



CONCLUSION

As Queer as a Black Girl

Navigating Toward a Transnational Black Girlhood Studies

Lucía Mock Muñoz de Luna with Esther O. Ohito

If only we could remember: we were small and full once, and the sky was wide open. Whether our situation was ideal or not, we could still imagine something else, and we did so with ease. This imagining was not a burden—it was the point.

—Yrsa Daley-Ward, *The How: Notes on the Great Work of Meeting Yourself*

Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different. . . .

It was a while before we came to realize that our place was the very house of difference.

—Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

[O]utsiderness is always a combination of things: it might be queerness, but also class consciousness . . . ; it might be queerness and disability . . . ; it might be old age, illness, and a rapidly changing world. . . . The outsiderness is never just one thing and can't be reduced even to the terms I've just used. But because of that,

Notes for this section can be found on page 260.

it takes on this universal sense that I think a lot of readers of all stripes relate to. Being an outsider is a fundamental human experience.

—Jenn Shapland, quoted in Monika Dziamka, “Jenn Shapland on ‘My Autobiography of Carson McCullers’ and Uncovering Queer Identities”

Queerness is a methodology of desire that allows us—and it is “us,” not “I”—to “see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” so we may “think and feel a then and there.”

—Stephen Dillon, quoting José Esteban Muñoz, “Blackness and the Aesthetics of Freedom”

Queer is not just an aesthetic or a professed politic—it’s an erotic practice and a material relationship to power.

—Savannah Shange on Twitter

One of my clearest memories as a girl is the Christmas that my grandmother (who my family called La Mae, pronounced “la mī” in Spanish) came to visit us in North Carolina, all the way from Spain. I (Lucía) was about eight years old, and we had been living in the United States for a few years, so my relationship with my grandmother was distant, literally and figuratively. I remember her in my mind as a towering figure, cunning and short-tempered, particularly when it came to my mother.

On Christmas Eve, we opened our presents, including ones La Mae had brought for us. Knowing that money was tight for our family that year, she had bought my older brother and me very nice gifts: a remote-controlled toy car for him and a doll for me. The memory that matters most here is that in all of my childish honesty, I could not hide my disinterest in the doll she had gifted me, marveling instead at my brother’s remote-controlled car and helping him figure out how to make it work. I recall this story here, which in many ways was just a small, insignificant moment, because it is the first time I distinctly remember seeing disappointment in the gazes of my grandmother and mother at me—or at least what I understood as disappointment of my disregard of what was deemed appropriate for a girl. Of course, now I look back and am ashamed by my lack of gratitude for La Mae’s kind gift, but I am also struck by my recognition that their disappointment was not only in my thoughtlessness but also in my inability to be a “proper” girl.

These moments of recognized disappointment accumulated throughout my girlhood, so by the time I was fourteen and starting to realize that my most intense and prolonged crushes were on other girls, I understood

that queerness was one more thing that would be met with deep-seated disappointment in those who loved me. Twenty years removed from that realization, I can now see that the disappointment of a girlhood unfulfilled is a through line in my family, with most of us women somehow finding a way to subvert the imposition of a normalized girlhood onto our bodies, desires, and ways of being. But in those moments, the lessons learned were life-altering and, at times, crushing. I am glad to now understand this disappointment as an opening for otherwise, for the possibility of girlhood outside of what has been deemed appropriate, while also still marveling at how profoundly a girl can understand her self in relation to being a disappointment, a disturbance to the comfortable ascriptions of girlhood.

This narrative about La Mae marks my epistemological place of origin. I chose to begin this volume's conclusion with a story because

stories have the capacity to open avenues for new conceptual frameworks and forms of praxis. . . . In the burgeoning literature, scholars agree that stories are more than representations of worlds of experience and feeling, they have the capacity to create radical openings that move people to act and imagine in ways that can shift and change a terrain of struggle. (Clarke and Mullings 2023: blurb)

From La Mae, I learned disappointment as a way of knowing my self and the world. I share this story of disappointment as a queer white woman in a decidedly Black space. My racialized positioning necessitates my presence here, in this book, as contingent; I introduce myself to you through this queer disappointment to gesture toward how we might be in relation to one another within and against the world as it exists now, that is, outside of separation, domination, and violence. What might we learn from traveling the terrain of disappointment? What might we learn from how we have disappointed and felt disappointment in this world?

