

Tales From the Motherboard: Black Mothering Across the Black Networked Consciousness

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Abstract

A motherboard is the main circuit board in a computer, the connectivity point that ensures communication between important circuits and provides space for peripheral components to connect. As the central hub, the motherboard is the backbone, the point where power and data are distributed to the technological mechanisms that need it. Without the motherboard, connection is severed and functionality ceases. And is this not a description of Black mothering? Black mothers and othermothers are points of connectivity and communication between one generation and the next. They hold important data that will be transferred to their children, and they absorb and distribute power to the next generation to ensure current and future functionality in the Black community. Considering the idea of Black mothers as communal motherboards, this article utilizes Endarkened Storywork (undergirded by the Afrofuturist concept of the Black Networked Consciousness) to explore how one Black mother used ancestral knowing to help her children develop the navigational capital to succeed in a small urban characteristic city. As many education studies neglect to center the

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needs of Black youth in urban characteristic locations, we present a story and an accompanying analysis that illuminates this oft-forgotten geographical and learning landscape. In doing so, we present implications for education stakeholders to explicitly attend to geographical specificity in urban education.

Keywords

Afrofuturism, Endarkened Storywork, mothering, daughtering, Black Networked Consciousness

Introduction

In an attempt to create shared knowledge in the field of urban education, Milner (2012) created three classifications to describe urban schools: urban intensive (located in large, heavily dense metropolitan cities—that is, New York, Chicago, Atlanta), urban emergent (located in large cities, but not as large or dense as those in the intensive category—that is, Nashville, TN; Columbus, OH; Charlotte, NC), and urban characteristic (located in smaller cities, suburban areas, or rural contexts). To further document the typology, Milner and colleagues (2015) suggested that urban schools can be identified by analyzing the following:

- (1) the size of the city in which schools are located—dense, large, metropolitan areas; (2) the students in the schools—a wide range of student diversity, including racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity; and (3) the resources—the amount number of resources available in a school, such as technology and financial structures through federal programs such as Title 1 as well as property taxes. (p. 531)

In creating these criterion-based groupings, Milner (2012) provided a shared definition and communal language that could assist scholars in advancing the field of urban education.

In the years since Milner's (2012) categorization of urban schools, education research has focused on "urban intensive and urban emergent schools as these are more consistent with traditional definitions of 'urban'" (Opara et al., 2022, p. 4). The focus on urban intensive and emergent spaces suggests there is limited scholarship centering the prolific knowledge production of the people who live or have lived in urban characteristic areas. In fact, minimal scholarship has meaningfully highlighted urban characteristic schools in the past decade (see Anderson et al., 2022; Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2020; Schaffer et al., 2018 as examples). However, the authors of this article

were raised in an urban characteristic space, a small city that experiences various school-related challenges, like a lack of adequate schooling resources, increased economic disparities, and struggles in students' academic development. The purpose of this article, then, is to center a geographical space often overlooked in urban education research while also engaging in a theory of the flesh (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981), where we trace the physical realities of our lives as Black women and former Black girls raised in the urban characteristic city of New Castle, Pennsylvania.

New Castle is a micropolitan city located in the Rust Belt region of the United States. The city is in a fertile agricultural region eighteen miles southeast of Youngstown, OH and 50 miles northwest of Pittsburgh, PA, and although it was once a prominent manufacturer of tin plates and steel, heavy deindustrialization, economic decline, urban decay, and population loss has decimated the once thriving city. Its current population is 21,795, which is a 17.8% decrease since 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021), and the current racial makeup of the city is 56% white, 20% Black, 17% Multiracial, 5.7% Latine, 0.27% Indigenous, and 0.09% Asian.

Compared to national averages, New Castle's median household income (\$36,595) is approximately half that of the United States at-large, and the poverty rate (26.2%) is more than double. The high poverty rate in the city has resulted in each of the four schools in the district (two elementary, one junior, and one senior high school) receiving a Title I designation. In fact, of the 3,010 students who attend the local schools, 100% qualify for free (not reduced) lunch (NCES, 2023). Ultimately, New Castle is a city experiencing the same issues as commonly researched urban areas, but its nebulous geographical characteristics—too dense to be rural; too far from a large city to be suburban; too small in population to be a “traditional” city—have relegated the micropolitan city (and others like it) to the margins of urban education research.

