

“Yea. I’m in my hood. No strap”: Black Child Play as Praxis & Community Sustenance

by

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Ariana Denise Brazier, PhD

University of Pittsburgh, 2021

Based on three summers of intensive ethnographic research inside an Atlanta school cluster and neighborhood community, this dissertation analyzes the intersection of Black child play and protest in order to illuminate the way their play and joy are methods of developing and channeling collective responses to their everyday experiences of institutional anti-Blackness and intergenerational oppression. I consider how Black child play and Black joy are reflective of a relationship between ratchet, a term commonly used to define the precarious and fluid realities of poor and working class Blacks, and womanism, a community-oriented form of Black feminism situated within the everyday. More specifically, I forward a ratchet womanist lens to frame how Black child play sources the radically visionary/imaginative, self-sufficient, and community-oriented aspects of womanism in a politics of the body existing under state-sanctioned deprivation that normalizes the conditions of the Black Ghetto. The connection to our bodies is critical to human survival—ratchet is the practicing and conditioning of our bodies to intend towards creative, subversive, and sustainable usage especially in the presence of overwhelming struggle. Hence, a ratchet womanist lens compels us to examine how Black children come to know and be known by their larger communities, and the ways this knowledge informs their self- and social consciousness. Simultaneously, we must imagine how we—people who are not Black children—can live in such a way that Black children can own lovingly their Black child bodies.

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To my baby boy—Remix—Black joyous freedom is your birthright. Your village has claimed it for you.

1.0 pLaY bReAk

August 2017

Hey Sean,

I wanted to take a long moment and thank you for such an amazing summer. From start to finish, this summer was amazing. I am not even sure where to begin. Working with PBSA [Purpose Built Schools Atlanta] was awesome in that I truly believe I have found new family. But working alongside you was just indescribably incredible. To actually witness *every day* the impact you have and continue to have on the lives of so many families made for a profound experience that I know will motivate me throughout the next phase of my life.

So, there is this quote: “The universe has been sliding me love notes in the form of people.” Through you I received many love notes in the form of people and new relationships that I could never have expected would come to mean so much to me. You know how much I love people, and I thought I knew just how much I could love people—but then I met these people and my heart just kept expanding to include all of them too. It is a scary thing to love people as much as I do, but these new relationships have reassured me that I am where I am supposed to be and I am who I am supposed to be. None of this would have been possible without all of the effort and commitment that you’ve poured into *all of the work you have ever done*. Great things happen to great people and through you, PBSA was great to me and countless others.

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I know that we are two powerful individuals and though I am pretty much always anxious about the future, your example is a constant reminder of my own power. That is reassurance enough. I am proud of you and all that you have accomplished, and I am already proud of all that you will accomplish. The future is lookin bright.

Anyways, I just wanted to thank you and tell you that you’re awesome and tell you that I love you.

2.0 Introduction

“Done effectively through urban regime politics, Atlanta's white kingmakers analyzed the city's black leadership, gathering what blackface they needed....”

- Maurice Hobson

“In the spring of 2010, as the school year ended and I began my new job as a counselor, excavators clawed down the sturdy brick walls of Thomasville Heights, home to three victims of the Atlanta child murders, and the last public housing project in Atlanta to be razed. That year, there were five thousand people on [Atlanta Housing Authority's] waiting list for housing vouchers; many of them had been on the list for nine years.”

- Shani Robinson & Anna Simonton

“As property values skyrocketed in areas where public housing dwindled and charter schools proliferated, it became clear that whatever varied purposes public education had served over time, in Atlanta it increasingly had a singularly powerful function: to drive the real estate market.”

- Shani Robinson & Anna Simonton

“Atlanta is an interesting case for investigating the courses of urban inequality. It is a city that presents a paradox of phenomenal growth in contrast to the unexpected high level of inner-city poverty and economic stagnation, and of a Black mecca in contrast to the unexpected high level of segregation.”

- Mark Pendergrast

In December 2018, Peachtree-Pine Shelter was forced to close its doors on its last remaining residents and clients after a decades-long political and legal battle with the city of Atlanta. No city-funded alternative had been established in the shelter's place. Legally a shelter for homeless men, it also maintained a section for emergency housing that served women and children in the right wing of the building where the offices were located. On Atlanta's coldest nights, Peachtree-Pine Shelter, managed by the Metro Atlanta Task Force for the Homeless, would house over 700 individuals. The emergency shelter was recognized for its policy of accepting just about anyone—those who had been turned away because of occupancy restrictions, lack of

identification or prior registration, or accessibility or health-related needs that other shelters could not accommodate. Mark Pendergrast recounts the shelter's founding:

The Task Force for the Homeless got its start in 1981, after seventeen homeless men died during a cold snap. In 1985, Anita Beaty took over the organization. In the run-up to the 1996 Atlanta Summer Olympics, she became a vocal advocate for homeless rights, as the city offered free bus tickets to any homeless people who would leave town. The Task Force sued the city over sweeps to clear the streets in which police carried blank arrest papers preprinted with 'African American male' and 'homeless' (116).

While the Peachtree-Pine Shelter had its own exploitative policies entrenched in anti-Blackness, misogyny, and transphobia on both structural and interpersonal levels, it served a critical role as "the emergency relief valve for a system long broken" (Torpy). But in January 2019, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (AJC) announced that Central Atlanta Progress (CAP)¹ had sold the 28,500-square-foot facility for \$6.2 million to Emory University, whose hospital is located conveniently across the street from the shelter building (Stafford).

My short tenure as a volunteer case manager for the Metro Atlanta Taskforce in 2014 was my first introduction to the anti-Black sociopolitical histories of the Black Mecca, i.e. "The Atlanta Way." The Atlanta Way refers to the historic, concealed cooperation between Black elites (political leaders, business owners, etc.) and wealthy white elites that enabled these leaders to

¹ Their website describes CAP as "a private nonprofit community development organization providing leadership, programs and services to preserve and strengthen the economic vitality of Downtown Atlanta." See: "About CAP." *Atlanta Downtown*, Central Atlanta Progress, www.atlantadowntown.com/cap.

“negotiate incremental advances in racial issues to avoid public protest and preserve the city’s business-friendly image” (Bagby). However, despite over forty years of Black mayors, even the incremental advances remain elusory for the average Black resident of Atlanta, a city that “leads the nation in income inequality and lack of economic mobility. The median household income for a white family in the city is \$83,722, compared to \$28,105 for a Black family” (Donnelly). The shelter served a predominantly Black clientele, while the streets outside its walls were replete with predominantly Black men, women, and nonbinary and teenage sex workers, hustlers, and addicts. According to the narratives shared during their interviews with caseworkers, many of the individuals utilizing the shelter’s services had been forced out of their already decrepit homes due to health concerns related to mold or rat and roach infestations or they had been evicted due to loss of income or the presence of relatives with felony records. The Peachtree-Pine Shelter was considered rock bottom.

During his tenure as Atlanta’s fifth Black mayor, Kasim Reed enacted the Homeless Initiative Registry, Quality of Life ordinances, and panhandling prohibitions, and oversaw the shuttering of the Peachtree-Pine Shelter—decisive policies that criminalized Atlanta’s disproportionately Black homeless and housing-insecure residents and enabled gentrification across the city. Commenting on the simultaneous gentrification of some of Atlanta’s oldest neighborhoods (Summerhill, Mechanicsville, Peoplestown, Pittsburgh, and Grant Park) and the ongoing legal battle to evict the Metro Atlanta Task Force from the building on Peachtree and Pine in 2017, Atlanta grassroots organizer and writer Da’Shaun Harrison posed an urgent query about the unique situation in Atlanta: “It is a wonder, with sixty-seven percent of Atlanta’s council being Black, serving under a Black mayor, why the council (specifically Kwanza Hall) would introduce an ordinance to shut down Peachtree-Pine and build a police precinct in its place.” Harrison later

concludes that “[i]f white supremacy can recruit and weaponize Black American people to advocate for and push its policies, it can undermine the importance of the Black Liberation Movement and create what is ultimately the only and real black-on-black crime.” Atlanta’s legacy of Black leadership²—complete with acclaimed titles, degrees from Black institutions, famed net worth, and histories of Civil Rights activism—is frequently perceived, or assumed, to connote solidarity with Black Atlanta. Yet these leaders have become some of capitalism’s principal gatekeepers, employing anti-Black rhetoric and policies that further embolden racist media and news coverage of impoverished communities, which reinforces the perceived urgent need of such policies and rhetoric. This cyclical process preserves elitism, racism, and the exploited role of the subjugated poor.

The city’s sixth Black mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms, currently in office, sustains the legacy of The Atlanta Way. She has authorized the criminalization of Atlanta’s water boys,³ ATV riders,⁴ Black Lives Matter activists, and grassroots organizers, and continues to ignore the plight of Black low-income residents, resulting in their displacement from the city’s historically Black neighborhoods. Meanwhile, “[t]he City of Atlanta has an affordable housing crisis” as “Atlanta ranks 5th out of 70 large US cities in the rate of eviction notices per rental homes.” And, “[t]he last time the Atlanta Housing Authority opened its waitlist in 2017, it received 80,000 applications. Only 30,000 made it on the waitlist” (Stokes). The housing crisis has a distinct effect on Atlanta

² Atlanta’s Black elites also include administration of education and higher learning institutions; rappers, musical producers and pop culture icons; as well as historic and/or mega church leaders.

³ See: Godfrey, Gavin. “The Water Boy’s Hustle.” *Atlanta Magazine*, 16 Oct. 2020, www.atlantamagazine.com/news-culture-articles/the-water-boys-hustle/.

⁴ See: Keenan, Sean Richard. “Arresting 11, Atlanta Police, State Troopers Crack down on Illegal Dirt Bike and ATV Use.” *Curbed Atlanta*, Vox Media LLC, 10 July 2018, atlanta.curbed.com/2018/7/10/17552752/police-georgia-state-troopers-dirt-bike-atv.

Public School (APS) districts’ demographics, funding, and performance ratings as “75% of the nearly 58,634 [students] are Black; 77% have below-average household income” (Mandel).

By 2011, the city that built the nation’s first public housing complexes in the 1930s became the first American city to demolish all its public housing. The proposed plans during the demolition years mirror the plans on the table today: replace the public housing stock with mixed-income developments and affordable housing units. In fact, Bottoms’ mayoral campaign centered affordability for Atlantans, and in mid-2019, her administration released the Housing Affordability Action Plan. According to Dan Immergluck, Professor at Georgia State’s Urban Studies Institute, the plan has some strengths and noteworthy flaws, including the lack of specificity in the label “‘affordable’” as the plan “[fails] to specify that a large portion of public subsidy will go to such low-income residents would mean underserving those who are seriously cost-burdened and most vulnerable to instability, eviction, and displacement.” Immergluck also notes the “vagueness of the actions” and the process going forward: without specified objectives, actionable items, or a viable timeline, residents will not be able to hold Bottoms and her administration accountable effectively.

Nevertheless, efforts facilitated by and on behalf of Atlanta’s Black low- and no-income residents are visible throughout the city, including the 2016 protests to save the Peachtree-Pine Shelter outside the building and inside the Atlanta City Council meetings,⁵ 2017 Tent City outside of Turner Field,⁶ 2018 protests focused on displacement caused by the Atlanta BeltLine,⁷ and 2019

⁵ See: Stokes, Stephanie. “Over Protest, City Council Takes Step To Close Peachtree-Pine.” *90.1 FM WABE*, 4 Oct. 2016, www.wabe.org/over-protest-city-council-takes-step-close-peachtree-pine/.

⁶ See: Tatum, Gloria. “TENT CITY AT TURNER FIELD ENTERS DAY NINE, CBA DEMANDED.” *Atlanta Progressive News*, Atlanta Progressive News, 9 Apr. 2017, atlantaprogressivenews.com/2017/04/09/tent-city-at-turner-field-enters-day-nine-cba-demanded/.

⁷ See: Staff. “Protesters Target High Atlanta BeltLine Prices Outside Atlanta City Hall.” *11Alive.Com*, WXIA-TV, 20 July 2018, www.11alive.com/article/news/local/protesters-target-high-atlanta-beltline-prices-outside-atlanta-city-hall/85-576051824.

sit-ins outside of Keisha Lance Bottoms' office protesting the lack of affordable housing and demanding justice for residents of Peoplestown.⁸

2.1 Thomasville and Traplanta

In the summer of 2018, amidst the aforementioned string of public protests and demonstrations, an organizing effort began to take shape in the Four Seasons neighborhood. Maternal rage over Black male deaths and worsening living conditions erupted at the same time that their demands for the “right-to-return” to the apartments after renovations were seemingly being ignored by The Millennia Companies, the prospective developer working to finalize its purchase of the apartment complex. The collective rage and grief exhibited by these mothers illuminated their constant exposure to “crisis, dislocation, and loss” (Williams 22)—the most wretched manifestations of the afterlife of slavery. The loss was threefold: first, the loss of neighborhood kinship networks from gentrification-induced mass evictions; second, the loss of Black life as their sons were victims of murder due to the complexities of survival economies and imposition of outsiders in unstable territory; and third, the impending loss of the “last option,” as Four Seasons is widely known as the “last projects in Atlanta.” Kimberly Dukes, a former resident, community organizer, and mother of ten, articulated the fear gripping Four Seasons residents as she explained how the violence would worsen due to gentrification: “It's going to get worse

⁸ See: Habersham, Raisa. “Activists, Residents Stage Sit-in Outside Atlanta Mayor's Office.” *Ajc*, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, 16 Dec. 2019, www.ajc.com/news/crime--law/atlanta-loss-affordable-housing-subject-protest/5vFU9clJDdn6U6AabndVDP/.

because people are scared and don't have control of what's next." Families were beginning to experience the panic and grief of entrapment—of Atlanta, the trap.

Located in Southeast Atlanta, two blocks past the U.S. Federal Penitentiary on McDonough Boulevard, just before you hit the intersection that opens onto Moreland, is the Thomasville Heights neighborhood. To the left of the neighborhood's welcome sign is Thomasville Heights Elementary School and to the right stands Forest Cove Apartments, the sprawling 396-unit Section 8 complex also known as Four Seasons; across the street from both is the massive vacant lot where the Thomasville Heights projects once stood. When I was first introduced to the neighborhood in 2017 through my work with Purpose Built Schools Atlanta (PBSA), the nonprofit that was reorganizing the Carver school cluster into a public charter school cluster, 90% of Thomasville Heights Elementary School's student population resided across the street in Four Seasons where the median household income for nonworking families was \$2,500/year, for working families was \$16,806, 80% of the neighborhood had a high school diploma or less, and only half the population was in the labor force (American Community Survey).

As of spring 2020, 95% of Thomasville's student body resides across the street in Four Seasons and "each of the school's 417 students is considered by the Georgia Department of Education as 'economically disadvantaged.' All but two are Black. The families sit in the city's bottom household income bracket—\$9,400. And, the school has been among the bottom 5% of performers for as long as the state has been keeping CCRPI scores" (Mandel). Since PBSA's takeover, which coincided with the entrance of the Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation (AVLF) into the school cluster, the school's turnover rate has been reduced to 25% from 40% three years ago (Mandel).

As of December 2020, the livelihoods of the approximately 860 residents in Four Seasons and the longevity of Thomasville Heights Elementary School are at stake as the pending property sales and plans for a \$51 million renovation will force tenants out of their homes during the proposed upgrades. This, despite the initial plans in 2018 that reassured residents they would not be removed from the property, but moved to different units while theirs was renovated. While Millennia has managed Four Seasons since 2018, residents have argued that conditions have continued to worsen over the years, with grievances including environmental hazards, accumulating trash, violence from hired security staff, crumbling infrastructure, managerial neglect, and retaliation.

AJC's Vanessa McCray reports that the property manager and developer, school leaders, and nonprofit leaders are working to identify “new places for already vulnerable families to live while construction occurs, ensuring that children’s education is not disrupted and that they receive social services, and making sure tenants come back when the work is done.”⁹ News and media reports typically center Thomasville Heights Elementary School, though I am sure Price Middle School and Carver STEAM High School will be directly impacted by the impending displacement as Thomasville students generally feed into Price before they enter Carver STEAM. Students from Slater Elementary School, the fourth school that comprises this cluster, are heavily located in and around The Villages at Carver, also known as Carver Homes, a mixed-income housing complex that was constructed after the city-sanctioned demolition of the public housing project George

⁹ This task seems particularly difficult as it has become “increasingly hard for recipients of Section 8 vouchers to find willing landlords in the city. According to the ordinance, more than a thousand vouchers expired over the course of a year because the tenants couldn’t locate housing” (Stokes). Another Atlanta city-sanctioned trap.

Washington Carver Homes. My research centers children at Thomasville, Slater, and Price, though I spent the most time with Thomasville families and teaching staff.¹⁰

In news, school, policy, and media reports about the rapid gentrification displacing Atlanta's residents—especially those in Thomasville who are consistently characterized by the interpersonal and gang-related violence as well as drug sales associated with “trapping”—there remains intentional silence about the structural racism enshrined in city policy that has preserved the Atlanta Way and undergirded the entrapment of low-income Black folks. These narratives of neighborhood violence are not untrue as violence and trapping do dictate the daily realities and color the memories of Four Season and Thomasville residents. Four Seasons is the trap. The “choice to ‘trap,’ a black vernacular term that denotes a house where crack cocaine and other drugs are sold or used, had little to do with the fascination for street life, yet was seen as a way to supplement income after working a 9 to 5 job” (Hobson 242). Socioeconomic disinvestment and resource deprivation, failing education systems, persistent felony records, and respectability politics leave Black people in the neighborhood with scarce options to ensure their family's basic survival. Rodney Carmichael summarizes what a closer examination of the situation in Thomasville reveals about Atlanta: “[In a city that] is saddled with too much of the same racial baggage and class exclusion [...] The same pols who disgrace their districts by failing to advocate for economic equity find themselves more offended by crass lyrical content than the crass conditions that inspire it. Meanwhile, systemic ills continue to fester at will. It's enough to make you wonder who the real trappers are in this town.”

¹⁰ I feel this is largely because I worked with the PALS [Parents As Leaders] team, which was primarily composed of Thomasville parents while I awaited IRB approval of my research study/before I officially began my fieldwork. So, I had established strong bonds with the parents and their families prior to the commencement of my research.

The crass conditions described in trap music are the outcome of the ratchet political structure (Brown and Young) in which poor Black folks are living. Brown and Young argue that Black women (though I am broadening the scope to include all Black people) “who engage in ratchet behavior often do so as a reaction to their membership in a polity that defines their humanity with the structures of ratchet politics [...] ratchet politics [are] policies, structures or institutions that promote and/or result in inequality, oppression, marginalization, and denies human beings his or her full humanity as a citizen or resident of a nation state” (7). As a means to survive, Black folks behave in ratchet ways that oppose the ratchet polity. In the process, their experiences, practices, and imaginings found a critique of survivability and question how far one can deviate from the norm to escape governmental and societal foreclosures. In a move to save one’s own life and expand their own access to creative possibilities, ratchet behavior endeavors beyond limits towards embodied illustrations of how much queerness, joy, money, recognition, or attention one can get in the doing.

In most spaces beyond the Black ghetto, ratchet is yet another social trap. Atlanta is full of traps—with the most violent set in motion by those brokering deals behind the closed doors of board rooms and private offices, dispossessing Black children of the fullness of their Black bodies and Black joy. For example: gentrifying leasing companies implement tenant guidelines prohibiting loud music, large gatherings, loitering, or guests; new development brings increased traffic and fenced-in construction sites that obstruct and/or crowd out previous play spaces; gentrifying neighbors bring a heightened police presence that reads every Black child as a superpredator, Black boys and men as dopeboys and felons, Black girls and women as negligent mothers; underperforming schools enforce hyper-structured daily schedules and high-stakes standardized testing that deprioritizes culturally relevant curricula and unstructured playtime (this

is if their school does not close and/or is not ultimately replaced with a charter school instead); intentional community disinvestment leads to the depletion of job opportunities and potential sources of income; media portrayals of the neighborhood elevate the social stigma that follows residents into job interviews and welfare institutions and shapes their interactions with individuals and institutions beyond the geographic borders of their community; displacement causes the disintegration of community and kinship networks that counter the marginalization of their children by centering them as the source of their community's sustenance.

Though I will elaborate upon many of these traps, I am vehemently committed to highlighting and amplifying the significance of this last point about the children being *the source* as I consider the ways in which Black children and their joyful, imaginative play practices sustain entire communities. The children and families in PBSA, especially those from Thomasville, taught me this communal maxim through their living.

2.2 Research Overview

During an interview with *Hood Affairs*, Worl, activist-rapper and Four Seasons native, walks through the apartment complex on a late afternoon and explains that Four Seasons is Atlanta's last remaining housing project. As he speaks of the myriad forms of violence *and* the intergenerational community that formed his childhood, children are seen and heard playing and interacting throughout the background. At one point during the interview, a group of men chillin' on a sidewalk address Worl—acknowledging them first, Worl then turns toward the camera and

happily states, “Yea, I’m in my hood. No strap.”¹¹ Worl is at home. His taking pride in a zone of comfort and familiarity does not negate the danger he speaks of in the same interview but here, niggas got his back. He is cared for and recognized as a human and an activist who contributes to his community by telling its story and remaining connected with the folks and families who raised him, are raising his kids, and preserving the joy that exists in Four Seasons. Four Seasons is family and there is no need to be strapped when you are with family.

“Yea, I’m in my hood. No Strap,” extends the discourse of love-based ethics (Chin; hooks; Sharpe) and community to include explicitly Black children, especially those living in poverty, as community gatekeepers and activists. Such a repositioning of Black children is critical because Black children’s voices and analyses frequently remain obscure and/or absent from notable social movements such as Black Lives Matter and Black Girl Magic even amidst the increasing violence of the school-to-prison pipeline, environmental racism, and housing insecurity. Thus, this dissertation expands these movements by intervening within public and academic conceptualizations of the Black child as my fieldwork amplifies the actual voices of Black children.

Moreover, the establishment of political communities that are rooted in the radical ethic of love occurs through praxis (Cox). By centralizing and conceptualizing their play as an embodied praxis, we can better understand how celebrating the subversive intellectual and cultural practices exhibited by the Black children in my study is an invitation into intentional consciousness-raising circles. Through these circles, we can experience the intense joy generated amidst the struggle as we struggle together in community (hooks; Love).

¹¹ “WORLD 4 SEASONS PROJECTS - REP MY CITY: [ATLANTA SEASON 1] EPISODE 2” YouTube, uploaded by Hood Affairs, 20 June 2018, https://youtu.be/7fCyCD5K_Ic

I kindle this conceptualization of Black children through community-based collaborative research that analyzes the intersection of Black child play and protest in order to illuminate the way play, and the resulting Black child joy, is a method of developing and channeling collective responses to their everyday experiences of institutional anti-Blackness and intergenerational oppression. More specifically, I consider how Black child play and joy reflect a relationship between *ratchet*, a term commonly used to define the precarious realities of poor and working class Blacks (Brown; Love; Young), and *womanism*, a community-oriented form of Black feminism situated within the everyday (Phillips; Walker). Together, these two lenses allow me to continue engaging with Black children's play through fieldwork and to consider more seriously the Black women of the Thomasville community who have sustained the lives of these children and their extensive kinship networks (Stack) for generations. Both the ratchet expressions and womanist ethics evident in play assist in the co-construction and trans-generational survival of low-income Black communities.

More pointedly, I forward a ratchet womanist lens to frame how Black child play sources the radically visionary/imaginative, self-sufficient, and community-oriented aspects of womanism in a politics of the body existing under state-sanctioned deprivation that normalizes the conditions of the Black Ghetto. The connection to our bodies is critical to human survival—ratchet is the practicing and conditioning of our bodies to intend towards creative, subversive, and sustainable usage especially in the presence of overwhelming struggle. Hence, a ratchet womanist lens compels us to examine how Black children come to know and be known by their larger communities and the ways in which this knowledge informs their self- and social consciousness. Simultaneously, we must imagine how we—people who are not Black children—can live in such a way that Black children can own lovingly their Black child bodies (Durr).

Hale and Bocknek assert that “[t]he intergenerational historical narratives of Black families are encapsulated in the social and communication patterns parents transmit to children and relevant to the study of early development. Play is a known medium through which children work through difficult and complex issues, actively move from one development stage to the next and consolidate parts of their identities” (88). In my fieldwork, I witnessed the ways in which low-income and poor Black children discover and create new forms of play that open them up to alternative and parallel realities that reframe their current circumstances and resituate them within their social networks. My study of Black child play and corresponding fieldwork intentionally vacillates between play and protest, ratchet and womanism, and the ways their communities shape these relationships. Therefore, I also documented the adults’ (mostly parents’) interactions and expressions in order to identify the mechanisms and practices the larger community employs in addressing their daily challenges. I used both children and adult participants’ descriptions of their own behavior and opinions to construct my analysis.

2.3 Note on Methodology

Ocho Jinks, a 6th grade student at Price Middle School, began taking ownership over my research towards the end of the summer in 2018. On multiple occasions, Ocho Jinks would get off the bus and immediately ask me, “Where’s our notebook?” “You got our journal?” or “You takin notes, Ari?” Ocho Jinks’s persistent questions and his unequivocal declaration of our shared ownership over the research process continually mandated my accountability to “our research,” thus ensuring that my ethnographic approach remained fluid and collaborative. His type of engagement and investment in this dissertation was evident in countless students throughout

Thomasville, Slater, and Price, and their parents who would jokingly tell me “Oh, Lawd, Ari. Don’t put this in your notes” on some occasions, and request I take notes at their community meetings, help create their grocery lists, or document a story they wanted to be told to others.

The experiences of Black, low-income children require unique methodological approaches to the challenges of locating them within their own culture as Black children’s intersectional identities are frequently severed into categories that isolate and address only fractions of their existence. My dissertation seeks to counter the violence of this severance by identifying the myriad forms through which Black children’s agency is manifested and the ways in which communities are transformed by their presence. Moreover, the potent complexities of personal expression from the Black children discussed in my research affirm the need for a “comprehensive ethnographical analysis of the self-directed behavior of Black children in their home environment” in order to understand the ways in which Black child play behaviors and expressive styles shape and are shaped by their sociocultural environments (Hale and Bocknek 93). My own ethnographic method is a modified form of community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) (Israel, Eng, Parker, and Schulz). This approach invites community members to help with interpretation of data that enhances the possibility of generating culturally-specific interventions. My modified CBPAR form combines elements from the Black ratchet imagination (Love), as well as public (Amar), collaborative (Brown; Cox; Ginwright) and relational (Desmond) ethnographies while centralizing a consciousness of Black youth’s precarity and agency.

Accordingly, I primarily sought the “insider view” (Eng, Strazza, Rhodes, Griffith, Shirah, and Mebane) from the children and youth living in abject poverty and with the associated institutional violence, trauma, and neglect in order to identify the events and practices that children, living in Black bodies, are conditioned to accept as norms—and more importantly, their radical

resistance to these norms. The insider's view further validates their contextual knowledge and expertise as it engages the collaborative aspect of my ethnographic form and celebrates their protest. Thus, my approach contrasts with traditional academic research, legitimized through the university's internal review board (IRB), not only by critically deconstructing the ways in which social science is self-invested in the exploitation of Black lives (Willse), but also by prioritizing my alignment with the locally-constituted ethics of the students and their families, my research collaborators (Heath; Christensen and Prout).

Beginning in summer 2018, students expanded their intellectual proclivities through playful, or ratchet, performances as they carried, exchanged, protected, and contributed to my field notebook. In my writing, I describe how students used my notebook to perform as ethnographer, note their observations of me, reveal private information that may have contradicted their public selves, and investigate their own interiority (Quashie). Through the collaborative use of my notebook, students affirmed their intellect by documenting experiences in casual language that invoked laughter and invited me into the dialogical practice of relationship building. Essentially, they inserted Black joy, redirected my initial inquiries, and expanded our research possibilities as they subverted institutionalization and created space for analysis, laughter, and joy through their responses to and self-insertion within my research.

By the time the students had reconvened for the new school year, parents and students had begun associating me with my notebook and my habit of documenting both ordinary and important occurrences throughout the day. Because of this association in the broader community, I was invited into daycare orientations, tenants' association meetings, conference calls, kickball games, and after-school activities, and students started directly requesting to "have" my notebook

throughout the duration of lunch or after-school days in advance. They always promised to “keep it safe” for me. And, they always kept their promises.

The names of the students have been changed to protect their identity as mandated by standard IRB procedure with minors and/or “vulnerable subjects.” Many of the students’ pseudonyms were created by the students themselves; I selected those that were not created by students, as I was unable to follow up with many due to school turnover (their housing situation changed and they transferred schools), an intentional choice not to choose a pseudonym, and/or Covid-19, which prevented my ability to travel and follow up before this final draft. Except for Mr. Blanson, I did not use pseudonyms to identify adult participants as they had the option to be named or remain anonymous. Even though I have changed many students’ names in accordance with the pseudonyms they chose for themselves, I continue to grapple with this requirement of my research. I feel as though I may be undermining Black child agency by not naming the individuals to whom these notes and playful expressions belong and with whom I have conducted *our* research. Each of the students wrote their name at the top of their entries, indicating that that particular page belonged to them. They were not directed to do so as names were not fully written out elsewhere in the notebook.

I am most conflicted about Julio in particular. Julio explicitly requested that my “book” be named after him and immediately rejected the notion that I would have to assign him a pseudonym too—even though he instructed me, “Tell [your teachers] I gave you permission to use my real name.” Yet, when I think of Julio, I must consider Katelyn who consumed half pages with just her name. How does anonymity somehow mitigate the awesome force with which she seized the pages of *our* notebook? Or consider Lauryn, who intentionally chose to remain anonymous. How does anonymizing all the other students undermine the profundity of Lauryn’s decision not to write her

name at the top of her entry? How does removing the names of these children while leaving my name re-center my voice and identity? How does this action reinforce the notion that this research belongs solely to me (and my university) or that I am the sole author?

Finally, I am forced to consider how quickly low-income Black children are named in their communities and in the media for assumed criminality and constrained choices, both of which ultimately result from institutionalized racism. I must also acknowledge my position of privilege in the institutions that allow my name to be publicized and accrue the associated accolades but simultaneously constrain choices and continually deny Black children ownership due to the strategic deployment of the infantilization and protection of childlike innocence that would likely be denied to these same children in any other context because of their Black bodies.

2.4 Scholarly Voices

In their explanation of the cultural prism in the study of play behavior of Black children Hale and Bocknek argue that we “need to adopt a multifaceted perspective grounded in the sociocultural contexts in which Black children’s development and socialization occur” (77). Within the context of my research, the multifaceted view is rooted in my academic interdisciplinarity, the community’s intergenerationality, an intersectional feminism that reflects my own lived experiences and those of the PBSA families with whom I worked and played, and shared prolonged space with Thomasville community members.

Alongside their children, I centralize Black mothers living and working in Thomasville as leading scholars in my research as I foreground their experiential knowledge of Black motherhood, Black girlhood, Black activism, Black Atlanta, and Black feminism. Throughout my dissertation,

I situate the mothers in conversation with feminist scholars of color in traditional academic discourse such as Saidiya Hartman, Aimee Meredith Cox, Audre Lorde, and Tara Yosso, because it is these mothers' lived experiences, complex interiorities, and critical analyses that create and mold the intersectional feminist practices evident throughout the local community and enliven the theoretical scholarship explored in classroom spaces and women studies programs more broadly. Their expert explanations, my honest questions, our shared vulnerability, and collective imaginations formed an analytical framework, rooted in mutual care, through which I read all the research material—field notes, academic scholarship, local news, policy reports, etc.—that comprise the pages of this dissertation.

2.5 Chapter Breakdowns & pLaY bReAkS

The experiences cultivated and the stories revealed through my fieldwork inform and animate the theoretical infrastructure of each chapter. I structure my dissertation by introducing racialized play deprivation as an unexamined but potent consequence of Black bodily movements in the afterlife of slavery (Hartman). In, “‘Ari, were you here for the commotion?’” (chapter one), I demonstrate how depriving Thomasville children of opportunities to play is a method of dispossessing them of the bodily autonomy and collective agency needed to dismantle tyrannical institutions. In highlighting the lived experiences and play practices of Thomasville's children, I argue that poor Black children will play interactively and laugh ostentatiously *even while* they grapple with societal imposition of oppressive ideologies and the associated identity consequences under the threat of violence, surveillance, and criminalization within their own neighborhood. The Black child play created amidst Black Ghetto conditions can expose the structural determinants

working to maintain the afterlife of slavery; simultaneously, their play can resist, reframe and reclaim Black community narratives.

After establishing this racial historico-geographical framing, I illuminate the racial knowledge that Black children embed in performative play practices in “Love is like a tree” (chapter two). In identifying and defining the function of a ratchet womanist lens, I explain how Black child play provides a foundation for understanding the local interaction order (Duck) in the PBSA communities; these communities consist of intergenerational kinship and friendship ties that undergird communal solidarity and collective efficacy that molds, informs, and maintains “street codes” and organized survival practices. As I engage and describe certain “ghetto games,” I illustrate how the play currently engaged by PBSA students comprises an archive of knowledge that is passed down and expanded through customs of care and familiar zones.

Next, in “Happy Crack” (chapter three), I theorize the generative power of play, the ultimate vehicle through which joy and energy are transformed and transferred. Employing Audre Lorde’s definition of erotic power as a foundational concept, I analyze the “life-force” and energy catalyzed through communal play and circulated throughout the neighborhood. Relevant to the discussion of Black women’s life-force, I recollect moments of laughter and joy that emerged from our [Thomasville families’ and my] experiences of intimacy and activism to illustrate the radical profundity of these connections and emotions in the larger political project of destroying structural barriers and reimagining alternatives.

Finally, “Just cause we live in poverty, doesn’t mean we have to live like [we in] poverty” (chapter four), honors the organizing efforts and intergenerational impact of “Black activist mothering” (Sakho) exhibited by Thomasville mothers who publicly elevate the community cultural wealth (Yosso). Black mothers fighting for equitable opportunities are labeled “ratchet”

or “ghetto” for their exhibition of zeal, defiance, and audacity. Nevertheless, their ambitions are community-oriented and ancestrally-rooted; the intellectual, agentive, and subversive behaviors of their children, biological and extended kin, reflect the efficacy of their mothering back to them. I conclude the dissertation with a consideration of my research’s pedagogical value, implications for public policy, and contextual value for the families with whom I work.

