



CHAPTER 6

"You Know, Let Me Put My Two Cents In"

Using Photovoice to Locate the Educational Experiences of Black Girls

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In the late 1920s, at the early age of four, Esther Jones began her career as a performer known as Baby Esther. She was a Black girl who first grew in popularity in Europe due to the unique baby-like voice she used when scat singing. Later, she grew her platform and popularity in the United States. Eventually, the performativity of her singing style (scatting) was stolen by a white woman, Helen Kane, who gained profitability and was known most for performing as the character Betty Boop (Samuels 2016). In 1932, Kane attempted to sue Max Fleischer and Paramount Publix Corporations by claiming that she had inspired the character Betty Boop and was due compensation for the character's popularity. Although Kane had studied Jones's Baby Esther character in order to appropriate her unique style, Jones was never given the proper acknowledgment. Kane eventually lost her case because her former manager proved that the voice and persona she presented were stolen from Jones, who was never financially compensated for the appropriation.

Notes for this section can be found on page 167.

According to Feierman and Sawyer (2019), a variety of tactics have been used in the United States to silence and steal the voices of Black girls for several decades. Those tactics include not taking Black girls' protest of injustices seriously, misappropriating their voices, disciplining Black girls for speaking up for their childhoods, and denying them their childhoods altogether. At an elementary school in Florida, a six-year-old Black girl named Kaia Rolle was arrested for throwing a "tantrum." The video clip recorded on the officer's body camera circulated throughout the nation and is disturbing. During her arrest, she cried not to be taken into custody, saying very clearly, "No, don't put handcuffs on. Help me!" (Zaveri 2020: para. 1). Even with her cries and pleads, her voice went ignored. Unfortunately for Kaia, she was not seen as a child. She was viewed as not performing "ladylike" behavior, so, regardless of her age, the violence against her body was deemed to be justified. There is a long history of Black girls being treated more like adults. As a result, Black girls are often not given the benefit of the doubt. Baby Esther and Kaia are linked not by time but by the lack of space their voices were given to thrive.

Black girls are aware of the expectation for them to act "mature." When asked to tell me a little bit about herself, one of the co-collaborators I worked with for the current chapter described herself as "mature":

You know, let me put my two cents in. I think I am too [mature], actually, because the way I was growing up, I really had to, like, babysit my brother and my sister. Like, I was, like, basically they mom. So, it was like I had to be mature, and I did stuff at that age. (Research interview 2019)

The expectation to perform adultlike duties contributes to the "molding" of Black girls into adulthood, often at very young ages. E. Morris (2007) documented how Black girls are seen in schools as needing to be molded into "ladies." Specifically, teachers and administrators in his study perceived Black girls as loud and assertive, without "proper" manners. Further, Black girls are listened to only when they play into respectability politics. Nyachae and Ohito (2023) demonstrated that even when extra-curricular or after-school initiatives attempt to center Black girls, a singular lens continues to be reproduced in terms of trying to mold Black girls into more "respectable" human beings, meaning conforming to white supremacist, patriarchal expectations of what it means to be a girl or a woman. This further illustrates the importance of listening to how Black girls locate the world through their multifaceted eyes, in addition to listening to them speak their truths directly from their perspectives.

I begin this chapter by providing an explanation of why it is important to listen to Black girls and do research with/on Black girls in educational spaces. I then move to provide context on the purpose and rationale of the current chapter. Next, I outline my theoretical framing of Black feminist theory (BFT) and Black girlhood studies, specifically the concepts of voice and space. Following this discussion, I explain the methods and design of the research that informed this chapter. Finally, I provide concluding thoughts and reflections on how educational spaces can improve, based on the voices of the Black girls I worked with.