Rather than continue to ignore urban characteristic areas, we come to this article on Black mothering in education by centering our mother–daughter relationships alongside an acknowledgment of the city that mothered us. Collectively, “we [have felt] the pull and tug of having to choose between which parts of our mothers' heritages we want to claim and wear and which parts have served to cloak us from the knowledge of ourselves” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983, p. 23). We have had to decide when, where, and how to give space to the place that contributed so much to our individual and communal existence. Through this work, however, three Black women, a mother and her two daughters, move toward wholeness, reconciling the parts of our histories long neglected because the stories and heritages of urban characteristic spaces are forcibly cloaked.

To reclaim and recover our past while also considering new possibilities for the future of urban education, we utilize Endarkened Storywork (Toliver, 2022) undergirded by the Afrofuturist concept of the Black Networked Consciousness (Lavender, 2019) to explore how one Black mother used ancestral knowing and spirituality to assist her children in developing the navigational capital (Yosso, 2005) to succeed in a small urban town and in the world at-large. To do this, we follow Toliver's analytic method that centers story, research, theory, real-world events, and personal life. We also follow this method by beginning with story rather than conforming to the traditional format that often governs academic writing. As Toliver (2022) argued, Endarkened Storywork requires a focus on the story to ensure that readers can engage in the task of story listening. So, we begin with an Endarkened Story and follow the narrative with a companion analysis that provides clarity around the academic foundations of the article, describes what Stephanie and Erin learned from their mother, and suggests what these learnings can teach those who are responsible for educating Black children within and beyond urban characteristic spaces.

Response: An Endarkened Story

She promised herself she would never go back. But when the outer states began falling into the ocean—for the third time in the past 10 years—Sudie reconsidered her promise. It's better to go back to the home you ran away from than die in the ocean because you're too stubborn to retreat to a world you worked so hard to leave.

Everyone thought California and Florida would be the only states to succumb to the weight of the waters, but the Mother had other plans. When Maine drowned, people panicked. Everyone in New England clamored to move inland, away from oceans, away from death. They didn't move far enough. The rest of New England fell within the next decade. By 2125, fifty United States had been reduced to 35.

The safest places were in the middle—Nebraska, Kansas, the Dakotas—so people moved. At least, those that could. Many couldn't afford to live in the shelter states because trillionaires saw the country descending into chaos and decided to preserve their family lines by buying all "unoccupied" land. Manifest destiny and all that. When the outer states surrendered to the water, those families were ready. The rest were forced to stay in the "new" outer states in hopes that the Mother was done wielding her scythe.

And, of course, Sudie was one of the unlucky people forced to live on the perimeter of destruction, compelled to move back to a family home long vacant, but always tended. She should have known she'd be called back.

No one ever truly leaves New Castle. Some people just couldn't leave. Intergenerational poverty and trauma held them in place, rooting them to the soil without the means to nourish the field they were forced to populate. Some people explored the many wonders of the world; moved to large, diverse cities; and traveled the globe hoping to escape the confines of small-town life. But they always came back one way or another. It's hard to be the flower plucked from the soil and taken to sterile, concrete landscapes when you know there are so many who were not selected, although they easily could have been. It's hard to leave home...leave family and community, even when the world tells you that leaving is the only way to be successful. Sudie was no different. New Castle was... is... home. Somehow, as much as she tried to ignore the truth, she knew that no matter what the Mother threw at that city, New Castle would always prevail. It was stubborn that way. It had always been an obstinate force, refusing change, refusing innovation, refusing death.

The family house was just like the city. Old. Stubborn. Ancestral. Sudie's great-great-grandparents, Susie and Nuni, imbued the family magic into the rafters, poured love into the floorboards. Her great grandma, Susan, grew up in the house, then maintained the tradition long after the ancestors brought her parents' home. The next generation left the city, swapped tradition for modernity, even though they came home often to marinate in the magic the house provided. But Soleil, Sudie's mother, was called to do more than visit. The house had a pull, an ancestral connection Soleil couldn't ignore. It was a family relic, the one place everyone in the family called home, the one place any Johnson could go when they had nowhere else to turn. So, when the house called, Soleil responded and became the new tether between the house and the family, just as her grandmother had done before her. When it was Sudie's turn to assume her duties as the connector, however, she refused. She ran. No one ever asked her if she wanted the responsibility. No one asked if she wanted to be tethered to a stagnant city.

But now, with the world crumbling and loved ones fighting for breath against a ravenous sea, Sudie knew it was time to go home. The house had been calling. At last, she would respond. She felt the ancestral connection tingle beneath her skin as she parked her minivan on the rocks in front of the house. She was home, even if she'd rather be anywhere else.