Each chapter is preceded by a “play break” (interludes), which occupies the space and curates the thinking between chapters. Breaking for play and free-form storytelling amidst the structural formalities of academic writing is an immediate application of the imaginative expression of recognition, intimacy, and agency for which my dissertation advocates through a discourse on play. The analysis mobilized by each chapter and play break strategically serves as an individual tactic for constructing a conceptualization of childhood that is inclusive of Black children and their historical identities. Each play break demonstrates community members’ diverse engagement and investment in the history, restructuring, and sustaining of a homeplace (hooks; Love) for Thomasville children.

3.0 pLaY bReAk

In May 2018, the Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation (AVLF) community advocate situated inside Thomasville Heights Elementary School introduced me to a 60-year resident of the Thomasville Heights community, Mr. Blanson.¹² On the short drive over to his home, she informed me of his credentials: unsung hero of Thomasville Heights Elementary School; retired police officer; a leader in the Thomasville Heights Civic League.

While I observed his living room walls cluttered with community awards, certificates of acknowledgement, framed photos, and newspaper clippings, he began his exposition on the history of the Thomasville Heights neighborhood. He and his wife had moved to Thomasville when the houses had outhouses and the walk home was via a dirt pathway. He spoke of his more than 30 years of community work with the Thomasville Heights Civic League as they have worked to maintain the cleanliness of the neighborhood roads and the large “Thomasville Heights” signs at the corner of McDonough Boulevard and Henry Thomas Drive and the corner of Moreland Avenue and Isa Drive Southeast. When the homes were primarily occupied by homeowners, the neighborhood would be decorated on holidays and flowers planted by the mailboxes. When asked his favorite memories and aspects about the neighborhood, he immediately began recalling the names of neighbors and later responded, “I love it because of the little togetherness they have is sincere.”

Nevertheless, as he recollected his own experience in the “homes side” of the neighborhood, his tone of voice revealed a tension between neighborhood homeowners and Forest Cove apartment tenants. According to him, over the years, homeowners have either passed away and willed the properties to negligent recipients or become negligent themselves. Additionally, “when Kasim [Reed] finished his term, all the money went with him.” The local recreation center became a privatized Boys & Girls Club and the library shuttered its doors.

Even while acknowledging the disinvestment that has plagued the neighborhood, the blame somehow still fell on the apartment complex’s female tenants. He, not unlike female tenants themselves, implied that women are the source of the problems in the apartments as he asserted that “these women” need to stand up and not let “that trash” (“these jokers”) stay in their apartments. Furthermore, the seniors, he informed, allow the problem: “Those seniors up there [in Forest Cove] know the problem, they just don’t want to have anything to do with it.”

¹² “Mr. Blanson” is a pseudonym. I was unable to follow up with him to request a pseudonym or confirm the use of his real name.

...

In May 2019, I spoke with Ms. Slaton, a revered Thomasville Heights Elementary School staff member and lifelong resident of the area, who started volunteering at Thomasville Heights Elementary School when her daughter was in Kindergarten (1975-1976 school year). She continued to volunteer whenever she was off work and has been volunteering at the school for over 40 years now. In 2017, she was hired into the Parents As Leaders (PALS) program which allowed her to be paid for the auxiliary assistance she provided to the school and in the classrooms.

Sitting on the school blacktop after the 2019 5th Grade Graduation Program, Ms. Slaton began her exposition on the history of the Thomasville neighborhood. According to her, the blacktop we were currently occupying what used to be the public basketball courts, and the grassy area where the students play soccer and tend to a community garden used to be the baseball park. The entire school property, originally, was a peach orchard.

Ms. Slaton lived in Forest Cove apartments for 10 years as an adult but was raised in Carver Homes which, she informed, was originally built for veteran families. When I first met her in 2017 and was walking through the complex with her and the other PALS, she exclaimed, "I loved livin' over here... After 5 it's like a concert." She recollected how the apartments were beautiful when they were first opened for working families in the 1970s.

She, thoughtfully intimated that when her daughter was attending Thomasville Heights Elementary School, the children played "like children"—there was no fighting. "Now, you gotta watch kids at all times, to make sure they're not doing any grown stuff." Attempting to reframe the dialogue somewhat, I asked her what is special about the children today. She said, "Most are very respectful and loving to you... Like if I come to work and they see that I'm down, they'll come up and ask me what's wrong. I don't know how they know." After a few moments of thought, she commented that some of them come in the morning and need a hug. "They see so much violence in the neighborhood."

She, too, informed me that the "houses are bad now too." Since elderly people are passing away, young people are either allowing the homes to decay or selling them to investors.

4.0 “Ari, were you here for the commotion?”: Institutional Racism, Neighborhood Violence, and Black Children Deprived of Play

“... slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America... because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment.”

• Saidiya V. Hartman

“I name this paradox the wake, and I use the wake in all of its meanings as a means of understanding how slavery’s violences emerge within the contemporary conditions of spatial, legal, psychic, material, and other dimensions of Black non/being as well as in Black modes of resistance.”

• Christina Sharpe

“And historically black bodies in motion in this country have always spelled danger to the white power structures.”

• Wallace Best

“I hear parents say they can’t let their kids outside all the time... it’s definitely sad cause who don’t want their kids to go outside and play.”

• Mya

An August 2018 *11 Alive* news report captured a female resident of Four Seasons apartments’ distressed plea for intervention. She said directly to the camera: “They’ve scared us to the point where some of us won’t even speak out but today we have to speak out. Our kids is feared for their lives [...] We are not the cause. Y’all treating us like we’re criminals and we’re not the criminals.” Moments before her comments, the camera flashed through video footage of armed men clad in police-like uniforms and bullet-proof vests as they patrolled the complex’s common areas and stood in small clusters near their silver Dodge Challengers. A lawyer at the scene testified that the security company, 3D Protective Services, employed by the current property manager,

Millennia, was targeting the wrong people.¹³ Just a few weeks prior, residents alleged to me that the hired security company had handcuffed and detained children after they fled from uniformed security guards and their dogs. Two months before that a parent questioned: “Why is security harassing us? Our kids are scared. When security comes around, the kids jump back on the porch.” And two months before this, one parent informed the Forest Cove Tenants’ Association that “security says they aren’t here for the tenants. They’re here for management.” Four Seasons residents are living in a carceral state reinforced by privatized security personnel, Atlanta Police Department officers, and corporate surveillance technology. The hyper-policing tactics imposed on residents are reactionary measures to racialized structural inequities that are continually shrouded by public narratives of neighborhood-based interpersonal violence. Residents have no safe recourse for counteraction, which renders them vulnerable to further institutional violence and increased policing. The accounts recollected here and throughout this chapter uphold the veracity in Wallace Best’s assertion that a “Black body in motion is never without consequence.”

Historically, Black people have used their bodies to perform resistance (Kinloch) and freedom as they engaged in domestic labor,¹⁴ fled plantations (read: emancipated themselves), marched peacefully and riotously, and played cooperatively as a means of communicating and extending necessary survival and visionary practices. Their physical and creative movements begat a certain form of familial adaptability and social mobility. The consequences of these actions have been fatal. As evidenced by the hyper-policing tactics employed in Four Seasons there is a

¹³Aldridge, Donesha. “‘We’re Not Criminals’: Residents Say Apartment Complex Security Guards Harass Them.” *11alive.Com*, WXIA, 3 Aug. 2018, www.11alive.com/article/news/were-not-criminals-residents-say-apartment-complex-security-guards-harass-them/85-580345350.

¹⁴ In her essay, “The Black Woman’s Role In the Community of Slaves,” Angela Davis writes: “As the center of domestic life, the only life at all removed from the arena of exploitation, and thus as an important source of survival, the black woman could play a pivotal role in nurturing the thrust towards freedom” (11). Domestic life was solely about ensuring the survival of and creating pleasure for Black people.

historical precedent for the threat Black children's physical play and creative expression pose to prevailing hierarchies. Black children's physical and creative movements threaten the hierarchical social order that requires passivity and resignation. Passivity maintains a racialized, subjugated populace disconnected from the power of the ancestral legacies encased within their physiological and socio-cultural bodies. Play is the most immediately accessible method for Black children to reclaim these legacies and assert/insert themselves in space, while they simultaneously discover and embrace the potent truth of their own lived experiences; thus, splintering the oppressive capacities of white supremacist institutions.

The endurance of slavery—the afterlife, or wake, of slavery (Hartman; Sharpe)—is evidenced by the conditionality of Black existence. This conditionality is sustained, compounded, and enforced by the anti-Black ideologies that inform the socioeconomic and politico-geographical infrastructure that has buttressed the systems of chattel slavery, terroristic lynching, Jim Crow segregation, and mass incarceration, systems that have disallowed public recognition of Black humanity in the United States for the last four-hundred years. In the “afterlife of slavery,” Black people are positioned as captives: “They are perpetually watched but are simultaneously denied access to their humanity, including rights and privileges over their lives and bodies” (Wun 173). Black people are subject to institutional racism that constructs conditions for criminality and confinement. As a result, Black people's temporal, spatial, and physiological movements are perpetually criminalized and confined. The conditions for confinement are routinely (re)created and sustained via the deprivation of communal resources and personal liberties.

The deprivation of play from Black children is a denial of agency over their own bodies and access to a sense of self- and communal-efficacy cultivated through shared history and traditions. Play deprivation is the experience of being denied access to opportunities for myriad

forms of play critical to holistic development (Belknap and Hazler 219); this form of deprivation—a denial or a refusal to acknowledge a child’s right to play¹⁵—is an intentional act of institutional violence that severs people, specifically Black children, from the efficacy within their physical bodies. The institutions that enact and enforce play deprivation “are part of a larger social condition that [Saidiya] Hartman has identified as the ‘afterlife of slavery’” (Wun 178). Considering that slavery was designed to annihilate the possibility of Black efficacy, an examination of the afterlife and its impact on Black child development and play compels us to consider how Black children create new possibilities out of impossibilities. This chapter reveals racialized play deprivation to be an unexamined but potent consequence of systemic responses to Black bodily movements in slavery’s afterlife. As I will demonstrate, depriving Thomasville children of play is a method of dispossessing them of the bodily autonomy and collective agency needed to dismantle tyrannical institutions such as child protective services, local police departments, the prison industrial complex, and negligent leasing companies.

Play, in general, is instinctual, but Black child play constitutes the “learned ways of being that foster and reflect individual and group identity within African American communities” (Gaunt 13). On a cultural and developmental level, depriving Black children of communally reflective play experiences and/or criminalizing their play practices abstracts them from their ancestral and communal history and resituates them between harmful tensions attached to their racial, gendered, and classed identities (Black children are positioned as simultaneously invisible and hypervisible (Cox); criminal and innocent (Stockton); adultified and infantilized (Epstein, Black, Gonzalez); hypersexualized and desexualized (Morris); threatening and passive; etc.). Ordinarily, play is the

¹⁵ See Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child for more on children’s right to leisure and play. The United States has yet to ratify the Convention.

means through which Black children merge and transform experiences, behaviors, and social and cultural expressions into a practice that catalyzes self-interrogation and communal exploration (Hale and Bocknek 88). In the afterlife, however, Black children living in poverty often face socioeconomic and racial obstacles that affect their social-emotional and physical development as the availability of safe play spaces is far more restricted in low-income neighborhoods. In highlighting the lived experiences and play practices of children in Thomasville, I argue that poor Black children will play interactively, tell stories expressively, dance competitively, and laugh ostentatiously *even while* they grapple with societal imposition of oppressive ideologies and the associated identity consequences¹⁶ under the threat of physical violence, governmental surveillance, and the literal criminalization of their physical and social movements within their own neighborhood.¹⁷

Recognizing that police omnipresence is a reality for Thomasville residents, I consider the frequency of hyper-policing, hyper-surveillance, and propagandized media narratives to be critical components of the afterlife of slavery as it exists in Thomasville. These narratives of Black childhood often go unexamined and normalize deprivation in an attempt to flatten Black children's potential and criminalize the adults around them. Considering these factors, I forward my argument by providing an elemental overview of the stages of play necessary for holistic child development, as well as the racialized and classed ways in which play is deprived as Black children age and grow. This overview is foundational for understanding the ways in which neighborhood violence,

¹⁶ In "Double Reading: Young Black scholars responding to Whiteness in a community literacy program," Stephanie Power Carter and Kafi D. Kumasi define identity consequences as "[t]he cost associated with the constant struggle and contestation with mainstream culture about one's own racial identity, culture, and/or community" (79).

¹⁷ According to stats from The Annie E. Casey Foundation's *2019 KIDS COUNT Databook: State Trends in Child Well-Being*, 33% of Black children in the United States currently live in poverty and 28% live in high-poverty neighborhoods. High-poverty neighborhoods are communities where poverty rates for the total population are 30% or more (also referred to as concentrated neighborhood poverty).

and more importantly the institutions that incite and/or manage that violence, deprives Black children of their right to play.¹⁸ I highlight the racial knowledge that Black children embed in performative and communal practices, such as play and localized forms of communication. Because I argue that Black children will play anyway, I conclude this chapter by highlighting the racial knowledge that Black children embed in performative play practices that are both exploratory and revelatory of their larger community narratives. This chapter, drafted with major contributions¹⁹ from Julia Brazier²⁰ and Kimberly Dukes,²¹ utilizes our collective and individual years of community-based organizing and child development field-based practice as well as corresponding literary, sociological, and ethnographic scholarship on developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant play from infancy through elementary school.

4.1 Ages & Stages of Play for Black Children in the Afterlife of Slavery

Beginning as early as infancy, from birth to approximately three months, babies are developing an understanding of how their bodies move in what is referred to as “unoccupied play.”

¹⁸ Additionally, the desire to map white, middle-class heteronormative developmental narratives neatly onto Black children is consistently disrupted due to social constructions and perceptions of age (ex: the impact of adultification and infantilization) and/or temporal order (ex: chronically absent and perpetually suspended students experience time differently due to the constant disruption of their time in the classroom) that are not inclusive of and/or applicable to the lived experiences of Black children. See Capshaw and Duane *Who Writes for Black Children: African American Children's Literature before 1900*.

¹⁹ Contributions were primarily in the form of ongoing dialogue and neighborhood updates as well as relevant public and academic scholarship that shaped our [first Julia and me, then Kimberly and me] initial co-authored conference papers and presentations.

²⁰ Julia Brazier is a retired family childcare coach/mentor at Auburn University. She facilitated training for early care and educational professionals throughout Alabama. She has been working in the field of child development for over 30 years. Julia has a degree in International Studies/Latin American Studies from The Ohio State University. She has also raised four magical and joyful Black children including me!

²¹ Kimberly Dukes is a single mother of 10 magical and joyful Black children. Formerly, she served as the Community Engagement Coordinator at Thomasville Heights Elementary School. Currently, she serves as Executive Director of Atlanta Thrive, a nonprofit empowering Atlanta Public School parents to disrupt inequities in education.

Occurring simultaneously and extending into toddlerhood is “solitary play.” While children at these early stages do not express an interest in or engagement with other children, these stages of play are nonetheless critical as the patterns and consequences of play deprivation become evident at this time. For low-income Black infants, early child care programs are often their first encounter with the debilitating effects of institutionalized racism as their caregivers may be compelled to choose low-quality child care due to socioeconomic challenges that are extant for both the caregivers and the childcare providers.²²

Within low-quality childcare facilities, children may be more likely to spend far too many hours strapped into bounce seats, swings, or highchairs for management and control reasons in under-resourced and understaffed daycares. Prolonged sedentary periods deprive infants of “tummy time”²³ and deprive toddlers of the exploratory freedom required by this “solitary play” phase. During “unoccupied” and “solitary” play infants begin developing motor skills and young toddlers begin developing an awareness of themselves as individuals (Derman-Sparks 1). Essentially, “the physical environment in which the child lives [or occupies] can enhance or inhibit aspects” of motor development and self-identity (Baghwanji, Milagros, and Fowler 10). Within these early stages of childcare, institutional racism manifests most clearly in class disadvantages that disproportionately affect Black people as housing segregation tends to concentrate low-income Black families together where they are disconnected from higher-quality services, like

²² In “Quality Disparities in Child Care for At-Risk Children: Comparing Head Start and Non-Head Start Settings,” Marianne Hellemeier, Paul L. Morgan, George Farkas, and Steven Maczuga explain that “African American children are generally enrolled in child care that is of comparatively lower quality. For example, child care data [...] demonstrated that caregiving environments of African American children received lower quality ratings than those of white children [...] Aspects of care quality evaluated included caregiver responsiveness and sensitivity, qualities known to be associated with optimal facilitation of child development and school readiness [...] these results can be interpreted as evidence that residential location in comparatively resource-poor and segregated neighborhoods limits the ability of minority families to secure high-quality child care for their children.”

²³ The necessary time for infants, typically placed on their tummies atop a blanket or mat, to move freely and explore their surroundings.

daycare, that are often located in wealthier neighborhoods. Other compounding factors exacerbate poor Black families' ability to access proper childcare as public transit systems are frequently unavailable in poor areas and stringent work schedules do not allow the time necessary for long commutes.

The physical and socio-emotional consequences of institutionalized racism are significant at every stage of child development as demonstrated by the fact that play deprivation can occur literally from birth. Therefore, the physiological conditioning of our brains and bodies begins at birth. A lack of synaptic connections and learning impediments often occur because of a lack of experiences and not a lack of ability. The system depriving Black children of these formative experiences is the same system that deprives Black and Brown people of housing and developmental resources and amplifies systems of control in place of these resources. While my analysis does not contemplate infancy or toddlerhood, I use a racial lens to discuss these early stages in order to initiate a cataloging of the different manifestations of bodily dispossession in the afterlife.

At approximately two years old,²⁴ children begin practicing “spectator” or “onlooker” play during which they frequently watch other children at play but do not immediately engage with them. The physical proximity of play experiences becomes important as older two-year-olds transition from merely observing other children playing to playing physically near them; this is termed “parallel play.” As mentioned above, restricting babies and toddlers inhibits their ability to experience fully these first three forms of play. As babies age out of the toddler phase and into

²⁴ Notably, these ages and stages are not rigid. Stages of play overlap and can occur at much earlier or later ages for numerous socio-environmental and developmental reasons. For example, for many children growing up in large and/or extensive families, the associative and cooperative stages may occur much earlier due to the presence of older siblings, cousins, etc.

“childhood” at the age of three and/or four years old, children begin practicing “associative play.” In this stage of play, children interact with each other as they may be performing similar activities near one another. At this age, rules and even overly structured schedules replace highchairs, playpens, and bounce seats as adults seek to contain physically children’s play. Rules encoded within disciplinary policies combine with the implicit biases of teachers and administrators of preschool facilities and the consequences of a “Black body in motion” (Best) become increasingly evident as Black toddlers grow more mobile and vocal and teachers become reliant on exclusionary punishments.

The consequences of Black children’s physiological growth, bodily motions, and emotional expressions within the classroom result in disproportionately high rates of preschool suspensions and expulsions. School-based exclusionary policies and disciplinary codes are henceforth a primary source of racialized play deprivation. Walter Gilliam explains how preschool expulsion and suspension rates exist for the same reasons that low-quality daycares may be compelled to restrict infants and toddlers in highchairs and playpens: a lack of institutional resources and large child-to-adult ratios. Studies have also indicated that classroom teachers’ and instructors’ implicit biases towards Black children lead them to perceive the children as aggressive and threatening: “[T]hese correlations alone suggest that factors other than child behaviors contribute to the high rates of expulsion and suspension” (Gilliam 6). The primary factor is the operation of whiteness in the afterlife of slavery, as early educational institutions sanction deprivation via the operation of these violent readings of Black children, which then necessitate exclusionary policies to maintain classroom control.

Disciplinary codes “produce ideas about what constitutes deviance at the same time they legitimize the attending consequences.” These codes are “[l]ess about controlling violence, these

policies regulate students' non-violent movements, labeling expressions and forms of communication as 'defiance' and 'disobedience'" (Wun 182). Although behavioral differences enacted/embodied by Black children are not inherently deviant, punitive school-based codes legislate normativity based on white middle-class values. Black children, therefore, are suspended and/or expelled for historical perceptions and conditions that existed long before their personal entrance into the classroom. Any movement—whether inoffensive, playful and/or life-sustaining—is liable to be punished. The portrayal of Black children as inherently delinquent leads to a denial of their humanity and justifies their social death inside and outside of school. Social death, defined as the negation of the civil rights that provide legal protection against political, social, and physical violence, positions Black children as “always already the object and target of law, never its authors or addressees” (Cacho 5). This reality echoes back to the fearful condemnation of security force violence expressed by the female resident of Four Seasons referenced in this chapter's opening: “Y'all treating us like we're criminals and we're not the criminals.” Her community's children were targets of physical violence because their bodies, and therefore their play, are continually read through a white supremacist lens constructed in slavery.

This lens can be unconsciously acquired by other children in the classroom. Students may propagate pathological readings of their Black classmates as they witness brash responses and severe punishments inflicted more heavily upon their Black classmates. The process of racial identification intensifies throughout these early stages of physical and socio-emotional development; children actively use “racial categories to identify themselves and others, to include or exclude children from activities, and to negotiate power in their own social/play network” (Winkler 2). A critical examination of the historical construction of the racialized categories employed broadly by children uncovers the instrumentality of anti-Blackness in their socialization.

In the process of navigating relational power dynamics, children form play practices as tools for making sense of “how they will fit into the significance and structure of their social, political, and economic systems” (Isenberg and Quisenberry 5). For many Black children, the challenge becomes dealing with the ways they are excluded from systems of power as both their school and classmates deprive them of developmental and social play opportunities. In this way, play can trigger a child’s early understanding of race and sociality as they are invited into or excluded from group dynamics due to identity politics. Play experiences then become the source of consciousness for Black children that they are indefinitely involved in a power structure of which they are not the authors. Such self-awareness can engender feelings of individual and communal powerlessness and entrapment.

Given all the skills developed through certain types of play at different ages, the lack thereof contributes to Black children not performing at the same level with other children when they enter primary school.²⁵ Most significant to my discussion of Thomasville is the “cooperative play” stage that occurs from four through teen years (i.e., elementary school age). When participating in cooperative play, children are playing together and expressing a shared interest in the activity with their fellow participants. Children are equally interested in the challenges and experiences of the activity and the other children involved. Their play evolves as they learn the

²⁵ Not performing in accordance with historically racist, state-determined standards. As Bettina Love explains: “It is one of the fallacies of justice to know that the achievement gap is due to race and class and yet never proclaim racism and White rage as the source of the achievement gap” (*Abolitionist Teaching* 92). Relevantly, on a solution-oriented note, Meiners asserts that “[t]he response to the purported ‘academic achievement gap’ of African American and Latino students is not to close, deunionize, and privatize public schools but to widen what counts as legitimate curriculum and assessment, equalize school funding, remove white control of schools, and name and mobilize around the academic debt or the ‘opportunity gap’ owed to communities of color, not the achievement gap” (100).

boundaries of social behavior standards and the expansiveness of their own problem solving and creative potential.

This elementary-school age and stage of play officially marks the entrance into a larger education system through which institutionalized racism most clearly manifests itself in the form of “punitive control measures,” hyper-surveillance, restricted access to recess and classroom activity breaks, and “less school time allocated to the creative arts and physical education” (Monnat, Lounsbery, McKenzie, and Chandler S8). Also, “reduced recess in poorer areas is reflective of adult concerns that it is not safe for poorer children to have unstructured time; yet, it has not been proven that recess is unsafe” (Ginsburg and Milteer e206–7). Many of these restrictions on play are enforced in under-resourced and/or under-performing schools as an effort to reduce academic disparities and reinforce dominant socialization processes that mandate individualism and conformity despite evidence-based practices that reinforce the profound efficacy of physical and culturally responsive play in under-resourced schools. The perception of Black children and their movements as menacing and delinquent informs these policies, functioning directly against Black student welfare. Their time must be occupied with standardized assessments and structured activities that uphold whiteness and maintain the [school]master’s dominant social order.

Julio, a 7th grade student at Price, encapsulated this stage of institutionalization, characterized by a lack of play, as he stated: “School feel like prison—we here all the time.” Another middle-school student corrected him: “No, it feels like juvie.” Julio and his peer underline the urgency of constructively critiquing the school as an influential neighborhood institution; ergo, an indispensable structure upholding the afterlife of slavery in poor Black neighborhoods—like Thomasville where school staff and administration intentionally and unintentionally invite

debilitating outside institutions directly into children's lives as staff and administration employ police guards, contact Department of Family and Child Services (DFACS), and speak to the media about the poverty-related issues that challenge local families. These school officials, in accordance with the white cultural norms that undergird the United States' education system, subscribe to and profit from the racist, partial narratives propagated by public media and police tactics.²⁶

The lack of playspace and playtime provided to Black children exists across the institutions and spaces in which they are most frequently located, as barriers to physical play manifest in low-income neighborhoods through interpersonal violence, failing infrastructure, a lack of supervision and/or safe play spaces, fear of victimization or harassment, drug dealing, and vandalism. Additionally, as I have previously alluded, hyper-policing is an overlooked factor in play deprivation: police interrupt play in low-income neighborhoods with their mere presence, but most forcefully through stop-and-frisk policies and targeted physical violence. The violence of denying Black youth innocence and hyper-policing Black child bodies at play in their own neighborhood is made clear through the life and death of twelve-year-old Tamir Rice. Tamir Rice was playing in the snow with a toy-pellet gun when Officer Loehmann perceived Tamir as a threat and subsequently deprived Tamir of not only his right to play, but his right to live.²⁷ Hyper-policing of Black children's play and their play spaces exemplifies the ways in which law and capitalism coalesce into a system of domination. Complementing the conditions of slavery that imposed criminality and confinement as the consequences of Black bodily, autonomous movement, this

²⁶ There is a quagmire that results for teachers who are conscious of how institutional surveillance systems encoded into individual school policies interrupt the lives of their students. Arguably, the most prevalent of these policies include mandated reporting and zero tolerance. Several Thomasville faculty and staff have personal histories with the neighborhood community and/or specific families, which have offered them alternative methods of addressing concerns for student welfare that do not involve police and/or case workers.

²⁷ In her exclusive interview with *ESSENCE*, Samira Rice, mother of Tamir Rice, revealed that "After Loehmann killed Tamir, police officers then assaulted and handcuffed Tamir's sister (14 years old) as she ran sobbing to check on her baby brother."

system reproduces and routinizes fatalistic institutional violence by placing legally and socially sanctioned restrictions on the access to and width of the temporal and spatial movement of poor Black children.

As this section on development has outlined, play possesses special importance in the lives of poor Black children. The theorizing and processing that happens in play can equip them with the skills and imaginative force necessary to confront oppressive ideologies that restrict their holistic development. For this same reason, play must be deprived from Black children so that the conditions of the afterlife are maintained.

4.2 Play inside the Gates of the Black Ghetto in the Afterlife of Slavery

As of 2017, Atlanta Volunteer Lawyers Foundation (AVLF), an organization of volunteer lawyers, had worked with 10% of Four Seasons Apartments' 396 units fighting or avoiding evictions, eradicating mold and lead, and handling severe maintenance issues. Four Seasons can be conceptualized via Mitchell Duneier's definition of the Black Ghetto, a phenomenon delineated by the domination of external institutions that incite neighborhood disorder (225). The structural determinants undergirding the conditions in Four Seasons are simultaneously publicized in governmental records and news media and concealed through racialized media reports and irreproachable leasing companies/corporations. Because of a series of failed U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) inspections as well as the revelation of slumlord conditions and tax scandals, the religious 501(c)(3) organization, Global Ministries Foundation, that owned and operated Four Seasons Apartments at the time of my fieldwork in 2018 had been legally compelled to sell their properties to a company promising substantial renovations to the

complex. The arrival of Millennia coincided with city-wide gentrification²⁸ that rapidly displaced Thomasville students and fueled mass evictions of Four Seasons residents.

The Black Ghetto endures as a formidable feature of the afterlife of slavery, for within it multiple historically anti-Black institutions (police, welfare, education, real estate, etc.) work collaboratively to normalize, experiment, and extend legally and socially sanctioned restrictions on Black life. Together these operative institutions crystalize the housing deprivation system, which “produce[s] the lives contained within, shaping, for example, vulnerability to living without shelter as an expression and experience of racialized subordination in labor markets and consumer economies” (Willse 54). This housing deprivation system exacerbates the experience of existing within an “always already weaponized Black bod[y] (the weapon is blackness)” (Sharpe 16) while dwelling within a geographically and socioeconomically defined space of social death. In this way, the systemic criminalization of Black bodies “not only forecloses empathy but does so through producing people and places always already subject to a form of discrimination believed to be both legitimate and deserved” (Cacho 82). Black children in Thomasville, and those in Four Seasons Apartments in particular, are deprived of play by the same system that deprives their communities of physical protection (shelter) at governmental and corporate whim.

In June 2018, district councilwoman Carla Smith visited Four Seasons Apartments at the urgent behest of the Tenants’ Association as tenants were seeking the right to return after Millennia’s proposed renovations; they also desired an outlet to communicate their grievances about the ongoing harassment authorized by the new security company. While touring the complex

²⁸ See Mark Pendergrast, *City on the Verge: Atlanta and the Fight for America’s Urban Future*, as well as Shani Robinson and Anna Simonton, *NONE OF THE ABOVE: The Untold Story of the Atlanta Public Schools Cheating Scandal, Corporate Greed, and the Criminalization of Educators*, for information on the charter school movement, the BeltLine Project and gentrification in Atlanta, Georgia.

and individual units, Smith greeted residents with obvious condescension and indifference. As residents identified gaping holes in living room ceilings, bullet holes hidden behind family photos, toilets not bolted down, and tubs ringed with black mold, Smith asked, “What brand is your TV?” As residents expressed concerns for the pervasive roaches and cat-sized rats, Smith stated that the residents need “some Raid and a new exterminator.” Egotistically, in between her entrance into the individual units, Smith reiterated her pride for having been involved with the construction of the public playground located directly across from Thomasville Heights Elementary School and at the entry gate to the bottom set of Four Seasons apartments. She shared this even though there is now an approximately eight-foot iron gate that surrounds each of the two sets of apartments in the complex. The gate separates the public playground from the private complex.

Juxtaposed with such deplorable living conditions, signs of children are everywhere: toys on the roofs of units, children riding bicycles, small groups of children roaming past puddles of stagnant water, boarded windows, chemically infused roach traps, and walkways littered with garbage—candy wrappers, soda cans and firecracker residue. While walking through the complex, we [myself and the tenants escorting Smith] noticed a group of children attempting to climb over and slide through the iron gate to obtain the Frisbee or ball that had been thrown on the other side—the side nearest the playground. After tenant association members and Smith scolded the children about the dangers of climbing this massive fence, a tenant informed us, “They done put fences everywhere.” Kimberly Dukes, a former resident, later informed me that the fences are not there to keep danger out—rather they were constructed to keep people, specifically those fleeing from the police, in. The gates around the apartment buttress resident consciousness of the ways in which their lives are surveilled and criminalized. This consciousness is further amplified by the

fact that from within the gate surrounding the “top” set of apartments, tenants have a clear view of the federal prison and its three-tiered, barbed-wire fences.

In a neighborhood plagued by institutional and interpersonal violence, the impact of these gates is threefold. First, the gate prevents access to the playground which Smith brandished as evidence of her commitment to the residents’ quality of life, thereby mitigating the supposed benefits the playground might ordinarily provide to resident life. Second, the gate serves as an arbitrary division amongst Thomasville students. This demarcation was inadvertently revealed to me when Kendra wrote in my notebook: “[Meme] is mad because Ari won’t walk with her” (as I did not walk any of the students beyond the gateway entrance into Four Seasons that day). The next day, a few of the girls shared with me that Kendra is not allowed to walk outside the gate, while Meme is not allowed to walk inside the gate. (Meme lives in a house behind the complex.) This explanation parallels the ways in which some students proudly acknowledge they “from Four Seasons, nigga,” and others respond with an indignant, “No. I don’t live in Four Seasons.” Third, and most critically, the gate prevents parents from maintaining access to children at play in the complex and/or on the playground in the event of an emergency such as the shooting referenced later in this chapter.

The observance of children playing near and climbing up the gate urges a critique of the gate’s purpose in the ghetto. It reinforces the consequences of criminality—obstruction, confinement, and definition—for the Black community within and approximate to the apartment complex. In the afterlife, the ghetto has a cyclically haunting effect as it reminds people how they “were once excluded because they were black, now [excluded for] criminal behaviors, partly brought about by the ghetto itself, [which can] lead to further exclusion—first in prisons and jails and later in certain zip codes where large numbers of ex-felons tend to live” (Duneier 224).

Alongside the view of the federal prison, the gates bring the children's seemingly inescapable positionality within the cradle-to-prison pipeline²⁹ more fully into focus for Thomasville residents. The role of external institutions and governmental policies that strengthen and reinforce the gates around the ghetto, however, is pushed further away from public view. The observance of Black children at play in Thomasville confirms that racialized play deprivation emanates from the carceral conditions of the afterlife.

During her visit, Smith noted that Four Seasons has never had a leasing agent located in Atlanta, Georgia, as the leasing companies have always been geographically located in other regions of the country. The invisibility of controlling external institutions is not a phenomenon singular to Thomasville. In *No Way Out*, an ethnographic study on the social order of low-income neighborhoods like Thomasville—neighborhoods publicly defined by drug dealing, failing schools, and police enforcement—Waverly Duck explains the disruption “outsiders” introduce into the daily lives of the neighborhood residents. He writes that “[o]utsiders neither interact with people in these communities nor perceive the conditions that exist there, while at the same time creating policies that simultaneously produce and punish them” (51). Smith’s identity as a white upper-middle-class woman with the capacity to execute business on behalf of the state positions her as an extreme outsider.³⁰ Even though she is accountable to the residents because of their

²⁹ “So many poor babies in rich America enter the world with multiple strikes against them: born without prenatal care, at low birthweight, and to a teen, poor, and poorly educated single mother and absent father. At crucial points in their development after birth until adulthood, more risks pile on, making a successful transition to productive adulthood significantly less likely and involvement in the criminal justice system significantly more likely. As Black children are more than three times as likely as White children to be poor, and are four times as likely to live in extreme poverty, a poor Black boy born in 2001 has a one in three chance of going to prison in his lifetime and is almost six times as likely as a White boy to be incarcerated for a drug offense.” Marian Wright Edelman illustrates the term in her column article “THE CRADLE TO PRISON PIPELINE: AMERICA’S NEW APARTHEID.”

