing this work. It is often easier to report out and bask in the beauty of our work with Black girls, but reflexivity in research demands that we engage in careful and truthful interrogations of the tensions or what Hill (2018) describes as “Where I sit in the messiness of what I thought I knew, what I seek to know, and what I am coming to know about how I know what I know” (p. 384).

Reflexivity is curious about how you/we live, examining whether our living and being is reflective of the Black girlhood practices we pontificate and considering “how [our research motives] may or may not align with the girls’ practices, ways of knowing, and being” (Butler, 2018, p. 32). Specifically, we need to interrogate our readings of and distances to and from particular versions of Black girlhood and how privilege, coloniality, classism, respectability, homophobia, transphobia, heteronormativity, and internalized misogynoir possibly shape them. This interrogation happens during “the time we spend with Black girls, as well as thinking and writing about Black girlhood” (Griffin & Turner, 2024, p. 131). If/when we

**Table 1.** Examples of Black Girlhood Approaches in Educational Research.

| Brief description                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Paradigms</b>                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Black girl literacies (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016)                              | Black girls know, possess voices, and exhibit/produce diverse onto-epistemologies; Black girl literacies are multiple in practice and theorizations, co-constructed, historical, intellectual, political, critical, complex, inextricably linked to identities, and maintain a deep concern for humanity                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Black feminist-womanist research paradigm (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015)             | Black girl research is a spiritual and intellectual pursuit for community building, and social and personal change; the individual only appears through community; perspectives and navigational tools are transmitted intergenerationally; personal experiences with (and assumptions about) Black girlhood influence research practices/processes; Black girl perspectives include intersectionality and metaphysical realities                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Ethics</b>                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Black girl reliability <sup>a</sup> (Hill, 2018)                             | Make spaces that foster close authentic relationships with Black girls and celebrate all iterations of Black girlhood; inclusive of <i>tracing</i> or a consideration of who gives knowledge, who has access to it, who the lesson is for, and the relationship between the giver(s) and receiver(s), <i>collective grounding</i> or sustaining relationships where imagining otherworlds, check-ins, celebration, being challenged, and theorizing happen in community, <i>embracing paradox</i> or welcoming mismatches in the everchanging “what” Black girls know, say, think, and create and how they feel about it |
| Relationships, beingness, and voice (Edwards et al., 2016)                   | Research processes must involve <i>relationships</i> between the researcher and participants that are dialogic, transparent, nourishing, and judgement free but not without challenge; <i>beingness</i> that centers Black girl personhoods and “profoundly being together and being ourselves” (p. 432), have an ethic of care, commitment, and access beyond the research project, places Black girl needs before research agendas; centering Black girls’ voices and their naming of lived realities, and labor against the co-opting of their experiences                                                            |
| Saving our lives hear our truths (SOLHOT) <sup>a</sup> (Kwakye et al., 2017) | Vow not to harm Black girls, practice collective leadership and responsibility, engage in accountable love for the self and others, be present, “perform research, be personal, vulnerable, dare to insert your narrative and claim that Black girls matter” (p. 7)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Methodologies/Methods</b>                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Anti-respectability Methodology <sup>a</sup> (Garner et al., 2019)           | Black girl pleasures, agency, and body decision-making shape the community formed during data collection and what is then created in that community; rooted in <i>love</i> as a reciprocal collective and relational action, <i>reliability</i> (see Black girl reliability in Table 1), and <i>funk</i> or the conceptualization of bodily knowledge through work, play, and performance                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Black feminist poetry (Ohito & Nyachae, 2019)                                | Employed for rigor in critical discourse analysis through the de/reconstruction of initial data analyses that produces new analyses via three poems: (1) list poem or an inventory of declarative statements from the raw data arranged in poetic format; (2) three-voice poem that puts researchers in dialogue with the data and with each other for triangulation; (3) free verse poem for reflexivity                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Black girl cartography (Butler, 2018)                                        | Study and exploration of how and where Black girls are mapped in education physically and socio-politically and the ways Black girlhood is bound to geospatial location through intersectionality; attending to the spaces/places where Black girls thrive, are oppressed, make meaning, negotiate, and the spaces they create, demand, and/or seek                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Black/Girlhood imaginary (K. Brown et al., 2022)                             | Working/making/doing with Black girls and the archives to recover, recuperate, repair, and reconcile their knowings, embodied experiences, images, and subjecthood to “construct and excavate an imaginative space of Black girlhood” (p. 77) across the diaspora, time, space, and geographies                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Endarkened storywork (Toliver, 2022)                                         | Researchers and participants engage in African ancestral, familial, and spiritual storytelling practices and storylistening to remember, recover, and revive Black storytelling traditions for deeper relationality and creatively expansive forms of data collection, analysis, representations, and reporting; capturing Black girl sociopolitical experiences and otherworld dreaming and imaginings that can guide us to freedom                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Melt Methodology <sup>a</sup> (Lewis, 2019)                                  | Researchers and participants co-develop processes for engaging their spirits, curiosity, creativity, self-definition, identity, Black girl aesthetics, image-and meaning-making while critiquing and/or disrupting societal representations of Black girls for the purpose of producing a magazine                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |

(continued)

**Table 1.** (continued)

| Brief description                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Photography in black girl spaces <sup>a</sup> (Taaffe, 2014) | Black girls produce images and methodology, and engage in collective meaning-making, analysis, and knowledge production through their creations; photography, photovoice, and visual ethnography in Black girl spaces are transformed into tools for “interrogating notions of power, voice, representation, and stereotypes” (p. 190) |
| Wreckless theatrics <sup>a</sup> (R. N. Brown, 2014)         | The intentional creation, dramatic structuring, display, and valuing of Black girl meaning-making, multiple truths, culturally embodied knowledge, complexities, (e)motions, images, performances, and stories of Black girlhood to critical communities of practice                                                                   |

<sup>a</sup>Birthing within Ruth Nicole Brown’s (2013) SOLHOT space.

discover mismatches then we must “do the work to be well” (Kwakyee et al., 2017, p. 9). In essence, do the self-reflexive and healing (hooks, 1994) work necessary which may be found in theories of Black girlhood (e.g., R. N. Brown, 2013, 2014; Edwards et al., 2016), endarkened feminism (e.g., Toliver, 2022), Black feminism (e.g., Love, 2017; Nyachae, 2016), womanism, or a theory hybrid (e.g., Lindsay-Dennis, 2015). Moreover, we do not leave our girlhoods behind, attending to how they come alive in contemporary in-person interactions with Black girls. We learn more about ourselves as we see ourselves in the Black girls we work with (Butler, 2018; Hill, 2018; Lewis, 2019) and navigate the rememory of own inner Black girl child (Smith-Purviance et al., 2022).

On the other side of theory and inner child work, acts of refusal may await us. For example, we are often asked to justify investments in Black girls when writing articles and grant applications, but otherworld-making requires a refusal of attaching them to a larger human narrative (i.e., human as Man). Aja pointed out the dehumanizing labor of navigating the task of getting “the non-Black girlhood person or entity to see themselves or want to be invested in my work.” The specificity of Black girls is enough, and we must constantly reflect on whether, how, and when we are making these justifications or connections. Black women researchers are often seen as nonhuman in the university space while also doing research on and with groups who are also seen as nonhuman. We must possess an understanding that we are disposable to the university in our resistance to and refusal of the anti-Black colonial project, which frees us up to do the work we *must* do with Black girls. Being comfortable in unfree places/spaces means that a level of complicity, conditioning, obedience, and submission has been accepted.

### *Transdisciplinary Intellectual Rendezvouses that Seriously Read and Cite Black Women*

“You always have to remind folks to remember Black women.” – Tiffany

“And because folks don’t seriously pick up the work of Black women and girls—other than for maybe a quote, you know,

citation planes—we don’t really think about the rigorousness of the theoretical, methodological, or pedagogical of what they’re saying to us and giving to us in terms of how we live and be free.” – Aja

Black women have significantly contributed to many intellectual spaces that are currently dominated by men folk. This tendency is more than a matter of men taking up too much space. Rather, the contributions of Black women are at best left unread or at worse uncited, plagiarized, or completely erased (Bailey & Trudy, 2018). The ‘inbetween’ of these two extremes is the patronizing head nods or brief mentions that leave so much of their renderings unexplored. Moreover, Aja observed how these spaces often “become such a male dominated space of repeating what Black women have been saying while falling short of how Black women have also said there is a way out. We don’t have to live this way.” Project-Praxes of Otherworld-Making in educational research and Black Studies call for transdisciplinary rendezvouses that seriously read and cite Black women. Yes, it is falling in love with the scholarship and intellectual contributions of Black women. Do not only read and cite them to understand Black girlhood but also for discussions of oppression, liberation, criticality, what it means to be human, and much more. In fact, what Black women have always said curiously become novel in the mouths and work of men/male-presenting scholars. Tracing, a component of Hill’s (2018) Black girl reliability, shows how we are indebted to the lessons Black women have taught us and building from a deliberate genealogy to sustain the future of BGS.