Listening to Silenced Black Girls' Voices

It is important to acknowledge that this chapter is not another piece of research about "giving" Black girls voice. As the lead researcher of the project discussed throughout this chapter, I believe that Black girls already have voices. However, as educators, we often are not listening to their voices. I commonly heard, "They don't listen to us" and "You're not listening to what I am saying" while working with Black adolescent girls in Girls Purpose Squad (GPS; pseudonym), an after-school mentoring and leadership movement.¹ GPS is located within a community-based organization in a historically Black neighborhood. The "they" the girls often referred to usually reflected a variety of adults in their lives, such as parents, community members, and teachers in their schools. As a Black woman working with Black girls, it was important for me to listen to what they had to say. I tried my best to listen, but sometimes I fell short and was placed in the "you're not listening" category. Therefore, I began to reflect on two questions: What does it mean to truly listen to Black girls? What does it mean to listen to them and locate their knowledge and narratives in the broader context of education? These questions are important for educators who work with Black girls. Given the inequities they tend to face in education policies and curriculum, it is important to understand Black girls' experiences directly from their voices. We can mobilize these voices to improve the context of education and better understand educational spaces. As I continued to reflect on locating Black girls' voices, I thought about the ways in which their voices could be located not only audibly, but also visually. Moreover, I reflected on what Black girls say both visually and audibly when we listen.

Black girls being pushed out of the formal context of school has been documented continually (Crenshaw 2015; M. Morris 2016). Racism, sexism, and classism are interlocking systems of oppression (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991) that historically have affected and continue to influence the educational experiences of and opportunities for Black girls. These interlocking systems have played a significant role in how Black girls experience school and construct their identity. Although this is the case, Gibson (2015: 201) noted, “There is limited research that solely focuses on Black teenage girls’ gender and racial identity construction within the context of educational institutions.” Furthermore, few educational reformers have investigated how to amplify the voices of Black girls to understand how the interlocking systems of oppression affect the girls’ educational experiences. This lack of research demonstrates the need to know more about how Black girls are making sense of and experiencing educational spaces, how this may affect their understanding of self, and how they choose to locate their voices through these spaces. Therefore, for this chapter, I looked at how Black girls situated themselves via photos documenting their educational experiences.

Purpose

Through this chapter, I seek to chart an emerging terrain in how Black girls participating in GPS, a leadership and intergenerational mentoring movement, used an after-school space to (re)claim their voices about their educational experiences using photography. I highlight one major finding from a larger study (Meyers 2020) that suggests visual methods are a compelling way for Black girls to display and locate their voices and epistemologies through a creative medium. I also provide nuance into the diverse and multifaceted experiences of Black adolescent girls.

Rationale

Over the last decade, several studies have focused on the disciplinary experiences of Black girls in school (E. Morris 2007; M. Morris 2016; Winn 2011; Wun 2016, 2018). In addition to these studies, narratives that Black girls are “good” have also become prominent because of their academic

achievements, attainment, and ability to be resilient in the face of inequities (Apugo, Mawhinney, and Mbilishaka 2021). Although important, fewer works have deconstructed and expanded on the complexity of Black girls' experiences in education, particularly works centering the voices of Black girls themselves. Specifically, limited research has concentrated on how Black adolescent girls reveal their understandings of voice, place, and space. There continues to be less work locating and theorizing the meaning of girlhood from Black adolescent girls' perspectives (Evans-Winters 2015; Wun 2016, 2018). Additionally, a gap exists in empirical studies focused on Black girls from an asset-based stance. In the study discussed in this chapter, I centered the emerging conversation on education from Black girls' perspectives. According to bell hooks,

For those of us who dare to desire differently, who seek to look away from the conventional ways of seeing blackness and ourselves, the issue of race and representation is not just a question of critiquing the status quo. It is also about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews and move us away from dualistic thinking about good and bad. (1992: 4)

Given the continual evidence of Black girls—including their voices, thoughts, and ideas—being physically pushed out of school spaces the results displayed in this chapter pushed to move representation beyond dualistic thinking in terms of seeing experience as only negative or positive. Rather, I acknowledge that educational experiences happen beyond the dichotomy the education context tends to create. The adolescent Black girls in this study used photography as a way to provide visual voice (Burke 2005) and add layers to understanding their experiences. It is rare to see literal and figurative images that Black adolescent girls create about their experiences: therefore, this chapter provides insight into how Black girls use research to share their knowledge through visuals and their voices. Beyond locating their voices, this chapter provides insight into what Black adolescent girls in GPS said could be done to create educational spaces for them, with them in mind.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framing

As a Black woman scholar who was once a Black little girl, this work is both a professional and personal endeavor. BFT and Black girlhood stud-

ies allowed me the space to illuminate the voices of the Black girls I worked with. The foundations of BFT and Black girlhood studies were both important in centering the Black adolescent girls in this chapter. BFT centers the experiences and knowledge of Black women. Black feminism is both a theoretical and praxis-oriented philosophy that opposes multiple forms of oppression, such as patriarchy, sexism, and misogyny (Crenshaw 1991; hooks 1992). Additionally, hooks (2000: 33) asserted that feminism is “a movement to end sexist oppression [and] directs our attention to systems of domination and the interrelatedness of sex, race, and class oppression.” Therefore, in my approach and analysis, BFT was key. It allowed me to specifically center the voices of the Black girls I worked with, paying close attention to their racialized and gendered experiences. Furthermore, as the researcher focusing on Black girls, I recognized BFT was born out of Black women experiences, and I wanted to complement this theory with a field of thought born out of girls’ childhood locations.