³⁰ Duck later defines “outsider” by clarifying how “Outsider status is given to anyone who does business on behalf of the state, such as politicians, mail carriers, social workers, law enforcement, trash collectors, teachers, firefighters, and emergency medical technicians” (85).

constituency, Smith's concern for their livelihoods was performative and her political responses to the conditions at Four Seasons have been empty and ostentatious. Her lack of sustained interaction with the residents affords her the privilege of physically and socially distancing herself from the morbid conditions that the residents are fervently trying to bring to her attention.

Smith's distancing as a city official allows for the management and exploitation of neighborhood violence because her negligence reinforces a sense of helplessness in the residents while legitimating the inordinately punitive policies of the landlord/leasing agency. Her negligence directly corresponds to the landlord's inaction enabled by Georgia laws that provide landlords with "little incentive to clean up unhealthy conditions." One tenant, Madrika Gray, described the moldy conditions of her Four Seasons Apartment unit to *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (AJC) reporter Willoughby Mariano; she informed him that the condition "takes away your value, your self value, living in an area like this." Madrika explains how chronic breathing problems and infections have damaged her children's health as well as their ability to attend school—and, unspoken, but implicit—their ability to play freely. The residents of Four Seasons apartments are "constantly exposed to evidence of their own irrelevance.' [...] living in degrading housing in dangerous neighborhoods sent a clear message about where the wider society thought they belonged" (Desmond 257). In the wake of slavery, Black lives are denied access to empathy and self-defense as their stories "disappear and are disavowed;" they are "ever-observed yet without recognition" (Wun 178–9). Smith's apathetic response to the dire conditions residents are surviving under maintains the trauma induced by the external domination and neglect that characterizes the Black ghetto.

During subsequent meetings with the Tenants' Association and Millennia representatives locally and regionally located, tenants spoke directly to the leasing company about the concerns

they maintained for their children.³¹ For example, the security company had handcuffed and detained children after they fled from uniformed security guards and their dogs. Speaking directly to the security agent, one tenant stated, “We didn’t receive a letter about security. We didn’t know ya’ll comin.” Another tenant lamented: “It was the way y’all came. Y’all came in a terrible way. And were terrorizing us.” A third tenant condemned the emptiness of such security measures as she declared, “You talkin about saving a life [and paying a security company] but I be coughing like a dog in the middle of the night [because of mold].” The perpetual reoccurrence of tenant grievances and the inaction that consistently results from these meetings proves that “[l]andlords rent to tenants [...] knowing that their legal situation puts them in a precarious position and potentially works against them. Unlike their tenants, landlords have a relatively free hand in operating outside the law” (Duck 110). In Georgia, “a tenant’s sole recourse is to sue for damages, but low-income tenants cannot afford to hire an attorney and test the unit” (Mariano). With some degree of truth, Smith annoyingly reiterated how little authority she has over their housing situation as the property is privately owned, but not yet fully controlled by a single company. She either neglected or refused to acknowledge how the property and its residents are existing in a liminal space that enhances their vulnerability to outside influences and myriad forms of violence.

At some point during the summer of 2018, Millennia provided documented evidence of its racist and classist perceptions of Four Seasons tenants in its “notice to all members of [residents’] households,” which outlined community policies that ban residents from “hanging out [...] playing [...] standing/congregating in front, behind or on the side of buildings...” Residents “shall not make [...] any disturbing noises, conduct, music, television, or parties anywhere on this property which

³¹ Chapter four recounts this struggle for tenant rights more extensively as the chapter focuses on the Black maternal care involved in community organizing in Four Seasons. As a result, meetings and documents briefly referenced in this chapter are elaborated upon later.

would or could, disturb or annoy any other resident(s).” Black children at play and Black families “hanging out” are methods of establishing social capital and strengthening collective efficacy, “which emphasizes mutual trust and solidarity among neighbors and a willingness to intervene for the common good or active social control of public space” (Chang, Hillier, and Mehta 2065). Efficacy, harnessed by Black people individually and collectively, threatens hierarchical relations that are predicated on the subjugation of Black bodies such as landlord/tenant and security/resident relationships. Therefore, Black children must be deprived of their rights to congregate and play to sustain the presence of institutional racism and the afterlife of slavery in their own neighborhoods.

Structural deprivation (play, housing, healthcare) in the ghetto intersects in the lived experiences and physical bodies of poor Black children. Deprivation produces scarcity and insecurity, which can incite interpersonal violence. In the two days before Smith’s visit to Four Seasons, two men under the age of thirty had been shot, one killed. The day after Smith’s visit and just three days after the shootings, I was sitting with Kimberly and her children and Monique and her family on the playground awaiting the start of the candlelight vigil commemorating the local shooting victim. Children were playing on the public playground Smith commissioned (outside the gate surrounding Four Seasons)—they were on the swings, climbing the ropes attached to the diamond-shaped platform, climbing the steps to the slide, talking under and on the slide—while we adults were sitting and talking on the park benches, in parked cars, and folding chairs around the entrance of the playground. After nearly half an hour of hanging out, we heard what we assumed was gunfire, but the men behind us promised was the sound of fireworks. Moments later, however, a woman walked calmly through the playground and touched my shoulder as she quietly informed us that,

“Yes.

They are shooting, Monique.”

She walked on...

No one seemed to move.

Not Immediately.

Then, a car was heard.

Then a car was seen...

Swerving

through

the

complex

up

And

over the curb,

just opposite the playground.

Suddenly, adults and children were running to their cars, other children attempted to slide between two broken poles in the iron gate, while the (privatized) Boys and Girls Club behind the playground locked its doors. One female child (maybe seven years old) stood alone—frozen, holding her white sandal—until a random adult picked her up and sprinted towards the iron gate. As they ran in one direction, a young Black boy, shirtless but packing two guns in his waistband, ran through the playground and between the swings in our direction. As he approached us,

Monique

stood on the tabletop and fearlessly yelled,

“All y’all niggas going to jail!”

We were both silenced as he raised his guns in our direction. I too froze for a second before moving away from the table and behind Monique.

The boy kept running and escaped into the neighborhood

... past the public pool.

As we departed the playground in each of our vehicles

to the
sound of
more
gunshots.

An hour later, safe inside my aunt’s house twenty-one miles away in the suburbs of Atlanta, I learned that another young Black man had been killed trying to keep the peace.³² #LLR³³

I returned to the playground when I was informed of the man’s identity. When Kimberly, her children, and I reconvened two hours later, her nine-year-old son, Jordan, asked: “Ari were you here for the commotion?” He had already forgotten that I directed him into the car and instructed him to remain ducked down in his seat. Kimberly recalled how, long before the ambulance, both the *First 48* film crew and the police arrived. The police arrived with choppers pointed at the crowd of residents that had formed. Calling for backup over their intercoms, the police were claiming that a crowd of 300 was present. Children were seen sitting on apartment steps and walking in the street while the police were removing the man’s body from the scene.

³² A week later, I learned through neighborhood gossip that the shooter was only sixteen years old himself. I have not seen any reports confirming this, but tenants seemed to know the boy’s personal history of violent trauma.

³³ The hashtag is commonly used to memorialize the life of two prominent Thomasville residents. To my knowledge, the hashtag was first used to remember the life of Red, Monique’s thirteen-year-old nephew who passed away after a motorbike accident in 2016. After the 2018 shooting recounted here, the hashtag has also been used to remember Richie, Monique’s twenty-seven-year old cousin who was murdered in the shooting. #LongLiveRed #LongLiveRichie

While this event may be received as an isolated incident of interpersonal violence, interpersonal violence is triggered by state violence (Meiners 69). In fact, this shooting is another example of violent external domination and the ways in which residents must “manage poverty in a terrain of life-altering sanctions” (Duck 96) at Four Seasons. As a condition of the ghetto, survivors of interpersonal violence must deal with the consequences of criminal investigations while the corporations or governments that precipitate the violence remain invisible. This form of external domination resulted in the loss of life and threatened play space and time, as the Black children who survived the shooting are subsequently hyper-criminalized, triggering an increasing need for the policing and containment of their bodies.

Reports on the debilitating housing conditions, instances of interpersonal violence, and drug-related crime in Four Seasons reiterate recycled police-driven narratives about gang influence and neighborhood lawlessness. These media reports sever these incidences of interpersonal violence from their context by erasing the histories of institutional racism and state-sanctioned violence that predispose children to vulnerability and compel their families to participate in survival economies. The erasure of institutional responsibility for neighborhood disorder conceals how “murder, which is relatively rare in most communities, is interpreted by people from outside the neighborhood, they tend to project their own preconceptions upon it. Prosecutors commonly put forward the notion that deadly violence is gang related because they regard inner-city neighborhoods as pathological” (Duck 83). Pathological explanations for the dangerous conditions in Four Seasons circulate uncritically as living near premature death is a normalized aspect of Black Ghetto reality in the afterlife slavery (Wun 178).³⁴ Such pathologies cause group-based harm

³⁴ According to “Atlanta, Georgia Life Expectancy Methodology and Data Table” (societyhealth.vcu.edu), the average life expectancy at birth for the 30315 zip code is 72, as opposed to 84 for the wealthiest zip code (30237) in Atlanta, Georgia. See also: Green, Josh. “Pricey Atlanta Zip Code Cracks 100 Wealthiest in the Nation.” *Curbed Atlanta*,

because they reinforce “disparaging stereotypes about Black family unfitness and need for white supervision, by destroying a sense of family autonomy and self-determination among many Black Americans, and by weakening Blacks’ collective ability to overcome institutionalized discrimination” (*Shattered* ix). Disparaging Black family life covertly criminalizes Black social-emotional movements that foster and reflect individual and group identity within Black communities.

The debasement of Black families and justification for increased surveillance is explicitly stated in one local newspaper: the news source quotes the police deputy chief describing Four Seasons Apartments as “islands of crime... [where] managing the lawlessness is [...] the best you can hope for,” while the deputy chief commander explained the “plan to focus anew on [Four Seasons]... ‘We’ll be bringing in reinforcements. Some you’ll see, some you won’t” (Boone). Another article covering a shooting that took place about a mile away from the apartment complex identified the alleged assailants as family murdering their own family over a crooked drug deal. Thomasville residents have contended that though the shootings were drug related, the murders were not intra-familial and were part of a series of murders that had occurred over the preceding two weeks. Narratives framed by anti-Blackness produce and sustain pathological assumptions of the Black Ghetto and ensure that the institutions upholding the afterlife yield a profit from neighborhood disorder: “‘This framework defines the actors as potential menaces to society, thereby undermining any sympathy when lives are taken by an act of violence. As a result, the public feels a macabre sense of relief when it is reported that the ‘menaces’ kill each other. Death

Vox Media, 20 Mar. 2018, www.atlanta.curbed.com/2018/3/20/17143258/atlanta-zip-code-100-wealthiest-nation-30327.

framed as violence begs the question, ‘Where is the tragedy?’” (Ginwright 55). This imposition of delinquency on Black bodies illustrates how intersectional violence can become compounded in Black childhood as poor Black children are adultified, criminalized, traumatized, and denied access to empathy. Furthermore, by dismissing the shootings as intra-familial and/or neighborhood gang related, police and the media can push the narrative that the homicidal incidences and the pathologies that prompt them are contained within the gates of the ghetto. No further investigation is necessary, nor is concern from the larger public merited.

Condemning the tension among the Thomasville residents, the local police, and public media, Kimberly informed me: “The news don’t know and they take the word of the [figure of the institution] and not the people living there [...] They always talk to another motherfucker to make our stories not true.” She related how the presence of a single gang in the neighborhood does not validate the police narratives of gang-driven neighborhood violence; in actuality, you rarely hear about people from Four Seasons shooting each other. The violence is perpetrated by external individuals, groups, and institutions—outsiders—forcing claims on, physically invading, and/or threatening a resident’s livelihood. Kimberly warned that outsiders “finna do a hostile takeover” as dealers, leasing companies, and real estate moguls claim new territory in the gentrifying neighborhood. Kimberly’s comments identify how “[m]isconstruing crimes as gang violence when there are clear individual motives leads to their description by law enforcement authorities and the media as ‘senseless’ acts of ‘random violence.’ In fact, many of these ‘random’ acts of violence are usually tied to interpersonal disputes related to retribution, issues over turf, and harm to innocent bystanders” (Duck 93). Thomasvilles’ children are thereafter labeled “at-risk,” “ghetto,” and “aggressive,” and their behavior and play practices are deemed “senseless” and “unwarranted” in accordance with the neighborhood descriptors deployed by the news media and police.

The potentially fatal consequences of these unexamined narratives combined with the invisibilizing of external institutions proliferate as Black children remain hyper-policed but unprotected. Meanwhile, the perpetrators of violence, both institutional and individual, remain at large. The Black child play that is created amidst and/or in response to Black Ghetto conditions has a unique ability to expose the structural determinants working to maintain the afterlife of slavery; simultaneously, their imaginative play can resist, reframe and reclaim Black community narratives.

4.3 Play as an Expression of Black Child Impossibility in the Afterlife of Slavery

The public narratives that circulate about Thomasville construct an assumed absence of Black childhood. Black children are excluded from the conventional definitions of childhood because “[t]he black [child] [...] is not weak enough to come across as innocent. [They are] a paragon of strength and experience” (Stockton 31). Consequently, “experience is still hard to square with innocence, making depictions of streetwise children, who are often neither white nor middle-class, hard to square with children” (Stockton 32). The experiences that publicly typify Black childhood are rarely regarded as enlightening or invigorating; rather, the experiences of “[e]xclusion, rejection, and stigmatization” that many Black Ghetto children endure “were neither desired nor imposed by healthy human beings” (Duneier 115). Their survival (read: resilience) through these experiences justifies the widely held belief that Black children have been deprived of a childhood. Because deprivation might precipitate depravity, the government must operate parentis locus via the carceral state (the children are adultified) or welfare state (the children are

infantilized). Under the oppression of both, the entire community is criminalized. This perceived impossibility of Black childhood exists in the wake, or afterlife, of slavery, which “produces Black death and trauma [...] [but] we, Black people everywhere and anywhere we are, still produce in, into, and through the wake an insistence on existing: we insist Black being into the wake” (Sharpe 11). Black children *exist within* the realm of impossibility as they unsettle conventional notions of childhood through their performances of resistance and freedom.

Because their play forms can be especially empirical Black children speculate, discover, and innovate methods of disrupting the violent institutional agendas that seek to deprive them of the socio-emotional, developmental, intellectual, and collective agency that play makes possible for all children. Black children living in poverty create their own survival practices that then become mechanisms of collective thriving transferred across generations through play and customs of care existing in familiar zones.³⁵ Through the play that occurs in these often-concealed zones, they learn, exchange, and create ways to signify and make meaning in spaces that deny them the freedom of personal signification.

Critical to these instances of meaning-making is the adult recognition of play in its myriad forms, as well as children’s recognition of themselves in play. I have witnessed how play can reveal the cultural dynamics and institutional apparatuses to which students have been exposed. This revelation confirms that play can speak across generational, invisible, and/or even hostile barriers. Here, I provide a brief example of self-directed play shared by a teacher at Thomasville

³⁵ Familiar zones can be conceptualized as relatively unregulated spaces established and utilized by youth to “foster informal social networks, to hide rule-breaking behaviors, and to maintain the impression of compliance with official policies that are actually unrealistic and impractical” (Silver 615). Children utilize familiar zones to meet social, safety, and economic needs. A fuller discussion of familiar zones and Black child play can be found in chapter two.

Heights Elementary School. Below is my retelling of the story shared with me during a public dialogue:

A student brought a sack of flour to school and claimed this was his “brick” [another name for a kilo of cocaine]. Other students were fascinated by the sack of flour and began playing with the student. The students playing with the flour understood the obvious drug reference. The students did not verbalize their experiences with the drug, yet through their engagement with the flour, students communicated a silent acknowledgement of their shared experiences.³⁶

Drugs of various types are common in the households and neighborhoods of many Thomasville students. It is important to reiterate that 80% or less of the neighborhood population has a high-school diploma or less and only half of the population is gainfully employed; because of these factors, opportunities for socioeconomic mobility are geographically absent from the neighborhood as businesses and jobs are scarce and virtually unattainable for many residents due to educational disparities and felony records. Drugs generate money and income that then circulate throughout the larger community—the money pays bills, purchases household supplies, and affords some personal luxuries. This child’s play is a method of communicating information about the conditions under which he may be living or to which he has been exposed.

³⁶ Challenges abound for teachers with an understanding of the students’ community. The teacher recollecting the “brick” encounter explains how she was careful not to punish or condemn the child for attempting to make sense of his relationship to drug dealing, but was also compelled to acknowledge that drugs are inappropriate to the school environment, and no child should be exposed to the violence associated with underground survival economies.

A similarly revelatory and communal play practice was introduced to me via the 2nd grade after-school students at Thomasville.³⁷ They were folding pieces of lined loose-leaf paper into dollar bill size folds, stacking them on top of each other, placing rubber bands around the stacks, then walking around school bragging about their “fat stacks” (or their cash money). With these stacks of paper, the students pretended they had large wads of cash that they continued to accumulate and eventually “spend” as they traded larger stacks for cuts in line. They even used the stacks to barter with me, their instructor, for classroom privileges: “How much will it cost me to get out of time-out?” I was once asked by a student after I pulled him aside.

Through the systematic production and exchange of their stacks, I watched the students discover and create new forms of play that opened them up to new ways of existing within their current circumstances, within their social networks, and within the larger world that constitutes their reality. While many adults read the “paper stacks” as both a waste of paper and an indication of their students’ interaction with drug dealing and hip-hop stereotypes, the practice exemplified the fact that resistance can take many forms. Hence, rather than ruling out the influence of such stereotypes, I believe that there is implicit value in the imaginative stacks. Like the one student’s “brick,” these students were revealing their neighborhood’s dynamics and the institutional underpinnings.

The children were developing new interactions with each other as they identified overlapping experiences and established a sense of ownership over a game or practice that could

³⁷ I was first introduced to the paper stacks in 2016 before leaving for my doctoral program. I continued to see the paper stacks in and throughout Thomasville the next three years. It was the joy and innovation in this specific play practice that created the foundation for this entire dissertation.

not be controlled by authority figures because they could always just fold more paper. The value is in the confidence of their ability to create and contribute via a reciprocal exchange.³⁸

This confidence and self-assured excitement was bursting out of Mason, a 1st grader, as he asked me to take him to the corner store. When I asked him if he had corner-store money, he flashed a paper stack at me, and informed me that they'll accept his stacks over there. The store does not accept the folded loose-leaf but we went to the store anyway and bought candy with my cash money.

The resistance in the "paper stacks" is obscure, and because of the *known* circumstances in which these children live, these Black children's creative play frequently gets disregarded as "wasteful," "childish," and/or "ghetto." And it becomes easy to overlook how these children were exchanging practices and ideas as they contributed to the expansion of their neighborhood culture. I was later told by a parent that high school students were seen carrying a version of the stacks and the middle school principal said his students were using their notebook paper for the same purposes.

Clearly, the elementary students were creating methods of asserting and redefining themselves in spaces controlled by hierarchies of age, socioeconomic class, and education such as at their school and in their home. This self-definition or self-valuation was being overlooked by teachers as mere mimicry and overlooked by community adults because of the seemingly frivolous value of child's play. Adults missed the fact that after having worked to create this cash, students' play led to a small-scale economy. Thomasville students reside within the city's bottom household

³⁸ Just think about it: we all walk a little taller, a little happier, a little more confidently when we have more money in our pocket than we are used to. We even buy name brand cereals and fill up our gas tanks, making us a little bit more confident and assured about our daily activities and interactions as well as about what we have, can, and will accomplish.

income bracket. With their “paper stacks,” students attempted to negotiate status, authority, and privileges with each other and adults in their community. There was no cash (the children wanted and/or needed cash and adults were not able to provide cash), so these kids created their own cash system. Play produces new knowledge and shifts realities. Through the paper stacks, students were learning how they exist within a community network that is formed through and around shared experiences of poverty, consumerism, and innovation.

Another communal and culturally responsive³⁹ example of play that invited self-definition and communal recognition occurred at the live performance of the “5th Grade (Music Video)”⁴⁰ at the 2018 Thomasville 5th Grade Graduation Ceremony. A 5th grade student, referred to in this paper by his rap name, Limitless Kin, collaborated with the school media specialist, Ms. Z, and a prominent male teacher, Mr. O, to create a literacy project that resulted in the online music video and school-based public performance. My first encounter with the song was at the graduation ceremony, which was held in the cafeteria. The stage backdrop was draped in silver and gold streamers with a black banner that read “Reach for the Stars CLASS OF 2029” in white hand-painted letters. The principal, vice principal, and other administrators had front-row seats on the right side of the floor.

Limitless Kin and Mr. O took to the stage and began performing. A few verses in, all the 5th grade boys, most dressed in their white button-down shirts and black dress pants, and one 5th grade girl in a white button down and jeans rushed the stage with bags of Hot Cheetos, Takis, and stacks of cougar bucks (fake money from the cash reward system the school instituted to

³⁹ According to Geneva Gay, cultural responsive practices “center the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance style of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them” (newamerica.org).

⁴⁰ “5th Grade (Music Video)” *YouTube*, uploaded by Thomasville Heights, 21 May 2018, <https://youtu.be/9QupppswUGE>

incentivize good behavior). The students danced while Limitless Kin and Mr. O rapped the refrain, “Fifth grade came a long way. Yea, fifth grade came a long way. We turn up. We turn up. We turn UP.” Students threw and littered the stage with cougar bucks, while the crowd of parents swarmed the rope barrier that divided them from the seated students; with smartphones recording, babies on hips and shoulders, and loud unifying chants, the parents were turned up. It seemed that most parents knew the lyrics.

Some administrators were obviously repulsed by the throwing of cougar bucks, an imitation of “throwing cash” or “making it rain” often seen in strip clubs; Ms. Z, in conversation with Kimberly and myself, did not deny the connection to strip clubs. However, they elaborated upon the fact that throwing money has developed a new significance in their community. The practice can signify sharing wealth and experiencing great joy. The local cultural references in the performance engaged the larger intergenerational community in a moment of play and joy-making.⁴¹

There are obvious overlaps among the paper stacks, the “brick,” and the music video in which people, extreme and somewhat outsiders, might read all three play practices as glorifying stereotypical hip-hop and drug dealing culture. However, if you noted in the analysis of the paper stacks and listened to the lyrics that compose “5th Grade,” it becomes evident that all three forms of play are not only telling stories of their community’s struggles with state-sanctioned, institutional oppression, but also employing community-building play practices. In “5th Grade,” Limitless Kin identifies teachers who acknowledge the omnipresent pressure students carry to hit the streets and make money; he says: “The teacher main concern/ instead of tryina be a baller/

⁴¹ This was one of many moments in which profound pride and ratchet Black joy were simultaneous. See chapter two for definition of “ratchet” and chapter three for “Black joy.”

show him how to be a scholar.” Later, he references the school’s 2015 status as the lowest-performing school in the state of Georgia; the status was conferred after a series of chronically failing standardized test scores: “Remember the time we was failin/ Georgia Milestone we ain’t failin.” Limitless Kin concludes by identifying the major overhaul to their educational experience his community was subjected to as Atlanta Public Schools (APS) entered into a public-charter school partnership agreement with Purpose Built Schools Atlanta (PBSA) in 2016: “Believe you can achieve/ Stay in school do the streets later [...] Purpose Built got a lot of haters/ 2015 they was goin out bad/ Almost shut down that was really bad.” The experiences Limitless Kin and Mr. O lyrically illustrate are communal. The 5th graders “came a long way” with and within their community. Thus, the “we” in the refrain, “We turn up. We turn up. We turn UP,” is not limited to the students.

Play, specifically imaginative and performative play, can subvert and/or reinforce the oppressive ideologies that criminalize children’s physical, developmental, and socioemotional movements. In the wake of slavery, state-sanctioned obstacles and the conditions of poverty continually impede Black children’s developmental trajectories. However, these impediments can yield alternative renderings of childhood that expose all extant oppressions operating in conventional definitions of childhood. If we understand Black children as already free but quickly constrained by an anti-Black social schema—the schema allows for the violent conditions of the Black Ghetto, fatalistic hyper-policing, and institutionalized play deprivation—then Black children and their cultural productions innovated through play compel us towards an acute awareness and radical reimagining of the possibilities that already exist. Play provides a safe foundation for Black children to see, affirm, and cultivate each other *and* their community. Through play Black children can not only identify shared needs and invent solutions such as in the

“paper stacks” example, but also reframe historical and communal narratives such as in the “5th Grade (Music Video).”

5.0 pLaY bReAk

Odale (7 years old): "I gotta friend named Ratchetboy and he gotta girlfriend named Ratchetgirl and he kiss his girlfriend like *kissing noise* (as he twists and shakes his body to indicate a sensual hug)..."

Odale: "These Real People!!!"

Mason (5 years old): "Somebody stole his girlfriend... I'm a beat him up."

Kaden (6 years old): "His girlfriend be fighting people."

Odale: "Her name is Strawberry... She at school..."

...

Kaden: "He doesn't like [his old crush] cause she's ratchet..."

Their Mama: "Oh, she's dusty!"

6.0 “Love is like a tree. When a new child in the family comes, your love just grows... You never run out of love to give”: Ratchet Womanism in the Formation of Community & Kinship Networks

“A ‘womanist’ is a feminist, only more common.”

- Alice Walker

“Ratchet is what we come from, it’s our culture, it’s how we livin, it’s the way we came up. We came up struggling hard... Ain’t had a motherfuckin thing... Niggas ain’t got shit. I ain’t ashamed of where I come from... You got to keep it thorough and be real with yourself. This is real ratchet shit on our end.”

- Mandigo

“They [Thomasville students] finna get ratchet now if it already wasn’t... Cause they free and they loose. And they can yell.”

- D

“Joaning just come to your brain out of nowhere... That’s how I learned my ABCs”

- Zuri

“Living as I have argued we do in the wake of slavery, in spaces where we were never meant to survive, or have been punished for surviving and for daring to claim or make spaces of something like freedom, we yet reimagine and transform spaces for and practices of an ethics of care (as in repair, maintenance, attention), an ethics of seeing, and of being in the wake as consciousness; as a way of remembering and observance...”

- Christina Sharpe

On a hot day in July 2017, Big Franko and I walked up to the corner of Grant Park and were immediately engulfed by a sea of children, teenagers, and adults all wearing blue T-shirts. Children were sitting at the benches, some chasing each other, while adults were fixing plates at the buffet spread across the picnic tables. Mr. Neal’s first family reunion was under way. As we sat down in a shady corner underneath a huge tree, Mr. Neal turned to us and told me, “Everything

in blue is mine.” Mr. Neal,⁴² a graduate of Thomasville Heights Elementary School, had eleven children, fifty-two grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren (at the time of the picnic). The majority, if not all, of his family tree extends throughout Thomasville Heights Elementary School, the original Thomasville Heights Projects, and now Four Seasons. As we sat and talked with Monique, a mother of nine and one of Mr. Neal’s daughters, we watched four or five children pile up on Mr. Neal, pushing each other off his lap and shouting at one another, “My grandpa! My grandpa!” When the pile up started to become rough, Mr. Neal admonished his grand- and great-grand-children to “go on and play somewhere,” in the way that old Black folks do. As he did, he unconsciously instructed them to organize, learn, and perform their part in the community.

Through countless debates, a few barbeques, and plenty of lunch breaks over the course of my first summer at Thomasville, Mr. Neal revealed to me both the challenges and the alchemical effect children have on a person’s most ordinary experiences. Mr. Neal’s comment, “Love is like a tree. When a new child in the family comes, your love just grows... You never run out of love to give,” validates the significance of extensive kinship networks and the integral role children possess within them. In recalling Mr. Neal’s tree metaphor to convey the connection between love and kin, this chapter describes how play helps build strong roots. Through play, “family as a concept [becomes] elastic and inclusive,” collective child-rearing practices become diversified as youth innovate care and pedagogic strategies to extend to younger children, and younger children establish their own “networks of care that [don’t] depend on biological relationships” (McClain 55). In this way, Black children and their specific aura of play ensure that “racism and resistance to racism are [...] not the sole defining features of a black sense of place” (McKittrick 949).

⁴² His family was referred to as “Thomasville Royalty” by one Thomasville Heights Elementary School teacher.

Instead, a relational culture of intergenerational care transferred through structured and imaginative games is a defining feature of this sense of place, and residents' sense of self.

I use field narratives and discussions with residents to document the community's familial and historical relations that create prominent social networks. Using these social networks, which are frequently child-centered, I theorize how play manifests the horizontal worlds of sociality and agency between Black children and their larger communities as I identify the construction and demonstration of "customs of care in which younger children are placed in the care of older ones" (Hale and Bocknek 90) and "familiar zones." Identifying and analyzing familiar zones enhances our recognition of the strategies youth employ as they "[engage] in the process of knowledge production that is most necessary for their own flourishing" (Floyd-Thomas 2).

Because of the tensions within which Black children are situated, I find that play is not only reflective of that tension, but is one informal strategy used by Black children to call other Black children into community and transform these tensions into a form of resistance. In play Black children enact a radical subjectivity that becomes critical engagement. Through customs of care, children are invited into myriad forms of play, and through these established relationships, younger children eventually contribute to the longevity of familiar zones. Familiar zones can be conceptualized as relatively unregulated spaces established and utilized by youth to "foster informal social networks, to hide rule-breaking behaviors, and to maintain the impression of compliance with official policies that are actually unrealistic and impractical" (Silver 615). Children utilize familiar zones to meet social, safety, and economic needs. In womanist fashion, Black children living in the Black Ghetto extend the "revolution to be self-actualizing in a death-dealing context" (Floyd-Thomas 3) as they uphold a commitment "to [the] survival and wholeness of entire people" (Walker 4).

Within my research situated at Purpose Built Schools Atlanta (PBSA) and the neighborhoods that comprise the school cluster, familiar zones refer to the peer-governed, unregulated spaces in which Black children and youth use their personal agency to form, discover, and exchange strategies to endure amidst the rigidity of state demands, elder hierarchies, and the aforementioned tensions associated with their intersectional identities. Within these zones, children “confuse the adult order” and “create for themselves considerable room for movement within the limits imposed upon them by adult society. This deflection of adult perception is crucial for both the maintenance and continuation of the child’s culture and for the growth of the concept of the self for the individual child” (James 395).⁴³ These zones exist on the periphery of or obscurely within casual adult-governed spaces and formal bureaucratic institutions; for example, students’ interactions and conversation topics shifted when we were playing on the trampoline, whispering at the kitchen table, laughing at the lunch table, climbing on the playground, waiting in the car, sitting on the sidelines, or in the cut at recess⁴⁴ as opposed to in the classroom or in the living room with their guardians present. These shifting performances and scripts reinforce the sagacity that children possess as they maintain the boundaries of their familiar zones.

I structure this chapter by first defining ratchet womanism and the concept’s function as a framework for reading the Black child play and bodily expressions that transpire in the hood. Ratchet womanism, situated within a broader history of Black feminism, identifies the

⁴³ For children in families living in severe poverty, such as those in Thomasville, familiar zones may exist within larger familiar zones. The families themselves may create and vacillate in and out of a community-wide familiar zone away from the authority of welfare agents, security officers and police, and within that, the children carve out their own zones away from adults.

⁴⁴ One afternoon during summer camp (2018), I walked outside of Price towards the cutaway where I noticed the Thomasville 5th grade girls were huddled around a student. As I walked up one student said “Now we can’t do it anymore. Cause she’s [referring to me] gona tell on us. You gona say we too young.” I reminded them that I’m not a teacher. So, she turned around and told the group, “Yall gotta cover me.” She proceeded to bend over, grab the bench, and twerk to the music playing from another student’s phone, surrounded by her peers’ rhythmic chants.

physiological impetus towards survival that is creatively manifested in the sociocultural, interpersonal relations that comprise the Black community. This framework provides a foundation for understanding the local interaction order in the PBSA communities; these communities consist of intergenerational kinship and friendship ties that undergird communal solidarity and collective efficacy that molds, informs, and maintains “street codes”⁴⁵ and organized survival practices. Next, I theorize “ghetto games” through a ratchet womanist lens in order to reveal how Black child play creates and sustains community and kinship networks in the Black Ghetto. Whether in familiar zones, formal institutions, or public spaces, the social embodiment of Black children’s games is “significant in its power to carry, pass on, and connect the core values and ideals of a [...] tradition from the past, and project it into the future as a memory” (Gaunt 59). By using their bodies to preserve a common history of ghetto games and the traditional communalism contained within them, Black children cultivate their own shared identity. Finally, I illustrate how the ghetto games currently engaged by Thomasville and Slater children comprise an archive of knowledge that is passed down and expanded through customs of care and familiar zones.⁴⁶ Understanding the operation of ghetto games in the broader PBSA community provides a foundation for recognizing active, self-facilitated, and unstructured play and communication between Black children and youth occurring in familiar zones. Their play unconsciously expresses a ratchet womanist epistemology that highlights the way play centers a community’s lived experiences and constructs

⁴⁵ Duck cites Elijah Anderson in order to define “the code of the street [...] [which] refers to the set of informal but commonly understood rules that govern interpersonal behavior in public when law enforcement and other formal means of settling conflicts are absent” (5).

⁴⁶ Psychologically, “[a]ctive play fosters personal meaning. When children perceive events as personally relevant, their neural connections proliferate and situations, ideas, and skills become part of their long-term memory. Meaningless concepts, such as isolated facts, are irrelevant and typically will not become part of long-term memory” (Isenberg and Quisenberry 6).

an embodied praxis that can reframe and/or reject oppressive social constructions, resulting in a more cohesive Black community.

6.1 Ratchet Womanism & the Creative Impetus toward Survival

Black child play, particularly occurring amidst the conditions of poverty, is a physical manifestation of the local ordinary as it enacts what I forward as ratchet womanism. Womanism is “concerned with the mental, physical, and social dimensions of Black women’s real-lived epistemology because knowledge construction that seeks to inform Black women’s culture, survival, and liberation must be embodied and multisensory” (Floyd-Thomas 5–6). Because 89% of Thomasville families are led by single women,⁴⁷ the children likely mirror the values they witness in their own community through play and dialogue with and within Thomasville. In Black everyday practice, their play forms are ethnocentric methods of channeling and establishing a politics of the body that centralize and perform the confluence of the local, communal, diasporic, and ancestral. Moreover, because play evolves and adapts to new or shifting circumstances while children grow, play is also capable of building expansive kinship bonds throughout the neighborhood and across generations as Black children experience the cyclical impact of state and institutional violence, but also the cyclical impact of womanistic love.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Statistics are from the 2017 American Community Survey

⁴⁸ I define love in accordance with M. Scott Peck’s definition in *The Road Less Traveled*: “The will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth. Love is as love does. Love is an act of will—namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love.”