We have also encountered research with/on/about Black girls that does not engage the scholarship of Black women or does so sparingly. This practice is unacceptable and disappointing. Scholars engaging in Black girl research “must read widely to gain a comprehensive understanding of the development trends and cultural strengths that Black girls employ in their everyday lives and use this to conceptualize your research agenda” (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015, p. 513). However, transdisciplinary intellectual rendezvouses do not only happen in the abstract or through reading; they must also happen dialogically in the relationships and collaborations we form with other Black girlhood scholars, workers, and advocates. To put it another way, we do not have to work in silos or

compete. In fact, we should work in transdisciplinary research collectives that include therapists, counselors, teachers, practitioners, activists, organizers, and community members for holistic approaches to caring for and thinking about/with Black girls.

### Writing with Regard for the Spectrum of Legibility

Our writing must recover the subjecthood of Black girls (K. Brown et al., 2022). Recovery begins by making sure we understand what they said the way they intended it to be understood (Edwards et al., 2016). And when we confirm what is meant, we ponder over what will be shared. K. Brown et al.'s (2022) *Black/Girlhood Imaginary* reminds us that the "spectrum of legibility is where we continue to labor" (p. 77) and our writing should reflect it. This means negotiating storytelling in terms of which stories get told or how they get told. There are some sacred stories from Black girls that we will never write about and there are parts of them that will remain illegible in our writing. And in whatever we write about Black girls, we must locate/situate ourselves in the work (Griffin & Turner, 2024; Toliver, 2022). Still, we do not give away too much of our own stories and girlhoods to academia. There are aspects of us that will remain illegible or inaccessible in our writing.

### (Re)Turning to Black Girlhood

BGS allowed us the space to return to and reflect on our younger selves in ways that were integrally connected to the communities, Black girl spaces, and scholarship we co-created alongside Black girls. We would not have been able to do this work without being connected to young Black girls, to learn (and unlearn) alongside them new ways to honor our truths, the complexities of our stories, celebrate the creativity and authenticity we each came with as we listened to each other's dreams and imaginations for collective lives, living, and ultimately our liberation. We mirrored this process as we came together in our EFSCs, shaping new Project-Praxes of Otherworld-Making as Black girlhood scholars intimately rooted in community, joy, and the freedom to show up as our full selves. This approach ultimately disrupted the traditionally harmful, individualistic approaches that run rampant in research.

First and foremost, we were intentional about keeping Black girls and Black girlhood at the center. It was not enough to only be in conversation with our younger selves, but also to bring along with us the memories, voices, and experiences of Black girls who have also shared personal stories with us and carved out spaces where each of us felt seen, heard, and loved. The collective past-present-future otherworld-making that took place in our homes, backyards, through our hobbies, and the spaces where we could be most free as Black girls deeply inspire how we show up and create spaces alongside Black girls today. In many ways this continues to be the Project-

Praxes of Otherworld-Making in our scholarship on Black girlhood, as Black girls have full autonomy to lead and guide us. As scholars we seek to step back to truly hear and listen to Black girls. Through Project-Praxes of Otherworld-Making, Black girls can show up as their most authentic selves and fully expect the same of us as researchers. We were not invested in a project of changing, fixing, or colonizing young Black girls through our work. We instead acknowledge that they already have the language to express how they feel and what they know. We hold their descriptions as truth and learn from them to honor their/our lives in the work. We never sought to only take their stories from them but practiced vulnerability and shared our personal narratives in community with them. Most importantly, in this space of otherworld-making Black girls have the freedoms to read, dance, play, eye roll, and clapback too. Project-Praxes of Otherworld-Making makes possible Black girls' humanity, at the intersection of Black girl fugitivity and BGS, making our freedom dreams a closer reality.

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