Although Black women and girls have similar and overlapping experiences in a society that is often anti-Black and anti-women, it is important to understand how these experiences differ for Black girls because of their spatial location of being marked by childhood. Therefore, I coupled BFT with Black girlhood studies theoretically. Black girlhood studies centers the lives of Black girls and their diverse experiences (Brown 2009, 2013; Chatelain 2015; Cox 2015; Crenshaw 2015; Evans-Winters 2011; Simmons 2015; Wright 2016). The study of Black girls by Black women in particular has grown and expanded over the last decade.

Historical Context

The historical legacy of enslaved Black women and girls has meant that Black girlhood has not been acknowledged or allowed to thrive in institutional structures and everyday life. As demonstrated by the historical legacy of slavery, Davis (1981) explained, Black girls are still not afforded their childhood. Davis provided the following example to illustrate this: “for most girls and women, as for most boys and men, it was hard labor in the fields from sunup to sundown” (1981: 2). Given this historical context, Black girlhood studies serves as a counter-discourse, a literal and figurative time and space to center the experiences of Black girls and celebrate their everyday joys and struggles (Brown 2009; Evans-Winters 2017; Wright 2016), including their right to name their realities. Both Black feminist and Black girlhood theories offer important concepts in centering the voices, experiences, and visuals of Black adolescent girls. In this

study, I used voice from BFT and space from Black girlhood studies as my analytical lenses.

Voicing, Naming, and Constructing Reality

Within Black girlhood studies and BFT frameworks, voice is a central construct. Having a voice, being able to name yourself, and using your voice to change sociocultural inequities continue to be essential components of both frameworks. Edwards, McArthur, and Russell-Owens (2016) displayed how providing space for voice—that is, allowing Black girls to name their experiences—is essential in working and doing humanizing research with them. In *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, hooks (2015) explained that the importance of moving from silence to speech is a site of struggle and healing for oppressed people, but ultimately it liberates them. This was evident in the current study in how the co-researchers I worked with named and (re)claimed their experiences.

What Does It Mean to Name?

I conceptualize voice as “naming one’s own reality” (Ladson-Billings 1998: 13). Voice, or lack thereof, continues to be an important factor in both BFT and Black girlhood studies and research focused on Black girls (Ault 2017; Brown 2013; Edwards et al. 2016; Evans-Winters 2017). Providing a space where Black girls can vocalize their experiences is crucial to better supporting them and understanding their diverse perspectives from their point of view. That is not to say that Black girls do not have voices; however, their voices have been silenced in and out of school spaces in intentional ways. Black girls also have used deliberate silence as a means of survival and coping with stereotypes (Asia Thomas 2021). Naming one’s reality is important because it demonstrates how “much of ‘reality’ is socially constructed” (Ladson-Billings 1998: 13); allows marginalized groups to self-preserve through speaking their truths, which allows for the examination of narratives that are often overlooked or generalized; and can influence oppressors’ perspectives. Naming one’s reality allows the illumination of experiential knowledge which is often undervalued (Edwards et al. 2016). Finally, naming is also important because Black girls have often been given names and labels forced onto them without their consent or approval (Asia Thomas 2021). Thus, it is important to understand exactly how schools intentionally silence Black girls and how Black girls use their voices as a form of resistance and resilience.