I forward the term ratchet womanism to specify how Black child play sources the radically visionary/imaginative, self-sufficient, and community-oriented aspects of womanism in a politics of the body existing under state-sanctioned deprivation that normalizes the conditions of the Black Ghetto. Employing ratchet womanism as a framework for reading Black child play allows us to examine first the ways in which Black children use creative performance strategies and embodied responses to address the “fundamental need to be seen and heard on one’s own terms” (Cox 37). In examining these strategies, I illuminate how Black children use their bodies to resist debilitating tropes within the context of “policies, structures or institutions that promote and/or result in inequality, oppression, marginalization, and denies human beings his or her full humanity as a citizen or resident of a nation state” (Brown and Young 7). Ratchet and play—ratchet play—can be a method, divorced from Black respectability, for Black children to make themselves visible to others. The games recollected in this chapter continually ground children simultaneously in their community, culture, and body and affirm how Black child play demonstrates the viability of “the four tenants of ‘womanism’—*radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love, and critical engagement*” (Floyd-Thomas 5–6) as they exist in Thomasville. I argue that ratchet womanism provides an avenue for understanding how a Black child comes to know and is known by their larger communities, and the ways in which this knowledge informs their self- and social consciousness.

The first appearance of ‘womanism’ in Walker’s works occurs in the short story “Coming Apart” in *You Can’t Keep A Good Woman Down*, in which ““the wife has never considered herself a feminist—though she is, of course, a ‘womanist.’ A ‘womanist’ is a feminist, only more common”” (Phillips xix). Layli Phillips explains how “[t]his act of joining the terms ‘woman’ and ‘common’ at the border of feminist/not feminist’ situated a particular mode of women’s resistance

activity squarely within the realm of ‘everyday’” (xix–xx). Womanism affords Black people personal and social agency while working to ensure there are no hierarchies of difference by promoting a recognition of daily, shared experiences between oneself and others. Womanism fulfills its commitment to uplifting Black communities by encouraging Black people, Black women especially, who are frequently situated at the community’s center, to practice autonomy and community-consciousness in their everyday living.

Ratchet, too, is a lifestyle situated within the ordinary livelihoods of Black folks. Real ratchet shit connotes a shamelessness about the ways Black folks have had to survive. Ratchet frequently involves a public display of the dirt in the struggle to survive that is often hidden for fear of shame. The public expression of what has historically been relegated to private domains disrupts the public/private binary rigidly enforced by Black respectability politics and predicated on white heteropatriarchal cultural norms. Ratchet, then, can be read as the “performance of the failure to be respectable, uplifting, and a credit to the race, as opposed to the promotion of failure or respectability” (Stallings 136). This display or performance is propelled by an embrace and embodiment of the fervent emotions that comprise the *impetus*—the force or energy that moves the body—towards survival amidst Black Ghetto conditions existent in the afterlife of slavery.

Grounded in the Black Ghetto, ratchet exists in and reveals “spaces where we [Black people] were never meant to survive” (Sharpe 131), as it moves against the notion that whiteness is the only precept for survival. Because ratchet disrupts socialization into acceptable, public performances and ways of being, readings of ratchet as inherently negative reflect back to us the exercise of internalized oppressive ideologies. For instance, sitting around the table in the classroom during an after-school break-out session one afternoon, Aariah picked up the research

question sheet⁴⁹ I had drafted for them and laughed out loud. She asked amusedly, “You still doing this?” I told her that they did not give me good answers the first time I asked. Laughing again, Ariaiah read aloud from my sheet: “How do you define ratchet.” I responded, “Well... how do you define ratchet?” Ariaiah’s response, and the subsequent group-wide discussion her comment prompted, follows below:

Ariaiah: Just go to Four Seasons and you’ll see ratchet.

Me: What do I look for?

Ariaiah, and four or five other girls clamored: Look for someone fighting... arguing.. shooting... People have their guns out for no reason... They sell stuff they ain’t supposed to sell... Weed, blunts...

Another girl interjects: Why you gotta say that? You coulda just said “Stuff they ain’t supposed to sell.”

Ariaiah: We have a candy lady. So...

Me: You not supposed to sell candy?

Another girl: Just not on Saturdays... cause that’s when the police come out.

⁴⁹ I had drafted a list of questions I wanted to ask the students after school. I circulated the sheet around the table of 3rd–5th grade girls one afternoon and asked if they had any answers. The questions were: 1) What makes a child a child? 2) How do you define “ratchet”? 3) What does it mean to be ratchet? 4) What makes a game a game? 5) How do you know if someone “play too much”? 5) What’s great about being Black? Responses to each question are shared, and some discussed, in chapter three.

Relevantly, in a previous dialogue with Aariah and her after-school peers, a Black girl student and Four Seasons resident commented that “[Ratchet] means to be ghetto—it means to ****body rolls**** and be doing ghetto stuff... Ghetto means to be bad and you don’t know nothing.” In their discussion of ratchet, the students reveal how heavily intertwined the concept is with conceptualizations of the Black ghetto as a place, a set of behaviors, an embodiment. Ratchet, broadly defined by Four Seasons residents and Thomasville teachers, is “loud, out of place” and “ignorant.” Conflating the conditions of the Black Ghetto that necessitate underground survival economies (tenets of the afterlife of slavery) with ratchet, the creative and physiological impulse toward survival, reattaches the bodies of poor Black people to a violent political discourse that associates Blackness with tragedy, irresponsibility, criminality, and futility.

Aariah’s comments illustrate how attaching ratchet to the public display of what should remain private—fighting, arguing, discussion and exchange of money—becomes a reading of Black bodies as “rude,” “aggressive,” and “violent” (terms associated with “ghetto,” not necessarily ratchet, according to the same Four Seasons residents and Thomasville teachers). Most importantly, however, their comments exhibit a community consciousness as they acknowledge the relationship between ratchet and the movements and expressions of the body, as well as the interaction order that is functioning under the constrained conditions that delineate Four Seasons as the Black Ghetto—the interaction order to which everyone in the neighborhood must respond (Duck 138). Because everyone must respond to these collective means of navigating and surviving within their community and the larger world, everybody has some ratchet in them (Badazz and Chris).

Whether behind closed doors (example: “Ratchetfied Bill Clinton”) or “in da streets,” ratchet is self-permitting the compulsion of impulse even at the risk of reproach. The communal

experience of surrender to the physiological and sociocultural impulse towards survival can engender a vitality impervious to the genocidal impact of social death. The connection to our bodies is critical to human survival—ratchet is the practicing and conditioning of our bodies to intend towards creative, subversive, and sustainable usage especially in the presence of overwhelming struggle. #TheStruggleIsReal. Ratchet exemplifies the fact that “under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (Halberstam 2). The losing is threefold: losing the inclination towards safety that mandates an acquiescence to white hetero-patriarchal middle-class norms; losing the neoliberal perception that an individual is responsible for, and therefore isolated within, her own struggle; and losing oneself to the prolific potentiality of uncertainty.

Ratchet most acutely intersects with womanism in its exhibition of community-consciousness that situates this impetus concentrically. The concentricity prompts an active undoing of the myth of individualism and the corresponding experiences of shame. Ratchet is vitalized relationally—the force simultaneously manifests inward and outward—and activates a felt awareness that the experience of struggle belongs to the community. For example, in his definition of ratchet, Mandigo, the Ratchet King responsible for creating the term, recollects how “it ain’t all about a hoe or a nigga, cause we all got some ratchet in us... See, I remember growing up when we ain’t got no water. We got to go next door. Ms. Brown can we get a bucket of water? Madea might say go get some water from Ms. Brown so we can take a bath, and all five of us

might be in the tub.”⁵⁰ Ratchet is in the interdependence of survival and the common dirt associated with living in the Black Ghetto.

In “Do Da Ratchet,” Lil Boosie’s description of ratchet compels an identification with a certain shamelessness that can exist across gender; he raps:

She in da club jiggin like she a classic chick she on da wall posted
up u kno u ratchet bitch
She got bout 9 churin but she be makin feddies
But i cant talk bout lil momma cuz i got three already (Harris,
Hatch, Mandigo, and Williams)

Here, Lil Boosie sees aspects of himself in the chick with nine children. Ratchet is in the recognition of self in other. Similarly, in “Ratchet (Remix),” Hurricane Chris raps:

This for the nigga who be stunting in his baby momma car
Ran out of gas in his baby momma car
When his baby momma call he ain’t gon’ answer the phone
Cause he know she gon’ tell him to bring your ratchet ass
home (Badazz and Chris)

Hurricane Chris proceeds to list the ratchet in himself, as well as “your sister, brother, auntie, uncle [...] your niece [...] her sister.” The whole family is ratchet. The whole city is ratchet. The whole region is ratchet.

As evidenced in Mandigo’s comments, as well as Lil Boosie and Hurricane Chris’s lyrics, ratchet not only exists across gender identities, but can also reframe gender performances by

⁵⁰ “Mandigo Ratchet City King live from Angola State Penitentiary” *YouTube*, uploaded by RealLyfe Productions, 17 February 2017, <https://youtu.be/vXbTKH0BSC0>

illustrating the ways in which “[t]he word *ratchet* indexes not only poor, working-class Black behavior, but also non-normative forms of practicing sexuality” (Lane 44). In the aforementioned lyrics, there is, at times, a cross-gender identification, and at other times, a cross-gender interdependence (specifically, a man’s reliance on a woman), that eludes the rigid gender norms and hierarchies that publicly position man as the breadwinner and figurehead in a heterosexual relationship. However, each of the three male rappers illustrate ratchet as extant in the interdependence of ostentation—the nigga needs his baby mama to stunt in public. In his definition of Black queer literacies, Eric Pritchard explains how “queer” is not exclusive to LGBTQ people, but includes those inhabiting non-normative subjecthood such as “the pathologized ‘welfare queens,’ teenage parents, drug addicts, sex workers, incarcerated prisoners, single fathers, and single mothers. While each of these identities may include individuals who are heterosexual or normatively masculine or feminine, the gender and sexual practices of these individuals ‘stand on the (out)side of state-sanctioned, normalized, White, middle- and upper-class, male heterosexuality’ and are therefore still viewed as lacking propriety, respectability, and are thus insufficiently normative” (22).

For poor Black women and femmes, their identifying and/or being labeled as ratchet can result from “Black women’s desire for individuality and self-determination *outside* of structures which silence us,” (Lane 27) which frequently entails a refusal or lack of desire to “mimic the problematic patriarchal family structure of white people” (Lane 27). These decisions and behaviors, situated within a racist and sexist socio-political context, acquiesce with neither class-based respectability nor normative heteropatriarchal practices of sexuality—these women are queered by their race, class, and sexuality as they fail to be a credit to their race, and forge new

ways of being. Emphatically, “the question of who is and what constitutes ratchet is a struggle over which configurations of race, class, gender, and sexuality are most legitimate” (Lane 28).

The relationship between queerness and ratchet womanism surfaces “[i]f we think about queerness as a resistance to the politics of normativity, whether that’s whiteness as normative or straightness as normative, then there’s something fundamentally queer about Black people making an intentional commitment to love each other and show up for each other in the fullness of our Blackness in a system that normalizes white supremacy and anti-Blackness” (Dionne). The radical subjectivity—the “outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior” (Walker xi)—and redemptive self-love is visible in the impulse to survive on one’s own terms to the best of their ability in the Black ghetto. The impetus functioning amidst these conditions can disconnect the body from harmful mainstream values and practices entrenched in whiteness and further connect the body to the immediate, local context where the consciousness that “everybody got something wrong with them” (Sanneh) as Lil Boosie explains, or “everybody got some ratchet in em” (Badazz and Chris), is shared, is joy-producing, and is mutually reinforced by a public acknowledgement of their communal struggle.

6.2 Womanist Ethics & the Local Interaction Order

Monique was visibly upset leaving the PALS (Parents As Leaders) office attached to the gymnasium after we received word that an organizational representative was trying to abruptly end the free lunch program the PALS were facilitating for the entire Thomasville community during the summer of 2017. So, I followed her. She was moving swiftly through the back hallway leading to the school cafeteria when she stopped to face me. Indignantly she declared: “You ain’t

finna handle us like that! [...] People do Thomasville so dirty [...] These are our kids.” Though she was speaking directly to me, I knew she was actually speaking to the representative who was about to deprive the eighty or more individuals and families that had been participating in the free breakfast and lunch program during the summer. In her private proclamation that “These are our kids,” Monique was invoking responsibility for *all* of Thomasville’s children—whether they are biologically hers or not. Monique’s comment echoed Kimberly’s intimation to me a day earlier. She said, “We may fight, but this is family.” In separate conversations, Monique and Kimberly were introducing me to what constituted normalized behavior in the neighborhood and what was considered “acceptable at their parties” (as stated by a former community member and PBSA employee).

Black people are perceived to be deeply devoted to a widely shared belief that they are responsible to and for each other. The consciousness of Black people has a common historical social memory that has been preserved through habitual practices that foster links between generations of youth, and between youth and adults (Gaunt 232). Dorothy Roberts explains how scholars “argue that most Black Americans share a social orientation characterized by ‘communalism,’ which emphasizes the social interdependence of people” (*Shattered* 232). The social ecology of Thomasville consciously and unconsciously reflects that interdependence through the habitual practice of shared dwelling—persisting in a state of individual and collective struggle (conditions of the afterlife), enduring weeks of intense grief at human loss and material deprivation (conditions of the Black Ghetto), relaxing in extended afternoons of communal play (neighborhood kickball tournaments and firecracker shoot-outs), and relishing evening-long celebrations (Thomasville Heights Reunion Day and Fourth of July fireworks).

Mya, a community advocate working at Thomasville Heights Elementary School, recalled the summer-long breaks she spent in Thomasville throughout her own childhood. Mya expanded on her critical engagement with play deprivation in *Four Seasons* by identifying prevalent neighborhood dynamics. She stated that Thomasville “has been the same. It’s not been any growth.” By “same,” Mya was referring to the continued presence of poverty-stricken conditions, violence, and drugs, and a lack of educational focus. Families are “always in survival mode.” I then asked if she would argue there is community in Thomasville. Mya responded that “some people don’t have family, so that’s their family. That’s all they know [...] That’s how I get my clients. Word of mouth. They definitely lean on one another. That’s how they get the resources.” Reflecting on the gendered dynamics I witnessed in control of the public identification and exchange of resources, I asked about her perception of the mothers in Thomasville. Mya asserted that Thomasville “is definitely a female-led, child-led community [...] This would be the place you come to if you’re just trying to get a roof over your head and you’re raising children, especially if you’re raising more than one child by yourself.” While the housing conditions are wretched, a woman can build a basis of support because “there are definitely women watching other people’s kids or picking up other people’s kids while their parents at work” (Mya).

Mya perceived the biggest asset in the community to be “[t]he fact that people are really tied to the community. They grew up here and don’t want to leave [...] Also, the school. People want they kids to go here cause they went here. It’s a generational thing.” Multiple generations of overlapping biological families populate the apartment complex and neighborhood housing; multiple generations frequently live within a single apartment. The networks in Thomasville are often intergenerational, female-led, and child-centered with a collection of adults and teenagers sharing responsibilities for the networks’ children. Carol Stack explains that “[c]hildren born to

the poor [...] are highly valued, and rights in these children belong to the networks of cooperating kinsmen. Shared parental responsibilities are not only an obligation of kinship, they constitute a highly cherished right” (89). These shared responsibilities and conferring of rights contribute to the local interaction order that denotes the ways “ordinary people create order in everyday interactions. This common-sense approach to understanding and navigating the world provides insights into what every resident needs to do to navigate this space. Their culture is not inadequate. It is adequate for the place and the challenges they face” (Duck 8).

My lengthy dialogue with Mya underscores the presence of womanist ethics in Thomasville’s subsistence as these ethics both “affirmed connectedness to the entire community and the world, rather than separation” (Phillips 18) and provides a way of conceptualizing Black women’s historical experiences as a distinctive reality and potent cultural force. The womanist practice of extending communal care and cultivating personal efficacy is in the exchange *and* the radical subjectivity that is partially predicated on a recognition of the community’s shared—even contingent—needs. Due to the dire conditions of the Black Ghetto in Four Seasons, “[t]hese kinship networks have stability because the needs of the poor are constant” (Stack 54). In Four Seasons, there is obvious “closeness—a lot of them [residents of Four Seasons] related, see each other when they come to school and see each other when they go home” (Mya). Mya elaborated: “They have to survive together. For example, [they] might have to use the neighbor’s stove to cook and they may end up eating together.” And, if the families are eating together, the children may end up playing together. These survival mechanisms and forms of interplay usually initiated by their mothers create considerable social opportunities and physical space for Thomasville children to learn, engage, and evolve the local interaction order.

Duck claims that “[e]veryone must respond to the local interaction order. The contingencies of *this* place, as in all places, are managed by enacting identities and performing practices that are consistent with them” (138). As a result of the constitutive character of local interaction order practices, residents’ identities are defined in large part by kinship. And yet, absent from the discussion of social networks and street codes presented in both Stack’s and Duck’s ethnographies is the critical role children’s play maintains in the formation of residents’ kinship networks and the conditioning of younger children into the local interaction order. From the perspective of three 4th grade Thomasville students and Four Seasons residents, however, the adults are primarily responsible for the drama in Thomasville. Lauryn said that “kids will be home [in the neighborhood playground] arguing over like a swing and they go home and tell their mamas and the mamas come out and really get to arguing.” Aariah concurred and shared a story about unnamed students whose moms came out to the swings to argue. A third student stated frankly: “Play fights turn into real fights at Thomasville.”

The children’s’ reports are repeatedly substantiated by public media outlets. An April 2019 *11 Alive* news report⁵¹ reposted an Instagram video that “showed dozens of children and adults physically attacking each other in an apartment courtyard in southeast Atlanta” (Henke). Jasmine, a mother living in Four Seasons, told reporters that “A lot of people out here, they’ve been out here for 20 years, so that is what they live for, this is all they know [...] So, that is normal. They wake up ready for a fight. Ready for their kids to get into an argument, so there can be a fight.” During my first week working with Kimberly in 2017, she informed me that the occurrence of interpersonal fighting in Thomasville is unique: “Ordinarily, a child’s response would be, ‘ima tell

⁵¹ Henke, Joe. “Massive Brawl at Atlanta Apartment Complex Part of Storied History, Neighbors Say.” *11Alive.Com*, 17 Apr. 2019, www.11alive.com/article/news/crime/massive-brawl-at-atlanta-apartment-complex-part-of-storied-history-neighbors-say/85-7eae56-39ec-4da5-a446-ff4bcdcdf6d9.

my mama' but, in this neighborhood, the children will respond 'Oh. Your mama can get this [ass whoopin] too.'" Mya, too, believed that the biggest challenge in Thomasville is the seeming lack of nonviolent tactics for conflict resolution. To develop their observations further, I reiterate here the exigency of scrutinizing the consequences of Black Ghetto conditions: structural deprivation in the ghetto intersects in the lived experiences and physical bodies of poor Black women and children. Deprivation produces scarcity and insecurity, which can incite interpersonal violence. In short, state violence precipitates interpersonal violence.

The sometimes-contentious presence of adults emphasizes the profundity of childhood customs of care and familiar zones operating invisibly in the local interaction order. In these unregulated, peer-facilitated spaces, "[c]oping strategies and informal social networks [...] remain hidden from those [...] regulators in positions of authority" (Silver 625);⁵² in the lives of Thomasville children, the authority figures consist of adults generally and the state abstractly. Removed from the dominance of adults, "play [can serve] as the training for performance. Through interaction, we learn fair play. That is, we learn the ethics of a culture and we learn to identify good play, which is similar to learning how to recognize good performance" (Gaunt 74). Children learn effective methods of conflict resolution.⁵³ They also learn to recognize real (performances, game, etc.). Through the omnipresent influence of customs of care and extended kinship networks that delineate the boundaries of familiar zones, Black children develop a dexterity and ingenuity for language and play as they become aware of their own ability to produce knowledge and transfer information, providing them with indelible potency within their own interpersonal relationships

⁵² Imaginative play and regimented play therapy have been proven to help children address the effects of toxic stress and vicarious trauma.

⁵³ Effective, here, does not necessarily denote morally ethical or nonviolent, as within these spaces children also learn to fight physically, joaning can become bullying, and false information can be shared.

(Hale and Bocknek 90). The children create cooperative learning spaces that affirm Black life via culturally specific and sustaining play forms. Though expressed differently, the womanist practice of extending communal care and cultivating personal efficacy is also evident in Black children's play.

6.3 Ghetto Games in the Construction of “Homeplace”

Sitting in the front office at Price Middle School with a group of PALS, some working and others awaiting their next task, I enthusiastically described the experience I had just had during the recess break with the multigrade combo group (a small group of students with behavioral challenges from across the grade ranges in the Summer Blast program). We had played kickball with “straight bases.” In this version of the classic game, there are only two bases: there is one all-time roller; a student kicks the ball, runs to the first base, and if time permits, he may run back home. The game is designed for a small group in a small space. The instructor had ripped a pizza box in two in order to set out the bases. My amusement and fascination at “straight base” kickball must have triggered a flood of memories as the parents informed me “that’s how they play in the projects.” Immediately, they began recollecting other “ghetto games” like “Anyhop” (ghetto baseball) and “Cans” (Hit the Can). According to Moomoo, who grew up in Thomasville (and is Monique’s uncle), as well as Ms. Snow, who grew up in the Bluff⁵⁴ and later lived in Four Seasons, Anyhop is designed to play with many people in the parking lot between the cars. The game has a few basic rules:

⁵⁴ The English Avenue/Vine City area of Atlanta has some of the highest poverty and crime rates in the city.

You catch the ball on a hop.

Then you gotta roll the ball to the bat, and if you hit the bat,
then it's your hit.

Only roll the ball to the bat if you catch it on the roll.

If you catch it on the hop then you can be a pitcher, catcher,
or go into the field.

I am not sure that I was able to conceptualize Anyhop quite as easily as Cans which had even simpler rules, in my opinion:

Smash two drink cans.

Place one on one side and one on the other; so, the cans are
on opposite ends of the yard, walkway, patio, etc.

One person stands behind the can and shoots a basketball [in
the direction of the other can].

If you hit the can, you get the point.

The first one to ten points wins.

The enthusiasm in their description was obvious. Big Will, a former Four Seasons resident, emphasized his belief that Cans continues to be the most popular game because everyone—the drug dealers, parents, kids and pimps—line up to play cans on any evening at Four Seasons.⁵⁵ Clearly, “these games encouraged others to perform community in public spaces” (Cox 231).

⁵⁵ Duck informs that “in this community, the drug dealers are not outsiders but long-term residents who are well integrated into community life and protect it as their own” (1). Similarly, drug dealers in Thomasville have robust kinship and social networks. So, many neighborhood events, celebrations, funerals, and memorials are sponsored by drug dealers.

Evidenced by the preceding dialogue with the parents, the mere recollection of “ghetto games” allows them to return to a historico-geographical and socio-ecological practice that is continually reanimated through succeeding generations of the community’s children. As a result, the children and their play forms enliven the source of residents’ joy. There are no illegitimate children, and their childhood is critical to and for everyone; in the hood “a child’s existence seems to legitimize the child in the eyes of the community” (Stack 50). For many Thomasville residents, both adults and teenage youth, “the children” are defining features of their personal identities, and their concern for the children is the determinant of their life goals. The geographical space in which the Black child joy exists is solidified as a physical homeplace to which residents can physically return; “‘homeplace’ is a space where Black folx truly matter to each other, where souls are nurtured, comforted, and fed” (Love 63). The ongoing existence of children in the community provides stability.

Homeplace has historically been a site of resistance committed to Black racial uplift and collective struggle (“Homeplace” 388). “In the contemporary situation, as the paradigms for domesticity in black life mirrored white bourgeois norms (where home is conceptualized as politically neutral space), black people began to overlook and devalue the importance of black female labor in teaching consciousness in domestic space” (“Homeplace” 388). Espousing the significance of homeplace, hooks calls for a reimagining of Black liberation that focalizes feminist survival practices. Recognizing how Thomasville (and the communities that compose PBSA broadly) engenders the establishment of homeplace exhibits the influential role of ratchet womanism in daily practice. Womanism affirms the homeplace as a Black female-lead space of “everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people

and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension” (Phillips xx–xxi). Ratchet addresses the call for a reimagining of Black liberation that centers and continually elevates Black embodied, lived experiences—the labor performed by and for the survival, nurturing, and pleasure of Black bodies. Ratchet womanism reinforces a conceptualization of poor Black communities as self-sustaining and collectively efficacious while maintaining a critical consciousness of the ways in which “ratchet behavior” can be (but not always) a response to the structural and social constraints often imposed on poor Black people, Black women especially.

Communal play *is* collective efficacy in action. Team, or cooperative, play requires mutual trust and solidarity among players while building community—a “consciousness of the interrelatedness one has with others” (Ginwright 78). Acting on this (sub)consciousness, Black children inhabit and wield active social control of public space within Thomasville, generating communal joy as they repurpose communal sce, which “is organized through human activity, relational action, and the exercise of bodies. Thus [...] the institutional and social spaces they occupy are continually being remade through their activities” (Cox 234).⁵⁶ In the process of remaking space, children at play rupture existing and create alternate realities that negate constraints imposed by socially constructed contradictions. Their play, and the space they inhabit, is a joy in the literal sense: a *source* of euphoria. Play is performed and joy is experienced, then, on their own terms unconcerned with racial oppression that more directly dictates their identity performances beyond the geographic and relational boundaries of their community. Through play, empty lots become modified baseball fields, a trampoline becomes a place of intimacies, the streets alongside the apartment complex become racetracks, the parking lot (aka the “horseshoe”) becomes the common ground for neighborhood-wide celebrations, events, and memorials.

⁵⁶ This discussion of communal joy and relational action is continued in chapter three of this dissertation.

Neighborhoods publicly defined by decay and violence are [re]defined internally by interlocking familial histories and moments of common joy.

I theorize ghetto games as consisting of “passionate physicality [...] bodily stylizations of the world, syncopations and polyrhythm's that assert one's somebodiness in a society in which one's body has no [perceptible] public worth, only economic value as a labor” (Gaunt 5). The passionate physicality exhibited in these games “[carries] the rhythms, moves, and linguistic expressions of the everyday and the communal” (Gaunt 33–4) as well as the emotional and acquisitive. Play becomes the strategy and individual games become the tools utilized by youth “to reclaim and make space for cultural practices birthed out of the need for ‘their imaginations’ nourishment for creating a world of freedom where they could be whoever they felt they truly were” (hooks, quoted in “A Ratchet Lens” 541). Through ghetto games, Black children living in poverty learn and refashion the rules of their collective social identity as they produce cultural labor that reveals ratchet to be an improvised practice of a messy, “layered definition of agency” (“A Ratchet Lens” 540) existing amidst the complexities and fluidity of working-class, low-income, and no-income Black life (“A Ratchet Lens” 539). Ghetto games disrupt the dire conditions of the Black Ghetto and transform communal space as Black folks reassert themselves through an embodied expression of Black joy.

By asserting one's “somebodiness” in a socioeconomically and geographically delineated space of social death, ghetto games have the ability both to reframe public narratives of the Black Ghetto and construct a homeplace in a common neighborhood space through Black bodies engaged in cooperative play. While Black women have created the framework for and facilitated the sustenance of homeplaces, Black children have contributed to the structuring via customs of care, where their imaginations “truly matter to each other [...] [and] are nurtured, comforted, and fed”

(Love 63). Therefore, ghetto games compel a reframing of Thomasville as a homeplace and invite us to reimagine play as didactic while simultaneously revealing how Black child play establishes a common sense of purpose around which thought and action can be organized.

6.4 Black Cooperative Learning and Collective Identity Formation in Ghetto Games

In June 2018, I was holding Kyra Gaunt's book, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop*, while talking to students in the car pick-up line after camp when JJ, a 4th grade Black girl student at Slater Elementary, enthusiastically commented, "I know the games Black girls play." Completing my sentence fragment on the page in my notebook, "I know the games Black girls play..." JJ listed four hand clapping games in my notebook before providing excerpted lyrics for her favorite; she listed: "lemonade, ono dosey ara, Slide baby, Shame Shame."⁵⁷ Her favorite of the four is Ono Desy Ara; the excerpted lyrics follow:

I like coffee, I like tea, I like a Black boy, he like me, so step up
white boy, he ain't shy, I gotta Black boy who will beat your
behind. My boyfriend took me to the candy store... Mama, mama I
feel sick, take me to the doctor, quick quick.

JJ shared that Ono Dosey Ara is her favorite game because it makes her and her friends laugh. Whether conscious or unconscious, the bonds are being forged in the shared experience of intimacy and joy produced through embodied play experiences. The relational, interdependent aspects in hand clapping games are obvious as the partners typically face each other because each movement

⁵⁷ The spelling of the game I employ here is JJ's. Other spellings I have seen include: Uno, dos-ee-ay-say.

is dependent on the coordination and cooperation of the other partner; if one child moves too quickly or too slowly, then their partner(s) cannot complete the sequence (Chagall). As JJ suggests, the game is meaningful because it generates laughter and “[t]o laugh deeply is to reconnect, reembody body, emotion, intellect, and will” (Westfield 68). The game is a tool for critical engagement.

Hand clapping games, and the ghetto games subsequently discussed, are considered “ordinary” or “everyday” because of the process through which they become normalized and viewed as merely an amusing pastime. Here, I posit that this perception exists largely for two reasons: first, “embodied literacy is taken for granted” (Gaunt 186), and second, this embodied literacy is peer-facilitated. White hegemonic culture is disembodied and individualistic; as a result, learning that occurs in and through the body is deemed inferior and unintelligent. There is an identifiable relationship to Cartesian dualism or subjecthood which promotes the belief that the mind, and therefore human intellect, exists separate from the body. This theory continues to have a racialized and gendered impact, as women and children, specifically Black women and children, are defined according to the stereotypes and tropes attached to their bodies, not their minds. Embodied learning styles exhibited in ghetto games are undervalued or overlooked as intellectual forms of engagement as they “[rupture] fixed notions of learning according to dominant definitions of and relationships between institutions of power and racially subordinated Black masses” (Kynard 33).

Black children develop social knowledge early in their childhood partially as a result of intersecting, institutionalized oppressions that force a conscious awareness of how their bodies and movements are contextually read. The lyrics of popular Black hand clapping games frequently

gesture toward the outcome of institutional violence and intersectional oppression.⁵⁸ Additionally, their social awareness is partially, if not largely, rooted in the “collective conception of self [...] [that] is manifested in contemporary African American life in the continued tradition of extended families and the superior performance of Black students in cooperative learning situations” (*Shattered* 232). Black children evolve a keen perception of the ways in which their bodies relate to others via the physical expressions of care, pleasure, and play that inform them of their continued position within a kinship network.

Second, “[i]n learning these games, [Black children] inhabit or embody the formulas of black musical identification of stylistic expressions at a time when learning is intuitive rather than systematic, oral rather than written, and disciplined through competitive and cooperative play among peers, rather than as a set of rules defined by those outside of play” (Guant 62). Many ghetto games occur within familiar zones that exist on the periphery of adult spaces, and within those spaces, the learning is occurring within the body. Researchers, educators, and adults in general who have subscribed to white cultural instructional styles are conditioned to denigrate peer-facilitated, cooperative learning experiences. In play, children have the capacity to create and establish the rules of engagement, and therefore dictate their own learning processes. For Black children, these rules are often not standardized either. The influence of customs of care exhibited in ghetto games reaffirm countless studies that have emphasized the immense value of learning in mixed-age groups. Through these customs, older children set the example for younger children and provide younger children with socio-emotional incentives to invest in their own and their peers’ development as they work collectively to establish and maintain their position in the broader

⁵⁸*Let’s Get the Rhythm* employs “Rockin Robin” as an example: “Mama’s in the kitchen cooking rice; Daddy’s in the backroom shooting dice; brother’s in jail, raising hell; sister’s on the corner selling fruit-cocktail.”

community, inside kinship networks, and within familiar zones. They also work to compete in the varied, complex games created and executed by older children and adults; the increasing complexity becomes a core element of educational scaffolding.

The cooperation or relationality in ghetto games is embodied in myriad forms. Two of the most prominent forms recurring in my fieldwork is communal, imaginative storytelling and joaning sessions⁵⁹—both forms of verbal word play that involve an imaginative critique of and analytical engagement with interpersonal relationships. These games are oral manifestations of the Black Ratchet Imagination (Stallings), which “assumes Black people who exist within the space of ratchetness redefine what it means to be and exist in a Black body [...] It accepts expressions of Blackness that are unregulated by a White gaze” (Toliver 4). Through customs of care, Black children develop and exchange Black vernacular expressions that mobilize social critiques and momentarily “re-mythologize life” (Hale and Bocknek 97). The vernacular expressions, commonly accompanied by physical gestures, promote Black children’s process of appreciating their whole bodies as inherently agential and powerful.

Joaning is an “oral and competitive verbal art” that “usually involves overt or covert, direct and indirect ‘serious, clever conflict talk,’ ‘aggressive witty performance talk’; and ‘nonferrous contest talk,’ in everyday conversation, or in oral performance narrative traditions like playing the Dozens” (Gaunt 131). While joaning has commonly been associated with Black men, I witnessed Black girls demolish their male classmates multiple times throughout summer camp. Their bold verbal assertion over the boys exposed and countered racialized gender dynamics that both Black girls and boys were negotiating. In fact, two 4th grade girls at Thomasville Heights Elementary

⁵⁹ Traditionally referred to as “signifying” or “playing the dozens,” but also regionally referred to as “flaming” or “roasting” in addition to “joaning.”