Disturbing Factors: Queer and Black in Emplaced Relation

Esther and I titled this piece "As Queer as a Black Girl" to gesture toward how queerness and Blackness inform each other and necessarily disrupt and disturb hierarchical categorization and normalizing discourses in place. As Malpas posited,

place cannot be reduced to any one of the elements situated within its compass, but must instead be understood as a structure comprising spatiality *and* temporality, subjectivity *and* objectivity, self *and* other. Indeed, these elements are established only in relation to each other, and so only within the topographical structure of place. (1999: 163)

The authors in this volume, then, have sought for their respective chapter to be a disturbing factor in normative educational spaces, particularly those that enclose and are used to control Blackness and gender.

To think through the concept of disturbance, we turn to Hartman's (2019: x) *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. The book begins with this epigraph: "She was, she knew, in a queer indefinite way, a disturbing factor." Taken from Nella Larsen's (1928) novel *Quicksand*, this nearly century-old observation by/about a young Black woman growing up in the United States animates Hartman's inquiry and serves as inspiration for this volume's embrace of transnational Black girlhood studies. The poignancy of Larsen's words comes in the knowledge (of self, of space, and of the world) embodied in her narrator, that she is a disturbing factor—echoed in Hartman's various descriptions of Black girls and women as "riotous" and "troublesome." Important, too, is the queerness of it all—the *disturbance*. Hartman dedicates her writing to lovingly speculating on the lives and loves of young Black women in early-twentieth-century New York City and Philadelphia: how they (re)negotiated kinship, intimacy, and sexuality in the aftermath of Reconstruction and in the midst of seismic shifts in life in the United States. The book shares stories of various girls and young women whose presence in the historical archives has largely been dictated by sociologists, reformers, and others who reduced their lives to pathology, lives in need of intervention or saving. In refusal of this archive, Hartman instead paints each character as complex and agentic, as radical in their own undertaking of life and love. These girls knew themselves as disturbing factors.

Important, too, is Hartman's (2019) method of critical fabulation—forgoing the formal archive in favor of imagination, in the yearning for what could (or should) have been, or maybe was but was not recorded. That is, Hartman is a storyteller, treating each of her characters as worthy of love and attention in the absence of that care in the archive. Through each story, desire abounds as Hartman tends to the sensual practices of these young women, imagining how they built their lives and families in the afterlife of the destruction of kinship that slavery wrought. The kin-

ship bonds and practices formed in these stories are undeniably queer, in the way that hooks described it:

I think of . . . being queer, and not as being about who you're having sex with. That can be a dimension of it, but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live. (2014: 1:27)

In this volume's Introduction, Esther and I argued that Blackness and girlhood themselves remain undertheorized within the field of Black girlhood studies, rarely theorized and/or articulated as contested beyond topical references to fixed notions of race and gender. In this Conclusion, we further develop what we previewed in the Introduction: a transnational approach to Black girlhood studies located in the Black queer spatial imaginary. Drawing from the authors' contributions as the basis for a framework for the study of Black girlhoods with theoretical and methodological utility, in this volume, we seek to bring together Black feminist spatial theory (and, specifically, Black feminist geographies), Black/queer theory, and Smith's (2019) conceptualization of transnationalism, to think through a queer/transnational approach to Black girlhood studies.

Schooling Desire and Sexuality

Schooling spaces have historically been modes through which young people are educated into whitened gender and sexuality. From the reform schools of the twentieth century that sought to correct "deviant" sexual behavior in young women and educate them into gender and sexual normativity (Zaborskis 2020), to the contemporary sex education programs (both through formal curriculum and the informal, hidden curriculum) that have remained firmly entrenched in cisheteronormativity, schools are spaces where gender and sexuality are thought and made. Zaborskis's article on an early-twentieth-century reform school for Black girls details both the ways Black girls' existence was pathologized and the ways education was framed as a tool for intervention and correction, where sexual normativity was taught in order to "be able to draft African Americans into citizenship and humanity" (Ferguson, as cited in Zaborskis 2020: 374). Implicit in these interventions was the belief that Black girls' deviant sexuality was not only inherent but also compounded by their supposed "criminality" (Zaborskis 2020: 374).

Over a hundred years later, the echoes of this foundation for educating Black girls remain firmly present in the overcriminalization of Black children in schools, and in the renewed battles over sexuality and gender being fought in educational spaces. As Kromidas (2019) noted, the work of molding children into the image of the Wynterian Man has been a deeply philosophical endeavor tied to the production of a cohesive, totalizing figure of humanity through whiteness and against Black life and being. Queerness has no space in the figure of Man, so schools and schooling practices have become spaces where cisheteronormativity is normalized and invisibilized. Likewise, consideration of Black girls' sexuality has remained on the periphery of education research and practice, engaged mostly in the context of pathology and the need for interventions (Chapter 5 in this volume explores this topic through engaging with Black teen mothers). With a few notable exceptions (e.g., Curtis 2009; Garner et al. 2019; James 2011; Ohito 2023; Shange 2019; Tucker 2021), relatively few scholarly inquiries have dwelled on the ways sexuality and pleasure can be a source of knowledge for Black girls, and this is even more pronounced when considering queerness.

