



CHAPTER 7

“They Were Like Family”

Locating Schooling and Black Girl Navigational Practices in Richmond, Virginia

Renée Wilmot

Don't touch my pride
They say the glory's all mine.

—Solange Knowles, “Don't Touch My Hair”

When I close my eyes, I can still feel my classroom. It is small, rectangular, contained by beige cinder block walls and worn, beige tiles. Light from the afternoon sun comes through the window and shines gently onto my desk. The walls are decorated with colorful student work and book covers, such as *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, *Animal Farm* by George Orwell. If I am still long enough, I can hear the walls talk:

“Ms. Wilmot, when is this due?”

“Ms. Wilmot, me and my friend saw the new Annabelle movie. Do you wanna know what happened?”

“Ms. Wilmot, I got into JMU [James Madison University]!”

“Ms. Wilmot, I got a new job!”

Notes for this section can be found on page 196.

"Ms. Wilmot, do you think Pecola [the main character in *The Bluest Eye*] can ever be happy?"

"Ms. Wilmot, I almost cried when Tea Cake [the main character's husband in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*] died."

"Ms. Wilmot, when do we get to watch the movie?!"

"Ms. Wilmot, do you think true love exists?"

My students' counterstories deconstructed and reconstructed what I thought it meant to love oneself. As I reflect on my experience as a teacher, I also acknowledge the lies I had to unlearn about my understanding of education, as many of my beliefs were informed by white, middle-class norms. Listening to my students' counterstories made me confront Eurocentric ideals that I had internalized. Ladson-Billings (1998: 14) discussed that "naming one's own reality" is a central theme in constructing counterstories that can "heal the wounds of pain." I am grateful for the ways my students challenged me to see my own and their reality, pushing me toward a paradigm shift that was both healing and expansive. The student population of Church Hill Academy in Richmond, Virginia, is 100 percent Black. Having attended two predominantly white institutions, this was the first time I ever had the privilege to be in a predominantly Black space. Through "naming [their] own reality" (Ladson-Billings 1998: 14), the students taught me that grades are not an indication of intelligence. They taught me that I should value the non-academic just as much as the academic. They taught me that degrees and credentials do not make you better than anyone else. Importantly, each lesson of unlearning and learning taught me how to better love myself and love my students.

You will read about my former students in this chapter. I had the pleasure of teaching and learning with them in their ninth-, tenth-, and eleventh-grade years. Over the course of these school years, my students led, mentored, and cared for their peers with consistency and boldness. Doing research with my former students and their (grand)mothers created a space for me to see more of their experiences and legacies beyond their brief time in my classroom. This was an opportunity for me to see and hear the stories that brought them to Church Hill Academy, as well as the familial experiences that made the girls, now women, into who they are. This project was truly beautiful, and it was a privilege for me to be welcomed into their stories.

"Don't Touch My Pride": Black Women's Legacies in Richmond

African American¹ girls and women hold positions of "multiple jeopardy" (McCluskey 2014: 11). We experience oppression in more than one way, including, but not limited to, that which is based on gender and race. As early as the 1800s, prominent African American women in the South, such as Lucy Craft Laney, Anna Julia Cooper, and Mary McLeod Bethune, advocated for the full liberation of African American women and girls and, furthermore, asserted that this liberation would result in full liberation for humanity (Muhammad and Haddix 2016; McClusky 2014). Current education researchers are also drawing upon these notions by centering the voices of African American women and girls' schooling experiences. As Muhammad and Haddix (2016: 300) posited, "focus[ing] on excellent educational pedagogies for Black women and girls . . . lay[s] the foundation for advancing education for all." In this project, I worked with three recent high school graduates, two mothers, and one grandmother² about the ways race and gender influenced their schooling experiences in Richmond. In part one of this chapter, I contextualize the histories and geographies of Black and, specifically, African American women in Richmond against the backdrop of white supremacy. In part two, I connect a through line between the historical and the contemporary to illustrate how Black women's navigational practices contribute to a legacy of survival and collectivism.

Drawing on the scholarship of Black women, in this chapter, I consider the schooling experiences of Black women in Richmond and foreground their narratives. I utilize Black feminist theoretical and participatory methodological approaches in order to offer narratives of Black women in Richmond. Black women have a long historical legacy as activists and educators in the city, but this work has been largely overlooked. Moreover, historical and contemporary events in Richmond often work together as actors to suppress the narratives of Black women. Specifically, the women live and go to school in Church Hill, a predominantly and historically African American neighborhood in the East End area of Richmond marked by landmarks of colonialism and slavery, as well as the contemporary, rapid increase in gentrification. Constructing counternarratives that draw on the intersections of geography, race, age, and gender creates a unique understanding of the decisions and lives of Black women and girls in this city.

Two research questions guided me in this study: (1) What practices do Black women and girls use to make decisions about schooling and navigate oppressive societal and educational structures in Richmond? (2) How do the present-day counternarratives of Black women illuminate a through line to the historical navigational practices of Black women in this city? My goal was to center the narratives of African American girls and women using portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997) as a method to reveal the tension and harmony between their desired and lived schooling experiences. I used portraiture to interview Black women several times over the course of six weeks and worked with a Black woman photographer³ to take individual and familial portraits of the women at the end of the interview experience. In overlapping the historical and contemporary navigational practices and decisions of Black women in Richmond, I point to a legacy of Black women's navigational practices in the city. Through my two research questions, I intentionally aimed to take up a community-centered approach to the project. The significance and authenticity of this project were driven by the women and context of Richmond.