School provided me with the “official steps to joaning” when I told them my research was on the games they play and I mentioned joaning as the most immediate example. Aariah and Zuri shared these steps:

- 1) You find someone who’s not too sensitive.
- 2) You can’t get on “hush mode” (when someone says something and you stop talking).
- 3) Make sure they don’t get you back good.
- 4) Make sure your joaning is appropriate because the teacher might stop you and it gets boring.
- 5) Make sure your joan’s not lame. (Lame if no one laughs or no one gets it).
- 6) Make sure people laugh. You just say something that makes you laugh.
- 7) Don’t team up because its gonna start a fight.
- 8) Never joan a snitch.

Zuri, as a sort of afterthought, added: “Yeah. Never snitch.” These steps reveal the cognitive skills required to compete adequately, the prominence of street codes even in play, as well as some insight into the character of the students who engage in these games. The two girls start by noting that you cannot joan someone whose feelings may be easily hurt for humane and logistical purposes as you cannot continue the session if the child starts crying, gets upset, or snitches. Further, their rules, particularly one, four, and eight, gesture towards an awareness of the omnipotence of adult order and their dependence on adult approval. While Zuri and Aariah share the rules with a sense of ownership, they still frame the rules around their assumptions of adult

standards of appropriateness and school-based behavioral constraints in order to avoid adult intervention. Their rules emphasize the fact that the “social world of children, whilst being separate in relation to the adult world, is nevertheless dependent on it. This dependence is not passive, however. Instead there is a creative process of interdependence: children construct their own ordered system of rules by reinterpreting the social models given to them by adults” (James 395). As an outcome of the “active experience of contradiction, often with the adult world” (James 395), the children develop and practice a double-consciousness of sorts that enables them simultaneously to perform adult-sanctioned childhood scripts, align themselves with the neighborhood interaction order, and engage their peers on their own terms.

While sitting outside at Price Middle School during summer camp (2018) with the 4th graders from Slater Elementary School after lunch, two 4th grade boys broke out into a live reenactment of the popular video game *Fortnite*. One boy was pretending to chop down a tree while the other was shooting him down. Then, they would randomly break out into dance.⁶⁰ At the same time, the girls were sitting on the picnic table, playing in each other’s hair when one of the boys, not playing *Fortnite*, walked over and tried to scare the girls by screaming, “It’s a bug! It’s a bug!” Nobody moved. But the girls were not going to let him walk away without a word. So, it began: a joaning session.

Female student 1: “Your hairline fell off.”

Male student: “You ain’t got no edges.”

Female student 1 asks the girls sitting around her: “What’s
the definition of edges and hair line?... [Cause] his hairline

⁶⁰ *Fortnite* is widely known [in the Black community] for stealing dances from popular Black rappers and groups without payment or even credit. The game raises further considerations of cultural appropriation—and the ways race and racism become archived in games and play forms that are largely viewed as merely “children’s culture.”

go zip-zap-zop.”

The female student bent down and picked up a leaf off the ground. She beckoned the girls to lean closer and analyze the crooked stem and midrib of the leaf. After a second of close analysis, she exclaimed: “OH MY GOD. I found his hair line! [...] It’s over here on the ground [...] Ya’ll help me put it back together.” The girls burst into loud, riotous laughter. I was dying, tears in my own eyes because her wit surprised me. Quickly realizing he was losing this battle, the male student again screamed, “It’s a bug!” I think he was hoping to distract them or replace his humiliation with theirs. But all he did was rile *all* the girls up this time.

Female student 1: “Yo mama is a bug!”

Female student 2 breaks into song: “It’s the itsy-bitsy
spider...”

Female student 3: “You look like American dad with that
booty chin”

This example stands out because the girls’ playful comradery was undeniably entertaining and revelatory. Seemingly ordinary moments such as this publicized the authoritative presence many of the girls possessed, especially in the presence of their male classmates. These girls, both at Slater and Thomasville Heights Elementary Schools, asserted the full force of their presence whenever provoked. Ruth Nicole Brown explains how Black girlhood is frequently defined as an absence (8) because Black girls are generally expected by larger society to be seen and not heard. However, individually and collectively, through their everyday “performances of self,” the Black girl students in my fieldwork continually asserted themselves and rejected the dichotomous tropes of redemptive or exceptional, victim or delinquent, derelict or prodigy (Cox 150). They also disavowed oppressive racialized, gendered binaries of respectable or disrespectable, as well as

adultified or infantilized through the performance of ratchet womanism. Recall: womanism, as Alice Walker explains, is derived “from the black folk expression of mothers to female children, ‘You acting womanish,’ i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior” (xi). The girls were acting womanish—totally disrupting respectable, adult-sanctioned childhood scripts—and embodying ratchet: “making room for the art of shade, a good read, and all the other nuanced ways we communicate as Black folks. Ratchet is also the undercurrent of awareness of other black folks” (Melanatedmoney). Through joaning, a ghetto game, the girls were skillfully executing a learned and embodied form of intellectual engagement.

Many of these same students (especially those in 4th–6th grade) expressed an awareness of the gender scripts they were expected to undertake and perform. Countless girls explained how their favorite colors are pink and purple, unicorns are their favorite animals, hair and nails are critical—the typical patterns of girlhood and gendered consumerism were present. And yet, they frequently and outwardly rejected these scripts when their male classmates were the enforcers. For example, during lunch with the 4th grade Slater Elementary Students, this quick conversation occurred:

Male student wooing at a beautiful female teacher: “When I see ladies, I don’t know how to act.”

Me to the male student: What’s the difference between “ladies” and the girls you go to school with every day?

Male student: “Ladies are more prettier” [as opposed to the girls he attends school with].

The first female student from the previous session proceeded to explain loudly how she basically has no interest in little boys who still pick their noses and “pick wedgies.” The male student

immediately responded to her by yelling, “You know you don’t want to joan me. You know I’ll eat you up.” This set the remaining girls at the lunch table off, and thus began another loud joaning session.

I read these two sessions as exemplary of the “[t]he kinetic orality [...] that girls learn to inhabit through [...] games [which] points to a lived phenomenology of gendered blackness as well as a complex web of relations that suggest an ‘ethnographic truth,’ the ‘spirit of the local and situational quality of knowledge and experience [...] positioned within the experiences of specific historical actors’” (Gaunt 57). The full use of their bodies (neck rolling, finger pointing, voices booming), the loud and authoritative use of language, employment of visual imagery (leaf metaphor and cartoon references), and the unspoken invitation extended to their peers to participate in the moment are indicative of a broad history of Black expressive performance styles and of the local interaction order. The Black girl comradery that was activated in these moments counters claims that “[p]oor, racially isolated neighborhoods are weak on collective efficacy, which emphasizes mutual trust and solidarity among neighbors and a willingness to intervene for the common good or active social control of public space” (Chang, Hillier, Mehta 2) as the girls intervened intuitively on behalf of one or multiple girls engaged in the verbal competition against the boys. Moreover, the specific interaction order being exercised in this moment as the girls were navigating a perceived affront to their gender and beauty “constitutes an important but overlooked form of collective efficacy, even though, forged as it is in a context of poverty and isolation, it often works against the visible expression of middle-class values” (Duck 19). The girls practiced a ratchet form of collective efficacy that was available to them as Black, low-income elementary school-age children.

Self- and collective efficacy manifests in various forms as children involve themselves in competitive games and performative play that provide them with “important learning mechanisms for African American urban children, especially in the face of schools that are unable to meet their needs” (Hale and Bocknek 89). Collective play experiences facilitate kinship ties as children accumulate and exchange social capital, which facilitates access to scarce resources that are critical for surviving poverty. Cox explains that “practices of resistance are always tied to larger processes of capital and commodification and formed within spaces of contradiction” (230). These spaces of contradiction disallow Black children the right to access the full range of their humanity. In these spaces, dichotomous tropes that frequently define Black childhood are normalized and consequently erase the structural oppression that negatively conditions social readings of Black children. The contradiction is maintained when we neglect to recognize that the choices Black children make are already constrained and choose to judge the children anyway (Brown and Young 20).⁶¹ While the mechanisms they use for self- and group-assertion often do not uphold middle-class values that mandate certain respectable behaviors and proper English vernacular, it is through joaning sessions and fantastic storytelling that many Black children learn to control their environment, identify comrades, and respond to challenges that seek to oppress their humanity.

Sitting at the lunch table one afternoon in 2017, a random 2nd grade boy at Slater Elementary School told me that Kenneth, another 2nd grade boy, is the funny twin and he goes by the name of Grandpa. Intrigued, I jokingly asked Kenneth about his lineage. I was completely unprepared for the thoroughly fabricated family tree he and his three or four other classmates improvised in that moment. After a few debates about which child belongs to whom, Grandpa

⁶¹ This practice of displaced judgement reminds me of a conversation I had with long-time Four Seasons resident Romeo. He said: “Kids make mistakes. Adults make bad choices [...] but it’s a life experience we can get from each other.”

Jefferson informed the lunch table that he has seven kids: Bernard, Albert, Vanessa, Marianna, George Jefferson, Brayln, and Brendon. He is married to Olivia, also known as Grandma. Together, the couple has three official children: Doug, Apple, and Kenneth Brown-Jefferson. The designation of “official” is important because mere moments after Kenneth listed his family tree, another 2nd grade boy sitting close by excitedly announced to Kenneth, “I’m yo grandkid too.” Kenneth, however, rather bluntly replied, “You not in my custody!”

Eight- or nine-year-old Kenneth’s usage of the term “custody” is indicative of a subtle awareness the state-sanctioned systems like DFACS [Department of Family and Child Services] and child protective services broadly that fragment families and/or dismantle kinship networks by taking “custody” of Black children at disturbing rates.⁶² At the same time, Kenneth demonstrated an acceptance of—rather, likely an appreciation for—varied family structures that stretch to include many people, especially children. This appreciation is reflective of a tradition of the co-creative experience of establishing “fictive kin.” According to Eric Pritchard, “[a]nthropologists use the term ‘fictive kinship’ as a fundamental concept in describing group relations between people who have no blood relations but may share other relations that condition their lived experiences along economic, social, and cultural customs. Fictive kinship has also long been part of scholarship on African diasporic parlance” (20). In this moment of play, Kenneth epitomized the formation of real kinship that occurs around the “relations that condition their lived experiences”—shared familial histories, cultural expressions, and socioeconomic realities. Through his initial banter and imagination, he invited the rest of the lunch table into his story,

⁶² DFACS has an ominous presence in the Thomasville Heights and Carver Homes neighborhoods. One mother once asked me, “What good has DFACS ever done for anybody?”

creating a space for genuine laughter, self-definition, and extending literal kinship while constructing a narrative of fictive kinship.

The creative, oral expressions of Kenneth and the 4th grade Slater girls echo how the “artful use of language [...] is a source of pleasure, entertainment, reflection, and of course, socialization. It’s not only where you learn to speak the language of those you love; it’s where you learn to love and be loved. It’s where you have your first formative experiences of being a member of a family, a community, a culture” (Alim and Smitherman 59). Joaning and storytelling, within and alongside a legacy of ghetto games, can be perceived as messy in a nonlinear social way—children loudly talking over each other and/or performing the same activity at once, and completely improvised, mixing, sampling (Gaunt 18), and recycling movements, concepts, and materials. Because these games are usually handed down from parent to child, and/or older child to younger child, they reveal localized socialization processes. If “[t]he study of child-rearing and peer and family socialization is an examination of what ‘goes in’” and “[t]he study of play behavior is the study of what ‘comes out’” (Hale and Bocknek 77), then ghetto games reaffirm the presence of homeplace, the impact of familiar zones, and the exercise of ratchet womanism. Each are examples of intergenerational investment in the community’s children, and the individual agency and collective efficacy evident in Black children’s play reflect this diversified investment.

Within the comfort of familiar zones, such as the lunch table and backyard trampoline, children establish their own cooperative learning spaces as they play with language, and practice, perform, and switch among different identities necessary for survival on the streets and inside institutional spaces, as well as critical for self-exploration and personal efficacy. Inside customs of care, play is the prevailing pedagogy and care is the catalyst. The older children (consciously and/or unconsciously) experiment with their instructional styles as they provide cooperative

learning experiences for the younger children and challenge them to take risks while under their protection. These risks, as I have witnessed, often promote “a multitude of whole-body sensory experiences on a daily basis [...] [where] young bodies are challenged by the uneven and unpredictable, ever-changing terrain” (Strauss). The terrain connotes the socio-emotional as well as the historico-geographical experiences that children must learn to navigate in order to operate within, resist, and/or deconstruct the hierarchical institutions that seek to surveil and confine them. These communal learning experiences promote and refine a relational culture that equips children with the knowledge and skills necessary to thrive as fully human. Acknowledging that “‘relationships are the best indicator of quality child care’ and [that] ‘we shouldn’t underestimate the pedagogic power of deeply loving care’” (Chritakis qtd. in McClain 86), I uphold these familiar zones, dictated by customs of care, as especially potent for Black child development and community sustenance.

While I was chilling in the Thomasville media center in 2018 with Julio and his brother C.J., Julio shared two of his favorite games: Flip Master and Flip Contest. He told me that Flip Master involves him training his five younger brothers to do new flips over the course of the week. Whoever completes the best flip is the new master. Similarly, Flip Contest begins with a game of Rock, Paper, Scissors to determine who will flip first and second. Then, the judges (which usually consist of him and maybe another brother) decide who executed the best flip. The prizes include the right to play the [video?] game the longest and/or the privilege of playing on Julio’s personal phone. These two games and the trampoline play I engaged in with Julio and his brothers require creative, whole-body risk-taking for the purpose of mastery and enjoyment. The features of these games “make play both a process and a product. As a process, play facilitates individual understanding of skills, concepts, and dispositions; as a product, play provides the vehicle for

children to demonstrate their understanding of skills, concepts, and dispositions” (Isenberg and Quisenberry 3). Julio effectively transfers a hard skill (flipping), that indirectly cultivates a plethora of soft skills (self-discipline, imaginative foresight, spatial awareness, principled judgement, etc.). His care is in the teaching—the extension of himself for the benefit of his siblings. More important, however, are the ways in which Julio’s pedagogy transforms the trampoline into a liberatory space that invites his brothers to discover new ways of relating to their bodies, which is ultimately conducive to their experience of freedom (Ziyad). #BlackBoyJoy.⁶³

The presence of homeplace, reflective of a Black-female led interaction order, is predicated on the culturally sustaining pedagogical (Alim and Paris) and community-building capacity of ratchet womanism mobilized through Black child play. Ghetto games, facilitated and expanded within familiar zones, transfer narratives and tools for liberation amidst the constraints of the Black Ghetto. These games “[organize] the consciousness of the ‘racial’ group socially” and call the neighborhood’s children into the “different practices, cognitive, habitual and performative, that are required to invent, maintain, and renew identity” (Gilroy qtd. in Gaunt 70). Ghetto games facilitate the visceral experience of joy in the hood that sustains a foundation for recognizing the humanity of Black people as play builds on individual and communal ability to imagine, create, participate, and extend.

⁶³ The popular social media hashtag has become a way of celebrating and archiving the myriad dimensions and expressions of Black male happiness. A rebuttal to racial stereotypes that erase Black childhoods, particularly those belonging to Black boys, Black male-identifying people across ages have used the hashtag to move away from headlines that associate Black boys and men with tragedy and violence. The hashtag has become a method of showcasing the pride, authenticity, and diversity in the Black male experience.

7.0 pLaY bReAk

“Do you want me to read a story?” Kaden, a 1st grade student at Thomasville Heights Elementary School, asked Big Franko (twenty-five years old). With confirmation from Big Franko, Kaden sat on the floor next to him, pulled the Dr. Seuss book, *One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish*, from his backpack, and began reading aloud to Big Franko without question or hesitation.

I did not become a fully engaged listener until Kaden had turned a few pages. In the first three pages, it was clear that Kaden was providing his own rendition of the Dr. Seuss classic for Big Franko, who was responding equally with imaginative inquiry. On approximately the fourth page, Kaden stopped picking his nose. He then turned completely around to face a slumped but attentive Big Franko, and said with shock in his voice: “He beat the baby up.” Calmly, Big Franko replied, “Aw, that’s messed up.” Kaden turned his body back towards the book, then threw up his right hand to signal an abrupt halt:

“ANNNDddd he said, YELLOW FISH STOP when I beat you up Nigger.”

A smile spread across Kaden’s face as he looked up at me—and while his grin revealed two shiny silver teeth, the sense of self-pride in the loud provocation was in his eyes. He paused for dramatic effect, but Big Franko’s voice occupied the pause: “Whaaaaattt. That’s a messed up fish right there.” And so, a bit more impassioned, Kaden continued, “Yellow fish nigga you need to stop gettin out my way.” Big Franko commented, “Mannnn... he tryna get these hands man. Tryna catch these hands I see.” Kaden, almost entirely consumed by his own story, raised his voice to exclaim:

“Heyyy

I can fight everybody in the whole world.”

Big Franko responded: “Aw mann... that’s a lot of fighting...” Kaden, still consumed, hollered,

“Boom Boom nigga I can beat you up all day.

I can beat everybody up in the whole world.”

Then, Big Franko asked the only question that mattered: “Can he fight though?” Kaden responded

Inevitably, his thirteen-year-old sister interjected with, “Oh that’s what the book say?” before she threatened to snitch to mama. Unbothered, Kaden returned his attention to the book, and while looking down at the page, said to his sister, “Ion care, Ion care.” Clearly, this moment belonged to him and Big Franko. As he proceeded to narrate a story page-by-page, he occasionally turned around to Big Franko to emphasize illustrations and imagery. He was completely immune to the noise and chaos happening all around him. At one point in the book, Kaden shrilly screamed:

NIGGA. Say NIGGA. Why you *layin* in my BED?"

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8.0 “Happy Crack”: Black Joy—Energy Transformed & Transferred

“What every ethnographer understands is that the mode of ‘discussion’, the discourse, is not always and exclusively verbal: Issues and attitudes are expressed and contested in dance, music, gesture, food, ritual, artifact, symbolic action, as well as words. Cultural performances are not simply epideictic spectacles: Investigated historically within their political contexts, they are profoundly deliberative occasions.”

• Dwight Conquergood

“Armed with the love of those who raised us and given our ability to share what they taught us, we organize, educate, question, and move. At the end of the day, we are freedom personified, and that is enough for us all.”

• Ruth Nicole Brown

“There are no grit lab tests for Black joy, and Black joy is infectious.”

• Bettina Love

“With happy all in my pocket, a little something to spend.”

• Noname

Sitting on the front steps inside Thomasville’s cafeteria in 2018, C.J., a 6th grade student at Price Middle School, poured a rainbow-colored powder from a clear plastic bag into the palm of his hand and licked the center of his palm. He proceeded to pour the powder from the bag into the eager hands of other students. As he did this, C.J. explained how this particular bag of Happy Crack, consisting of Kool-Aid powder and sugar, was provided and gifted to him by Amanda, another 6th grader at Price. Having grown up and attended Thomasville and now Price together, C.J. identified how Amanda was “like a sister” to him.

For Thomasville kids, like most children anywhere, the (unsanitary) exchange and consumption of candy is common. That same summer, two 3rd–5th grade Thomasville girls explained how they were selling candy to their peers for what appeared to be unregulated prices (though this did not bother me as I was allowed, and I accepted, the maximum amount of pixie

sticks for free). And, a group of 3rd grade Slater students explained how Hello Mr., their privately owned company, consisted of “a group of men with some ladies [selling] clothes, shoes, food and drinks, candy, backpacks.” Hello Mr. had a billboard in the milk cartoon town they were creating in art class. Chance, the supposed leader, informed me that company members “smoke smarties [...] a lot of people do [...] You [just get] the taste of candy in your mouth.”

The circulation of C.J.’s Happy Crack and the irregularity of these students’ pricing—their basically monetary-free exchange of goods—not only reaffirmed the popular association between candy and U.S. children’s culture, but also emphasized the role each student consciously played in another students’ happiness. The students’ companies were formed in groups, and they bartered with their peers according to individual needs and access. In C.J.’s case, it was another student who had concocted and provided him with the Happy Crack he shared without hesitation. In his article “Confections, concoctions, and conceptions,” Allison James identifies how “kets,” or “candies,” are “an integral part of the child’s culture. Children, by the very nature of their position as a group outside adult society, have sought out an alternative system of meanings through which they can establish their own integrity” (404). This candy-based system parallels the construction and exchange of their paper stacks.⁶⁴ Adults are typically disgusted by the unsanitary or “uncivilized” consumption of the candies they also label “trash”—in other words, candy is not real food. Similarly, many adults read the “paper stacks” as both a waste of loose-leaf paper and an indication of their students’ interaction with drug dealing and stereotypical hip-hop culture, elements of which are frequently viewed as social refuse. Nevertheless, both systems provided students with ownership over a practice and membership in a subculture that could not be controlled by authority figures. This student-led subculture was formed in the exclusive

⁶⁴ For explanation of the “paper stacks,” see chapter one.

interactions that built, adapted, and sustained various systems of play and exchange, particularly as the students developed communicative practices and production strategies that are rarely written but communally recognized. Emphatically, the systems provided students with a self-confident value in their abilities to create and contribute via reciprocal exchange.

Most notably and relevant to the argument forwarded in this chapter is that “[candies] are not distanced from the body. Indeed [...] ‘Gob Stoppers’ are removed from the mouth for comparison of colour changes and strings of chewing gum continually pulled out of the mouth” (James 402). The devouring of Happy Crack and other candies is a full-body experience through its involvement of the five senses. Obviously *taste*—nothing hits more than that first bite of a candy bar or the first Sour Patch. *Touch*, as articulated by James, is a critical component of the candy-consumption experience: the more playful, the more enjoyable. The *sight* and/or *smell* of candy alone excites a child (or person—I, too, love candy) and witnessing another child enjoying candy initiates a certain series of social interactions, revealing the relationship dynamics within a group of children. The increasingly loud *sounds* of children smacking on their gum, nialaters (Now & Laters), Laffy Taffies, and the ensuing laughter is contagious. And so, as I watched C.J. casually lick his palm and watched increasingly more students doing the same, I realized how the colorful, sugary concoction, childish consumption, and pleasurable circulation (James) of the Happy Crack is a minute manifestation of the more vigorous energy transferals that are initiated and sustained through ordinary embodied play and shared intimacy.

This chapter explores the generative power of play, the ultimate vehicle through which joy and energy are transformed and transferred. Cox uses co-performative witnessing⁶⁵ and play in her

⁶⁵ In chapter four, I elaborate on the experience of co-performative witnessing particularly as it relates to students witnessing their mothers’ individual and collective struggle for basic rights.

ethnography to refer to the joy in working collectively to activate agency that threatens the most subtle aspects of institutionalized injustice (*Shapeshifters*). Likewise, through my own ethnographic method, I was continually re-positioned as a “co-performative witness,” and consequently was invited into the everyday intimacy of the children and their families in my study as I existed co-temporally with them “inside the materiality of their struggles and consequences” (Madison 829). Essentially, as Kimberly informed her folks via social media, I’ve “been in the trenches” with them. Through the daily intimacy of our shared struggle, experiential learning, and riotous laughter, the relationships we developed revealed potent manifestations of Audre Lorde’s “erotic power.”

As Lorde explains, the erotic is an extension of the sensual that nourishes an individual’s deepest need, the human need for connectedness (7), and ultimately invites others into an intensely gratifying joy. Lorde articulates the erotic “as an assertion of the life-force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (3–4). While the erotic is often understood as explicitly sexual, Lorde asserts that the erotic can be indulged through dance and poetry, and as I will demonstrate, through play. Similarly, Hale and Bocknek identify the collective call to creative vitality initiated by Black child play: “Energy is called into play by the performer and his performance. The individual performer is regarded as the instigator of action only. He is not appreciated necessarily because he is so much more talented than the group. He is appreciated for his ability to bring the group into the performance, thus sharing the energy source” (95). Through play, the liberatory impact of the erotic power and life-giving energy [of our mothers] can be transferred from person to person across socially constructed boundaries such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, etc.

This chapter employs Lorde's definition of erotic power as a foundational framework for analyzing the "life-force" and generative energy that is transferred and transformed through communal play and circulated throughout the predominantly female-led neighborhood in which my research is situated. I structure this chapter by first defining the intergenerational experience of Black joy, which I argue is composed of this sensual energy and animating force. My definition is illustrated through the recollected moments of profound, radiating joy initiated and expanded by PBSA students and their families.

8.1 Definition: Black Joy

If joy is defined as a "source or cause of delight" (Merriam-Webster), then Black joy is a meta experience or meta possibility—a consciousness of the ways our Blackness serves as the "source" or "state" of both the experience and the expression of one's inherent, positive life-force. Positive, here, should be understood as "definite, unyielding, constant, or certain in its action" ("Positive"). Where there is motion, there is possibility. Black joy is the release of a transgenerational energy, stowed within our physio-psychic bodies, that mobilizes us. Energy cannot be created or destroyed; it can only be transferred, transformed, or harnessed. Black joy, then, is a concentrically energetic birthright that "spins itself out over time, increasing in meaning as it recounts its origins, and yet it compresses its significance in a [moment]" (Browning 2). That moment is the Black joyful body in motion expanding and/or defying the historic and contemporary bounds of Black conditionality.

In other words, Black joy is a "meta-joy, the joy in being able to experience or give joy" (Solomon) from the depths of the Black collective conscious amidst the abject vulnerabilities that

contextualize Black conditionality in the United States. Black joy is an innate capacity of the body that transgresses “the isolation of bodily individuality” (Solomon) that whiteness has enforced as a way of separating us not only from the literacies, efficacies, and legacies encased within our Black bodies, but also from other people. Our bodies—through rhythm, impulse, pleasure and struggle—release historic trauma, reconnect our spirits with our bodies, and attach us to those contributing to the synchronous rhythm enlivening the universal struggle for human recognition. Together, we mobilize a “psychic proximity in desolate times that happiness does not match” (*Far* 700). This psychic proximity connects us to multiple humans across spatio-temporal boundaries—when we experience Black joy, we become aware of our place within our immediate and diasporic communities. We are linked to people, memories, and knowledge transformed through and throughout the Afro-Diaspora.

Embodied knowledge of holistic freedom, transcendent joy, and spiritual connectedness—that long preceding slavery—was stored within African and Black bodies to be resurrected later by movement and motion. This reservoir of knowledge is evident in the histories of the Flying Africans who never fully forgot their capacity for flight (Hamilton), the histories of Samba that are intertwined with Yoruban spiritual traditions (Browning), the histories of ring ceremonies (and later ring shouts) of Nigeria, Dahomey, Togo, the Gold Coast, and Sierra Leone (Stuckey), and the histories of circle rituals from the Congo region (Stuckey) that are now evident in Black children’s circular rhythm games (McKissack). Each of these legacies, transported by people from across Africa throughout the Diaspora, established the ground on which cross cultural exchange occurred and kinship communities were built. This embodied knowledge and these movement-based practices inform Black folks’ “self-generative nature of their impulse toward freedom” (Stuckey 5) that produces and amplifies their resourcefulness, creativity, joy, and connectedness.

Community, defined by Shawn Ginwright, is a “consciousness of the interrelatedness one has with others. This conceptualization [...] is rooted in political, cultural, and economic histories as well as contemporary struggles in which people collectively act to make meaning of their social condition” (78). Similarly, Keith Gilyard highlights a core component of a community by arguing that “[c]ommunity involves a sense of involuntary cognition, of what members cannot help but know, regardless of what they make of such knowledge or any efforts to distance themselves from it” (87). Both scholars identify a preeminent socio-emotional and psychic proximity, a “consciousness” or “cognition” of our relationship to other people. I believe that this proximity is acute in the experience of Black joy because of the distinct ways our bodies mediate our daily experiences. This mediation attaches us to a historic consciousness that is born of a larger Black, ancestral community. Black joy emanates from the capacity to activate this knowledge, allowing “[o]ur bodies [to] collect potential [...] when we call into them a significance which will always exceed the individual capacities of both motion and imagination” (Browning 72). Essentially, Black joy amplifies the possibilities of our individual existence by mobilizing the collective synergies of the community. In and through our Black bodies, we feel the joy of our immediate, diasporic, and ancestral communities.

Poetically, it has been written that we laugh “because our bodies cannot contain the joy” (author unknown). In *Yoga Anatomy*, the best-selling anatomy guide for yoga, Kaminoff and Matthews espouse Eastern philosophical teachings that there is a space at our center that, when open, allows the flow of positive energy, eliminates waste, and enhances our ability to join with another human. Similarly, in the broader public imagination, we are conditioned to believe that the reserve that stores this joy is felt in our “gut,” or our gastrointestinal tract. When we laugh, our stomachs ache. Generally speaking, joy-producing movement, such as that generated through play,

channels the flow of positive energy through our center and enables us to transfer that energy, thereby cultivating and encouraging the practice of empathy.

When we consider how “[l]aughter expresses the pent-up power, the anxiety, and the joy, of many African American women,” it becomes clear how Black joy is somatic. “Effervescent laughter [...] is power expressed [...] based upon a shared experience. It is the expression of that power which harness the essence of an African American woman’s spirit” (Westfield 67). Following Westfield’s explication of hospitality that analyzes Black [female] joy through the framework of womanism, I argue that Black joy is basically a “psychological womb where development can happen” (Gregory). The sensual feeling of our own self-love, as well as our individual mattering within the collective and the collectives’ mattering to the individual, is intensified in moments of Black joy. This mattering translates into core elements of womanist philosophy. To reiterate, womanism is “concerned with the mental, physical, and social dimensions of Black women’s real-lived epistemology because knowledge construction that seeks to inform Black women’s culture, survival, and liberation must be embodied and multisensory” (Floyd-Thomas 5–6). Bettina Love summates these womanist sentiments in her definition of Black joy:

Black joy is to embrace your full humanity, as the world tells you that you are disposable and that you do not matter. Black joy is a celebration of taking back your identity as a person of color and signaling to the world that your darkness is what makes you strong and beautiful. Black joy is finding your homeplace and creating homeplaces for others. Black joy is understanding and recognizing that as a dark person you come with grit and zest because you come

from survivors who pushed their bodies and minds to the limits for
you to one day thrive (120).

Black joy is the reason for, product, and process of cultural sustainability. Moreover, Black joy, often generated through bodily movements and frequently identified via the resultant sensations, triggers the life-force or energy that transforms abject vulnerabilities into “plasticity and responsiveness [...] [that] help create a diversified-portfolio approach to survival” (Dobbs). Within this portfolio are myriad methods of concretizing and articulating the possibilities of our human connections that are capable of proliferating and improvising new methods of release, such as embodied cooperative play and dance.

Relevant to the relationship among plasticity, responsiveness, and survival, Lorde explains how we learn to harness the “power within our living” (36). She elaborates: “[T]hese places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling [...] it is deep” (37). We experience Black joy when we vitalize the darkness our bodies hold and we reap from that creative reserve. Through Black joy, Black people open the space at the center and transfer and receive the power of erotic energy. Within the context of my research the erotic coalesces with the Black ratchet imagination to diversify the portfolio approach to survival under state-sanctioned conditions of Black poverty.

The erotic is the connective tissue between Black joy and ratchet womanism, as Lorde explains how “[t]he erotic functions [...] in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the

basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference” (56). She continues, “[a]nother important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, harkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience” (57). In her description of the erotic, we observe prevalent aspects of Black joy—embodiment, an opening up, psychic proximity, harkening. We also witness ratchet womanism—sharing with another person, a demonstrable fearlessness, responsiveness to bodily impulse, a rejection of respectability, a flattening of oppressive identity-based hierarchies. The connection to our bodies is critical to human survival—ratchet is the practicing and conditioning of our bodies to intend towards creative, subversive, and sustainable usage especially in the presence of overwhelming struggle.

The erotic experience of Black joy, read through the framework of ratchet womanism, transforms “the redemptive power of intimacy born from struggle” (*Far* 25) into a capaciousness that awakens the critical imagination of the heart. Jacqueline Jones Royster explains critical imagination as “the ability to see the possibility of certain experiences even if we cannot know the specificity of them” (83). The ethnographic narratives recollected throughout this chapter illustrate how Black joy, and the associated expressions of ratchet womanism, cultivated and expressed via Black child play and Black maternal play, compels Black communities both to employ our entire bodies in the acts of imagining and freedom-dreaming. The multi-sensory, erotic experience of Black joy awakens us to “what it means to be radically engaged and committed, body-to-body” (Madison 826). Black joy makes freedom a felt reality. In this way, Black child play becomes an expedient grassroots praxis of Black joy that moves the collective towards Black liberation.

8.2 Black Joy Case Study⁶⁶ #1: A Song for Black Girls

I had enjoyed asking random parents and teachers in the Thomasville Heights community to define “ratchet.” Most, if not everyone, I had asked from May to July were initially befuddled by the question; they would proceed to associate ratchet with ghetto—though I did get some generative responses.⁶⁷ Then, I would ask what the difference is between “ratchet” and “ghetto.” One random day in August, 2019, I prepared a list of five questions I would pose to the 3rd–5th grade girls in the after-school program. The questions and their fragmented responses are below:

- 1) What makes a child a child?
 - Their personality.
 - The way they act—good, bad, ok, annoying.
 - You’re kid at every age.
 - If you’re a grown up and your mama is still over you, you’re a child and you’re a child of God.
- 2) What does it mean to be ratchet?
 - It means to be ghetto—it means to ****rolls body**** and be doing ghetto stuff.
 - Ghetto means to be bad and you don’t know nothing.
 - Loud.
- 3) How do you know if someone “plays too much”?

⁶⁶ I use the term “case study” to emphasize how each ethnographic narrative functions individually as an example of Black joy; each narrative, or “case,” can be studied intensively and offered as a representative moment as each case contains core elements of Black joy as it has been defined in this chapter.

⁶⁷ For more extended discussion of question two, see chapter two’s definition of ratchet.

- You know someone plays too much if you tell them “stop”
and they keep on playing and they keep on playing.
 - If they laugh a lot, or just laugh at anything.
 - If they keep hitting you.
 - Cause their heart beats too fast.
- 4) What makes a game a game?
- Cause it’s fun.
 - Games have equipment (and hands count as equipment).
 - Something you play.
- 5) What’s great about being Black?
- Cause you get to stand out.
 - Black people got real good hair.
 - My history.
 - Black people got a lot of shoes.