"Mama!" Michelle yelled from upstairs. The old banisters shook with the boom of her voice. "School starts tomorrow, and I have nothing to wear. Help!"

Sudie looked up from the kitchen table, exasperated. Michelle had plenty of clothes to wear. So many that one of the upstairs bedrooms had become a

closet. Still, Sudie understood the wariness that comes from being the new kid in a small-town school, especially when the new kid is entering junior high. New Castle was eleven square miles (an upgrade from the nine square miles it used to be), and it was the home to about 28,000 people (up from 21,000 a century ago). Everyone seemed to know everyone. Friendships were established in elementary school based on familial cliques formed several generations prior. New residents' "fit" in the existing hierarchy would always be tested. Sudie understood the anxiety even if she needed five more minutes of rest before heading to work.

You know you could've just used the FamilyLink, right?" Sudie thought over the connection. "It's much better *and* quieter than yelling.

I mean... yea. But don't you find it odd that you can just be in my head at any time? Isn't it weird to just be like 'Bing! I'm now in your head, dear daughter, hear my words?'

Sudie thought this over. It *was* a bit weird. When she was younger, family gatherings were loud and raucous. Kids screamed while they ran around the house playing tag, and parents yelled for the children to calm down. Since the creation of FamilyLink, parties and dinners were often quiet except for the music or television noise. As long as a blood or chosen family member accepted the connection, they could just *think* at someone, and the message would travel. No voice necessary. Family gatherings were muted, the joy diminished by quiet thoughts.

"Ok! I'm coming to help." Sudie shouted.

Upstairs, Michelle had twelve outfits prepared for her mother to view, and each outfit had matching accessories and shoes. "Girl, you know I have to go to work in less than an hour, right?"

"Mama, I know. That's why I need your help! Tomorrow is the first day of school, and you'll be working all day today, so tomorrow morning, you'll be tired. Your help now avoids a crisis in the morning."

Sudie considered the outfits laid neatly across the bed. "Do the red and black one. Trust me."

"But that's not *me* enough! I need vibrance, pop, personality! Red and black is so... bland."

“You wanted help because I know this place and what’s going to help you fit in. I say the red and black one, but it’s up to you.”

“So, you’re telling me everyone here is bland?!”

“No, I’m telling you everyone here loves the school, and since those are the school colors, you’ll have an easier time connecting.” Sudie picked up the red and black outfit and placed it near a different pair of shoes, ones that would bring more of her daughter’s vibrant personality to the forefront. “They love tradition in this city and at that school. Trust me. I was a student there at one point, and even though things change around the world, this place stands still. The teachers on your schedule are the children of the teachers your grandma Stephanie and great aunt Erin had when they were younger. The city administrator has been in that position for 45 years. People with certain last names can’t get jobs because, 75 years ago, their great uncle robbed a grocery store, and now, everyone thinks that last name means trouble. Coney Island is dilapidated and falling apart, but people won’t tear it down because they feel like removing a part of “history” is like removing a part of themselves. You can be your amazing and vibrant self, but if you want them to try to get to know you before they judge you, especially since you don’t have a common last name, I suggest the red and black.”

Michelle huffed but nodded. “You right. Small towns and all.”

“Exactly. Small towns can be amazing, but they can also be places where nepotism thrives, people are bound to and by the past, and outsiders are shunned.”

Sudie walked the mile to the tunnel where she worked since the new climate laws stated that personal vehicles were only allowed for distances of 50 + miles. It wasn’t a bad walk as long as she had her Parashield, the umbrella-like cover that provided protection from intense heat and deadly sun rays. While days above 95 degrees were rare for New Castle in her grandmother’s time, most days were now over 115. The tunnel system was a necessary creation, designed to stop people from dropping dead on their walks to work and school. There were hundreds of entry points around the city so no one would need to walk more than three minutes in the extreme weather. And yet, there were only three entryways on the Westside, the side formerly red-lined to contain the Black and poor folks. Except for a select few, most of the adults and young people on the West spent fifteen to twenty minutes walking to safety. Some didn’t have Parashields.

Even as she walked wearily through the stagnant heat, Sudie was grateful to have a job. New Castle had long been a city without employment for its

most vulnerable citizens, with many residents making barely enough money to live above the poverty line. At one point in history, the city had been known for its industry – steel, tin plate, limestone – but after the Great Depression, the biggest employers were Walmart and Dollar General. Climate change and outrage from the residents forced the city to follow the rest of the country and begin the tunnel system. It didn't pay much more than the stores, but it was good work.