We framed this Conclusion by tracing the normalization of cisheteronormativity in schools, and the implications for Black girls, in the context of a larger interest in how sourcing from the potentiality that abounds in Black girlhoods, inherently queer bodies, might create space for particular forms of educational activism, resistance, refusal, and/or transformation. Our argument here is anchored to queer potentiality with regard to the unsettling of the structures and strictures of race, gender, sexuality, and other categories that suggest being, becoming, and knowing. In this regard, we suggest a queer/transnational approach to Black girlhood studies as a frame through which to challenge the tenacity of bounded logics and orientations, which are tethered to whiteness. We wonder, what might Black girls' queer/transnational imaginaries look, sound, and feel like on educational terrain? How might we grapple with and make meaning of the possibilities for Black girls' liberation brought forth by these imaginaries in the context of a multipolar world? Fundamentally, we propose that the study of and about Black girlhoods demands (re)orientation to capacious conceptualizations of identity and belonging across spectrums of power and difference, and intentional theoretical and methodological pivoting away from normatively derived dichotomies (e.g., human/nonhuman, boy/girl, Global North/Global South).

So, what is the “potentiality of queer worldmaking outside of the confines of social pressures and expectations in the material world” (Alaoui 2023: 192)? How might we all, as storytellers and story gatherers in the field, source from that potentiality to queer approaches to studying and learning about Black girls’ ways of being and becoming Black girls in educational spaces? How do we queer knowledge of how Black girls (re)claim ownership and repossess worlds both interior and exterior (McKittrick 2006)?¹ These are questions of theory, method, perception, positionality, and posture. We organized this Conclusion, therefore, around two questions: Theoretically and methodologically, how might a queer transnational approach to Black girlhood studies call attention to the embodied and emplaced knowledges, needs, and lived experiences of Black school-girls? What might this lens bring to view?

Toward a Queer/Transnational Black Girlhood Studies

We begin our navigation toward a queer/transnational Black girlhood studies by engaging Smith’s (2019) notion of transnationalism as both a spatial analysis tool and a site for queer potential to flourish. Smith’s concept of transnationalism exceeds the bounds of nation-states to instead understand borders as part of the social and cultural categorizations that delimit what and who is a “proper” girl, alongside what is (im)possible for those marked as girls. “[T]ransnationalism, in the literal sense, has to do with the ways in which borders between nation-states are becoming less rigid and more porous rather than impermeable,” yet metaphorically, transnationalism “can function, too, as a way of describing a weakening of cultural and other ethnic imperatives” (Smith 2019: 1). In discussion of Gardini’s (2019) chapter, Smith noted that “the border between idealized girlhood and the experience of real lived girlhood needs to be broken down if girls are to be believed, taken seriously, and have their voices heard and respected” (Smith 2019: 10–11). In that vein, the authors in this volume engage transnationalism by focusing on how Black girls across the Black diaspora illuminate the porosity between and among the (commonly viewed as) static borders of Blackness and girlhood, and produce knowledge with the potential to transgress and guide our practice of freedom (hooks 1994).

Black girlhoods unsediment notions of “proper subjects” (Eng and Puar 2020: 2) and immutably bordered and bounded places and spaces. Black girlhoods are queer, understanding queerness as an embodied and

emplaced refusal (of fixedness) and recognizing indeterminacy as generative for knowledge creation. Given that, one opening for possible answers to the essential question anchoring this Conclusion was illuminated by Bey's (2022) *Cistem Failure: Essays on Blackness and Cisgender*. Bey argued that *Blackness* and *cisgender* are necessarily antagonistic and that the system (or "cistem," as Bey deemed it) that creates, and is created by, cisgender categorization is invariably white and, therefore, unable to behold Blackness. Speaking of their book, Bey explained,

What this treatise attempts to convey is how the cistem is as it is because of its exclusion of blackness, *and*, to be sure, because of how those who rebel against the cistem are invited into a dissent by blackness. (2022: xiii)

If Black girls, then, are always already excluded by the cistem, this perhaps allows one to understand Black girlhood as productively queer, given that, as Bey (2022: xiii) posited, "those proximate to blackness invite the necessary failure of the system of cisgender." This failure would cause a totalizing failure of the figure of the Wynterian Man that has been overrepresented itself as the only way to be human. We hope this volume invites you to delight in the possibilities of what a theoretical and methodological framework for Black girlhood studies that delights in the disappointment of failure might consider.