One student, Aneka, however, redirected the conversation by asking me thoughtfully, possibly self-consciously even, “How do you feel about being light skin?” I do not even recall my response, I am not sure that I actually responded before she added, “It’s my favorite color. I want to be light skin.” When I asked why, she correctly shared that “light skin people are always on TV.” When I said that we need more beautiful dark-skinned girls like her on TV, I also asked her if she had heard Beyoncé’s song “Brown Skin Girl.” I pulled out my phone and began playing the song for her when Keisha, a dark-skinned Black girl in the same age group, loudly exclaimed: “I’M BROWN!” She began dancing and making silly faces—clearly an effort to make the other girls laugh. She quickly shifted dance moves, genres altogether, really, as she said, “This how they

dance to this song” (I am assuming that she may have indicated who “they” are for me as she rolled her hips while doing a silly two-step).

Aneka’s comment indicates a nascent social- and self-consciousness about the impact of colorism in and the perpetual role of the media in propagating colorism, discrimination against people with darker skin tones that effectively advantages lighter skin people. Within the historical context of Black America, “[y]ou cannot separate the often painful stereotypes of colorism from misogyny, in part because of the fundamental fact that light-skinned Black people’s heritage in the U.S. stems from the practice of sexual slavery, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation inherent in American slavery” (Greenidge). Today, colorism, both interpersonal and systemic, is evident in more punitive school discipline, lower marriage rates, income and employment disparities, and longer prison sentences that negatively impact dark-skinned Black girls and women. These disparities exist inextricably from perceptions of darker-skinned Black girls as lacking femininity, being hyper-sexual, hyper-aggressive, and less intelligent (Greenidge; Nittle).

I offered to play this song for Aneka because I believed this song to be “an intentional ode to dark-skin Black women, and should not be co-opted by other, less marginalized groups” (Bashir) as Beyoncé intentionally celebrates the dark complexions of Lupita Nyong’o, Naomi Campbell, and Kelly Rowland in the music video and lyrics. Ultimately, Aneka did not sustain much interest in the song as she instead occupied herself with the after-school activities in front of her. However, I was unprepared for the sequence that followed as Keisha danced around the table and placed the phone up to the other girls’ ears for them to listen too. She even walked up to the afterschool director, a dark-skinned Black woman in her thirties, and placed the phone in her ear. Keisha replayed the song four times before retiring back at our table singing low to herself, “just like pearls.” She seemed to understand that she was the reason for *and* her Black joy the desired

product of this ode to dark-skinned Black girls and women. And so began Keisha's week-long obsession and all the Black joy that accompanied her solo performances.

The next day, Keisha approached me at the start of after-school care and we had a brief conversation before I handed her my phone:

Keisha: You can play the Black girl song?

Me: Why do you like that song?

Keisha: I don't know.

Me: Why?

Keisha: Well, I'm Black ain't I?

Her final retort was less of an actual question as she posed the rhetorical as an unquestionable act of self-assertion. Without further comment, I pulled up the song on my iTunes and handed her the phone. Keisha danced around the cafeteria with the phone speaker to her ear, seemingly secluded within the comfort of her own world. The other girls were dancing to different songs blasting from the director's Bluetooth speaker; songs like "Old Town Road" to which they had learned choreographed moves from YouTube personalities. Keisha, unbothered by the other girls' preoccupation, proceeded to hold my phone up to her classmates' ears, one or two at a time, and say "It's about us Brown skin girls." She told one 1st grade student, "It's all our song!"

Keisha played the song on repeat approximately another four times in a row, intermittently tapping me on the arm to show me how she switched up her dance moves or to mouth the lyrics with me, before finally pausing for a break. I listened to her mumble, "I'll never trade you for anybody else," before she informed me that she's going to "listen to this until my mama comes, and she might come late." When her mama came probably around thirty minutes later, Keisha

sprinted to the front office with my phone still in her hand. I ran after her and arrived just in time to hear her say, “Mom this my song,” before holding the phone between her mama and the secretary’s ears. Keisha was obviously proud of herself—I think for both her decision to share the joy she was experiencing and for being an identifiably Brown skin girl.

Every day for the final week I was at Thomasville that summer, Keisha would request the song in the same manner. One day, she recorded mini, disjointed videos of herself mouthing the words on my Instagram story, her fellow Brown and Black girls dancing and singing key lyrics in the background and/or alongside her. At this point, I was fairly certain that Keisha had approached every girl in her 3rd–5th grade after-school care group with the actual song or a comment about the song. That day, or maybe another just after, I was standing outside awaiting the arrival of parents at the conclusion of the after-school session when Keisha asked to play “the Brown girl song” once more before leaving. When her mom walked up and heard Ms. Z ask Keisha what the song means to her, mama said to her daughter: “That’s the song you stay talkin bout at home? Don’t be shy now.”

Keisha embodied Black joy as she enacted a ratchet womanist practice. Summative, and evident in Keisha’s public performances and her quiet lyrical mumbling, Love articulates Black joy as the “joy that is uncovered when you know how to love yourself and others, joy that comes from releasing pain, joy that is generated in music and art that puts words and/or images to your life’s greatest challenges and pleasures” (15). Responding to a song in which she witnessed her dark skin portrayed as one of life’s greatest pleasures, in which she was challenged to see her skin “just like pearls, the best thing in all the world” (Blue Ivy, Beyoncé, Jay-Z, St. John, Barthe, Sunshine, Uzowuru, and Anatii), Keisha’s Black joy spread from person to person like Happy Crack. She created a multisensory experience that was messy, unrestrained by respectable

sensibilities, and unconcerned with adult intervention as she discovered new pathways to the “intensely gratifying joy” that composes the erotic (Lorde).

As she moved from Black girl to Black girl and sang to them individually and collectively about the beauty of their brown skin, she transferred erotic energy catalyzed by (a potentially new) knowledge of personal self-love. While Keisha was undeniably complacent with singing the lyrics to herself, her impulse to invite other Black girls into the experience exemplifies how “[t]hat self-connection shared is a measure of the joy,” which she knew herself “to be capable of feeling, a reminder of [her] capacity for feeling” (Lorde 57). Keisha had discovered and was conditioning herself into a new self-perception that was rooted in what felt good. In many ways, it can be argued that she was following the directive within Beyoncé’s lyrics:

... them gon’ fall in love with you and all of your glory
Your skin is not only dark, it shines and it tells your story
Keep dancin’, they can’t control you
They watchin’, they all adore you
If ever you are in doubt, remember what mama told you (Blue Ivy,
Beyoncé, Jay-Z, St. John, Barthe, Sunshine, Uzowuru, and Anatii)

Keisha kept dancing and we (the other 3rd–5th grade girls and me) kept watching, and we, too, allowed the song to replay in our minds as we hummed along with her in the moment between Blue Ivy’s final refrain, “I never trade you for anybody else, say” and Keisha’s move to restart the song.

Notable, too, is the connection between the line instructing Brown Skin Girls to “remember what mama told you” and Keisha’s mama. I do not know Keisha’s mama as intimately as other Thomasville parents I have come to love, but I have interacted with her mother in a number of

spaces: Thomasville Heights Elementary School's front office, the old Thomasville Library during Forest Cove Tenants' Rights Association Meetings, the Atlanta Public Schools central office, and Atlanta Thrive meetings and events.⁶⁸ I have interacted with her mother in spaces where she was agitating for the rights, recognition, and futures of her children. I can imagine that the example Keisha's mother has provided for her children communicates to them through action, and possibly word, that they matter to her and the world beyond which any of them can immediately see. In each of these contexts, Keisha's mother was building a homeplace for Keisha and her fellow Thomasville children.

Contextualizing Keisha's performances through the organizing work of her mother allows us to conceptualize more fully the portion of Love's definition of Black joy: "Black joy is finding your homeplace and creating homeplaces for others. Black joy is understanding and recognizing that as a dark person you come with grit and zest because you come from survivors who pushed their bodies and minds to the limits for you to one day thrive (120). Aligning, too, with Walker's foundational concept of womanism, Keisha's movements illustrated how she "Loves music. Loves dance. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless..." (2). By singing "Brown Skin Girl" to her peers and exclaiming "This all our song!" Keisha attempted to remind other girls of their capacity for joy, thereby creating a homeplace for the other Black girls in her proximity.

⁶⁸ Atlanta Thrive is a nonprofit empowering Atlanta Public School parents to disrupt inequities in education.

8.3 Black Joy Case Study #2: Black Boys Going to Space

I was invited to accompany the 5th grade students from both Thomasville and Slater on their Summer Blast fieldtrip to the Beltline in 2018. While I was excited to spend the day adventuring with the students, especially those who had already taken a keen interest in my research, I was irritated at the seemingly overlooked irony of taking these poor Black kids to one of the Beltline's most popular playground areas. For context, the Beltline is a "twenty-two-mile ring of mostly defunct rail lines, running through forty-five neighborhoods girdling Atlanta's downtown, the BeltLine is currently being transformed into a stunning pedestrian walkway and potential streetcar line" (Pendergrast x). Areas along the Beltline have attracted considerable attention, contributing to the rapid gentrification of the historically Black neighborhoods that have been home to a disproportionate amount of Atlanta's Black poor. Peoplestown is just one neighborhood along the Beltline located walking distance from the edges of Thomasville, Lakewood, and Carver Homes—the neighborhoods and communities in which PBSA students live.⁶⁹

Regardless of this context, the fieldtrip was highly anticipated and I decided to accompany the Thomasville students (students were separated by schools in the Summer Blast program). The day began with a tour of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birth home on Auburn Avenue. Then, we made the approximately two-mile walk (that actually felt like ten miles in the summer heat) through the Beltline to the splash pad and playground behind Ponce City Market. The walk was memorable primarily because of the inextricable mix of emotions verbalized by the students—they were

⁶⁹ For more on the Beltline, see also Shani Robinson and Anna Simonton's *NONE OF THE ABOVE: The Untold Story of the Atlanta Public Schools Cheating Scandal, Corporate Greed, and the Criminalization of Educators*.

simultaneously pissed off about the length of the walk and excitedly intrigued by the different, interactive components of the Beltline. It felt special to watch and take photos of the students climbing the giant boulders and rocks, and sliding down the cement slope underneath a small overpass—even if the rocks smelled like fresh urine. It was also amusing to hear one student tell the white teacher who co-organized the trip, “Your culture likes this kinda stuff” as he implied that walking and hiking is not a prominent feature in his experience of Black culture.

Unequivocally, the most awe-inspiring moment of the fieldtrip occurred moments after our arrival to the actual splash pad. The Thomasville students, after having changed into their swim clothes, swarmed the playground while they awaited their turn at the splash pad. Black joy was all around me. On one side of the playground, approximately eleven students had climbed on top, around, and inside a giant ball-shaped contraption (there were ropes and curved metal bars extending from two circular platforms on the top and bottom, creating a climbable sphere-like structure). One adult pushed the ball as students spun around, laughing and shouting loudly.

About twenty feet away was a swing set unlike one I had ever seen before. There were three giant, metal discs with rubber edges that were connected to ovular metal poles by four metal chains. On the middle swing were five Thomasville boys, all of them barefoot and most in only their swim trunks or basketball shorts, sitting clustered, back-to-back. I was swinging on the disc next to them with three Thomasville girls, also sitting back to back. In between each swing were about two or three Thomasville boys who had given themselves the responsibility of pushing the swings as high as they would allow. The screams, shouts, and laughter seemed to be the only ones in the entire park. From the girls’ swing, high-pitched shrieks and from the boys, “Oh My God. Oh My God.” Then, one boy began: “GANG GANG, OH HERE WE GO. WE GOIN TO SPACE. WE GOIN TO SPACE.” Moments later, all five of them were rapping in unison; the lyrics I could

discern and document in the moment were as follows: “ALL MY NIGGAS... THEY AIN’T MY NIGGAS NO MO... HOLD IT DOWN FOR THE FO... MY SHIT... MY HOE.” Later research revealed that they were rapping lyrics from Atlanta native Lil Baby’s 2017 “Freestyle”:

None of my niggas gon’ fold

Couple pussy niggas told

Hold it down for the four

In the nine with the woes

Marlo my dawg, that’s for sure

We won’t fall out about shit

Specially not ‘bout no bitch

We ain’t gone fall out ‘bout hoes (Miyabi, DaVinci,

Martianz, JRHitmaker, Taylor, and Baby)

Right there on the Beltline, in this predominantly white park, these children were being loud, joyful, ratchet, and proud as hell.

Not unlike Keisha singing “Brown Skin Girl” as a means of celebrating a lived reality with which she identifies, these Black boys were reciting lyrics “that [put] words and/or images to [their] life’s greatest challenges and pleasures,” (Love 15) as Lil Baby highlights the struggle at “the bottom.” He also highlights the strength of the loyalty that exists between him and his niggas. These Thomasville students, particularly the boys, consistently exuded a sense of loyalty and obligation to their “Four Seasons niggas”—their gang. The same 5th grade boy who hollered “GANG GANG” on the swing and who possessed the most distinct voice in the group was also the same boy that continually reasserted “I’m from Four Seasons” when a teacher (obviously new

to the group) questioned his behavior during our walk. Confused, the teacher replied, “What does that even mean?” He responded with an intentional silence.

Narrating his upbringing in *Four Seasons*, rapper and community activist Worl says, “growing up out here was rough. Not your average hood shit. Everybody out here gangster. Shoot outs before you go to school, children getting shot every day.”⁷⁰ Similarly, in his autobiography, Gucci Mane, a rapper from East Atlanta credited by many as the forebear of trap music, says: “When I think about trap I think about something raw. Something that hasn’t been diluted. Something with no polish on it. Music that sounds as grimy as the world that it came out of” (52). Reflecting on his early career, Gucci says, “I was rapping for the young boys on the corner with dirty T-shirts on. The ones cooking up in the kitchen. The car thieves. The shooters. The niggas breaking into houses. I was rapping *my* reality” (110). These boys are living the realities and grappling with the tensions portrayed in the trap music they recite; in these lyrics, they see themselves, their communities, and the complexities with which they are or will soon be grappling. Importantly, their play, too, can be just “as grimy as the world that it came out of”—consider the student in chapter one who brought a sack of flour, his “brick,” to school.

I once asked Big Franko, an East Atlanta native who has personal relationships with a few of the Thomasville youth, why he finds joy in trap music when the lyrics often depict extreme violence and destitution. Big Franko explained how the lyrics hold a tension that deserves acknowledgement. For him personally, it is neither a celebration of trapping nor the state-sanctioned systems that necessitate Black men accept a label of criminality via their participation in the underground economy; rather, he finds himself reminiscing on the sense of self-pride in

⁷⁰ “WORL 4 SEASONS PROJECTS - REP MY CITY: [ATLANTA SEASON 1] EPISODE 2” YouTube, uploaded by Hood Affairs, 20 June 2018, https://youtu.be/7fCyCD5K_Ic

having money and being able to afford certain luxuries. He explained how trap culture both depicts the violent reality in the ghetto and keeps him mindful of the interpersonal relationships (his niggas, woes, and family) that became a collective source of survival amidst the racialized deprivation and poverty that define the ghetto.

Nathaniel Bryan highlights the tensions inherent in Black boyhood broadly: “Given the complexities of Black boyhood [...] Black boys have unimaginable childhoods and play experiences, and unforeseeable futures. Consequently, they are ‘beyond love’ and do not receive the same kind of empathy afforded to white children” (2). These tensions are exacerbated by the conditions of the Black Ghetto, a geographically and socioeconomically defined space of social death where Black children are positioned as hyper-vulnerable and legally liable to political, social, and physical violence. Gucci describes the curiosity exhibited by children as a “[search] for the truth. It’s why little kids say some of the rudest shit sometimes. Like they’ll tell somebody they’re fat or ugly. Most of the time those people are ugly as hell. The youngins just don’t know yet that they’re not supposed to say those kinds of things. As they get older they learn to put on the mask and pretend” (256). These Thomasville boys have not (yet) been conditioned into being ashamed of their upbringing, the “criminalized survival economies” (Willse) that have been created and/or engaged for their survival, or the sense of homeplace their families (their mothers, “other” mothers, and aunties) have endeavored to create.

In the predominately white institutions through which they may matriculate beyond Four Seasons, these Black boys are widely considered “marginalized youth,” but within the comfort of their hood, they are centered and their methods of eking out an existence for themselves and others are understood and celebrated. In their hood, they can express the exhilaration of having money, acknowledge the niggas who helped them stack up, and simultaneously “be just as silly and

frivolous as other children” (Bryan 28). Whereas “anti-Blackness in its truest form does not imagine Blackness beyond being subjugated and entrapped within the institution of enslavement [...] [where] there is neither humanity nor life” (Bryan 17), the visibly jubilant moments enacted by the Thomasville boys emphasize an awareness of their situatedness at the center of expansive “networks, constellations, [and] webs” (“Rethinking”) that represent a larger communal history. Their play is creating new life-worlds that destroy and create, complicate and elucidate social conceptualizations of Black childhood. In this way, their Black joy is disruptive as it obliterates popular binary notions of Blackness that have become violently attached to abjection and despair, thereby making social and political space for personal self-definition.

The Thomasville boys were vitalizing a lifeworld connected to a cultural memory through sound and sight as “[t]hey rose on the air. They flew in a flock that was black against the heavenly blue. Black crows or Black shadows. It didn’t matter, they went so high. Way above the plantation, way over the slavery land. Say they flew away to *Free-dom*” (emphasis in original, Hamilton 208). This quote is from Virginia Hamilton’s title story in her collection of Black American folktales, *The People Could Fly. The People Could Fly*, which documents the story of the Flying Africans, a folktale that has been a staple in Afro-Diasporic oral tradition for generations. The story recounts how “[l]ong ago in Africa,” some people could fly with black shiny wings, but once captured for slavery, they shed their wings and eventually forgot about flying and/or kept secret their magical abilities (Hamilton 204). As slaves, the people labored in the plantation fields until some could no longer endure the abuse and Toby, a slave elder on the plantation, decided it was time to fly away. The flight of those who fled was propelled by an incantation Toby spoke quickly in a native language that the slave drivers could not understand. Those that could not fly remained in the field and passed the story of the Flying Africans onto their children and subsequent generations.

In studying the stories of Flying Africans, scholars have identified two types of Flying African narratives: “In the first type, a person flies home to Africa. We can call these *Stories of Return*. In the second strand [...] someone chants words to create the possibility of flight. We can call these the *Stories of Rising Above*” (emphasis in original, “Swing Down”). The Thomasville boys illustrated a “Story of Rising Above” as they were not returning home to Africa but to outer space. “[T]raveling through space in a ship propelled by music” (Senko-Hall), by a chant that binds them to each other and the struggles of their community, their flight is emblematic of their ability to imagine themselves beyond the abjection of Black poverty in the afterlife of slavery. Through the capacities of their individual bodies, they encountered feelings of expansiveness as the possibilities of freedom-dreaming were visualized, embodied, and expanded in the collective. The profundity of their Black joyous kinetic-orality, their imaginative play, juxtaposed with lyrics reciting kinships forged in a grimy reality, highlights the “limits and possibilities of new millennial Black movements when Flying Africans board spaceships” (Colbert 146).

This moment of #BlackBoyJoy on the swing, in which five Black boys were clustered together back-to-back with smiles stretching across their faces as three of their peers pushed them higher, provides an image of the ways in which Black joy transgresses “the isolation of bodily individuality” (Solomon). The energy transference can also be understood as “an exchange of embodied truths” (Johnson) that happens as Black joy transforms the space. Black joy politicizes the moment as the children assert themselves through collective movement and improvised noise (curse words, lyrics, clapping) and become radically aware of their interrelatedness with others. Furthermore, acknowledging how bodily malnourishment is historically a consequence of state-sanctioned deprivation, “[t]o share erotic experiences is to nourish an individual’s deepest need: the human need for connectedness; the need to share deep feelings (Lorde 58). This shared, multi-

sensory experience of Black joy can “[provide] another set of political tactics to ‘make do’ and use the in/visibility and in/audibility of black joy as a site with which to operate outside of white supremacy” (Johnson).

The chaos of these boys’ play was an exhibition of ratchet womanism. Read in the socio-geographic context of the moment (the whitewashing effect of the Beltline), their Black joy exhibited a shameless pride in the “grime” or “dirt” associated with living in their Black Ghetto, Four Seasons. Though shame is operationalized to reinforce an insecure self-consciousness and compel an individual to conceal their struggle, these boys’ play diminished their individual consciousness of self and reinforced an appreciation of their homeplace within the struggle. As evidenced through their words and actions, these boys also, “[love] music. [Love] dance. [Love] struggle. [Love] the Folk. [Love themselves]. Regardless...” (Walker 2). **REGARDLESS.**

Their Black joy, generated through their collective play, mobilized them against white supremacy. They were positioned simultaneously inside and outside of white supremacy; the generally negative readings of ratchet exist because of the ways in which notions of respectability necessitate a proximity to whiteness, specifically white supremacist hetero capitalism. Nevertheless, the Thomasville boys’ “performance of failure to be respectable” (Stallings 136) opened pathways to collective survival that do not depend on a reinforcement or internalization of whiteness. The expression of their Black ratchet imagination disrupted the whiteness and associated assumption of “safety” within the park space as the ostentation of their presence unsettled the marketed image of the Beltline as amenity for all (white) Atlanta residents. Grounded in the Black Ghetto, ratchet exists within and exposes the “spaces where we [Black people] were never meant to survive” (Sharpe 131). Considering how rapidly the Beltline is gentrifying

historically Black, impoverished neighborhoods in Atlanta, these Black youths were neither meant to survive nor innovate alternative, Black joyful paths to collective survival within this park space.

8.4 Black Joy Case Study #3: Black Boys' Backflips

Standing in the grass outside the old Thomasville library during Kimberly's Atlanta Thrive event on the "Good, the Bad, the Changes" parents want to see in their PBSA school cluster, I gave Kaden a few minutes of my undivided attention. Proudly, Kaden made multiple attempts at a standing backflip. After each attempt, he would stop, take a deep breath and look toward me and Mr. Neal for commentary. I was actually quite proud of him because after each attempt, his backflip became increasingly more precise. He was struggling with the launch as, initially at least, his body would angle to the side instead of up and backward.

As I watched him on his third or fourth flip, I remembered how often I'd seen other young Black boys about his age doing backflips—all five of his brothers showed me their backflips, one at a time, on the trampoline one afternoon. I witnessed one boy do standing backflips on the grassy hill out front of Thomasville while his dad's car was getting a jumpstart from Kimberly. I noticed another boy doing standing backflips on the grassy hill on the other side of the playground in front of Slater Elementary School, the other children running and screaming on the playground in front of him, and a large group of boys throwing the football behind him. When I told one 6th grade boy, Phil, about my research while working with Kimberly in Four Seasons, he explained that his play involves backflips, which he was taught by his big sister's baby daddy.

A cursory Twitter search of "hood gymnastics" reveals countless videos of Black boys doing backflips out of trees, hurdles over fences, and standing backflips on sidewalks alongside

videos of Black rappers Meek Mill doing flips off a trampoline and Blueface executing backflips and back-handsprings in a Spiderman costume for his son. Based on the accompanying commentary, it can be surmised that these boys' process of learning and executing standing backflips looks much like Kaden's—peer facilitated, self-motivated, and thoroughly improvised. Their process typifies the five characteristics of play that exist across age, domain, and culture:

- 1) intrinsically motivated and self-initiated,
- 2) process oriented,
- 3) non-literal and pleasurable,
- 4) exploratory and active, and
- 5) rule-governed.

These features make play both a process and a product. As a process, play facilitates individual understanding of skills, concepts, and dispositions; as a product, play provides the vehicle for children to demonstrate their understanding of skills, concepts, and dispositions (Isenberg and Quisenberry 3).

As a process, frequently initiated and facilitated within customs of care, these children were consciously engaged in active exploration of their physiological capabilities.

Reflecting on her lived experiences as a Black kid growing up in poverty, Ms. Z's personal insight on the relationship between Black boys in the hood and backflips/gymnastics speaks to each of the five characteristics of play:

I've seen it a million times. They go and join a group of their friend[s] playing around on something like a mattress and then it turns into a "watch what I can do" situation. And because one can do it, all are now determined to do the same. The drive is nonstop at that point. No matter how hard they fall... no matter if it takes 2 days... the tenacity is ingrained in the learning culture for our boys. They're fearless... no mental limit

Plus the mattress behind apt / unit 105 is a playground. While many more privileged youth have gyms and parks and playground with all the bells and whistles... our kids don't! So they use what they have[.]

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No literally someone would throw a mattress out... kids would go grab it and put it in a secluded place so they can play on it[.]

It's not uncommon to see in the hood[.]

It was one behind out apt building when I was a kid[.]

⁷¹ "Unit 5" is a placeholder for any apartment unit or complex.

That's where my brothers learned[.]

What do you think about the joy in their backflips as a form of play?

Well think about our boys. What do they glorify... strength, ability... like the cartoons they watch or video games. It's the main reason the kids at THES took random pill at the school this year because they thought it was steroid and it'll make them super strong instantly... They are just watching each other... mimicking the generation before them. The challenge is fun but the reward of accomplishing the goal is super satisfying. It's pure joy for a young black boy.... well from my perspective...

Like if you sit and just watch a group of kids... the curiosity in their eyes when something catches their attention. You can [literally] see them studying how it's done. And without an extra thought, they try it w/ no fear. It's an amazing process. Shows how the mind is such a powerful thing. When society tells the average person... no, you must go to school, learn from a professional or a skilled trainer, our boys knows NOTHING about that. If they want to learn it, they figure it out with the resources around them... which is usually limited to their own observations and... a mattress lol[.]

Because these boys were landing standing backflips, each attempt was literally “intrinsically motivated and self-initiated” (since you technically cannot be forced or physically prompted to do a standing backflip). Or, like Ms. Z explains, the desire and dedication to learn the art of back flipping is a “watch what I can do” situation in which the boys challenge each other to test and explore their “mental limit[s].” Furthermore, unlike most recognized sports, the two key components in their process of learning to backflip are repetition and visualization; all other components—coach and gymnasium, spring boards or foam mats, dietary supplements, athletic wear, and even first aid equipment—are luxuries.⁷² Thomasville children learn backflips in either the concrete and dirt patches outside their apartment units or in the driveways and crowded trampolines of their family homes. “Our kids”—Thomasville kids—practice a resourcefulness in order to create the playground on which they will conduct their study.

Ms. Z’s comments on this “amazing process” emphasize how the play is simultaneously “process oriented” and “pleasurable” for the boys involved. Most significantly, she situates Black boys’ backflips in the catalog of ghetto games explicated in chapter two as she reaffirms ghetto games an intergenerational, socio-ecological practice that is simultaneously normalized by and continually reanimated through succeeding generations. These games provide a framework for examining how Black child play transforms communal spaces and how Black joy informs a Black child’s identity through their customs of care and the exploratory relationship to their body often initiated through the challenge of these games.

As a product, their backflips demonstrated the outcome of a peer- and self-facilitated process, a commitment to exercising their physiological capabilities, and the knowledge exchange

⁷² See: Deutsch, Max. “I Challenged Myself to Land My First Backflip within One Month of Practice. Here’s What Happened.” *Medium*, 23 Mar. 2018, medium.com/@maxdeutsch/i-challenged-myself-to-land-my-first-backflip-within-one-month-of-practice-heres-what-happened-b2c246a5945f.

and feelings of safety extant within their customs of care. Each successive attempt reassured them of the profits and possibilities in their risk taking as they became increasingly more informed of the bridge between their bodily capacities and the expansiveness of their own minds. Backflips, then, can be understood as these boys' introduction to the erotic as potential. Lorde clarifies that, "[w]hen we live outside of ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge, and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual's" (58). I now realize that as I watched Kaden attempt one flip after another, I witnessed him listening to his internal knowledge, and quickly becoming intimately aware of his own interiority.

To learn to do a backflip is to practice the imposition of *your own* will power over *your own* body. And, "[w]illfulness" for Black boys, whose physiological and socio-economic mobility are externally directed and/or criminalized by anti-Black state-sanctioned norms, "is a struggle to exist or to transform an existence" (*Wayward* 396). Kaden was conditioning himself to embrace the struggle and feel the erotic energy and potential of Black joy in the doing. "For the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing. Once we know the extent to which we are capable of that sense of satisfaction and completion, we can then observe which of our various life endeavors bring us closest to that fullness" (Lorde 54–5). Even while capitalism conditions Black children into passivity via hyper-policing within their most frequented institutions like schools, understanding play as a process and product of self-conditioning allows us to study more fully how Black boys' backflips are "acts against oppression" that "become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within"

(Lorde 58). Kaden's self-possession over his Black joyful body in motion was defying the historic and contemporary bounds of Black conditionality in the afterlife of slavery.

Black boys' spontaneous and self-taught art of backflipping is illustrative of Black child play, the process *and* product, that compels children "to reconnect, reembody body, emotion, intellect, and will" (Westfield 68). Their play, an embodied literacy, (re)connects the active body to brain development and stimulates learning through multi-sensory cognition. Lorde identifies a socially constructed dichotomy that exists to sever the connection between our minds and our bodies: "The white fathers told us 'I think therefore I am.' The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel therefore I can be free" (38). Black boys learning to imagine and discipline their bodies according to the impulses and desires that stir them highlights the influence of ratchet womanism in their daily lives. Essentially, their play is not only a practicing and conditioning of their bodies to intend towards the creative, subversive, and sustainable (their play is ratchet), but also their play cultivates a radical subjectivity that eludes false binaries such as the think/feel and the spiritual/political (their play is womanist). In this example, the spiritual/political binary arises because "we think the work of fighting oppression is just intellectual" (Love 51). There is a common abnegation of the role our interiority has in the struggle for resistance. And yet, "[t]he real work is personal, emotional, spiritual, and communal. It is explicit, with a deep intense understanding that loving Blackness is an act of political resistance, and therefore it is the fundamental aspect to teaching dark kids" (Love 51). Universally, to complete a backflip, you must trust your body and overcome self-doubt. As Ms. Z testifies, a practice of fearlessness and limitlessness is evident in the Thomasville kids. Their backflips specifically visibilize a self-love that is predicated on love for struggle and love for folk, regardless (Walker 2). The resultant Black joy makes freedom a reality they can feel in the doing.

8.5 Black Joy Case Study #4: A Black Mama's Twerk

Standing outside in the roundabout in front of Price after an extremely long day of counting and sorting school supplies, filling backpacks with the selected number and type of supplies, and grouping the 2000 backpacks according to the number of students at each of the four PBSA schools, Kimberly turned up the stereo blasting music from her car. In her Harvard University “Future Freshman” T-shirt⁷³ and ripped jeans, she put both hands on her knees before placing them on the ground and twerking face down. Dancing solo, in the company of her children and friends, the Black joy emanated from her body and engulfed the moment. When the song changed to East Atlanta rapper Young Scooter’s “Jugg King,” Kimberly was joined by her three youngest sons, her two-year-old daughter, and four-year-old nephew as they all rapped the lyrics aloud: “You say you a hitman but you ain’t hit shit/ You say you a lick man but you ain’t hit no licks” (Scooter). We had struggled to collect the 2000 backpacks necessary to ensure that each PBSA student started the school year with basic supplies. Triumph was on the horizon.

Almost a full month later, with all the backpacks distributed one at a time to each student at the PBSA schools, we were headed back to Kimberly’s house after school when we paused at her brother’s house for reasons I cannot recall. It was my last day at Thomasville before I returned to Pittsburgh for the start of my own school year. After Kimberly pulled into and parked her car in the driveway and I parked my car across the street, each of her children hopped out of the car. This time, her three oldest daughters (all in high school) were present. As I walked up, East Atlanta rapper Lil Keed’s voice grew louder, “I ain’t have shit nigga, I ain’t have a dime / I ain’t have shit

⁷³ She purchased this one and ten other Harvard University T-shirts for each of her children during her visit to the institution as an employee of PBSA.

nigga, I ain't have a dime" (Mooktoven, Keed, ZackSlimeFR, Shawty) and her two-year-old daughter came around the car. She danced towards me with a purple Blow-Pop in her hand. Kimberly was twerking alone behind her and pointing toward her children who were dancing on the other side of the car. When the song switched to "Hip Hopper" by Blac Youngsta, her daughter turned on her phone's front-facing camera and set it on the grill of the car. Kimberly and all four of her daughters proceeded to twerk, shoot, and dance with all the laughter and energy in their bodies. There was no special occasion; just a Friday afternoon, the music was lit, and everyone was together.

These two moments of unequivocal Black joy are distinct from the others recollected in this chapter as both moments of play were initiated by a Black woman, a single mother of ten and "other mother" or "auntie" to many PBSA students. Her particular kind of unabashedly silly expression was consistent in our FaceTime calls after work hours. One day Kimberly, in the presence of her three youngest sons, shared that she believes children should have access to their own curse words "so they can express themselves." She explained this as she instigated a series of playful disputes between herself and the boys: "You mutha fudge cake" was responded to with "I'll whoop your aspirin," then another voice, "You black biscuit." We (Kimberly, me and whatever kids were in the space) would stay on FaceTime clowning one another, talking shit about the school day, and laughing until her phone died—usually about thirty minutes to an hour later.

None of us seemed conscious of what was happening in the moment (both in-person and virtual), but what is apparent to me now are the myriad ways in which Kimberly was curating and "nurtur[ing] protected spaces where we can relax and express joy and see ourselves as we are, no matter how black life is understood or treated by the broader public" (McClain 227). In the public, Kimberly is a firebrand who agitates on behalf of parents who are stereotyped as "ghetto,"

“aggressive,” “negligent,” and “lazy;” similarly, a few of her children have been labeled “problematic,” “disrespectful,” and “out of control” at times. Kimberly countered these derisive stereotypes of Black life in moments of Black play and domesticity that occurred in ordinary spaces—the car, the parking lot, the living room, and so forth. Angela Davis writes: “As the center of domestic life, the only life at all removed from the arena of exploitation, and thus as an important source of survival, the black woman could play a pivotal role in nurturing the thrust towards freedom” (11). For Black women, domestic life was solely about ensuring the survival of and creating pleasure for Black people. In these moments of Black joy, Kimberly was ensuring her family’s survival through pleasure. These spontaneous playful moments that, over the course of the summer, became intimate “spaces of mattering” (Williams-Johnson 17), (re)occurred as a consequence of our connected and collective imaginations. In these spaces, Kimberly recognized the interior lives of her children and acted on that recognition by co-constructing a “homeplace” as the foundation for their Black joy.