As a computer engineer, Sudie was able to work in the tunnels, designing, developing, and testing the underground computer systems. Her job was to make sure the tunnels maintained a constant temperature, prevented entry to anyone without the proper movement pass, and killed any insect or animal attempting to enter the underground haven. It was sadistic to eliminate the creatures who had once made their homes in the underground; but humans, if nothing else, were quite adept at sadism towards beings considered lesser.

"You're late." Glovelle, Sudie's supervisor, said in her usual dispassionate tone.

"Actually, I'm right on time. My shift begins at noon. It is noon." Sudie responded as she placed her Parashield in her locker.

"If you're on time, you're late." Glovelle's eyes furrowed slightly before reverting to inscrutability. "You're all the same. You'd think you'd be grateful enough for your 'affirmative action' education that you'd do what you're told; but no! You're lucky that we're understaffed and firing you would bring us under quota."

"Oh no" Sudie mimicked Glovelle's unenthusiastic mannerisms. "Not the quota. Whatever would you do if you didn't meet the minimum diversity threshold?"

Glovelle glared, letting her deadpan countenance slip even if just for a moment. She muttered to herself, but suspiciously loud enough that Sudie could hear her ramblings. "After all we give these people, they mock us for it! Going to our schools, taking jobs in our tunnels, and living wherever they want in the city. The quota gives *them* jobs even when they aren't qualified, but she has the nerve to mock me? The gall."

Sudie ignored Glovelle's rant since they were part of the standard background noise of the office. The micropolitan city of New Castle had experienced immense growing pains in the last several years, as an influx of newcomers moved in from the outer states. A population that was once a 2:1 ratio of white to Black/Biracial residents was more like 1:1. More than just Black and white, the population was filled with people who identified

as Latine, Indigenous, Asian, and Multiracial. Glovelle, and others like her, believed they were being replaced, kicked out of “their” city. Of course, the larger nation had experienced a steady growth in racial diversity over time, but New Castle had avoided the change. The city’s barricades barring difference and innovation were no match for the Mother, though. People were forced inward, and New Castle was as good a place as any to land. Glovelle may not have liked it, but there was nothing she could do, no matter how hard she tried.

“Did you check the motherboard like I told you to?” Glovelle hovered over Sudie’s shoulder as she worked.

“Yes.” Sudie said, agitation lurking beneath her words.

“But did you check all the circuits to make sure each connection was in prime condition? We need all aspects of the system communicating with each other. So, you need to make sure it’s distributing electricity correctly. Did you do that?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, that you checked the circuits, or yes that you did a thorough examination of the motherboard?”

“Yes, that I did my job, Glovelle.”

“Well, you never know. I’d have a much easier job if I could work with people I didn’t have to check up on every five minutes. Maybe if you could show me that you are *consistently* competent, I wouldn’t have to ask you such basic questions. Maybe if you were more like Chrissa.”

“Oh yes, blonde-haired, blue-eyed Chrissa who asks me for help every single day,” Sudie thought to herself. Then, to Glovelle, she said, “Maybe, I could focus if someone wasn’t hovering over me and asking questions when they’re supposed to be doing their own work?”

“Maybe, if we weren’t bound to the Reparations Act. Maybe, if this town were a little less... open. Maybe if we could hire based on merit not quota, we could make this place great again. We’ll never get back now.” Glovelle turned and walked away before Sudie could respond.

“This city.” Sudie whispered. “This city can break you if you’re not strong enough.”

When Sudie got home at 10, Michelle was already in bed, probably exhausted from anxiously planning her first day of school. Sudie was happy to have this moment of peace because it had been days since she'd been able to work on her secret project. It wasn't an illegal endeavor, but it did toe the line of moral ambiguity since FamilyLink was proprietary, and the Bezanette company would probably press charges if they knew she was tampering with their creation. Still, Sudie knew FamilyLink could be so much more than a means of connecting people across space. The circuitry could be altered to connect people across time.

She wished she'd found this information on her own, but it was the house that told her. She couldn't explain it, even if she tried. One night, she felt the house trying to call, but unlike her mother, she was unable to answer in the same way. Her mother could close her eyes and listen to the house speak. Sudie would close her eyes and hear silence. Initially, she thought she was just undeserving of connection to the magic of her ancestors. After a while, she knew there was a blockage. She could feel the pull; she just couldn't respond. The house had not forsaken her; but somehow, the house couldn't get through, no matter how hard it tried.