From Monument Avenue to East Broad Street: Mapping Richmond's History

It was seven o'clock on a Wednesday morning in spring. I left through the back door of my basement apartment and walked into the community garden that leads to the gravel-covered back alley. The sun shone between the row houses, and I passed through the hidden park toward my car on Strawberry Street. My drive toward the East End took me down Monument Avenue, and I contentiously, sheepishly, looked up at the statues of Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee, enshrined in my neighborhood. I continued through the campus of Virginia Commonwealth University and downtown, where the streets are shaded by towering Wells Fargo and BB&T buildings. Then, the buildings cleared, and the sunshine returned. I drove up to Church Hill, a tree-lined neighborhood with century-old row houses. I passed by St. John's Church, where in March 1775, Patrick Henry proclaimed, "Give me liberty, or give me death!" (History.com Editors 2009: para. 1). I tried not to think about what that phrase would mean for the Black families living here today. Where is their liberty, or is it only death? Eventually, the street ends at a stop sign, and a Confederate

Civil War cemetery forces a hairpin right turn. Down the hill, my car easily glided by the historic, African American Evergreen Cemetery, hidden deep behind the trees and closed off to the public. At 7:15 a.m., I parked my car and attempted to shake off any residual thoughts of indignation. After all, school would start soon.

Richmond's history plays an important role in contextualizing the historical and contemporary experiences of Black women and girls in the city today. Through the use of participant interviews and historical data in this study, I sought to highlight a through line between past and present experiences of Black women. This section has two main purposes: to provide a brief overview of a few prominent Black women in the city's history and to discuss the historical significance of Richmond, specifically the Church Hill and Jackson Ward neighborhoods.

There is a legacy of Black women taking up space in Richmond. Particularly, Maggie L. Walker's bank and Janie Porter Barrett's and Virginia E. Randolph's schools. However, throughout the city were abundant and massive monuments, removed only a few years ago, that marked space and served as a daily reminder of Richmond's white supremacist history (Schneider 2020). These monuments retold the dominant narrative of the city's story while erasing and suppressing any counternarratives (Black and Indigenous histories) that challenge whiteness. In this section, I highlight the tension between white supremacists' and Black women's histories as they took up physical space in Richmond.

Richmond is the capital of Virginia and was the capital of the Confederacy from 1861 to 1865 (Greenough 2022; Marszalek 2011). During the Civil War, the city limits were layered with barricades protecting the Capitol building. In the early twentieth century, several monuments were erected and museums were constructed across the city to commemorate the war and its leaders. The installation and insulation of these institutions solidified the celebration of the Confederacy, and many of these institutions still exist today. Richmond has a tenuous and dichotomous history stained by blatant white supremacist and anti-Black structural, social, and political movements, such as slavery, the Civil War, segregation, redlining, massive resistance, and the construction of the Richmond–Petersburg Turnpike. Nevertheless, at certain points in its history, Richmond had a flourishing and resilient Black community (Zehmer and Winthrop 1978). Several historical Black leaders were entrepreneurs, bankers, doctors, lawyers, and educators. In this chapter, I highlight Maggie L. Walker, Virginia E. Randolph, and Janie Porter Barrett because of their explicit commitment to

education and the Black community. During the early twentieth century, these women utilized their oppositional knowledges, networks throughout Virginia, and indignation to navigate Richmond's institutionalized white supremacist macro- and microstructures.

As a prominent leader and businesswoman, Maggie L. Walker utilized her position and success to empower the Black community. In 1903, she was the first African American woman to open a bank—now the Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site in Virginia—in the United States (McNeer 2019). As a member of the Independent Order of St. Luke and the later founder of the affiliated St. Luke Penny Savings Bank, she played an integral role in making insurance, commerce, and finance accessible to Black people in Richmond. Through these institutions, over six hundred Black families were able to buy homes, start businesses, and afford burial arrangements. Throughout her career, Walker consistently showed her commitment to thwarting oppressive institutions and creating pathways toward economic stability and wealth for Black Americans. As a philanthropist, she also made several donations to Richmond-based organizations, including annual Christmas presents to the Black girls at Janie Porter Barrett's industrial school. Today in Richmond, Walker's house is a historic site, and down the street is a governor's school named in her honor.

In 1886, Virginia E. Randolph graduated from Richmond Colored Normal School, which was later renamed Armstrong High School⁴ (Henrico County n.d.). She began teaching at the age of twenty (Belsches 2022). In 1893, she began teaching in Henrico County, near Richmond. Her pedagogy focused on agriculture and industrial training for African American youth; she “believed in educating the spirit, hands, mind, and heart” (Belsches 2022: para. 5). Additionally, she cofounded multiple local organizations to advance social welfare and justice reform for African American girls. Two of Randolph's endeavors were establishing the Black chapter of the Red Cross in Richmond and succeeding Maggie L. Walker as an integral board member of the Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls (founded by Janie Porter Barrett). Randolph committed over fifty years of her life as an educator, leader, and advocate for Black people across the State of Virginia. In 1949, she retired from her position as the supervisor of African American schools in Henrico County. One of her colleagues compared her with Booker T. Washington when describing her indelible mark on African American education. Today, several schools and academic programs are named in her honor, including the Virginia Randolph Education Center and the Academy at Virginia Randolph.