Conducted with Girls for Gender Equity, Venus Evans-Winters's study (2017) displayed how girls of color naming their reality became a perceived threat to the status quo and school administrators and how the bodies of girls of color tend to be read as dangerous by school officials. The girls' naming their reality through research exposed the oppressive nature of the school's disciplinary bias and also displayed how they talked back against oppression (Evans-Winters 2017; hooks 2015). Locating these counternarratives, experiences, and understanding is significant in better understanding the sociocultural experiences of Black girls in schooling spaces. The issue of voice and naming sits at the crosshairs of power, violence, and resilience, which continue to be a part of many Black girls' experiences in and out of school spaces. Furthermore, Evans-Winters's example reveals the deeply entrenched, ingrained, and endemic pervasiveness of controlling images that locate Black girls through a deficit perspective. Therefore, there is a continued need to hear Black girls' voices both audibly and visually.

Methodically Mapping Youth Experiences through Visual Research

Youth voices and experiences have continued to be located through visual research (Del Vecchio, Toomey, and Tuck 2017; Porterfield 2017; Templeton 2020). Although visual research with youth has increased over the past decade, more work with Black girls is still needed. In Porterfield's study (2017) on the visual discourse of a high school environment in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, she investigated what Black working-class girls learned from the visual culture in the school that adults created. She was specifically interested in the lessons Black girls learned concerning race, gender, and place. Porterfield found that even in a high school recognized as highly acclaimed and open-minded, a hidden curriculum through the visual culture of the school encouraged the Black working-class girls in the study to assimilate. She stated that Black girls

are often softly encouraged to change and or are re-programmed into more palatable, commodifiable versions of themselves that both sustain and advance the school's identity as different. This 're-programming' often requires young Black women to alter their dress, speech, and physical demeanour in order to find belonging in a larger school culture dominated by a discourse of inclusivity and diversity. (Porterfield 2017: 301)

Porterfield's study displayed the importance of visual culture in and around educational spaces.

Other Black women scholars have used photography as a means to critically reflect on their experiences from girlhood into womanhood. Hampton and Desjourdy (2013) collaborated on a photographic self-study in order to illuminate their experiences related to race, class, gender, and ability. Finally, other scholars have used photography as a means to interrogate education and popular culture in order to center the voices of Black women and girls (Taaffe 2016). With this emerging way to work with/for Black girls in research, community, and education, it is important to propose the question, What kinds of layered visual cultures do Black girls create about their experiences?

According to Evans-Winters (2017), girlhood is being redefined (by girls) as a stage of fortitude and active voice. Understanding how Black girls represent their experiences and use their voices is important because these girls tend to be seen in precarious ways through their racialized, gendered, and classed bodies. In *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy*, Brown (2009) explained that she has been asked several times to speak to girls but never to inquire about how they see the world and how they think the world sees them.

This chapter contributes to answering the call from Edwards et al. (2016: 437) to complete research that "affirm[s] and support[s] Black girls while simultaneously rejecting over-simplified, decontextualized, and reductionist views of the Black girl experience." More than offering a "good" girl or "bad" Black girl discourse, my hope was to collaboratively amplify, critique, locate, and complicate Black girls' outlooks on Black girlhood and Black girls' educational experiences. Furthermore, I do not intend for this chapter to romanticize youth or focus on them being victims of structural systems; rather, my purpose here is to complicate the discourses and representation that exist (Ginwright 2008). This chapter is ultimately about raising and locating Black girls' voices through the visuals they create.

Research Design

Youth participatory action research (YPAR) allowed me to engage with photovoice from a youth-centered standpoint. Moving beyond pathologizing frameworks, YPAR offers a framework that critically engages youth as co-researchers with adults in addressing various social justice issues

that are important to their communities (Cammarota and Fine 2008). Utilizing photovoice as my method—that is, using photography in the hands of youth and asking them to visualize and talk about their experiences—further complemented YPAR. With YPAR as the methodology and photovoice as the method, centering Black girls’ voices was essential. YPAR coupled with photovoice allowed for remapping an alternative geographical space for Black girls to visualize how they want to be located. The Black girls were involved with the design, questions asked, and implications of the study. Although not the focus in this chapter, the girls also co-designed a community exhibition to display their pictures.

Photovoice

Photovoice is a participatory method that uses photography and narrative as the main sources of data. *Photovoice* was coined by Wang and Burris (1997), and the method has three central goals: “to (1) record and represent their [participants’] everyday realities; (2) promote critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community strengths and concerns; and (3) reach policymakers” (Wang 2006: 148). The key focus of photovoice is how participants produce knowledge through pictures, narratives, and words. “Photovoice creates intellectual space for innovation by extending conventional boundaries and providing qualitative and arts-based researchers with increased options and opportunities for creating new knowledge, transformation, and social change” (Delgado 2015: 28). Black girls are their own best authors; that is, they are the experts on their experiences and the various injustices they face (Goessling 2020). Black girls need to be provided the space to speak on their own behalf about their experiences. Moreover, these spaces need to allow them to create.