It was at that point Sudie realized what was impeding her connection: FamilyLink. It was a small chip implanted into the brain at birth to "increase familial engagement from birth to death, before speech and beyond." At least, that's what the medical corporations said to make the mandatory device more palatable. Once implanted, the chip was connected to a portable communication unit mounted on the walls of each household. The link didn't affect sound or radio waves for things like radios, televisions, or comm-screens, but it did seem to block ancestral waves. Why else could her mother communicate with the house and the ancestors, but Sudie could not? No changes were made to the house other than the FamilyLink communication device. So, it stood to reason that the chip was her mental block, and the communication device was blocking the house. Aware of the intricacies of technological functionality, however, Sudie knew that any computer could be reprogramed.

She breathed in deeply as she soldered the last piece onto the circuit board, and she prayed it would work this time.

"Call?" Sudie thought over the link.

"Call."

"Call!"

Static.

“Response?” A voice crackled. Sudie froze.

“Reeeeespoooooooooonssssssse.” The voice said again in a bothered tone.

“Um... hello? House?” Sudie said shakily.

“House? Nah, honey. This Thelma. You can call me Grandma Dude. I’m working the Motherboard today, so you got me. You thought your mama n’em was talking to the house?” She laughed aloud, causing a ringing in Sudie’s ears.

It did seem like she was talking to it. “She said the house is what held the family magic.”

“Yea. It holds the family magic, but think of it more like a connection point. Your mama and the other mamas before them talked *through* it to us.”

“And... who is us?”

“Your mama ain’t teach you nothin, huh?”

“I...never asked. I didn’t want to talk to the house... or you all, I guess. I left before she could teach me much.”

“Y’all younger generations so stubborn. Well, I ain’t got time nor patience to teach you today. I volunteered for operator duty, so I’m directing calls from everybody trying to connect and it’s always busy at night.”

“Everybody?”

“Chile, you NOT the only one to figure this out. You know you have cousins, aunties, and uncles, right?” Grandma Dude laughed aloud. “You called. I, the operator, responded. I transfer the call to the person you wanted to speak to. You wanna talk to your mama? Your grandma? Your great great great grandfather? I direct your call, and they respond if they got time.”

Sudie considered this. She had so many questions. Would the connection work again after this? Would this be the only time to ask? What is the one question she should ask right now? “You know,” she said finally, “I’d love to talk to great grandma Sue. My daughter is starting school tomorrow, and I’m scared for her. I’ve been back 3 months now, and the racism is just as bad as it was when I was a child. My mama went to school here and told me things, but great grandma was one of the first to go through school in

this city and one of the first to help her daughters through. I need her help so Chelle can navigate this system.”

“Ok. Hol’ on.” Grandma dude clicked over and put Sudie on hold. A familiar, yet unrecognizable song, like a long-forgotten lullaby, played as she waited.

“Hi, my double buttercup!” A loud voice resounded over the link.

“Grandma Sue!” Sudie teared as she heard the familiar sound of her great grandmother’s voice.

“We have soooo much to catch up on, but Dude told me you need some help. What’s going on with Michelle?”

“Nothing’s happened. She starts school tomorrow, and I’m scared. I work in the tunnels now, and there’s this woman who’s just evil for no reason. I know Michelle might run into some of those same folks in school, and I want to protect her as best I can.”

“Well, when I was worried about my girls in that school, I just showed up.”

“Showed up?”

“Yea! If they had problems, I’d show up. If I wanted to get to know their teachers, I’d show up. If the girls just wanted me to come and visit the school, I’d show up. My mom did the same for me. If you’re worried about how she’ll be received there, I suggest you show up.”

“But, I’m not really sure how to do that. What should I say? What should I do?”

“If you’re afraid to speak, write.”

“What should I write?”

“Write a letter.”

“A letter? Not an email?”

“A handwritten letter. And you walk to the school and deliver it. Show. Up.”

“What should I put in the letter?”

“Girl. Go get some paper and something to write with.”

Sudie rummaged through the drawers to find a notebook and pen. It'd been a while since she used such antiquated tools. She felt like an email would suffice, but Grandma Sue seemed adamant that a letter be handwritten. Finally, she found what she was looking for.

"Good." Grandma Sue said. "Now, grant me permission to come through the link."

"Come through?!" Sudie questioned aloud before realizing she could accidentally wake Michelle.

"You don't know what to say, don't know what to write, don't know what to do. I do. Let me come through the link."

"How?"

"Say, 'I accept.'"