Black girls are embodied and emplaced reminders of the many complex and diverse ways to be human, Black, girl—and, and, and—all at the same time. We propose here that movement toward a queer/transnational Black girlhood studies demands increased theoretical and methodological attention to four interconnected axes with regard to the knowledges, needs, and experiences of Black girls:

1. Subjectivity (as plural, evershifting, embodied, and emplaced)
2. Spatiality (and the transgression of borders)
3. Relationality (as the praxis of being human)
4. Affect (care and connection as bonds)

The framework we present here is a theoretical and methodological tool that offers and invites paths to new ways of showing up to study and interact with Black (girl) life in "hostile geographies" (Rogers 2022). It is a scaffold for storytellers and story gatherers of narratives of Black girlhoods to understand the process of and possibilities for paying close(r) attention to the dynamic circulations, movements, and mobilities that constitute

and sustain Black girls in myriad educational spaces and places, both material and metaphorical.

Important to this framework is a careful consideration of what it means to tell and gather stories (Miles and Akinboye 2021). What does it require and demand of researchers, scholars, and educators of Black girlhoods? These, of course, are not new questions for research, but the study of Black girlhoods, in our understanding, necessitates that we all revisit the importance of gathering and holding one another through story. In fact, as Kromidas (2019: 67) wrote of Sylvia Wynter's work, storytelling is the very essence of how we all continuously become human: "Wynter insists that humans become human, are nourished or malnourished, in the amniotic fluid of *symbols, stories and representations* [emphasis added]." Thus, the work of gathering stories is paramount; it is not something to be done carelessly. For those of us who care for and love Black girls, our work must be to think about method and methodology (our story gathering) differently, that is, understanding story gathering not through a lens of accumulation and/or possession but as an act of love, as a way to find one another, and as a way through. We must also embrace a refusal of the academy's unquenchable thirst for knowledge and mastery. Shange (2019: 41) described her own work on queer Black girlhood as "a missive from the Black queer space that *demand[s] to be thought, but refuses to be known*," echoing Tina Campt's conception of the Black gaze that shifts ideas of "'looking at' to 'looking with, through, and alongside another'" (as cited in Dillon 2022: 421). The work of storytelling and story gathering is perhaps akin to that of freedom dreaming. When asked during a podcast (Center for Race & Gender 2019) what a free Black girl is, Shange responded that she does not and cannot know because freedom is something not yet realized. Rather, she suggested, the demand on all of us is to capacitate the conditions for a Black girl's freedom; then, that girl can tell and show us what freedom is and can be. We hear the imperative to capacitate the conditions for freedom as a demand to think about Black girlhoods expansively and queerly.

This Conclusion is anchored to the theoretically and methodologically significant question of how a queer/transnational approach to Black girlhood studies might call attention to the embodied and emplaced knowledges, needs, and lived experiences of Black girls, and what this lens might bring into focus. Collectively, the chapters in this volume move the field of Black girlhood studies in that direction, illustrating stories that paint Black girlhood as an affectively and otherwise textured landscape, complicate ideas of freedom in relation to Black girlhood, center the periph-

eral (the disturbing/disturbed), understand disturbance as an invitation to inquiry not as a foreclosed predicament or foregone conclusion, and cultivate capaciousness for complexities and multiplicities in Black girls' embodied and emplaced voices and subjectivities.

Each chapter contributes to this shift in important ways: Tamara T. Butler's (2018, reprinted as Chapter 1 in this volume) spatial analysis both complicates ideas of freedom and belonging and urges each of us to pay careful attention to the complexities of the navigational practices of Black girls. The letters to Toni Morrison penned by Katelyn M. Campbell, Lauryn DuPree, and me (Chapter 2) offer a capacious method for collectively thinking *with* Black girlhoods through and across difference, positioning our wounds as an opening for inquiry and solidarity. Taryn T. C. Brown's (Chapter 5) careful attention to Black teen mothers' ontoepistemologies centers those girls still labeled by dominant schooling practices as disturbing, insisting that their motherhood and girlhood are not predicaments but rather spaces for knowing the world differently. Nadine M. Finigan-Carr's (Chapter 4) work on the pipeline from sexual abuse to sexual exploitation to prison confronts the disturbing factors of abuse directly, challenging us all to reckon with and redress the ways schooling exacerbates harm. Adilia E. E. James's (2011, reprinted as Chapter 3 in this volume) meditation on her own evolving queer desires helps us think about theorizing from the space of desire and disturbance. Susan E. Wilcox's (Chapter 8) beautiful writing (see Nash 2019) about young Ghanaian women insists that we consider the complexities of freedom through the lens of Black girlhood, echoed as well in Lateasha Meyers's (Chapter 6) use of photography to show us how Black girls visualize and share their notions of self and liberation. Renée Wilmot's (Chapter 7) intergenerational exploration of girlhood and education in Richmond, Virginia, gifts us with a story of family and city across space and time, bringing together multiple voices and images to offer an expansive vision of Black girlhood. Finally, Esther's chapter (Chapter 9) offers a glimpse into the type of interdisciplinary methods of inquiry necessary for and possible in the expanse of a queer/transnational Black girlhood studies.