Next, I provide more information about the Black girls I worked with and show how they used their voices to provide knowledge on what could be done to improve, change, and enhance their educational experiences. Their suggestions and images connect to a larger conversation on how we can locate Black girls’ voices and move forward to effect positive social change, especially as it pertains to educational spaces.

Black Girls Voicing Experiences from Perspectives of Space and Place

The Black girls in this study not only named but also mapped out, so to speak, their experiences and what they desired and wanted done about the inequitable conditions they faced in educational spaces. The girls were

aware of how media (i.e., news, television shows, social media) tended to misrepresent them and how the schooling environment tended to rely on controlling images about their identities and also worked to push them to confirm and perform their identities in ways deemed respectable. Porter-field's 2017 conclusion, that Black girls are often encouraged to modify themselves into more "respectful" versions, was also supported through the work I did with the co-researchers. The Black girls I worked with also received messages from their schools via images, policies, and practices that encouraged working-class girls to change their behaviors to align with dominant perspectives of girlhood. The girls in this study pushed back against this narrative by demanding not to be controlled, but rather to be embraced and included in spaces as their whole selves. The girls offered important knowledge they constructed to provide solutions that can be incorporated when thinking about ways in which we can make the educational system more equitable for Black adolescent girls.

Black Girls as Co-researchers

It was important for me as a Black woman scholar to include the girls I worked with as co-researchers as much as possible. As a Black woman who came from a background similar to that of these girls, I was invested in hearing them and providing a platform where their voices would be taken seriously. Five adolescent Black girls participated in my study to provide their insight. Four of the girls were freshmen in high school, and one was a sophomore. Each girl selected her own pseudonym; during the time of the study, Blai was fifteen years old, Lil Ken was thirteen, and Phoo'j, Kayla, and Jale were fourteen. Although Jale participated in most of the study, she decided not to allow her pictures to be used in the study, so, I respected her voice and did not include any of them. Although her visual representations were not included, she allowed her audible knowledge to be shared. The girls I worked with came from working-class or low-income backgrounds. The girls represented two school districts in the Midwestern region of the United States.

In terms of demographics, in 2020, the Hamilton City School District, where two of the girls were enrolled, was composed of the following student population: 62.1 percent white, 18 percent Hispanic, 12.5 percent African American, 5.8 percent multiracial, 0.8 percent Pacific Islander, 0.6 percent Asian, and 0.2 percent Native American (Niche 2022b). In Hamilton City, approximately 22 percent of children lived in poverty. The other two participants were enrolled in the neighboring school district of

Fairfield. This school district's student demographics were 53.3 percent white, 21.6 percent African American, 12.6 percent Hispanic, 6.4 percent Asian, 5.8 percent multiracial, 0.2 percent Pacific Islander, and 0.1 percent Native American (Niche 2022a). Seventy percent of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch in the Hamilton district versus 37.7 percent in the Fairfield district (Niche 2022a, 2022b). In 2018, the Ohio Department of Education recognized the lack of diversity of teachers in comparison with the diversity of the student population. To address this gap "Ohio's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) state plan, approved in January 2018, clearly outlines the commitment by the Ohio Department of Education to increase the diversity of the educator workforce in Ohio" (Ohio Department of Education 2019: 3). However, as of 2019, when I was working with the girls in this study, they still felt there was a racial/ethnic mismatch between their teachers and the diverse student body. Although this is a nationwide issue, it is important in locating the girls in the larger context of education literature.

Listening to Black Girls' Voices

The main findings that I focus on in this chapter are from a larger data set. However, for the purposes of this chapter, the data discussed here focus on only one of the findings from the larger study which emphasizes voice. This finding is represented by the girls' pictures and audible narratives.

Lil Ken: "Include and Embrace Us"

Throughout the study, several of the co-researchers mentioned feeling invisible, ignored, and excluded in school. Although this was a common thread, it was very salient for Lil Ken. She had a tumultuous relationship with her school that ended with her being suspended and ultimately expelled for a nonviolent offense. Although she had a trying relationship with her school, she ultimately wanted to feel accepted and allowed to be herself without feeling like her behaviors were constantly under a microscope. Her picture of the embroidered art piece displays this (see Figure 6.1). She wants to both be herself, and, at the same time, be included in the school community.