"I...accept." As Sudie responded, the lights flickered, and the communication device blinked lights in rapid succession. She felt a course of energy move through her body and a sizzling heat languish in her arms. Her hands began to move.

"Sorry for the slight discomfort. It feels a little weird the first time." Grandma Sue said before Sudie could make the comment.

"What...is happening to me?" Sudie said, confused and scared.

"We're now connected in mind, body, and spirit. When I move, you move. I will help you write the letter that needs to be written."

Sudie sat in awe as she watched her arms move, guided by an ancestor long gone, but now here.

Dear Educator,

We are so excited that our daughter has the opportunity to learn with you this year. As mothers and othermothers, we are deeply invested in her success. So, we use this letter to share with you what we've learned about our daughter and how she approaches learning, both in and outside of school:

- *We have always been impressed by her voracity for learning. She loves to read books and will often read several novels in a week. She also adores learning games and completing educational workbooks and puzzle books over the summer.*

- *As soon as we ask her to assist us with a task, we turn around, and she has already completed it, waiting for the next one to be given.*
- *She adores helping others (e.g., assisting cousins with homework or her grandfather with household chores) and just being active (e.g., dancing, singing, gymnastics, basketball, etc.).*
- *She is active in mind and body, moving quickly through concepts as well as physical spaces. Because of this, she is consistently looking for ways to engage in imaginative, creative, and intellectual pursuits.*
- *She is a conceptual thinker, always trying to make connections across ideas. For example, she is a writer, and in the stories she shares with us, she shows us how the concepts she's learned at school, the stories she learned from books and movies, and the life experiences she's had are represented in her narratives. She is always connecting ideas and threads we would not have otherwise seen.*

Because of these noticings, we wish to share our desires for Michelle's education and her experiences in your classroom.

- *Like a computer, Michelle's processing speed is high, which often results in her completing schoolwork with relative ease. She might read ahead, read another book, draw, or write stories when she is finished. We ask that you don't consider these behaviors a form of disengagement; rather, it's her respect for the learning environment you're creating.*
- *Because she finishes her work quickly, she might ask "What's next?" or "What else do we have to do today?" We ask that you view her questions not as disrespect, but as the manifestation of her desire to continue learning from you.*
- *Her altruistic nature often results in her attempting to help others with their work once she has completed her own. She has been accused of cheating, or just being too talkative during class. We have taught her that learning is more of a collective than individual process, so we ask that you include more collective learning possibilities in the classroom.*
- *Her need to move her body or cultivate her mind has never been shunned at home, but the rigid and regulated nature of schooling has often been at odds with her needs. We ask that Michelle and her peers are given time throughout the class to stretch and move their bodies, to engage in imaginative, creative, and even speculative learning opportunities, so they have multiple ways to access their educational pursuits.*

- *We know there are standards and requirements for learning that guide much of the curriculum, but we also know Michelle and so many others need learning that connects to who they are as people. We ask that you get to know our baby girl and her peers. We hope that you will ask: Who are you? Where do you come from? Who do you come from? What do you know? What do you want to know? Where do you want to go? Who do you want to be? What can I do to bring these futures and dreams into existence? We ask that you take this knowing and use it to enhance your curriculum. We ask that you help them to find the threads that connect home, school, and world.*
- *Collectively, all these aspects of Michelle's being have led to her increased ability in knowing what success means for her. We align our definition of success with hers, which means that we do not regulate the concept for her. This definition has and will change, and we embrace whatever changes she makes. We know that everyone has an idea of what success is, but we ask that you make room for her self-definition, that you make space for her to define success on her own terms.*

*Sincerely,
Sudie & the Othermothers*

"There. Short and to the point. And, beautifully written if I do say so myself." Grandma Sue whispered.

"Thank you!" Sudie cried aloud. "This. This is what I wanted to say. This is what I needed them to know. This is what I wish all mothers could write for their children."

"We already do." Susan responded.

"What do you mean... we?"

"I didn't write this letter on my own. Bloodmothers and Othermothers from around the way all whispered in my ear. We all watched our daughter grow. We all watched her thrive. We watch all the children. This letter will be delivered by you, but this letter is not yours or Michelle's alone. This letter is for all of us."

Sudie couldn't contain her joy, nor the fear of responsibility that weighed on her. She realized that the tether she once avoided was not just a connection to the city, it was a connection to the mothers, to the family, to her ancestry. As she sobbed, with head in her hands, she felt a light touch on her shoulder.

“Grandma Sue?” Sudie asked.

“Nah, mama. It’s me. You ok?” Michelle said groggily.