Janie Porter Barrett was a Black women educator and an advocate for Black girls in a time when many white people mostly viewed Black girls as venues for cheap labor (Muth et al. 2009). In 1915, Barrett opened the Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls to protect Black girls and Black girlhood from white supremacist institutions such as slavery and prison. Through her school, she sought to humanize Black girls who had been criminalized (Webster 2020). This was especially important because even though the institution of slavery had been abolished, many Black girls were still living in enslaved conditions (Muth et al. 2009). Through the establishment of her school in Ashland, Virginia, she provided a safe place where Black girls could learn how to cook, clean, garden, take care of themselves, and advocate for fair working conditions. Barrett's desire and pedagogical practice focused on building a sense of trust, community, and respect toward Black girls, who are a multiply oppressed group based on age, gender, and race.

In the mid-1950s, many white politicians in Virginia strategically used massive resistance to avoid desegregation (Library of Virginia n.d.). By 1970, their actions led to a rise in the establishment of private K–12 schools by and for white families, whereas many Black students in Prince Edward County lost five years of schooling (Library of Virginia n.d.). Decades later, the impact of massive resistance can still be seen in Richmond's private and public schools (Allbrittin 2021). Today, the city's private schools remain predominantly white and middle/upper class, whereas the public schools are under-resourced and serve predominantly Black and Brown student populations.

In addition to the leadership of these three Black women leaders, the location and infrastructure of the city have been a testament to the Black community's strength and success, as well as white supremacist "Blacklash" to their success. Here, I delve into the history and historical landmarks in two major, predominantly Black neighborhoods in Richmond: Jackson Ward and Church Hill. Many Black families lived in the Jackson Ward neighborhood from the late 1800s into the early 1900s, when it was known as the "Harlem of the South" (McNeer 2019: para. 50). Black-owned banks, such as Walker's Consolidated Bank and Trust Company, were established in the Jackson Ward neighborhood and gained national and international attention (Zehmer and Winthrop 1978). Jackson Ward was a flourishing Black community until 1954, when the Virginia General Assembly voted to build the Richmond–Petersburg Turnpike (Zehmer and Winthrop 1978). The highway runs through the heart of Jackson

Ward, stunting any further growth of this thriving community for decades to come. Many Black businesses closed as the tight-knit community was displaced.

Church Hill is a predominantly Black neighborhood marked by historical landmarks of colonialism and slavery, as well as contemporary, rapid gentrification. The historical narrative continues to contextualize the city today. Church Hill has several historical landmarks and sites, and in this chapter, I discuss four sites: two churches and two cemeteries that highlight the dichotomous history of this neighborhood. Much of Richmond's history can be traced in the city's many cemeteries and churches. As a Southern city and the capital of the Confederacy, Richmond has cemeteries that tell a lot about the people who lived and died in the city and has churches that tell about social engagements. The Oakwood Cemetery is a Confederate burial ground near the back of Church Hill. Nearby is a privately owned, historically African American cemetery called Evergreen Cemetery, where several prominent African Americans are buried. These places are embedded in the neighborhood, and I drove by them each day on my way to work as a teacher. Oakwood is a larger, more prominent cemetery which is easily visible from multiple roads. A large US flag flies in the cemetery just beyond an iron gate and brick pillars. Evergreen is hidden behind trees, down a secluded, windy road. In recent years, both cemeteries have struggled to maintain their grounds, but Evergreen has also faced racist attacks. In August 2020, Maggie L. Walker's grave was vandalized, leading to the privately owned cemetery to require appointments for visitation (Suarez 2020).

I situate this chapter as a contemporary narrative of Black girls' navigational practices within the broader context of Richmond's history. Black women's enactment of Black feminist epistemologies and ontologies guide their navigational practices through oppressive institutions of schooling, and these practices are part of a historical legacy of Black women in the city.

Theoretical Framework

For this chapter, I used critical race feminism, Black feminist epistemology, and Black girl cartographies as theoretical lenses to analyze the data. Critical race feminism is rooted in critical race theory, which emerged from critical legal studies in the late 1980s (Yosso 2005). Since then, crit-

ical race theory has been used frequently as a framework for scholars to employ research to interrogate the role of race and racism in law, education, and other fields. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) explained the five tenets of critical race theory: (1) racism as normalized, (2) the idea of interest convergence, (3) race as a social construction, (4) the ideas of anti-essentialism and intersectionality, and (5) the valuing of experiential knowledge and counternarratives. Although informed by each of these components, I focused primarily on tenets four and five. Anti-essentialism disrupts the idea that all people within a particular identity group subscribe to one essential way of being (Delgado and Stefancic 2017; Wing 2003). Crenshaw (1989: 140) argued that a "single-axis framework" erases the experiences of "multiplicative identit[ies]" (Wing 2003: 7). Wing (2003: 7) introduced critical race feminism to argue that "women of color are not merely white women *plus* color or men of color *plus* gender. Instead, their identities must be multiplied together to create a holistic One." Through critical race feminism, our multiplicative identities as women of color can be illuminated by examining the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality. In part two of my project, the women discussed their experiences as both raced and gendered beings in school, as well as the multiplicative effect of these identities. In other words, their experiences could not be separated as either raced or gendered, but rather were specifically rooted in both identities. Furthermore, regarding tenet five, through counternarratives, the women's experiential knowledge is explicitly valued and uplifted. I believe critical race theory's use of counter-storytelling created space in the research project to highlight the importance of the Black girls and women's schooling experiences.