"Include and embrace us" may seem like a simple request from Lil Ken's picture, but her visual displays an even deeper reality. Several girls in this study did not feel included in the schools they attended. Their feelings



Figure 6.1. Lil Ken’s image, “Include and Embrace Us.” Author photo.

of exclusion were further intensified by the “energy” their teachers gave them. Phoo’j described it in this way:

Like when they’re [teachers] giving negative energy towards you. It’s like you sit in the back of the class, and like, every time you try to raise your hand, they go around or they’ll call somebody else before they call you, like just stuff like that.

This statement by Phoo’j not only displays the negative vibes the girls felt and heard but also connects to the importance of providing a place/space that fully embraces and includes them. This involves understanding their experiences, not going around them, and not ignoring their questions. Imagine what it must feel like to know educators are intentionally excluding you from the classroom conversation because the assumption from the moment you walk in the room is that you are a disruption. Furthermore, this highlights the importance of having positive relational spaces (Rogers and Butler-Barnes 2022) that cultivate a sense of belonging for Black girls.

My co-researchers discussed feelings of being left out at school because of notions of exclusion largely. The girls explained how the schools seem

like they are under the ownership of white people. The following transcript provides commentary from Kayla and Phoo’j about this ownership:

Kayla: Like I was saying, like if it is just more populated with white people, it just seems it comes off as if it’s [the school] their territory. So, it seems as if they do [own it], but in reality, they don’t.

Phoo’j: I mean, if you think about it, probably they do. The white people probably built the school.

Me: What do you mean by that?

Phoo’j: Like, it probably really is theirs. I mean, if you think about it, it’s the government’s, and if the government—it just depends on who’s in the government might be white. You know what I’m sayin’. So, it really is the white people’s.

Phoo’j located ownership of schools with white folks because she explained that whoever owns the schools owns the education system. Evans-Winters (2019) reminded us that this fallacy of thinking is widespread and has been purposely taught to students both formally and informally. She explained, “White people do not own education nor knowledge; we are only led to believe that they possess and are the guardians of both” (Evans-Winters 2019: 79). Several others have also argued that whiteness has been equated with ownership (Ladson-Billings 2009; Leonardo and Broderick 2011). In some form or fashion, Phoo’j was led to believe that white people own the school because it belongs to the government. Therefore, in her rationale, if the government’s representation is largely white, then it made sense to her that the white kids own the school. She offered an important critique of the schooling space.

This conversation displays the necessity of assisting students in critically examining representations that work to further marginalize, silence, and add to the idea that knowledge and education do not belong to Black folks. On the other hand, if one investigates Phoo’j’s statement in more depth, perhaps she is onto something. Scholars have argued that school curriculum, schools, and policies, as they currently and historically have existed, are constructs that largely uphold whiteness and perpetuate anti-Blackness (Collins 2009; Dumas 2016; Hines and Wilmot 2018; Ladson-Billings 2009; Leonardo and Broderick 2011; Young, Foster, and Hines 2018). Furthermore, these constructs both consciously and subconsciously silence marginalized histories and perspectives that confront the dominant society’s perspectives (Ladson-Billings 2009). Therefore, Phoo’j’s observations of schools makes sense. It is not that white people themselves actually own school institutions, knowledge, or education;

rather, it is that schooling institutions have been used to uphold white supremacy and whiteness.² That is, schools have been used to further reinforce whiteness as superior. Phoo’j named an ideological issue that Black girls continue to wrestle with in schooling spaces. Her ability to use her voice to discuss this issue is an important contribution for educators. Phoo’j’s assessment of schools provides further justification for why spaces like GPS are important to Black girls. This is illustrated through her photo in the subsequent section.