“Yea, baby. I just... I’m just happy. That’s all. What time is it?”

“It’s like four in the morning. I couldn’t sleep anymore. Too anxious.”

“Well, if you’re up anyway, I want to show you something.” Sudie went to the FamilyLink receptor, moved a few wires, and clicked a few buttons. “Now, I know you don’t like FamilyLink, but I want you to try something. In your head, say, ‘call.’”

Companion Analysis

To create the story, we first became story listeners, cultivating a synergistic relationship that made space for us to tell our own stories while also listening to each other’s personal narratives. To engage in this practice, we scheduled four Zoom calls to discuss our experiences growing up in New Castle and being raised by our mothers within the city. Stephanie and Erin were both raised by Susan, so the two of us spent much time discussing what we learned from our mother and how that learning helped us to survive and thrive in New Castle schools. In the same digital space, Susan discussed what she learned from her mother (Stephanie and Erin’s grandmother), how she used those learnings to keep her body and soul intact as a student in New Castle, and how she passed those teachings to her daughters. In each of these planned sessions, we learned much about how our mother–daughter relationships helped us to find success (by our own definitions) in New Castle schools.

To ensure we could revisit our collective conversations, we recorded each session, which resulted in approximately 12 hours of audio recording and 300 transcribed pages. Once data were collected and transcribed, we met both formally (one scheduled Zoom meeting) and informally (digitally via Google Docs, phone calls, and text messages) to discuss the threads we noticed across our conversations. These threads included concepts like the following: intergenerational mothering and daughtering, anti-Black racism in small urban cities, communal healing, community and family rooted to geographical location, the meaning of growth vs. stagnancy, and spiritual connection. We also zoomed out to notice the patches of our individual stories, and we noticed that although there were many threads connecting our narratives, there were differences based on our ages, social locations, and personalities.

We attended to threads and patches to breathe life into the characters of Sudie, Michelle, and Grandma Sue.

After centralizing our personal stories, we enhanced the narrative by focusing on education scholarship centering Black mothering in urban schooling spaces. Black mothers have always been active in the educational lives of their children, those they have birthed and those they have not. They hold high, but practical educational expectations, provide safety and care, engage in racial socialization, advocate for equitable learning experiences, and show up for their children in whatever ways they know how (Aguayo, 2022; Allen & White-Smith, 2018). They fight against narratives and systems that continually disparage Black youth and the geographical spaces in which they live (Powell & Coles, 2021). They share community, world, and individual smartness with their children by sharing family histories and legacies; ensuring their children are aware of anti-Blackness in the world; and teaching their children to engage critically with people and the world, rather than simply accepting anything at face value (Sankofa Waters, 2016). They have “considered their parenting pedagogies as a serious responsibility, inherently political, and critical to the survival of a people” (Henry, 2006, p. 330).

In school and societal systems that demonize, deprioritize, or simply disregard Black children, the knowledge, advocacy, and spirit of Black mothers is critical. And yet, Black mothers’ knowledges, theories, and words are often neglected in educational discourse. To engage in reclaiming and recovering the past, present, and future of Black mothers in urban characteristic spaces, our story focused on one Black mother to showcase how she relied on her individual and ancestral knowledge to assist her daughter in gaining the navigational capital (Yosso, 2005) necessary to survive in an anti-Black schooling landscape. It focused on how Sudie attempted to help her daughter, Michelle, maneuver through a schooling space that was not created with young Black people in mind.

Although we centralized Black motherhood at-large, we also knew, based on our collective storytelling, that geographical precision was paramount in urban education research. Thus, we examined New Castle through an urban characteristic lens to focus our analysis on Black mothering. Specifically, we noted the size of the city, the racial diversity, and the lack of resources that are common to urban educational spaces, but we also highlighted specifics that are unique to urban characteristic cities.

For instance, we noted that New Castle has experienced urban decay and deterioration over the past several decades, and although there have been attempts at urban renewal, some residents oppose change due to ecological conservatism, or the attempt to conserve tradition and the “deeply rooted

historical connections that are being threatened or annihilated by modernity” (Castellano, 2011, p. 75). As an example, although the city council approved a plan to build a new gas station and demolish an unoccupied house and funeral home that had been standing since 1880, residents challenged the idea, arguing that “local ordinances prohibit demolition of the historic properties” (WKBN, 2016, para. 5) and “preservation of historical properties results in positive economic and social impacts for a community” (para. 9). In this case, residents fought urban renewal for the preservation of history, even though the buildings had long been neglected. In New Castle, history is sometimes more important than progress and communal preservation.