Black feminist epistemologies forefront the ways Black women have historically and continually cultivated oppositional knowledges to validate and reify Black women's experiences and resist white supremacist epistemologies. These oppositional knowledges, as outlined by Collins (2002), are marked by a particular sense of self-definition which actively rehumanizes and recenters Black womanhood, thus forcefully upending the white gaze. Black women's epistemologies can be traced to West African ontologies and epistemologies. Collins's argument explicitly calls out the ways intellectualism can be a white supremacist tool, even when embodied by Black women. An important intentional tenet of Black feminist epistemologies is the inclusion of all Black women who actively resist the oppressive hegemonic gaze, in and outside of the academy. Collins acknowledged Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth as foundational to the

cultivation of Black feminist epistemologies, a move to explicitly separate educational status and Black feminist embodiment. Through this chapter, I aim to forefront oppositional knowledges as narratives of self-definition and independence (Collins 2002).

Butler's (2018: 33; reprinted as Chapter 1 in this volume) conceptualization of Black girl cartography provides a frame that encourages a commitment to "an ongoing dialogue with past, present, and future Black girls and women, especially one's self." Butler used a transdisciplinary approach to examine the ways sociopolitical and historical contexts transform geographical locations, as this impacts and intersects with Black women and girls' daily lives. Black girl cartography explores Black girl navigational practices and charting toward constructing a map of one's story. Black girl navigational practices emphasize Black girls' collective mindset and insistence on bringing whole selves into school spaces. Black girl navigational practices are important in understanding the ways Black girls conceptualize their own identities at the intersection of race, gender, and location(s), such as the school or their neighborhood. In my study, Butler's use of Black girl cartography pushed me to consider the ways politics, history, and gentrification impacted Black women's schooling experiences and navigational decisions in Church Hill and the broader city of Richmond. I utilized Butler's theory to draw connections between Church Hill's segregated and racialized history and Black women's present-day counternarratives and navigational practices.

I drew from critical race feminism, Black feminist epistemologies, and Black girl cartographies because the intersection of these frameworks shows how my women participants' oppositional knowledges are evident through their counternarratives and their cartographies. These frames allowed me to illuminate the ways the women's schooling experiences and decision-making not only create individual counternarratives but also contribute to a legacy of oppositional knowledges and navigational practices that are developed and shared with their families and the larger community.

Literature Review

There is a robust body of work on African American girls in school spaces (see, e.g., Annamma et al. 2019; Esposito and Edwards 2018; Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews 2020; Watson 2016). Some recent studies have

critiqued previous education research that overrepresented African American girls as discipline problems, thereby reifying stereotypes rather than centering Black girls' needs or humanity (Crenshaw 2015; Morris 2016; Nyachae and Ohito 2023). More recently, scholars have taken up culturally relevant, Black feminist, and critical race frameworks to better contextualize and locate the experiences and social identities of African American girls. As a former teacher and current researcher, I must consider how these identities inform Black girls' schooling experiences. My literature review is categorized by three subthemes: Black motherhood, Black girls in school, and Black girls' counternarratives. I use these subthemes to provide background for the intersection of Black grandmothers', mothers', and daughters' individual and collective relationships to school and schooling.

Studies on Black motherhood often have considered the intersecting oppressive structures that impact Black mothers' decisions. However, more recent work by scholars such as Gumbs, Martens, and Williams (2016), Nash (2018), and Nzinga-Johnson (2013) utilized Black feminist theory to reimagine Black motherhood as a site of political empowerment, spirituality, and reverence. These works shared humanizing narratives and complex choices Black mothers make to care for their children and communities. Richardson (2019) explored how Black mothers utilize critical literacies to navigate intersecting identities of race, gender, sexuality, and class. The study forefronted the ways Black mothers resist stereotypes and forge new narratives from themselves and their children. Richardson found that mothers often navigate systems of economic, gender, and racial oppression, even as they attempt to protect their daughters from these same experiences in schools. Powell and Coles (2021) positioned the narratives of Black mothers as sites of knowledge that can inform understandings of Black children's schooling experiences, especially as they relate to discipline. Similar to Richardson, Powell and Coles found Black mothers contending with the oppressive nature of schools, such as low expectations and disrespectful interactions with school faculty.

Many scholars have explored the oppressive and harmful experiences of Black girls and women in the academy. Studies have shown how school policies and teachers constantly enact white supremacist, patriarchal violence onto Black girls (Annamma et al. 2019; Carter Andrews et al. 2019; Crenshaw 2015; Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews 2020; Morris 2016; Wun 2018). Morris (2016) and Crenshaw (2015) illustrated the intersecting oppressive structures that push Black girls out of schools, such as dress codes, attendance and bathroom policies, and subjective behavioral stan-

dards. Black girls are often targeted by these school policies that expose Black girls to unsafe schooling environments. Further, Carter Andrews et al. (2019) showed how Black girls are constantly compared against white girls and expected to embody an impossible standard of whiteness. Many school dress codes and behavioral standards are based on middle-class standards of whiteness, which additionally contribute to Black girls' vulnerability. From these studies, we learned that Black girls in particular are vulnerable in school settings.