M. Morris (2019: 132) stated, “Educators must prioritize creating opportunities for girls to create organic and supportive networks among themselves. When this happens, girls with problematic educational histories begin to consider the school *their* [emphasis added] school, as opposed to just the school that they attend.” It is evident from Kayla and Phoo’j’s conversation that the supportive networks Morris talked about were not cultivated at their school. The co-researchers’ conversation displayed why it is important that schools have a variety of representation and diversity in the material they use to teach students; why it is crucial for students to feel like the school, and education more generally, is a part of who they are; and finally, the importance of the environment of the school to feel inclusive and center culturally relevant pedagogies and practices. Kayla and Phoo’j’s conversation illustrates what we can learn from Black girls when they are provided space to name their reality and listen to their voice: a Black girl space, one that “intentionally pull[s] them in rather than push[es] them out” (Rogers and Butler-Barnes 2022: 50).

Phoo’j: “Every Black Girl Should Have a Place to Go to Freely Be Themselves”

To counter the negative energy the co-researchers often felt in educational spaces, they tended to emphasize the need for having an affirming place and space to go to. When asked what the community (i.e., school, the general community they live in) could do to address how they experienced school, and education more broadly, Phoo’j responded that the community could provide more spaces where girls can “be themselves.” It is important to note that she used the word *themselves* to acknowledge how the space created should belong to Black girls. Her play on language exhibits the importance of identity and creating space that supports a sense of belonging with Black girls at the center. Her picture represents a space that affirms Black girls’ identities, and it displays a variety of activities and events done within GPS (see Figure 6.2).



Figure 6.2. Phoo’j’s image.

Author photo.

Note: In order to maintain the confidentiality of the organization and the girls I worked with in this study, I cropped out the organization’s name at the top of the picture.

As a result of feeling affirmed, several of the girls, including Phoo’j, participated in GPS for several years. GPS represented a safe place, where the girls felt they could freely express themselves. Phoo’j specifically said, “Yeah, and I just said do more groups like GPS, like get all the kids off the street. Either if it is white or Black, involve them in the community, like period.” The community she mentioned is where most of the girls in the study lived. During the study, there was an increase in violent youth crime there. The youth in the community were well aware of the effects this was having on their everyday lives. A variety of community members began meeting to think through how to address the increase in youth violence. Although this was the case, the Black adolescent girls in this study also had ideas about what could be done to decrease the violence, such as Phoo’j exclaiming, “like get all the kids off the street.” The school was not seen as a safe haven; rather, community spaces were. This knowledge that Phoo’j has about the community contributed to her response. Furthermore, when I asked her what these spaces and places might look like, she responded, “like just do little groups, like stuff like we’re doing, basically,” specifically referring to the activities the girls do in GPS. Examples of activities include taking the girls in GPS to see the movie *The Hate U Give*, which is based on Angie Thomas’s (2017) young adult novel, and having an analytical conversation about it; talking about media representation of Black girls and women; creating “I am” poems to proclaim who each girl is; and hosting a health awareness booth at a local health fair in the community. These are just a few examples of the “stuff” Phoo’j was referring to within GPS. Moreover, she not only called for spaces for Black girls in the community, to freely be “theirselves” but also called for small groups that affirm youth in the community.

I sense that Phoo'j's call for more small-group spaces was connected to the influence GPS has had on her life and the increase in violence she has witnessed within her community. In addition, she has seen firsthand the influence GPS has on the girls who participate. She further stated that "discussion" is a necessary component of these groups. Having a place/space to go where youth are affirmed, discussing topics important to them, and being heard by everyone became a common thread that every participant in this study discussed in some form or fashion, in the sense of not only just hearing them but also listening to what they say and taking their words seriously. Furthermore, several scholars have demonstrated the positive and necessary effects of having groups and spaces that center Black girls' multiple identities, literacies, and epistemologies (Brown 2013; Jones 2015; Muhammad 2012). Black girls need not just any space but a group that allows them to critically examine their materialized conditions and interrogate power relations and structures (Evans-Winters 2017; Weems 2018). These spaces and places must center Black girls' varied epistemologies and ideas to allow them to be completely free to be who they want to be.

The Strait Visual Analysis

A strait in geographical terms is a narrowly formed area that connects two bodies of water. The metaphorical visual strait allows for further connection between the interpretation of the pictures created for this study and the larger societal context. As a reminder, Lil Ken used a picture of an embroidered art piece made by a local adult artist to display what educators can do to be more inclusive of Black girls. She said that including and embracing Black girls, not for who society thinks they should be but meeting them where they are, is important. When one looks at her picture (see Figure 6.1), one sees a variety of vibrant colors. Everything in the picture is connected; even the circle that includes the words "embrace" and "include" are connected to the background of the quilt. From my perception, this further emphasizes the importance of togetherness.