In our search, we also noted the importance of family names in the city. Of course, “Black names” have been a constant topic in education research and beyond (see Brown & Lively, 2012; Foster, 2008; Stockstill & Carson, 2022), but we argue that family names are both racialized and attached to communal history. For instance, the first Black Mayor of New Castle, Chris Frye, said his candidacy was often overshadowed by his position as an “outsider” in the town even though the 33-year-old resident moved to the city when he was 10 (Zito, 2021). The last name, Frye, lacks historical legacy, and Frye’s identity as Black resulted in widespread skepticism about his ability to lead. In fact, 2 years into his tenure, the city voted to remove Frye’s mayoral power, reducing his position to that of a ceremonial figurehead.

On the contrary, Eric Sallie, a white man born and raised in New Castle, challenged city officials to aggressively engage in a revitalization project (Wachter, 2022). Although his community goals mirrored Frye’s, Sallie’s identity as a long-time, white resident fostered widespread communal and legislative support for his cause. Race *and* family genealogy, in this urban characteristic city, results in communal and legislative power. Ultimately, we use the story to connect New Castle to the larger landscape of urban education research, but we also note several characteristics that framed our experiences as residents of New Castle. In doing so, we narrowed our vision of Black mothering to focus on what it means to mother in this specific geographical space.

With a deeper understanding of Black mothering in the past and present, we then turned to scholarship that would assist us in envisioning what New Castle and Black mothering might look like in the future, so we turned to the Afrofuturist literature. Afrofuturism has long been connected to advancements in technology (Anderson, 2016; Nelson, 2000; Womack, 2013) and a belief in a Black Networked Consciousness (Eshun, 2003; Lavender, 2019; Toliver, 2022). Specifically, Everett (2002) argued that “despite the well-documented dehumanizing imperatives of the colonial encounter, the ethnically and nationally diverse Africans in the New World developed self-

sustaining virtual communities through paralinguistic and transnational communicative systems and networks of song, dance, talking drums, and other musical instrumentations” (p. 126). Additionally, Lavender argued that “a Black Networked Consciousness suggests that through Afrofuturism, communal memories and traditions, which link past, present, and future, make possible the hope that black people wish to experience from a painful past in building black futures” (p. 7).

These scholars suggest that Black people participate in ancestral communication systems that allow them to reclaim and recover the past, counter negative and uplift positive realities in the present, and create new dreams for the future. In doing so, Black people could overload and rewire white supremacist control systems toward the goals of Black joy and Black freedom. We employ these concepts both literally (via Sudie’s occupation as computer engineer and her ability to hack FamilyLink) and metaphorically (via the Johnson family’s ability to connect to their ancestors). Like Sudie, we were physically and spiritually connected to the Black Networked Consciousness and relied on communal memories, family traditions, and ancestral knowledge to bring forth this story of educational hope. In this way, we narrated our collective lives, memories, and stories through Sudie’s tale.

Following Toliver’s (2022) methodological process, we became story listeners, as the three of us shared our stories of living in New Castle. We followed the threads in our stories, finding seams that converged on ideas like outsider/insider, racism, urban decay/renewal, educational injustice, and freedom dreams. We considered the patches as we looked not only across our stories, but also viewed them as individual narratives worthy of being centered. By engaging in this process, we were able to remember our matrilineal heritage, naming characters after our grandmothers, great grandmothers, and othermothers. We were able to recover the Afrofuturist technologies of spirit that guide us toward the stories of our ancestors and force us to find those stories within. We were able to reintegrate joy, as we centered our first teachers—our mothers—and showcased that their wisdom is worthy of centralization in urban education research.

Conclusion

Through Endarkened Storywork, we highlighted our mothers’ dreams and hopes that those responsible for educating Black children, within and outside of urban educational spaces, would (1) see Black children as the vibrant individuals they are, rather than the stereotypes that often follow them into the classroom; (2) acknowledge that race and family genealogy is an essential component of Black life, and so, it is critical to provide

opportunities for us to find ways to connect home, school, and world across the past, present, and future; and (3) understand that Black people are creative, communal, and complex, so educators must consider ways to engage the multiple facets of our being in school spaces.

We contain multitudes, and so should our curriculum, instruction, and overall schooling experiences. We share this tale from the motherboard in hopes that urban educators and researchers will hack the system, show up for Black children, and make way for Black children to dream, create, and thrive. We share our mothers' teachings in hopes that someday, their words will teach others.

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