Furthermore, research by other scholars has explored Black girls' counternarratives (see, e.g., Evans-Winters 2019; Halliday 2019; Muhammad and Haddix 2016; Winn 2011). Evans-Winters (2019) argued that empowering Black girls' ontologies and epistemologies in and outside of schooling structures contributes to research that more authentically represents Black girls' experiences and stories in academia. This draws contrast to traditional research on Black girls that has framed them through deficit lenses and viewed them as problems. Muhammad and Haddix (2016) explored the historical legacy of Black girls' literacies and posited that uplifting educational experiences for Black girls will enhance quality education for all students.

Too Many Rivers (Positionality)

I can't be a singular expression of myself,
there's too many parts, too many spaces.

—Solange Knowles 2019, "Can I Hold the Mic?"

In this section, I call upon the lyrics of Solange's song "Can I Hold the Mic?" (Knowles 2019) to contextualize my positionality. In these words, she illustrates the complex constellation of a Black woman's identity. The repetition of "too many" defies the monolithic images and narratives often ascribed to Black women. Instead, she offers us a deep dive into the multiple intersections and experiences that inform Black womanhood. She illuminates the imagery of parts, spaces, manifestations, lines, curves, troubles, journeys, mountains, and rivers, which form the constellations of Black womanhood. Here, I extend the metaphor of rivers because it parallels my positionality in this chapter. This metaphor employs characteristics of movement (fast and slow), life (rivers help sustain ecosystems), change (rivers can dry up or overflow), and perseverance (moving rivers can overcome debris).

I conceptualize my positionality from three rivers: my identities as (1) a Black, middle-class woman from Northern Virginia; (2) a former secondary English/language arts teacher in Church Hill; and (3) a current doctoral candidate who explores the historical and contemporary schooling experiences of Black women and girls. I now recall the images of my classroom described in this chapter's opening vignette. As I approached this project, I thought about the stories and lessons my students shared with me. For years, I watched my students grow in community with one another: they cared for, loved, and held one another accountable. I wanted to honor this relationship dynamic in my research by mirroring those same themes: care, love, and accountability. While pursuing this research, I noticed the rivers move, mirroring the shifts in my positionality. I realize and contend with the ways I am viewed by my community and the women in Church Hill, as this image contrasts with my perception of self. These three rivers inform my connection with the Church Hill community, the women participating in the project, and how I engage in self-reflective practices. Even though I see myself and want to be seen primarily as a Black woman, I realize that the community and the women likely see me primarily as a teacher and/or researcher. Understanding the dissonance between how I want to be seen and how the community and the women see me, I sought to tease out when and where the three rivers of my positionality shifted and made this gap more visible throughout the research process.

Method and Methodology

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997: 9) explained the role of portraiture as a method through which the rigor of science and creativity of art converge. Portraiture creates space for "the coexistence of strengths and vulnerabilities" in the expression of the portrait and narrative. This complexity, in part, is revealed in the process of building relationships among the researcher and the participant. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis further explained that portraiture "requires careful, systematic, and detailed description developed through watching, listening to, and interacting with the actors over a sustained period of time" (1997: 12). Through this relationship, portraiture can be a tool to achieve authenticity, wherein the participant feels seen. Portraiture as a research method can be used to

reach beyond the academy and within communities to put forth insights which prompt social change.

I chose portraiture for this study because of the way it intentionally operates to center and uplift participant narratives. This project builds on previous research that took up an asset-based, community-oriented lens. Using counterstories, as encouraged by Wing (2003) and Evans-Winters (2019), I focused on the empowering and nuanced stories of Black girls and women in Richmond. Extending these ideas, this project's focus on portraiture offers a unique contribution to the field by connecting the historical legacies to the present within Richmond. Using portraiture allowed me to explore Black women's narratives from multiple perspectives: their self-image, my perspective as a researcher and their former teacher, the photographer's vision, and familial (e.g., a mother talking about her image of her daughter). The various layers of perspectives intersected to create a multidimensional narrative.

I used the works of Tuck (2009) and Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) as a guide in developing this study within a desire-based framework. Tuck described the desire-based framework as "an antidote to damaged-centered research" (2009: 416) that can overly emphasize societal ills such as poverty and low literacy rates through the lens of "historical exploitation, domination, and colonization" (413). Tuck and Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis agree that pathologizing community problems has the potential to lead toward centering failure, in which people can be viewed as victims. In response, the authors prompted researchers to take up theoretical and methodological frameworks that can center "health and resilience" (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997: 8). Here, I turn toward Tuck:

I write this letter to communities . . . that have troubled relations with research and researchers. The trouble comes from the historical exploitation and mistreatment of people and material. It also comes from feelings of being overresearched yet, ironically, made invisible. (2009: 411–12)

With this letter, Tuck encouraged me to wrestle with the ways Black folk in Richmond are being displaced and their histories erased. As a result, in this study, I focused on how Black women and girls "can exercise a bounty of decision-making power" (2009: 412) as they navigate schooling.

In this approach to research, portraiture first asks its participants, What is good? This question prompts the participant to reflect on and consider the strengths within their community from the onset. Authen-

ticity is cultivated in the ways the participant’s experiences, perspectives, and desires are expressed over time. As the complex narrative emerges, it reveals vulnerability and strength, a contradiction that aligns with blending the empirical and the aesthetic (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997).