Unlike the US melting-pot narrative that assumes we all "melt" together and, in the process, lose our individual forms to create a false sense of a communal form, Lil Ken's picture allows each of the colors to contribute to the art piece while maintaining their uniqueness. In other words, none of the colors fades into the background, not to be embraced. Fur-

thermore, no color seems to be more dominant than the others. I link this image with Lil Ken's desire to be embraced and included without having to lose the essence of who she is. She wanted to feel incorporated without having to give up her own individuality. Black girls are often expected to change who they are in order to be accepted by the dominant society. This further illustrates how Black girls are only included and accepted in mainstream society if their behaviors and actions are consistent with what the dominant society expects from them. According to Hines and Wilmot (2018: 63), "Black girls are being chastised and criminalized for meritless infractions including having 'too much attitude,' chewing gum too loudly, and talking 'unladylike.'" Lil Ken used her chosen picture to voice a statement on behalf of all Black girls to take us as we are, because we want to be included and embraced fully as our whole selves. Furthermore, including Black girls in educational spaces means valuing their input and voice on things that affect them and their peers.

Phoo'j chose to take a picture of images that displayed various activities she previously engaged in at GPS. In the photos, one can feel a sense of community and joy. Phoo'j, Kayla, Blai, and Lil Ken felt like GPS was an important space within their community. GPS became a space that not only affirmed Black girls' identities, but also provided space for them to navigate the complexities of the world. In her study on Black adolescent girls' interpretations of how the media portrays Black girls and how Black girls use writing to discuss how they want to be portrayed, Muhammad (2012) found that they need spaces where they can go to navigate representation of self and identity. In the larger context of mapping Black adolescent girls' experiences in education, this is increasingly important because very few places and spaces have celebrated Black girls and allowed them to explore their intersectional identities. These spaces must be places where Black girls can interrogate the controlling images that society puts onto them, in addition to being spaces where Black girls can develop, cultivate, and express their voices and where adults can advocate rather than suppress Black girls' voices (Griffin 2021). To create a space that is inclusive, adults who work with Black girls must critically reflect on and work through assumptions they may bring before creating this space. In this context, inclusivity means interrogating inequitable power structures for all Black girls to be welcomed in the space. It must not be a space that merely replicates the same inequitable power structure Black girls face in educational spaces. A space is needed where all Black girls can dream and be future makers (Turner and Griffin 2020).

Final Thoughts

In this chapter, I examined how Black adolescent girls constructed their educational experiences in and through after-school spaces and (re)claimed their voices using photography. I highlighted Black adolescent girls' use of photography to map their realities in order to (re)claim their voices in an after-school space in the US Midwest. This chapter ultimately contributes to the literature which directly centers the voices of Black girls and values their ability to (re)claim their knowledge through educational spaces.

As educators in school and after-school spaces, we need to do more to make the educational landscape more equitable for Black girls. This fact continues to be apparent in the experiences the Black girls in this study provided. Creating spaces and places where Black girls can go to learn, interrogate, and critique power and representation is a necessity. Furthermore, the adults working with these youth must also take the time to interrogate, reflect, and learn about their own relationship with power and how it affects the way they work with and see Black girls. Crenshaw (2007: para. 3) explained, "it's not about supplication, it's about power. It's not about asking, it's about demanding. It's not about convincing those who are currently in power, it's about changing the very face of power itself." My challenge to educators is that we need to critically reflect on how we can provide spaces that both include and embrace Black girls, as the girls in this study mentioned is important to them. Let us stop waiting for permission to provide these places and spaces. Let us change the face and landscape of power and demand change as a necessity rather than just an option. Most importantly, let us work together to deconstruct and diversify the narratives that work to oversimplify and generalize the voices and experiences of Black girls in education.

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Notes

1. The founder and director of the program describes GPS as a movement rather than a program because she wants what the girls do within GPS to go beyond the four walls they inhabit. Additionally, she believes GPS will affect social change in the community where the girls live and in the larger scale of society in general.
2. The term *whiteness*, as I use it in this chapter, “is defined as an ideology untied to certain bodies, but an articulation of disparate elements—some racial, some not—in order to build a racial cosmology that benefits Whites in absolute ways and minority groups relative only to one another” (Leonardo and Broderick 2011: 2209).

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