Historically, dance has served as a method of conflict resolution, spiritual worship,⁷⁴ archival memory, and self-gratification for Black people who have been situated in a white supremacist culture that has legally deprived us of access to an institutional justice system, indigenous African religions, our own diasporic narratives of subsistence, and the autonomous sensual expression of our bodies. Accordingly, “Black expressive culture that engages the body is one of the places where we work out shit that we can't make sense of any other way” (Cooper 216). We could not make sense of the obstacles that we continually confronted in the process of collecting those 2000+ backpacks, but that first twerk break Kimberly initiated was a visual

⁷⁴ For more historical context about dance, archival memory, and spiritual workshop and the Afro-diaspora, see Sterling Stuckey’s “Introduction: Slavery and the circle of culture” and Barbara Browning’s *Resistance In Motion*

manifestation of those “Nothing But God” moments, those moments of triumph that seem profoundly inexplicable. That moment in which your spirit is caught up in the rapture of the God that made it all possible. To be totally honest, I was so captivated by Kimberly and Monique’s unquestionable trust that God would provide a way for us to achieve our goal that I dedicated myself to daily prayer, too.

I wanted the parents to collect the backpacks for two reasons: first, because the families needed them and PBSA was not going to provide them that year; second, I wanted the parents to collect and distribute the backpacks as a “Fuck You” to any and every establishment that stereotyped our parents as “helpless,” “lazy,” and “negligent.” I told God this daily. Kimberly’s twerking was an expression of all of this—a response to our tears and the fulfillment of our prayers and ambitions. Brittney Cooper encapsulates the profundity of the moment as she explains, “Southern booty-shake music, the kind of stuff you can twerk to, is the place where I find the most productive synergy between the sacred and the profane, the place where I feel the most bodily freedom to let all my emotions—particularly the uncomfortable ones like anger and fear—hang out and find free expression” (216). Kimberly was releasing herself from the unproductive anger and fear that denigrating stereotypes had conditioned her into believing (on occasion), and simultaneously reconnecting with her body and the sensual life force that moves within her.

Understanding twerking as a “version of ‘public self-naming’ [i]n a world that is constantly denigrating the bodies of Black women and making their contributions to cultural production invisible” (Halliday 9–10) enables us to understand how Kimberly was publicly (re)naming herself in these moments of Black joy amidst the intersectional experience of Black motherhood. Twerking in her Harvard T-shirt, outside her children’s school and her place of employment, Kimberly was defying the constraints of anti-Black, misogynistic tropes such as “[t]he angry Black

bitch; the cunning seductress; and the asexual, overpowering thug [...] that have been used to define the ways of thinking about and potentially being a Black woman” (Cox 175). More pointedly, for Kimberly, “[e]ven when the stereotype has somewhat positive connotations, like the image of the superwoman, it is still a representation that requires a subjugation of the self to the interests of others and a strength that is presented as more combative and aggressive than empowering” (Cox 175). She was engaging “[c]onscious performances and skilled navigation of strategies for social mobility” (Cox 175). Kimberly was merging lifeworlds, challenging the boundaries of respectability, and dictating new readings of her body, and by association, those of her children.

As Aria Halliday asserts, “Black girl ways of knowing lead Black girls and women to a collective freedom that dismantles racist paradigms and misogynist dogma that keep us bound in the slavery that is dissemblance and toxic respectability” (4–5).⁷⁵ Kimberly was moving her children further away from the violence of white cultural assumptions about Black bodies and identity. “Black girls who playfully dance and publicly enjoy their bodies reclaim the possibilities of pleasure in blackness and womanhood through the visual connection between laughter, dancing, and group celebration” (Halliday 9–10). Simultaneously, she was transferring her ways of knowing as she modeled for her children the joy in embodiment and the pride in her Blackness. In this way, she expanded their portfolio approach to survival: developmentally, in teaching them how to initiate and participate in Black joy-producing, movement-based play such as dance, she facilitates the cultivation of socioemotional intelligence and learning, as the process teaches them empathy; thereby, instructing them on how to notice, feel, identify and extend their own joy and that of

⁷⁵ Other Black girl ways of knowing include musical and rhythmic play (Gaunt; Brown); Doll play (Chin; Bernstein); Fashion (Ford); Rhetorical and creative performances and strategies (Cox; Kinloch; Gaunt; Butler; Cooper); Digital and social media (Butler); Embodied and sensual pleasures (Lorde; Cooper; Morgan; Halliday).

others when joy is happening. And, in contrast, how to notice, feel, identify, and reject oppressive restraints enforced upon their bodies.

A declarative statement, a visual reminder of how she “[l]oves music. Loves dance. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless...” (Walker 2), Kimberly’s twerk sessions, breaks, and circles, read through the lens of the Black ratchet imagination, exemplify the messy, fluid, and culturally specific approaches to promoting play and experiencing pleasure. In this way, twerking, and the resultant Black joy, connects her both to the immediate community (Thomasville, Atlanta) and a larger, diasporic community (Afro- and Black girls). Twerking, as a form of reclamation that encourages the discovery of new ways of joyfully treating and relating to our bodies and communities, can also facilitate an interactive engagement with Black feminist traditions of embodied being, learning, and knowing. Through the play forms she engaged with her children, Kimberly, in womanist fashion, “worked at joy, and she made livable moments, spaces, and places in the midst of all that was unlivable there, in the town [they] lived in; in the schools [they] attended” (Sharpe 4). Kimberly was modeling the labor of love most critical to our survival. Through this embodied praxis, and the resultant knowledge of the body, those present to witness her family play experienced the creative dialogue and cooperative play integral to a broader (less respectable) movement for the love and honor of Black lives. Kimberly, via her playful display of ratchet womanism, immersed her children within a culture of Black mattering, and equipped them with the tools to access a “community [of] people with whom—not just against whom—to define [themselves]” (McClain 103).

Through embodied play, Kimberly was introducing her children to their own “erotic knowledge”: that which “is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire” (Lorde 54). Kimberly was creating moments of Black joy that would

become engrained in her children's kinesthetic memory. So, whenever necessary, they can "move back in time often to try-on memories of what it felt like to be free" (Lynch). Subsequently, her children will always know the feeling of what life *can* be—the feeling of aspirations achieved and shared – rather than merely accepting what they are conditioned to believe life *must* be in order to survive the conditions of anti-Black capitalism (Lynch). Kimberly failed to be respectable and upheld the "grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe" (Lorde 57) as she shamelessly visibilized the sensation of Black joy emanating through and from her body. Out of the ordinary, Kimberly acted on an impulse and created a pathway toward liberation, as "our freedom is held in the spaces in which we find joy and the places that we struggle to love" (Halliday 13). It is the kinesthetic memory, most fully transferred and actualized through Black joy, that sustains and mobilizes us through afterlife of slavery.

8.6 Black Joy: Redefining Survival via Interrupting Hope

One of the most formidable features of Black joy as a "psychological womb" is the birth of hope. Gregory Ellison explains, "Psychologists have stated that for hope to exist there must be some sense of captivity or deprivation [...] while deprivations internally trigger hope, outside forces are also catalyzing agents" (149). Kimberly frequently described the seemingly countless ways in which Black poverty trapped Thomasville families in a vicious cycle. Rejecting the prospect that her own children might repeat these cycles, Kimberly would often proudly exclaim: "I got ten children, so I will have ten college degrees;" or alternatively, if asked, she would say that her dream is to attend "ten college graduations." Noteworthy, again, are the Harvard

University T-shirts she and her children were wearing while outside Price, as well as the Morehouse College T-shirt her son C.J. wore on the Beltline fieldtrip.

In discussing the significance of hope, Ellison argues that “an interrupting hope shatters temporal realities [...] An interrupting hope emerges from obscure origins” (83). Embodied play and Black joy connect us across spatial-temporal realities as they embrace and/or release kinesthetic memories stored in our bodies. One of the seven properties of play identified by Stuart Brown is “freedom from time” and all of its constraints (“PLAY”), which creates new futures while releasing us from present captivities. The play initiated and enjoyed by Kimberly with her children enabled her to “turn away from any need to justify the future—to live in what has not yet been. Believing, working for what has not yet been while living fully in the present now” (*Burst* 132). Kimberly maintained an “interrupting hope” that intensified her yearning for the actualization of the freedom dreams she harbored for her children and sustained the laborious demands of her present reality—the struggle for educational equity for her Black children in failing schools. Her interrupting hope “lies in the possibility of a resistance that’s based on being able to face our reality *as it is*” (hooks 288).

Because Black child play is a means of processing present realities, thus producing new realities and igniting a desire to share the “sensual world around us with a pleasure that is immediate and profound” (hooks 218), it follows that their play is a conduit of Black joy, the machinery of interrupting hope, and a response to a Black child’s erotic knowledge. The erotic changes the way we exist moving forward, introducing Black joy as a distinct source of existential change. Once we have awakened to this “internal sense of satisfaction” we cannot rid our consciousness—or our bodies—of what it once felt like to be free. We now know the possibility of freedom (in some sense) is eternally and internally extant.

The exercise of our collective and individual critical imagination becomes integral to envisioning possibilities that will radically “[re]define survival in ways that are acceptable and nourishing to us, meaning with substance and style [...] True to ourselves” (*Burst* 99–100). As evidenced by Keisha, the Thomasville 5th grade boys, Kaden, and Kimberly, Black play, which triggers Black joy and critical imagination, becomes the basis for (re)defining survival as “a practice of making and relation that enfolds within the policed boundaries of the dark ghetto; it is the mutual aid offered in the open-air prison. It is a queer resource of black survival. It is a *beautiful experiment* in how-to-live” (*Wayward* 228). And, “[w]hat is beauty, if not ‘the intense sensation of being pulled toward the animating force of life?’ Or the yearning ‘to bring things into relation [...] with a kind of urgency as though one’s life depended upon it’” (*Wayward* 236). Together, Black play and Black joy position an individual within an intimate proximity of possibility. The kind of Black play outlined in this chapter enables Black children to visualize beauty within themselves as it brings possibility directly into their homeplace.

9.0 pLaY bReAk

While the Forest Cove Tenants' Association waged their campaign for the right to return, Kimberly and I were launching a campaign of our own: "'Straight Outta Backpacks': Backpack and School Supplies Drive," for the projected 2000 students that would be attending PBSA schools that upcoming academic year. Kimberly's vision far surpassed the needs of the children as she constantly reminded me that when you do for the children, you do for the parents. PBSA families were already entering the school year with standardized assessment-based deficits; now they faced the possibility of entering the year without the essentials.

We understood that although the backpacks were not physical necessities, the items met crucial psychological needs. Kimberly would later clarify that the possession of new backpacks and school supplies was an overlooked self-esteem issue for the students and their parents; when I remarked on the number of missing students on the first day of school, she intimated that some children stay home from school (even on their first day) because they do not have deodorant, haircuts, and supplies. The first day of school is *THE* day to stunt on all your peers.

Additionally, PBSA parents were in triage mode—a few Thomasville (and therefore Price and Carver) mothers were organizing around the right to return to Four Seasons; many more, organizing or not, were burdened by apprehension over mass evictions due to gentrification as well as grief over Black boys from the neighborhood who were missing due to death and incarceration. And so, our struggle to collect the backpacks had a sociopolitical impact as we began applying pressure on institutions and individuals with a foothold in the community: PBSA administration, faculty and staff, city council representatives, and longtime residents with expendable financial and/or human capital.

We endeavored to reframe the public narrative about PBSA parents through this labor of love. The closet inside Price in which the backpacks were stored required cleaning and reorganizing before our boxes could be brought in. We did that. Members of the PALS team assisted us with maintaining our inventory, printing and designing the donation boxes on display in the lobby of Price, driving to donor locations and transporting donations, pressuring faculty to donate funds and/or backpacks, sorting the supplies into the backpacks, and distributing the supply-filled backpacks with books directly to the students when the day finally came at each PBSA school. I even watched one parent donate the remaining \$20 (of \$21 and some change) from her personal bank account to our GoFundMe page—she could see the vision.

Each of these moments defied the denigrating comments and obstinate opposition we received from every direction. One administrator urged us to sell the backpacks to teach the parents how

to prioritize their own children, and another insinuated that a drive was unnecessary because backpacks will likely be donated from external entities. To this last comment, Kimberly replied: “When all our kids have five backpacks each its gona send the message that these kids have a community that cares about them.” Ultimately, Kimberly would invite outsiders into this dream by opening a space for them to experience a positive, internally driven vision of Thomasville. This experience sharply contrasted with news reports of parental negligence and interpersonal violence as well as the white savior narrative attached to PBSA and gentrifiers.

From the outset, Kimberly envisioned the initiative’s largescale impact. Each day, whether in person or via FaceTime, she added more intricate details to the initial picture; through her (and Monique who was constantly reassuring me that we would achieve our backpack drive goals), I learned how dreaming is an action. Moreover, because the children of Thomasville belong to the entire community, her dreams were large enough to encompass and care for them all.

Below, I provide a timeline of the backpack drive’s major moments.

June 12, 2018

8 AM–3:15 PM

Distributed flyers; Collected donations; Made phone calls; Created collection boxes; Etc.

June 22, 2018

Picked up 2400 24-pack Crayola crayon boxes from Kids In Need (KIN) at the Atlanta Community Food Bank (ACFB); Taped up donor recognition backpacks, graduation caps, and pencil cut outs;
Reached \$1000 in the GoFundMe

June 25, 2018

1500 Supply-filled backpack donations from KIN!

We had to rent a moving truck to carry the pallets of backpacks.

July 2, 2018

Backpack drive meeting with PALS

July 5, 2018

Inventory

July 22, 2018

TyTy’s Backpack Drive at the Chill Spot; TyTy donated a portion of the remaining backpacks and supplies to our drive!

July 26, 2018

REACHED OUR GOAL: 2000 BACKPACKS (REALLY 2031)

On FaceTime, Kimberly repeatedly screamed from her bed, "2000!" And her three youngest children marched around the room responding, "BACKPACKS!" This became our victory chant.

July 29, 2018

Sorting backpacks at Price

July 30, 2018

Gave out 335+1 backpacks

504 backpacks given at Thomasville

July 31, 2018

504 backpacks given at Slater

August 01, 2018

310 backpacks given at Price

August 02, 2018

250 backpacks given at Carver

August 03, 2018

82 more backpacks given at Carver

August 05, 2018

FINAL TOTALS:

2123 backpacks collected

1200 books donated

\$1930.00

1482 supply-filled backpacks donated in 1 week

(The remainder were emptied, inventoried and stored in Kimberly's garage)

\$500.00 worth of children's underwear purchased

August 18, 2018

ATL Parent Like A Boss, Inc. is incorporated in the state of Georgia

10.0 “Just cause we live in poverty, doesn’t mean we have to live like [we in] poverty”:

Effective Organizing is 25% Fighting & 75% Building Alternatives

“People be like bitch, you think you all that. No, bitch I want it and I want you to want it.”

- *Kimberly Dukes*

“You gotta stay away from those bad influences, cause you strivin to be what? Great.”

- *Mama comments to her daughters, Zuri and her sister*

“That’s why I was so upset that my food stamps got cut off... cause I was feeding the [neighborhood on that card].”

- *Kimberly Dukes*

“Y’all the ones I’m battling the world for—to make sure everything’s good for y’all.”

- *Kimberly Dukes about her children*

“... but I think the most important dividing line today is between those who believe our greatest resources is our imagination and those who think unbridled imaginations are dangerous, a threat to existing ways of organizing power”

- *Dani McClain*

One day, Amanda, Portia, and I were waiting for their mama in my parked car at Four Seasons. It was hot. My car was smoking, as it does when it overheats, and we were eating popsicles. It was summer 2018, and we were chillin’. 10-year-old Amanda opened the car door and spit on the ground just outside. Four-year old Portia was amused and leaned over to mimic her auntie, but Amanda wasn’t having that. She snatched Portia up by the arms, turned Portia’s little body to face her and said: “You will not be a follower. The world needs more strong Black women leaders and that’s what you will be. Not a follower. Now go’ne girl!” She flung Portia back into her seat, and just as she was about to return to her popsicle, we all paused. I made silent eye contact with them both before we burst out laughing in unison.

As I turned back around to face the steering wheel, an array of thoughts flooded my mind. I remember first thinking, how random—then, how beautiful—followed by, how powerful. I hoped Portia heeded Amanda’s forewarning, and I wondered who had poured such wisdom into Amanda. The moment felt entirely playful and wholly solemn. How did she know to seize the moment and make such a demand of her niece? This moment I witnessed between Amanda and Portia illustrates how play manifests the intimacy of Black ordinary and conveys womanist sentiments. Ratchet womanism is evident in Amanda’s zealous and defiant assertion as she sought to promote personal and social agency and a sense of communalism in Portia, as she mandated that Portia be independent and think critically in order to lead her community one day. Amanda was likely mirroring the values she witnessed in her own community. Like her mama, Amanda harbored a vision for Portia—a freedom dream—that exercised a form of imaginal care, an often fantastical form of care that is based in the imagination, and initiated a “process of retemporalization, where the future becomes an intervention into the present” (Hunleth). In retemporalizing the moment, Amanda was introducing an alternative reality in the current moment through a future in which Portia is not limited by the gender-based expectation of passive mimicry. Amanda had also launched an obvious cultural critique of racialized gender stereotypes.

Through play and her position in customs of care, Amanda possessed an integral role in the co-construction of Portia’s learning environments. But as she grabbed Portia, Amanda seized another form of participation in her niece’s socialization: through dynamic interpretation and effective communication, Amanda was overtly circumventing the socially constructed parameters of childhood that necessitate a certain level of passive innocence and ignorance to the socializing processes of the “adult world.” Acting on a critical awareness of stereotypes and her expertise in Black girlhood, Amanda chose to support Portia by “encourag[ing her] to be more deviant, more

defiant, and more disobedient” (Wun 192). She recognized Portia’s existent humanity and future potential. Accordingly, she did not punish Portia for her behavior; rather, Amanda provided an alternative lens for each of us to reimagine the consequences and implications of Portia’s mimicry. Amanda was demanding that Portia be defiant and create a new image of herself for herself first and her community second. And, while this moment was brief and concluded with loud laughter, “the meaningfulness and power of what these kids say and do should not be measured solely by their ability to transform a world that gives them only meager breathing space. The fact that these commentaries exist at all is a measure of their strength; the fact that they often exist briefly and subtly is a sign of their fragility” (Chin 179). Against the intersectional oppressions that require Black girls to make themselves small and mimic white middle-class norms for their own safety, Amanda seized and took up space, modeling this seizure for Portia while also instructing her to be autonomous in her own method.

Our earliest exposure to communication is frequently via the play experiences we engage throughout infancy as “babies learn to imitate other people’s actions and begin to communicate by using gestures and vocalizations. Mastering language and forming emotional bonds with their caregivers both prepare infants to learn from adults who are their first ‘play mentors’” (Leong 29). This practice of care and the experiences that transpire launch play-based mentor relationships that initiate a process of language learning that prepares younger children to receive and construct a specific social identity. Through the intimacy of care and play that molds their daily routines, Black mothers initiate a child’s early understanding of social awareness and political action through adult-facilitated and imaginative play. Broadly, the Black maternal imagination is a critical feature in political activism—Black mothers’ commitment to freedom dreaming for and with their children cultivates distinct forms of role play and self-assertion. In Thomasville, the

imagination and self-assertion reflect the intricacies of ratchet womanism. Individually and collectively, the community's mothers, grandmothers, aunties, and othermothers are emblematic of what it means to live intentionally, materially, and spiritually "for the 'we'" (McClain). Black mothers have narratives, skills, and a spirituality that are community-oriented and ancestrally rooted; the intellectual, agentive, and subversive behaviors of their children, biological and extended kin, reflect the efficacy of their mothering back to them.

Drawing on the experience of the "Activist Mothering" coined by Nancy Naples, "Black Activist Mothering" defined by Jacqueline Sakho, and "Community Cultural Wealth" forged by Tara Yosso, this final chapter utilizes my fieldwork to honor the organizing efforts staged by Thomasville mothers for housing rights, and to explain why Black child play should be understood as an "organic culturally-sustaining practice" (Alim) and praxis belonging to Black children, that, inherited from the community consciousness and visionary practices exercised by their mothers, disrupts institutional anti-Blackness and innovates culturally responsive interventions. I structure this chapter by first defining "Black Activist Mothering" before forwarding my own intervention about the role of the imagination—specifically, the operationalization of "imaginal caring" (Hunleth) and "community cultural wealth" (Yosso)—in their approach to community organizing. With this delineated framework, I identify how the Black mothers waged the fight for Forest Cove tenants' rights in 2018 by mobilizing their own forms of imaginal care and highlighting the centrality of the community's cultural wealth. The children, positioned as co-performative witnesses, testify to this struggle and the catalytic qualities of their mother's aspirations. Their testimonies become evident in the overlap between play and protest, as well as in the motivations children offer for their own dreams.

As the chapter's title suggests, effective organizing requires that most of our energy and resources be invested in building and establishing alternatives to our current structurally unjust realities. I postulate that many of the children intentionally resist the associated constraints and debilitation of hegemonic childhood scripts as they engage a form of cultural and social criticism and knowledge exchange (hooks); this criticism and exchange of knowledge is inextricable from culturally informed play and engagement. Arguably, childhood imaginations are not yet as colonized as adults'. As a result, children are able to identify the possibilities that *could* exist; as they simultaneously imagine and enact community, they also infuse public space with those possibilities.

10.1 Black Activist Mothering & Imaginal Caring

Rooting her analytic framework in Black feminist theory, Naples characterizes “Activist Mothering” as a response to mainstream notions of mothering and motherhood that are derived from white, cis-gender middle class norms. She argues that while both Black and white women engage community work as an extension of their identities as women and mothers, Black and Latinx women's commitment to their communities is further shaped by their fight against the tyranny of racism. Naples clarifies: “[T]he analysis of activist mothering provides a new conceptualization of the interacting nature of labor, politics, and mothering—three aspects of social life usually analyzed separately—from the point of view of women whose motherwork has often been ignored or pathologized in sociological analyses” (446). Black women's identities are frequently severed into categories that isolate and inadequately address only fractions of their existence. This is due to monolithic, hierarchical “knowledge structures that only deliver one

dimensional oppression narratives about Black women as mothers” (Sakho 7). This severance has obfuscated the ways their ethic of communalism and activism inform and are informed by their motherwork. An analytic that demonstrates the potency of knowledge generated from the intersections of Black motherhood in the context of poverty can decenter the dominant frameworks that reinforce the violence of misogynoir and erase the contributions of Black women to both the longevity of their communities and their legacy of radical political activism.

Activist mothering has included care-based emotional and physical labor for people outside of their kinship network as Black Activist Mothers extend the nurturance of their motherwork to entire communities. Historically, Black women have carried out their commitment to the survival of their community through the establishment of “what sociologist Patricia Hill Collins has called ‘other-mothering,’ a system of care through which they are accountable to and work on behalf of all black children in a particular community. This broad understanding of family responsibility often became a launch pad for public service” (McClain 4). This practice of “other-mothering” is an elemental aspect of Black Activist Mothering. According to Sakho, “Community work practiced through the tradition of Black Activist Mothering is a way of operationalizing our intersectionality toward reclaiming empowerment of our cultural, social, political, and economic spaces and places for the enrichment of our children and communities” (12). Conceptualizing Black Activist Mothering as a lived experience and an intersectional Black feminist analytical framework reaffirms how the labor I witnessed performed by Thomasville mothers was “boundary spanning” (Sakho 12) praxis: the application of “unspoken knowledge systems comprised of emancipatory and spiritual militancy strategies” (Sakho 6) towards the promise of futurity—visions they harbored for their children that extended beyond mere survival.

The generational impact of Black Activist Mothering is evident in the extensive kinship networks, both biological and fictive, that have been nurtured in Thomasville. I consistently witnessed Monique, Kimberly, and TyTy (Monique's sister) scold, discipline, feed, clothe, house, and pray for numerous children throughout Thomasville. Reflecting now, I cannot recall a moment I shared with them individually or collectively in which they were not literally providing for the immediate needs of a child or imagining possibilities for the future of the children.⁷⁶ These visions are a form of nurturance and emotional labor as they were performing a maternal type of "imaginal caring" (Hunleth). In her description of the care acts engaged by Zambian children (colorful drawing and fantastical storytelling) Hunleth elucidates the instrumentality of imaginal caring; she details: "Through their imaginal caring, children both expressed their care for others and were, in fact, providing care for these others *and* for themselves." Though Hunleth describes imaginal care as "fantastical," "exaggerated," and "counterfactual," I use the term in the context of Thomasville to reveal how the imagination founds the deepest expressions of care through visions of alternative, equitable realities.

Hunleth defines the words "care" and "imaginal" separately to elucidate how they function collectively: "Care is both a doing and a feeling and, while distinct, the doings and feelings of care are deeply entangled and difficult to separate." Second, "*Imaginal* [...] signifies another dual meaning... consider the imaginal as indexical of... the way in which people envision and critique their worlds and also try on their 'what ifs' and 'construct other versions of existence besides those actually experienced.' [...] [Hunleth also uses] *imaginal* to direct attention to the image as a vital

⁷⁶ When I met Kimberly and Monique when they were recently employed members of the PBSA PALS Team and were responsible for communicating between PBSA schools and parents. Today, Monique plans parties for families in her community and Kimberly is the Executive Director of Atlanta Thrive. TyTy owns The Chill Spot, a strip club and food joint in the Thomasville area.

datum for studying care.” By situating the two terms together, Hunleth shows how “children produced image-rich fantasies of performing care in the past, present, and future in an effort to elicit behaviors and feelings they wanted to produce in their kin.” While the mothers with whom I worked did not draw literal pictures, Monique and Kimberly uttered images of the future that offer a critique of their present realities and envisioned new directions for their families and communities. For example: Kimberly would frequently assert, “I got ten children and I will have ten college degrees.” Monique once shared that she dreamed of creating an initiative for girls at Thomasville Heights Elementary School in which they would “get their hair done, nails done, new clothes, etc. To create opportunities for them to feel pretty and experience something different.”

Their ability to envision future achievements for their community influenced behaviors and their own feelings toward a particular outcome. As a result, the frequency of these sort of imaginative utterances and the clarity of their visions are palpable in the dialogic encounters initiated by their children (evidenced by Amanda, and other students I introduce later in this chapter). Essentially, Monique and Kimberly’s imagination enabled them to identify and critique deleterious gaps in their community, as well as play with ideas and innovate schemes that might engender alternative realities.

Moreover, with their children depending on them for subsistence, these mothers became adept at “the art of scraping by and getting over” (*Wayward* 237). In a socio-geographic space of deprivation, subsistence necessitates increasingly vast creative capacities in order to provide and demonstrate a sense of physical and emotional security. Despite the scarcity of material resources and social capital, the exercise of imaginal care enabled Thomasville families —guardians and children—“to push back against external and deeply unequal [...] power structures in a place where care [...] was both critical for biological and social survival and difficult to accomplish”

(Hunleth). The imaginal caring practices within Thomasville are nuanced by conditions of the Black Ghetto as these families “exist within the space of ratchetness [...] [where their] expressions of Blackness [...] are unregulated by the white gaze” (Toliver 4). Hence, identifying how imaginal care is manifested within a locally constituted ethical framework provokes an examination of the efficacy of ratchet womanism specifically via the lens of the Black ratchet imagination.

The embrace of messiness and joy within the Black ratchet imagination aligns with my conceptualization of care as a practice of holding space which “means, my vulnerability meets your vulnerability with an open heart for the purpose of creating a safe moment in time where we can express authentically, courageously and vulnerably in any way we choose; free of judgement, agendas and expectations” (Sakho 14). Care, performed and extended, establishes relationships that allow for nuance and fluidity, and thereby augment self-expansion and communal exploration. Hence, I am describing a type of imaginal caring that is “grounded in [...] messy, filled with areas of gray humanization and hyper locality” (“A Ratchet Lens” 541). In this way, care contributes to the *disruption* of survival practices that are amenable to the material interests of the “external institutions that incite neighborhood disorder” inside the Black Ghetto (Duneier 225). Within Thomasville, a few of these expressions of care unregulated by the white gaze include but are not limited to: feeding the hood on your food stamp card; inviting another family on the waterpark adventure because it’s buddy pass day; hosting community-wide kickball games sponsored by the locally owned strip club; covering funeral costs with drug money due to a lack of life insurance policies; rappers sponsoring events for and/or featuring kids from their hood in their music videos. These manifestations of ratchet womanism mobilize the entire community through the afterlife of slavery, and enact an imaginal care that redefines survival as a “beautiful experiment in how-to-live” (Wayward 228).

Aligning with womanist ethics that profess the imperatives of radical subjectivity and social consciousness, Black mothers form empathic imaginings that facilitate communal experiences that transcend gender and generational boundaries. Because the children belong to the entire community, the emotional tumult is community-wide. The Black maternal imagination is birthed from the depths of these mothers' interior lives, as their yearnings found the affective behaviors and creative expressions they exhibit in front and on behalf of their communities. And yet:

“black women’s cultural products are read solely through a representation politic that routinely discounts *black female interiority*. While *interiority* is widely understood as the quiet composite of mental, spiritual and psychological expression, black female interiority is that—and then some. [Morgan uses] the term specifically to excavate the broad range of feelings, desires, yearning (erotic and otherwise) that were once deemed necessarily private by the ‘politics of silence’” (Morgan 37).

The products of Black female interiority are frequently overlooked and/or denigrated for many reasons. Two are integral to my discourse on Black activist mothering: 1) there is a “need for a concept of interiority, that [...] can support representations of blackness that are irreverent, messy, complicated—representations that have greater human texture and specificity than the broad caption of resistance can offer” (Quashie 23); 2) the products of their interiority are immaterial—these somethings are concretized through intimacy.

As a summation of both factors, I reflect here on my personal interactions with Monique. Monique is a self-identified introvert; her reputation as a member of “Thomasville royalty” proceeds her as her grandmother was one of the first tenants to move into the Thomasville Heights

Projects, and her two siblings, nine children, multiple grandchildren, and nieces and nephews maintain a familial presence in Four Seasons. She has endured the intersecting histories of institutional racism and state-sanctioned violence that predispose children in the Black Ghetto to vulnerability and compel their families to participate in survival economies. Her self-expression and her choices could be “irreverent [according to the dictates of hetero-middle class norms], messy, complicated.” And in her most reflective moments, Monique conveyed a deep ardor when she spoke of what she desired for her children, and on a few occasions in the privacy of my car or a park bench, what she desired for herself—I could feel the fervor that engrossed her imagination through the fervor that pulsed in my chest when she spoke. I wanted these visions to be realized so badly that I could feel them in my body, too.

Monique, like other Thomasville mothers, harbored Black maternal visions—freedom dreams—that enacted a form of imaginal care entrenched in ratchet womanism and initiated a process of retemporalization (Hunleth). Brittney Cooper reminisces on the ways in which her mother’s imaginings were indispensable to her mother’s political activism: “Sometimes for us [Black women], mind over matter really does become the only way that we have going for us. My mom [...] taught me that dreaming is at the core of politics. If things are going to get better, Black women have to stay invested in the project of dreaming” (Dionne). Their Black Activist Mothering cultivated ““political communities rooted in a radical ethic of care’ [that] occurs through action” (Cox 232)—imaginal caring and freedom dreaming are actions, visibilized in the embodied struggles waged by Thomasville mothers daily. The collective imaginations of these poor Black mothers (“Angela Davis”) have “played a crucial role in the continued survival of their own communities. Their goal was to see their communities grow, thrive, and become self-sufficient

beyond their lifetimes" (Naples 459). In this way, their practices of imaginal caring in the present become a means of ensuring a homeplace for their children in the future.

10.2 Community Cultural Wealth

Thomasville mothers' aspirations for their families and neighbors are community assets that partially comprise the community's cultural capital and wealth. Countering theories of social and cultural capital that are popularly defined in proximity to whiteness, Tara Yosso explicates the community cultural wealth as "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by communities of color to survive and resist the macro and micro-forms of oppression" (77). Summarized below are the six forms of cultural capital Yosso defines:

Aspirational: Sustaining hope; believing in oneself and people

Linguistic: The ability to express oneself well enough to be understood in diverse groups and contexts, often to achieve a desired objective or goal

Familial: Consciousness of oneself and ancestral histories that can be invoked and/or channeled to extend the rich cultural legacies and navigate various contexts

Social: A level of self-esteem that enables the development of meaningful and purposeful relationships that provide mutual support via the cultivation and exchange of personal and communal cultural capital

Navigational: The awareness of the people, networks, knowledge and capital that compose a particular community; the knowledge of one's rights, needs, and positionalities within a community enables people to access as well as disseminate services and resources throughout the community, rather than relying on an institution to provide

Resistant: The ability to discern where inequities are occurring and/or oppressions are operating, and having the integrity, means and resources to take action to censure, subvert and/or abolish them

Each of these forms of capital can be accumulated, exchanged, and performed via the embodied experiences that occur within a community. Because “wealth [is the] total extent of an individual's accumulated assets and resources” (Yosso 77), each form of capital contains overlaps with others in that they are cultivated, manifested, and/or utilized via similar practices and outlets, and all contribute to the full wealth of the collective. I will focus much of this chapter's analysis on aspirational, resistant, and navigational capital as these are the forms of capital most evident in the Forest Cove tenants' rights discourse and the dialogues I recollect with students.

Aspirational capital, “the ability to hold onto hope in the face of structured inequality and often without the means to make such dreams a reality,” is “developed within social and familial contexts, often through linguistic storytelling and advice that offer specific navigational goals to challenge (resist) oppressive conditions” (Yosso 77). The Black maternal imagination encompasses and intermingles the Black ratchet imagination and imaginal care, which, collectively and separately, are examples of aspirational capital as both involve a “doing and a feeling” (Hunleth) that is “fluid, precarious, agentic” (“A Ratchet Lens” 540), and necessitate a level of

skilled improvisation and practicable creativity especially in the absence of necessary resources and access to monetary funds. While the imagination contributes to all forms of the community's cultural wealth, it especially forms the basis of aspirational capital as it becomes a source of personal and familial power that contributes to the broader community's assets through other-mothering, kinship networks, and customs of care. Anything that is manifested begins as a thought or dream that is actuated through the capabilities and talents of Black women's bodies, producing navigational and resistant capital for themselves and their children.

Children learn how to mimic these talents and how to experiment with them by using the materials and networks to which *they* have access (which may differ vastly from the access of their mothers). Confident in the assets formed by their physical and mental capacities, these children feel emboldened to use their bodies to navigate and resist institutional oppressions. Furthermore, in the process of witnessing, exploring, and learning, children play with and through these experiences, and resultantly found their own communal knowledge base from which they can continually call and build upon as they age and grow. My conversation with Raden Britton, a 2nd grade student at Thomasville Heights in May 2019 exemplifies how children experience and infuse their community cultural wealth in their own daily experiences and aspirations. In a single, random conversation, Raden shared his knowledge on natural births, child-rearing, and self-esteem.