For part one of this project, I interviewed three young women: Ayanna, Altira, and Da’Kalia, who all recently graduated from Church Hill Academy, a predominantly Black high school. Additionally, I interviewed Ayanna’s mother, Airst; Altira’s mother, Tyra; and Da’Kalia’s grandmother, Delmore (see Table 7.1). I met with the women four times over five weeks between June and July of 2019. The participants chose the locations of their interviews, based on convenience and familiarity. The interviews were held in three locations across Richmond’s East End neighborhoods: the local public library, a coffee shop, and Church Hill Academy. I audio recorded the interviews, which were each thirty to forty-five minutes long, and designed them to be semi-structured (Fontana and Frey 2005). Between interviews, I listened to the recordings and developed new questions in preparation for the next session. I wrote up the interview questions and emailed them to the women prior to each interview meeting.

During our meetings, the women chose to be interviewed with their familial partner or individually. Delmore and Da’Kalia chose to be interviewed together, whereas the others chose to be separate. In aiming to situate this project in the community, a friend, Black woman and Richmond photographer Cheyenne Varner, took portraits of the women (see Figures 7.1, 7.2, and 7.3). While taking their photographs, Cheyenne asked questions such as these: “What makes you proud to be (name)’s (daughter/mother/grandmother)?” “What did you enjoy about this inter-

Table 7.1. The participants’ names and relationships. Created by the author.

Note: The women elected to use their real names as an authentic way to share their stories in this story.

Name (relationship)		Name (relationship)
Ayanna (daughter)	↔	Ariest (mother)
Altira (daughter)	↔	Tyra (mother)
Da’Kalia (granddaughter)	↔	Delmore (grandmother)

view process?” “What did you learn about your (daughter/mother/grand-mother)?” “What did you learn about yourself?” Through this experience, the women laughed and cried with each other. Finally, I transcribed the interviews verbatim.



Figure 7.1. Ayanna and her mother, Ariest. Photograph by Cheyenne Varner. Author-contracted photo.



Figure 7.2. Tyra and her daughter, Altira. Photo by Cheyenne Varner. Author-contracted photo.



Figure 7.3. Da’Kaila and her grandmother, Delmore. Photograph by Cheyenne Varner. Author-contracted photo.

In analyzing the data, I first listened to all of the interviews and took notes on themes or interesting remarks that I noticed. Next, after having the interviews transcribed, I read the transcriptions and highlighted words that came up often or insights into the women’s perspectives regarding schooling and society. I looked for patterns over the course of the weeks of interviews and developed themes. Our conversations tended to focus on the city of Richmond, its public schools, and the decisions each pair of women made together to navigate the city. I considered these themes’ connection to Richmond’s ever-present history that seemed to continue to impact the women today.

Findings

Don’t test my mouth
They say the truth is my sound.

—Solange Knowles, “Don’t Touch My Hair”

There is still a strong Black community in Richmond that relies on collectivism despite structural impediments of this community’s survival and

success in the city. Although physical spatial markers may not be as explicit, Black women today, much like women in the late 1800s and early 1900s, create networks through family, friends, and neighbors to uplift one another. In this section, I present two main findings: Black women rely on their community to find physical school spaces that foster a sense of belonging, and Black women practice reflexivity in a way that challenges white dominance and questions harmful schooling structures while creating a path for themselves. As the study participants reflected on their girlhood(s), they shared many experiences at the intersection of family, neighborhood, race, and gender. These aspects of their stories illustrate how they used their oppositional knowledges, collective decision-making, and kinship to inform their navigational practices.

Belonging in School

It just amazed me how the kids were. They were like family.

—Tyra

Tyra, Ayanna, and Altira each expressed the importance of a tight-knit community, which fostered a sense of belonging during their schooling experiences. Tyra raised three daughters in Church Hill, all of whom had experiences in both public and private schools in Richmond and the surrounding counties. Tyra reflected on her own experience of going between several schools in Richmond city and the surrounding suburbs, a personal experience which made her more aware of the differences between the city and suburban schools. When Tyra's eldest daughter was starting high school, Tyra initially planned for her daughter to live with a relative so she could attend a county school rather than one in the city school district. When a young woman in Tyra's neighborhood recommended Church Hill Academy to her, she was grateful that her daughters could go to school close to home. She explained how her experiences in school guided her decision to enroll her three daughters in the private school: "The school, I loved it so much." Because her two older daughters attended this school, it felt natural that Altira would attend as well. Tyra said she loved that the school was smaller and that the students received more attention from their teachers and were more community oriented. Tyra said "they didn't judge" one another based on appearances, which made her feel like her daughters would be safe: "It just amazed me how the kids were. They were like family."

Butler (2018: 31) discussed the lineage of Black women searching for and creating their own physical and epistemological spaces for "reclaiming

a sense of belonging." Physical spaces include homes, stores, places of worship, and epistemological spaces are "locations in a field of study or discipline" (30). For Tyra, it was important for her to find a school that would be a physical space for her daughters to feel safe and cared for and receive a good education. As a small, all-Black, affordable, private school, Church Hill provided a space for her daughters to express themselves, grow, and learn. Tyra expressed her admiration for the school and compared it to an accepting family. In this way, the school became a welcoming space wherein Black girlhood was valued and celebrated.