A World as Queer as a Black Girl

The first time I (Lucía) read Toni Morrison's (1970) *The Bluest Eye*, I was about nineteen years old. Although the feeling I recall most acutely was

grief at the sexual violence and unrelenting hatred exacted upon Pecola, I also remember being struck by Claudia's commitment to her friend (Pecola), and Claudia's own relationship to her Blackness and girlhood. Claudia recounts a story of a doll she had torn apart because of its reverence of white girlhood. I remembered La Mae and my inability to love the doll she gifted me. In some ways, I recognized Claudia's rage against this idealized white girlhood and felt comforted by the ways her righteous anger was an instigating force for her incisive critiques of the world she and Pecola inhabit. Claudia's refusal of normative girlhood, along with her fierce (if complicated) devotion to Pecola, made me love her. I loved Claudia's queerness and her unflinching insight into the world around her, and her own participation and refusal of this world. I wanted to love that in myself as well.

Claudia's disappointment with/in the world helped me recognize the contours of my own disappointment, the texture of my wounds. *The Bluest Eye* ends with Claudia's meditation on the soil that kills of its own volition and the world that forsakes Pecola and other Black girls. For me, Claudia's damnation of this world offers no resolution or comfort to our feelings about Pecola's wounding and also offers (demands) the possibility of shaping a politic that holds Pecola and Claudia with care and love. What future (and present) world is possible when that world is as queer as a Black girl? What stories will we tell of that world? Although that world might be unknowable, it demands to be thought of, about, and with. Perhaps, as is the case of Claudia's care for/of Pecola, it is always already happening in the spaces Black girls create for themselves and for one another. Perhaps, too, we can articulate that world in our own relationships. Perhaps we can do so by asking ourselves these questions: "What if our politics are shaped by the texture of wounds rather than the identity of selves? What possible future will have been opened up by posing that very question?" (van der Zaag 2022: 37).

To be a storyteller and a story gatherer of tales of Black girlhoods is to be a creator and curator. Regarding the former, it is important to note that "your job as a creator is to open a portal of connection. A door that reminds us that we all exist together on this flawed plane. The world explodes into chaos when we forget that we are one" (Ruffin 2022: para. 20). We hope this volume supports you in lovingly and carefully doing creative and curatorial work with and for Black girls. We hope that as you absorbed the curated narratives contained in these pages, you were moved to question who you are and desire to become in relation to the truths and fictions of

childhoods, your own as well as those of the Black girls you encountered in this book and those with whom you coexist on this earth. We hope you remember and return, again and again, to your core self as you toil with and for Black girls. We hope you have found value in engaging a womanist understanding of the intimate geographies of Black girls in educational spaces. We hope the stories shared here provided you with generative lessons on how to build and cultivate spaces conducive to Black girls living vibrant, viable lives (Jeffrey and Dyson 2022) in spite of the suffering (Dumas 2014) borne of a world bent on the decimation of Black girlhoods.

With love,

Lucía and Esther

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Esther O. Ohito, EdD, is a creative writer, curriculum and cultural theorist, and educational researcher. She is an associate professor of English/literacy education at Rutgers Graduate School of Education. Broadly, her lines of inquiry concern the entangled politics of Blackness, gender, race, and knowledge production at the nexus of curriculum, pedagogy, embodiment, and emotion. Her research agenda is split into three overlapping strands: the poetics and aesthetics of Black knowledge and cultural production, the gendered geographies of Black girlhoods, and the gendered pedagogies of Black critical educators. Her interdisciplinary research is as inspired by Black intellectual traditions as by (memories of) her lived experiences, including her stories as a multilingual, transnational, first-generation Black/African/Kenyan immigrant student in the United States, a teacher in the Chicago Public Schools system, and a US-based teacher/educator in various educational spaces across the African diaspora. She is a member of the Black Girlhoods in Education Research Collective.

Note

1. With deference to Dionne Brand, McKittrick (2006: ix) wrote, “the earth is also skin and . . . a young girl can legitimately take possession of a street, or an entire city, albeit on different terms than we may be familiar with.”

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