In Ayanna's story, trusted family and community members outside of the formal school context led her to find the right school for her. While she was in middle school, she and her parents and brother moved from the Hampton Roads area and to Richmond. Ayanna spent her elementary school years hopping from school to school, not really feeling settled in one place. During her first year in public school, she got into fights with her classmates and her grades slipped, so Ayanna and her parents began researching other schools. A friend of the family put in a good word for Ayanna and her younger brother with a local private school, Emmanuel Academy (pseudonym). At first, she was not admitted because of her grades, but at the last minute, she was able to take the school's placement test and gain acceptance. Ayanna expected to begin ninth grade in the fall, but after she took the placement test, the school recommended she reclass into eighth grade. Ayanna said, "It was fine because I was going to get the education that I should've got" in middle school. After her tenth-grade year, Emmanuel Academy closed, and Ayanna and her brother began looking for another school to attend. When they initially applied to Church Hill Academy, they were rejected because they lived outside the school's zoning. However, Ayanna emailed the head of school, asking to attend Church Hill and explaining her situation and commitment to learning. An exception was made for Ayanna and her brother to be admitted to the school.

Ayanna described Church Hill Academy as an ideal school community that was "more family-like than school-like," and described the teachers as caring. The school partnered with local organizations in Richmond that worked with students to get part-time jobs and college scholarships, prepare college applications, and study for the SAT. Church Hill Academy provided Ayanna with access to opportunities that she may not have had access to at other schools.

Butler's (2018: 30) Black girl cartographies forefront how "Black girls and women's liberatory practices have been, and will continue to be,

rooted in spaces that we demand, seek, create, and cultivate.” She argued that Black girls and women have a legacy, from Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman, to seek and advocate for our collective freedom. Growing up, Ayanna had to contend with moving from school to school and finding a supportive school community in both Hampton Roads and Richmond. When Emmanuel Academy closed when she was a tenth grader, Ayanna took on the onus of seeking out a better education for herself and her brother and found the opportunity for them to attend Church Hill Academy. Despite being reclassified at Emmanuel Academy and her initial rejection from Church Hill Academy because of zoning, her persistence cultivated a path forward. Through her advocacy and confidence, she demanded more for herself and reclaimed her sense of belonging at school.

Collectively, Tyra’s and Ayanna’s individual stories illustrate how Black women and girls navigate their schooling experiences and choices by relying on their community and family. Whether they are contending with segregation or gentrification, the women’s communities and families provided protection and guidance.

Reflexivity in Practice

I’m still trying to figure out why we’re paying to live on Earth when Earth was given freely to us.

—Altira

Butler (2018) described the practice of reflexivity in Black girl cartographies as Black women questioning everyday oppressive structures and policies while creating a new path forward. This was echoed in Altira’s persistent questioning of schooling structures and capitalism and in the ways Janie Porter Barrett challenged oppressive structures such as slavery by teaching Black girls how to advocate for themselves. Tyra’s daughter, Altira, attended and graduated from a predominantly Black, private school in Church Hill. Altira reflected on her experience attending high school during the height of gentrification in her neighborhood. She saw her Black classmates from elementary and middle school leave for the suburbs for better educational opportunities while many white people moved in. Although she graduated at the top of her class, she acknowledged the cognitive dissonance between her schooling experiences and lived experiences:

I feel like sometimes school is just a waste of time cuz half of the stuff I’m not gonna be doin’ in actual real life. . . . I think high school should be like college . . . just take the courses that you actually need. (Altira)

Altira's disappointment in her education seemed to be juxtaposed with her concern as she entered adulthood in a neighborhood that was becoming increasingly expensive due to gentrification. She later said, "In society, you need a whole bunch of money to survive. . . . I'm still trying to figure out why we're paying to live on Earth when Earth was given freely to us." Even though Altira was studious and graduated at the top of her class, the navigational skills she learned and used as a high school student have not easily applied to postsecondary life. For her, growing up during gentrification shaped her girlhood and complicated her transition to adulthood. She has had to find new ways to navigate school and her neighborhood. As her navigational practices evolve, she is forming a new path forward that will hopefully allow her to stay in Church Hill.

Discussion

Historic and modern experiences of Black women and girls in Richmond have been marred by racism, sexism, and social and financial divestment. Even still, Black women and girls continue to utilize oppositional knowledges and collectivist notions of family and community to carve out pathways toward success and liberation for themselves and their families.

Tyra's and Ayanna's counternarratives parallel the legacy of Maggie L. Walker. Tyra and Ayanna relied on family and community to find a safe and engaging school environment. Similarly, Walker took initiative in her community to create an opportunity for economic stability and growth. Whereas Ayanna advocated for herself and Tyra advocated for her daughter, Walker advocated for the needs of the Black community in order to establish a bank. In these collectivist ideas of community, each individual becomes an integral part toward the success of everyone in their community.

Tyra's story illustrates her family's legacy in Richmond as it intersects with school. As a girl, she and her family navigated various schools across Richmond and the surrounding areas, looking for better educational opportunities. As a mother, she utilized these past experiences to make decisions on behalf of her daughters. As a girl then and a mother now, her community and family collectively informed how she and her daughters navigated school in Richmond. Tyra's navigational practices are a part of a legacy of Black families, particularly in the South, seeking the best educational opportunities available (Anderson 1988). Furthermore,

Tyra's schooling experience lies in the wake of Richmond's legacy of Black women, such as Maggie L. Walker, Virginia E. Randolph, and Janie Porter Barrett, who strived to create schools for Black children and build a successful community.

Ayanna's story illustrates how Black girls and their families utilize community connections to navigate schooling for themselves and with their parents. Ayanna and her family learned about both Emmanuel Academy and Church Hill Academy through family friends and community members. When applying to Church Hill Academy, Ayanna also advocated for herself and her brother to attend the school, balancing her individual desires and her responsibility as an older sister to look out for her brother. Again, the theme of family arose when she likened her schooling experience at Church Hill to family, citing the significance of familial connections at school. The sense of community and family that Ayanna built with teachers and classmates at school created safe and foundational space for her growth and learning. Her advocacy and persistence fall in line with a legacy of Black women in Richmond who have advocated on the behalf of their families and communities toward success.

Maggie L. Walker advocated for the economic stability of Richmond's Black community. As a banker and philanthropist, she prioritized the community's need for commerce and financial opportunities. Her legacy shows a sense of community that meant leveraging her position and voice to create pathways for others. Walker used her national and international network to grow her reputation and strengthen her bank, even during the Great Depression. Through these connections, she also ensured that Black families in Richmond had a safe and stable bank to rely on for decades.

Black women and girls have navigated white supremacist ideologies and structures for generations. Utilizing their oppositional knowledges, Altira and Janie Porter Barret pushed against oppressive, white supremacist, patriarchal, and capitalist structures. Altira critiqued the function of schooling and capitalism. She questioned the purpose of schooling as an outdated learning experience that did not help her transition into adulthood. Further, she stated that in her adult world, she no longer utilizes the concepts that were uplifted in school, whereas the skills she needs now were downplayed. School taught her to decenter her own thoughts and focus on curriculum; therefore, through her critique, she recentered herself and reclaimed her agency. Furthermore, she pushed against capitalist notions of labor and property, citing that the Earth was given to

us, but through settler colonialism and capitalism, land has been commodified. Witnessing Altira's process of unlearning and reclaiming self illustrates the development of her oppositional knowledges that undergird her perspective.

Similarly, Janie Porter Barrett challenged the harmful and oppressive working conditions of Black girls in Virginia. When she saw that Black girls were enslaved or imprisoned, she enacted her oppositional knowledges to not only rehumanize herself but also humanize Black girls. She saw how white families across Virginia sought to re-enslave Black girls, abuse them, and deny their rights. Barrett had the resources and support to act. Through creating a school, she provided a safe haven for Black girls to learn, build healthy relationships, and receive medical care.

It is imperative for teachers and leaders to celebrate and protect Black girlhood, because Black girls in schools experience disproportionate rates in discipline and are pushed out of schooling (Crenshaw 2015; Morris 2016). Black girls are faced with "the impossibility of being White" (Carter Andrews et al. 2019: 2562; Woodson [1933] 1990), meaning they are constantly expected to embody stereotypical traits of white girls, such as meekness and eager obedience. The demands of US public schools are impossible because even when Black girls achieve these standards, they are still unrecognized, unprotected, and sometimes even punished (Morris 2016). Black students, especially Black girls, femmes, and trans and non-binary students, deserve to feel safe, celebrated, and affirmed in schools. Teachers play an important role in making school a supportive learning environment. By sharing these women's stories, I frame their experiences in an asset-based lens. I encourage teachers and school leaders to also take up an asset-based lens to better engage and support Black girls and their families. The Black women in this study relied on trusted community members to find safe and uplifting school environments. Consider the ways you listen to and engage with your students and their families. How can you make them feel welcomed in your classroom or school? Do your students feel seen? Do they feel cared for?

Conclusion: "The Glory's All Mine"

When I close my eyes and envision my classroom, I see students' art, I hear their questions, I feel their energy. Each day in that room, I made space to listen to them and get to know them as young adults. We talked

about what excited them, such as prom, horror movies, and summer jobs, and also what frustrated them, such as low grades and feeling disrespected or ignored. We had open dialogue, and we collaborated to find resolutions. We loved, we cared, and we held one another accountable.

As written in the Combahee River Collective Statement, “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (Taylor 2017: 22–23). Knowing our legacies as Black girls and women empowers us to learn, grow, and express ourselves more authentically. Even though Black women and girls hold legacies, oppositional knowledges, and collectivist attitudes in our bodies, we are often not taught where or who those knowledges and dispositions come from. There is a freedom that comes from knowing. The knowledge passed down by Black women has the potential to shape Black girls’ decisions as they navigate school and their communities. Drawing these through lines between the past and present, contextualized with a specific geographical location, provides lineages of nuanced and complex counternarratives that build on our histories. It is important for Black women and girls to know our histories and counternarratives that center our voices for the same reason that collectivism is important: the stories and needs of the individual build toward the unity, strength, and success of the community. Black women’s definition of self, as developed through their counternarratives, not only are sites of self-empowerment but also can illuminate an imagining of Black girl-centered schooling. When school systems—administrators, teachers, policies, and curriculum—collaboratively listen to Black girls and women’s counternarratives, school buildings can become safe places for Black girls to be their whole, authentic selves.

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Notes

1. Throughout this chapter, I use both *Black* and *African American* to describe the experiences of the women and girls. I use *African American* to highlight the descendants of Africans enslaved in the United States and the historical lineage of their experiences and oppression. I use *Black* to describe current women in the study who are descendants of Africans enslaved in the United States and the African diaspora.
2. Overall, in this project, I sought to uplift Black girls and women. Throughout this chapter, I use the term *Black women* because I asked women to reflect on their experiences as Black girls.
3. Portraits for this project were taken by Cheyenne Varner, a Black woman doula, designer, photographer, and writer. Learn more about her work online at <http://iamcheyennevarner.com/>.
4. Armstrong is the public high school in the Church Hill neighborhood. Delmore, a study participant, graduated from this school in the 1970s.

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