After enlightening me about how babies are born (they come from "mommies poop"), he casually informed me that he wants fifty kids so that "[he] can take care of them and inspire them to be just like [him] when [he grows] up." I'm fairly certain I must have asked how he planned to provide for all fifty children, because he responded: "If I was a grown up, I will have the biggest job in the world so I can take care of all of them." Together, he and his fifty will live in a mansion with a "joan room" (yes, a room for joaning). Each child will have their own space because it is

important for children to have their own space, he asserted. He concluded this future-oriented portion of our dialogue by proclaiming: “God is always going to be in my heart... As long as I live I’m going to be the best that I can be.”

On the walk back to the classroom, Raden shared that he transferred from Slater Elementary School. I asked if he liked Thomasville. He told me that people don’t want to be his friend because he talks too much and touches too much stuff, so he gets in a lot of fights. We agreed that talking a lot means you think a lot—and since we can relate on that, we should definitely be friends. Raden is not exceptional in his ability to envision a future family for himself. But, this conversation with Raden speaks to the ways in which “the children,” even his who do not yet exist, are defining features of personal identities for many in his community, as the aspirations for the children become aspirations for oneself. At seven or eight years old, Raden is already imagining how he will make a homeplace for his children, and within that home, there is room for joaning—a room specifically for Black communal play and the associated exchange of linguistic, social, and familial capital that results from engaging Black traditions and ghetto games within customs of care and familiar zones. Through imaginal care, through creative word play, through God, this child projected his best self and subsequent generations into the future.

10.3 Tenants’ Rights: Articulating Our Cultural Wealth

Yosso’s culturally sustainable, asset-based framework of community cultural wealth is especially helpful for understanding how the community’s existent capital rejects the deficit narratives and ideologies that publicly justify hyper-punitive and hyper-structured school cultures, as well as mass gentrification and racialized deprivation. The rejection of such deficit narratives

was apparent in the first housing related meeting I attended inside Thomasville Heights Elementary School's media center on May 24, 2018. At this meeting, a speaker discussed the status in Four Seasons and the looming threat of displacement. She highlighted the initial efforts of Four Seasons residents to found a tenants' rights group in the apartment complex. To date, the vice president recollected, the group had "sent letters, developed a petition, and is planning a march to demand the choice to move back after renovations." While the familial challenges posed by the housing voucher system are undeniable, the speaker gestured toward an overlooked factor in popular debates about gentrification and displacement; referring to no individual resident, she asserted, "What's disturbing is that she's not with her community anymore [...] and the community is what provides stability." Considering the necessity of fictive and biological kinship to survival in the Black Ghetto, neglecting to acknowledge the role of these social networks that sustain communities is a potentially fatal oversight. Kinship networks are familial capital as each member of this network invests in, exchanges, and creates other forms of cultural capital that permit a person access to and assist with navigation through certain spaces and places. Throughout subsequent tenant meetings, I wondered aloud why neither Millennia nor the media covering the city's housing developments ever asked why residents were so ardent about their right to return to a place Millennia representatives only characterized through the rhetoric of violence, destitution, and lack.

In her book *Toxic Communities*, Dorceta Taylor comments on the dichotomous perception of gentrification by juxtaposing the gentrifiers' attitude with those of the long-time residents: the gentrifiers believed that the wealth is merit-based; therefore, they "did not feel that gentrification resulted in displacement; for them, it was a race- and class-neutral process in which people either chose to relocate or did not belong in the neighborhood in the first place. Gentrifiers tended to

emphasize *exchange values* for the communities that could be easily translated into commodified market values” (emphasis in original, 90). When wealth is viewed as merit-based or merely monetary, then the discourse around capital and assets, whether personal or communal, can appear deracialized while reinforcing the “assumption [...] that people of color ‘lack’ the social and cultural capital required for social mobility” (Yosso 70). Because the community cultural wealth often cannot be quantified, materialized, or commodified, the community is perceived to be devoid of reason for preservation.

In contrast, longtime residents “saw each neighborhood as a ‘community’ and tended to stress use values such as informal exchanges, solidarity, and informal economies. These residents saw gentrification as deleterious, as it contributed to displacement of minority residents” (Taylor 90). At a later meeting, Ms. Peaches, a long-time Forest Cove Resident and President of the Forest Cove Tenants Association, challenged the Millennia representatives to acknowledge this sense of solidarity as she asked, “When y’all renovate will we be able to go back around our same neighbors?” (June 28) Thomasville children and students demonstrated a similar awareness of the ways they are situated at the nexus of overlapping networks and communities through their play and dialogue. For example, one day Julio, who frequently used literal play and explanations of his play practices to share about his life, provided a short list of the irrationalities of grown-ups. Amidst his list, he shared: “[My] Mama got a response to every question but the answer [...] Mama will respond when people ask her why she doesn’t talk to them: ‘Because you are very disrespectful and you don’t care about the Thomasville kids and you are selfish.’”

He then characterized her as possessing “extra ‘*motality*’” which he defined as “when you’re being very extra.” Lodged within this humorous criticism of his mother and the parent/child binary, Julio was demonstrating a conscious awareness of his mother’s labor on behalf of the

“Thomasville kids.” As a former Thomasville kid (then, a Price Middle School student) who was at that moment occupying himself in the Thomasville media center, Julio could not exclude himself from his mother’s broader care for the community’s children. His mama did not trust anyone who was not actively centering and mobilizing the best intentions for Thomasville kids. Surely, then, Julio was also situating himself within a network of care that included multiple individuals and families connected by their experiences in Thomasville—as he is a Thomasville kid. Furthermore, in imparting this observation of his mother, he simultaneously applied, and thereby taught me, a fantastic word that identifies his perception of her persona and the labor that informs it. Julio inadvertently engaged a form of cultural and social criticism and knowledge exchange. And, in a few sentences, Julio had skillfully showcased his familial, linguistic, and social capital.

And yet, Thomasville residents and Four Seasons tenants were navigating a noteworthy tension as they harbored both a consciousness of the ways in which “informal exchanges, solidarity, and informal economies” are invaluable assets, and a consciousness that their humanity is reason enough to be entitled to safe and decent housing. In order to achieve the standards of “safe” and “decent,” Four Seasons would have to be renovated completely. Consequently, tenants were simultaneously demanding decent and safe housing in Four Seasons and lobbying for their right to return after renovations.

During the next meeting I attended, on May 30, a document drafted by the Forest Cove Tenants’ Association for HUD and Representative John Lewis was shared with me. The document enumerated dangerous maintenance issues before asserting the residents’ humanity: “These conditions are inhumane, and we are reaching out to you because we as tenants and human beings do not deserve to live in these conditions. It is unsafe for our families and difficult for us to call a home.” The document then moved to identify the aforementioned nuance maintained by the long-

time residents as the association, speaking for the entire complex, explained their relationship to the community: “We are a community with close ties to our local school [...] Where many of our children attend and many of us work. This is a school with great need for improvement in educational performance for its students, and we know that having decent, safe, and dignified housing is vital to achieving that goal.” Considering that the association officers were exclusively Black women, it follows that their appeal for address centers the wellbeing of their children as will be the case in subsequent meetings. Here, the letter implies a goal that, theoretically, should broaden their appeal for quality housing conditions enough to galvanize the interest of all parents: the desire for the educational success of their community’s children.

In naming the school as a grounding institution, the tenants’ association was attempting to mobilize the community’s aspirational capital. The document did not deny that the community needed support the residents themselves could not afford; their aspirations alone could not radically overhaul the interconnected education and housing systems that had disenfranchised their children. And yet, their aspirations are an important intervention, a mechanism of imaginal caring. Their letter directly addressed a “What if” question (Hunleth), thus presenting an alternative to their displacement: what if we had decent housing? Our local schools’ students could experience improvement in their educational performance. These Black activist mothers were inviting HUD, local politicians, and Millennia representatives not only to acknowledge the structural histories undergirding the inhumane conditions inciting this call to action, but also to walk through the world they have imagined for their children and community. These women were offering a more definitive picture of their experience in this community, a picture centered on the “culture of possibility” (Yosso 78) they have nurtured in their children and kin throughout the neighborhood.

Finally, the document asserted: “We demand a full rehabilitation and renovation of the

apartments and complex, with a guaranteed right-to-return at full affordability under project-based section 8 for all current residents.” By demanding rights for *all* tenants, these Black activist mothers were demonstrating an awareness of the ways in which their individual interiorities and collective imaginings are both consequential and political. Essentially, not only did the tenants’ association reaffirm Thomasville’s cultural capital and immeasurable forms of wealth, but they also reaffirmed their investment in political activism on behalf of their entire community.

10.4 Tenants’ Rights: Rendering a New Image

The meetings and rallies spanned the full length of the summer. The tenants’ association, composed of Black women (primarily Black mothers), were clarifying for the representatives how the personal is political. Their personal experiences formed a collective struggle that was confronting the larger socio-political systems that were leaving them increasingly bereft of options. One of the most compelling comments from the tenants came on August 8 from Ms. Crystal, a mother of six. She was irate because Millennia had refused to address the threat of black mold in their apartment complex, and was now denying their prior refusal in the presence of the same tenants who had filed the grievances and work orders; she wanted them to acknowledge the resultant chronic hospital visits and school absences. In a raised voice that pierced the moment, she exclaimed: “Just cause we live in poverty, doesn’t mean we have to live like [we in] poverty.”

Ms. Crystal was practicing “a hope *against hope*, the possibility of politics not simply as hope for a different or better world, but as the ardent refusal of *this* world” (Bliss 93). Living in the afterlife of slavery, she was trying “to exceed those compulsions of capital” (Sharpe 71) that would have her believe the only options are to accept her current reality or harbor a passive hope

for better by “refus[ing] to accede to the optics, the disciplines, and the deathly demands of the antiblack worlds in which we live, work, and struggle to make visible (to ourselves, if not others) all kinds of Black pasts, presents, and possible futures” (Sharpe 115). Ms. Crystal was rendering an entirely different image that could become “*the site of the re-elaboration of [her] condition*, rather than its transformation” (emphasis in original, Bliss 90). Her exclamation conveyed neither a sense of entitlement to nor a desire for monetary wealth; nevertheless, she unequivocally rejected the ideology that would have her believe she deserved to endure morbid suffering caused by anti-Black structural conditioning.

Ms. Crystal was exercising an imaginal care that contributed to the *disruption* of survival practices that are amenable to the material interests of Millennia who would otherwise continue to benefit from her acceptance of Four Seasons as “good enough” and capitalize on her expressed desires for “better.” In this way, her refusal momentarily reoriented the goal of the tenants’ verbalized grievances towards the “reimagin[ing] [...] of an ethics of care (as in repair, maintenance, attention), an ethics of seeing, and of being in the wake as consciousness” (Sharpe 131). A year later, in 2019, I spoke with Ms. Crystal again. She reaffirmed her disbelief and rejection of the state of the apartments both socially and structurally: “I don’t know what’s going on in this neighborhood. I ain’t seen nothing like it.” She asserted this while also sharing her belief that the most pressing need in the neighborhood is “care. Love. They need love. These children need they ass whooped. They need somebody to love them.” They need people who will commit to an ongoing refusal of the “forms of contemporary Black public image-making” (Sharpe 115) that are premised on Black pathologization; people who will commit to other-mothering and imaginal caring as manifestations of love—love that ultimately establishes a homeplace that cannot be gentrified.

The Black activist mothers, through the organizing of the Forest Cove Tenants' Association, were lobbying for the recognition and renovation of the homeplace in which they have invested their community cultural wealth—specifically, their aspirational wealth that exists outside the whiteness of capitalism in its inability to be quantified, looted, and reallocated to systematize deprivation. Aspiration, however, can be “violent and life-saving” even as it restores “breath back in the Black body in hostile” circumstances (Sharpe 113). In their struggle, these mothers simultaneously acknowledged that to reside within quality housing conditions, the apartment complex must be completely overhauled, *and* that they are entitled to the opportunity to thrive within the community that is reflective of their own experiences.

They have a right to materialize the homeplace constructed from within their interiorities and through their Black maternal imaginations. Their practice of imaginal caring was a testament “for those bound to a hostile land by shackles, owners, and the threat of death, [that] an imagined place might be better than no home at all, an imagined place might afford you a vision of freedom, an imagined place might provide an alternative to your defeat, an imagined place might save your life” (Hartman 97). Amidst the afterlife, Thomasville children and families’ recourse is to the safety they experience as the fulcrum of the Black maternal imagination. Decisively, a common motif throughout the right-to-return discussions was that the children were unable to play outside without the threat of violence. This rhetorical motif is a recognition of the significance of Black child play, and the network that is cultivated through play—a network that, for many, exists beyond the walls of their unit. The community cultural wealth and intergenerational kinship networks that are founded on and augmented through cooperative play are the reasons these families would want to stay in Four Seasons.

10.5 Co-Performative Witnessing & Black [Girl] Imagination

The formation of the tenants' association and its tenants' rights campaign were tactics for deploying the promise of Black maternal freedom dreams. Alone and together, each tactic epitomizes the strategic and visionary work of Black motherhood that has been imparted to the community's children through disciplined imagination and play. Co-existing "inside the materiality of their struggles and the consequences" (Madison 829), PBSA children have been positioned as co-performative witnesses to their mothers' struggles to ensure their familial and communal survival in the Black Ghetto. They are actively witnessing and experiencing their mothers' struggles as they endure struggles of their own. As an embodied, ethnographic methodological praxis, Madison explains how "co-performative witnessing is ultimately a political act, because it requires that we do what Others do *with* them inside the politics of their locations, the economies of their desires and their constraints" (emphasis in original, 829). Expanding on Dwight Conquerquood's concept, Madison describes co-performative witnessing as an ongoing reminder "that cultures are performing bodies in the struggle to belong with and for each other across infinite forms of corporal suffering, geographic conflict, and discursive power" (830). Black mothers transmit culture (McClain 63) through embodied practices of care for their communities and survival strategies that confront systems of deprivation. Black children inherit and play with these literal and imaginative survival practices that undergird the culture.

Accordingly, PBSA children were situated as co-performative witnesses to their mothers' labors; their play, then, provides an avenue for understanding how a child comes to know and is known by their larger communities, and the ways this knowledge informs their self- and social consciousness. Children use play to "[develop] the appreciation that problems may have numerous approaches and multiple solutions;" solutions flourish as children "relate or explore a world where

they can have the control they may lack in their lives” (KABOOM!). Essentially, children create and establish ownership over new realities for which they develop the skills to demand and advocate through play. Play, therefore, is an actively disruptive, negotiated, intergenerational, and co-conspiratorial praxis as Black children apply daily the knowledge that is bequeathed to them and generated co-temporally.

Play is how families practice and embody an ethic of care. Play is the means through which experiences, behaviors, and social and cultural expressions are merged and transformed into a practice that catalyzes self-interrogation and communal exploration. The knowledge generated and exchanged through play is often culturally sustainable, in that play forms sustain the habits, customs, and institutions that dictate the daily routines in a specific community. For children who understood their positionality within the Thomasville community, play was the vehicle through which social critique was provoked and realized, games were created and accolades were acquired, burdens were alleviated and self-care was practiced, and they could be fully acknowledged for the personal experiences, historical narratives, and cultural practices and capital that they brought into the space. So, play was their earliest form of “holding space” as care for another person (e.g. chapter two’s recollection of Julio’s engagement with his siblings). In this way, Black children create their own form of imaginal care that visibilizes a cultural criticism and an “irreverent, messy, and complicated” interiority reflective of the Black ratchet imagination that is performed through play and informal dialogue.

Through imaginative and physically interactive play, we learn to use our bodily senses to understand our realities as “[a]ctive play fosters personal meaning. When children perceive events as personally relevant, their neural connections proliferate and situations, ideas, and skills become part of their long-term memory” (Isenberg and Quisenberry). In childhood play, our bodies are the

source of the experiential and imaginative engagement that informs our world. The kinesthetic interplay evident in make-believe play reveals how children translate meanings, “gestures, postures and movements into [and through] their bodies” (“With Social” 9). The development of our bodies expands our minds, which, for many, later become the source of our intellectual engagement. It is through play that we first learn to make and process our personal beliefs, as well as conceptualize world-making as a physiological, existential practice.

The experiential knowledge, embodied labor, and imaginal caring specific to Black mothering in the Black Ghetto are incompatible with American cultural norms and therefore were often illegible to people outside the Thomasville community. However, I observed multiple examples of Thomasville children mirroring their mothers by exteriorizing their own interiority as they verbalized and illustrated their own practices of imaginal care. These encounters were loud and shameless, divorced from respectability and seemingly impulsive, *and* executed towards the ends of self-assertion and autonomy under the constrained conditions resultant from Black poverty, childhood, and girlhood—in the opening of this chapter, Amanda and Portia are a quintessential example of ratchet womanism performed in a playful encounter unregulated by the obstructive forces of the white, male, and/or adult gaze as they performed ratchet womanism in their playful encounters. Together, they exhibited how “Black girls, too, learn to make meaning in concert with other Black girls and with Black women. Black girl epistemology evolves from similar ‘lived experience’, ‘use of dialogue’, ‘ethics of caring’, and ‘ethics of personal accountability’ that Collins elucidates as integral to Black feminist epistemology” (Halliday 7). Similar to and in concert with their mamas’, the Black child version of ratchet womanism highlighted the way play centers a community’s lived experiences and constructs an embodied praxis that can reframe and/or reject oppressive social constructions while holding space for other Black children as an act

of care.

In one of our daily conversations around the cafeteria table during after-school care, Aariah shared an intimate awareness of her mother's dreams for her future and the labor her mother has borne to actualize these visions. Zuri responded to me and Aariah with her own aspirations that were predicated on a form of imaginal care.

Aariah: Yea, my mom has big plans for me. She wants me to get principal's list, a lot of awards, and she'll throw me a party.

You have to pay for college unless you get a scholarship.

I wanna be a teacher, but I also want to be a scientist.

I like to talk about my family and how I like to yell at them.

Snickers

My mom has three jobs and she's saving to get us a new house.

First, we moved to a hotel, then another hotel, then me and my mom and her kids and my father rented an apartment.

....

Zuri: I want to be a scientist... a scientist that learns about powers to help people, like people who feel bad about themselves, I wanna help them feel good about themselves (2019).

In voicing her desires, Aariah amplifies the potency of her mother's aspirational wealth as she builds atop it with her own future aspirations. Her commentary also reveals "the perpetual suffering dark families endure in yearning for an education for their children is the elucidation of survival, the conundrum of a dark reality" (Love 15). Aariah does not disassociate the dark realities of her mother's exhaustive labor exacted for their survival amidst the housing deprivation system from

her mother's desire for her to be on the principal's list with a lot of awards—Ariah shares all this information at once because the realities and desires exist all at once. Critically, however, is the way in which Ariah and her mother “come together in that site of desire and longing” (hooks 256): their desire and longing for a fulfilling future. From this site, a homeplace cultivated by her mother, Ariah receives the “specific navigational goals to challenge (resist) oppressive conditions. Therefore, aspirational capital overlaps with each of the other forms of capital, social, familial, navigational, linguistic and resistant” (Yosso 77). Thus, myriad forms of wealth are harnessed, transformed, and transferred between Black mothers/other-mothers and their children.

Zuri's expressed goals create an image—we can see a scientist studying a set of powers. Or, a superhero employing a scientific method to explore the depths of her own superhuman capacities to realize a vision of self-love and/or self-esteem for all people. By identifying a personal desire rooted in some sense of self, Zuri's response can be conceptualized as evidence of her developing interiority as she demonstrates a nascent awareness of the “power” of feeling in her personal goals. The image of her as a scientist that she has created of herself for herself and anyone who feels badly about themselves is a form of care as “care is both a doing and a feeling and, while distinct, the doings and feelings of care are deeply entangled and difficult to separate” (Hunleth). Clearly, she feels deeply and has thought about what actions can be taken both to respond to her own emotions and elevate those of others. The creation of this self-image and this empathic vision is an action that makes visible our internal spirit and power (hooks 77). However, unlike adults who have been conditioned to identify existing occupations that address “feelings” and self-esteem, like psychology or counseling, Zuri imagines a pathway of her own—even further, she imagines powers. And, there is power in that act of imagination.

The desires harbored by these Black children exist within a larger context as their passions and hopes involve the freedom dreams of their families (most often, their mothers) for whom they extend embodied and imaginative forms of care and emotional labor. In conversation with Dorothy Roberts, Ruha Benjamin asserted that “[i]magination is a terrain of struggle” as many people are forced to exist daily in other people’s imaginations—considering that the social systems and technologies with which we exist are man-made (“Policing”). However, the imaginings of Aariah and Zuri and each of the Black children in this chapter are of a liberatory nature. They “[open] up possibilities and pathways, [create] new templates, and [build] on a Black radical tradition that has continually developed insights and strategies grounded in justice” (Benjamin 12). As Black children living and learning within the Black Ghetto, they also build on a Black radical tradition of imagining, moving, and strategizing that has been grounded in a creative struggle for survival and the energetic transference of Black joy.

10.6 Co-Conspiring: Play as Protest

Mobilizing their positionality as co-performative witnesses, each of the children in this chapter communicated a consciousness of their relationship to their community—current and/or imagined. As they dialogued about their dreams for themselves and their mothers’ aspirations for them, they explored an alternate reality that capitalized on the wealth of knowledge and cultural capital they had accumulated in the present. Each child practiced resistant and navigational capital as they explained the motivations that compel them to keep striving towards a personally successful future.

According to Hunleth, “[a]dults and children alike considered a good parent or guardian as someone who gave a child time to play and also imagined with and for that child. Much of this imagining was geared toward constructing better versions of reality based on their—the child’s and the adult’s—own desires and aspirations.” In Thomasville, the Black Activist Mothering, textured by ratchet womanism, necessitated that their mothers operate as co-conspirators with their children and place their bodies on the line for the realization of their familial freedom dreams. This co-conspiratorial practice was exhibited in myriad ways, one of which was consistent redirection to the children as the mothers consciously centered their children’s experiences and invited their children to speak for themselves. One Thomasville mother and Four Seasons resident bluntly instructed me: “Y’all need to talk to the children... They gona tell you the truth about what’s really gone on in their life” (2019). These women dialogued honestly with their children, and consistently prioritized the present joys and cultural practices of their children as they vocalized the daily challenges and demanded their rights to play safely, move freely, and form their own kinship networks. This elevation of Black joy moves against agendas that might center pathways to college, respectable employment, and civic engagement as sole reasons for neighborhood investment and/or preservation—each of which may be grounded in a desire for closer proximity to whiteness and a guarantee of their children’s identities as productive, laboring citizens.

The circulation and investment of the community’s cultural wealth instruct PBSA children in the art of interdependence as they learn to rely on each other for access to embodied knowledge, skills, and expression—all of which catalyzes the production and exchange of social capital rooted in a local culture that enables their access into other familiar zones while exhibiting the efficacy of the customs of care and the neighborhoods in which they have been brought up. In dialogue and play, students demonstrate the potency of their cultural capital as they infuse navigational tactics

and strategies for resistance into games and subversive conversations that respond to oppression and cultivate subversive practices of personal and collective agency. As Aimee Meredith Cox explains, “[p]rotesting and playing are interconnected practices used [...] in very well planned and overt ways as well as in ways that appear unconscious and spontaneous.” She uses “play [...] to refer to the joy in working collectively to confront the most subtle and difficult to define aspects of institutionalized injustice and everyday instances in which Black girls find themselves dismissed and/or violated” (Cox 141).

Extending this chapter’s commentary on imaginal care to include explicitly all the children in the PBSA community, the Black Activist Mothers who dream for their community and the children who inherit the wealth of their aspirations demonstrate how “[w]orking within community, whether it be sharing a project with another person or with a larger group, we are able to experience joy in struggle” (hooks 296). Black joy for the mothers is in the vision of their Black children at play, and Black joy for the children is experienced within the expansiveness of their play. We can also better understand how the “affirming insurgent intellectual cultural practice” (hooks 8) exhibited by Black children at play and/or theorizing through play is a culturally-sustaining praxis that continually extends and transforms the boundaries of the homeplace established by their mothers.

The mothers’ practice of imaginal caring manifested through their expressed visions of equity. With each meeting, rally or public fellowship, their “image-rich fantasies” (Hunleth) of care become a more expansive intervention on behalf of their children. These women are Black mothers “advocat[ing] for [their] children everywhere, from the playground to the schoolhouse to the doctor's office” (McClain 202); they understood that “[t]here is always a campaign to wage. There is always a need to make our children's humanity more visible and to convince, cajole, or

pressure someone who's making our lives more difficult because of their own blind spots or racist impulses” (McClain 202). By prioritizing and co-conspiring with the community’s children, they were securing and imagining a more equitable place for Thomasville families in the future. For these reasons and more, Black Activist Mothers practice a constant awareness of the culture that is foundational to their imagined and felt sense of homeplace, and consequently, experience an urgency in their fight for its preservation in order to continue transferring the grassroots tools for Black joy and survival located within their respective cultures and its cooperative play forms across generations.

11.0 pLaY bReAk

Summer 2019

Tyty hosted a kickball tournament at the Thomasville Heights field in the cut behind Four Seasons. I played for her team, the Chill Spot (the name of her strip club around the corner), which was composed of Black women across generations from throughout the neighborhood. I don't recall the name of our opponents, but they wore purple. The purple team had a similar composition.

A few folks had set up at the top of the bleachers with folding seats and a few kids were running around. Firecrackers in the apartments were a constant noise throughout the prep and game. By approximately the fifth inning, the bleachers had hella people. People were hanging on the fence and kids were everywhere, a few riding dirt bikes at the top of the bleachers just behind the folks in folding seats. A man had set up with a microphone and stereo and was announcing the game with music in between each play.

The game was intense and made even more so because the purple team cheated more than a few times. MooMoo, TyTy, and Monique's uncle, was the referee. Nevertheless, tension was disrupted by quite a few musical dance/twerk breaks between the coaches and teams.

I don't think I really noticed all the people until I heard a voice yelling, "Chill Spot! Chill Spot!" behind home plate. I turned around and saw Monique with her children and grandchildren. Then, I noticed the over 50 people watching, cheering, laughing, and dancing.

It was the bottom of the sixth. Purple team had 9 points and Chill Spot had 7 when Tyty called the game because of rain and thunder that was becoming increasingly heavy.

12.0 “Kids have more power than grown ups... That means kids don’t get more tired than grown ups”: Research Implications & Conclusion

“... ‘Success’ cannot be attributed to an individual’s traits alone, but instead should be understood contextually. Resilience is a multidimensional process shaped by individual action, social policies, and social networks.”

• Lauren Silver

“Your [Parent LAB] event was amazing and I really love the principles it’s based on [...] I think this could be a really impressive way to hold trauma in our communities... I am excited to see the ways you use this program and your mission to support in the healing of the most vulnerable families”

• Eva, Thomasville Heights Elementary School Teacher

“I know that there’s always so much to pray about [...] But today, I come humbly and earnestly. I have loved damn near every moment of my job here at Thomasville, so much so that it’s become increasingly more difficult to contain my love for people... Thank you God for this experience; thank you God for these people; and thank you God for such a place.”

• Me, June 29, 2017

“I am so overwhelmed with gratitude [...] This is so exciting. Just being present and basking in [the PBSA parents’] presence.”

• Me, August 1, 2017

In May 2019, after passing by a vote of 160-11 in the House and 48-4 in the Senate, Governor Brian Kemp vetoed House Bill 83, also referred to as “Georgia’s Recess Bill” (Rand). The bill mandated that school boards create policies to ensure recess for grades K–5 and encouraged each elementary school to include thirty minutes of supervised unstructured activity; moreover, “local boards of education shall establish written policies to ensure that recess is a safe experience for students, that recess is scheduled so that it provides a break during academic learning, and that recess is not withheld for disciplinary or academic reasons” (“House” 1). Kemp claimed that his reason for the veto was to preserve local control within the school boards. He

stated: “This legislation would impose unreasonable burdens on educational leaders without meaningful justification” (Rand).

Considering that under-resourced schools of color are more likely to be underperforming on federally sanctioned and state-ranking standardized assessments, and therefore are more likely to deem the students’ recess time as unnecessary, *and* that Black children are most likely to be criminalized within their school systems, and therefore are most likely to have their recess time withheld as punishment, we can logically deduce which demographic of students could have benefited most from H.B. 83. These racialized and classed disparities exist across the country, and everywhere across the country, Black children are vocalizing the severity of the institutionalization experienced within their learning spaces. Monique Morris quotes one Black girl student in Chicago Public Schools as she elaborates on the impact of play deprivation:

‘Now, that’s when you talk the most... they want you to sit at a table,’ Leila said. ‘I been wanting to tell her something since nine o’clock!... It’s not just ‘cause they’re Black. If you’re born poverty-stricken, you ain’t got no recess. The only time to talk is during lunch or after school. Y’all ain’t got no sports. Yall ain’t got no activities. You don’t have nothin’ to be proud of at your school. You ain’t paint nothing on the walls, or participate in nothing. You just coming from nine [o’clock]... to four or three-thirty’ (83).

Her comment aligns with Julio’s comment in chapter one that “School feel like prison—we here all the time,” as well as his middle school peer, “No, it feels like juvie.” As I explained in that same chapter, play deprivation directly opposes evidence-based practices that reinforce the benefits of physical and culturally responsive play in under-resourced schools.

And, though H.B. 83 was publicly promoted as a response to childhood obesity within the state of Georgia and less about social justice or equity, critical analyses of play deprivation and opportunities for child-facilitated play can provide alternative points of entry into a solution-oriented discussion on the prevalence of the school to prison pipeline. Subsequently, I offer a consideration of my research's pedagogical value and contextual value for the families with whom I work.

12.1 Pedagogical Value of Play

While some schools, such as those within the PBSA cluster, champion project-based learning (PBL), these schools—like most—do not begin their respective processes of curriculum development and desired identity formation for the students with an understanding of the community cultural wealth of students or their communities, nor do the schools seek to equip students with the language to identify and examine the racialized, sociohistorical conditions that pervade their neighborhoods. Rather, according to PBSA PBL Coordinator Diona Williams, the projects that compose their PBL curriculum are designed to equip students with the “cognitive and conative skills they will need to be competent citizens of a global society. We must design our instruction in such a way that it will challenge our students to use the linguistic, mathematic, scientific, economic, and historical knowledge and understandings they gain in classrooms and apply that knowledge and understanding to grapple with real world problems.” With whose problems are students learning to grapple? To construct developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive learning experiences, the projects that compose PBL curriculum would ideally originate in the teachers' observations of their students at play as it is within supervised

play that students reveal their personal interests, challenges, and aspirations (as exhibited by the students in chapter four). With play as the basis, teachers would utilize these revelations to formalize their students' PBL curriculum. Play-based learning is "not just allowing students to play freely" nor is it "a substitute or a hindrance for academic learning but rather the foundation. Purposeful play experiences can be constructed to create deeper learning experiences that a child will remember and internalize" (Niehoff).

Neither project-based nor play-based learning are substitutes for unstructured play either. For it is within unstructured play that children and youth establish their own cooperative learning spaces as they play with language, practice, perform, and switch among different identities necessary for survival on the streets and inside institutions as was evidenced in the play occurring inside the intimacy of their familiar zones in chapter two. Within these zones, children can resist the normative conventions of "childhood" that are simultaneously projected onto and denied them, as well as the associated identities of "student" and "citizen" that are based in white middle-class heteronormative ideals of obedience and deference.

After my first summer working directly with the PBSA students and their families in 2018, I returned to my university with a new praxis around which I sought to organize my learning spaces, and three years later, I continue to follow Black children's play praxes as I establish play-based communal learning experiences that promote and refine a relational culture, equipping people with the knowledge and skills necessary to thrive as fully human. Through play, Black children have created a space for shared vulnerability, dialogic encounters, and intellectual provocation that counters the representational violence inflicted upon them as they highlight the ways they are expressing agency by controlling space and creating alternative narratives. Play compels each of us to confront our perception of personal agency, as we are challenged to

comprehend how our identities are laterally aligned (the fate of one is connected to the fate of all) instead of hierarchically (one person's actions being more influential or important than others).

Anti-racist principles (broadly understood as philosophies, strategies, and practices that actively counter oppressive ideologies with the goal of dismantling the institutions and systems that uphold racism) challenge us to analyze institutional power and extend personal power instead. Infusing play with anti-racist principles allows us to identify the operation of racism, as we move against traditional, hierarchical educational settings in which Black people are expected to consume as little space as possible. When, where, and by what means we can exist in a learning space affects the development of our critical reading capacities. Together, anti-racism and play can activate a racially restorative project as play literally teaches us to activate our bodily capacities, seize and take up space joyfully in community. The case studies in chapter three illustrate the communal transference and embodied performances of Black joy in schools and the streets—anywhere Black children are.

I identify as a play-driven community-organizer and educator who conceptualizes play as an embodied process of creative inquiry that catalyzes self-interrogation and communal exploration. Using an anti-racist lens, my pedagogical practice mobilizes learners towards the protection and promotion of culturally diverse and intentionally disruptive modes of self-expression—specifically, I elevate the potency of Black child play as my teaching philosophy in both university and community learning spaces. Accordingly, I use play to develop a shared analysis that organizes communities around historically marginalized voices and their creative contributions to imagining new worlds.

I am committed to ensuring that my students expand a sense of themselves in the world. And, it is through play that we first learn to conceptualize world-making as a physiological,

existential practice. Emphatically, through imaginative and physically interactive play, we learn to use our bodily senses to understand our realities as “[a]ctive play fosters personal meaning. When children perceive events as personally relevant, their neural connections proliferate and situations, ideas, and skills become part of their long-term memory” (Isenberg and Quisenberry). In childhood play, our bodies are the source of the experiential and imaginative engagement that informs our world. The development of our bodies expands our minds which, for many, later become the source of our intellectual engagement. It is through play that we first learn to conceptualize world-making as a physiological, existential practice.

Relevantly, if we understand literacy as diverse forms of meaning-making contextualized by sociocultural conditions (Pritchard), traditions, and spaces, then play becomes a robust site not only for uprooting exclusionary academic literacy conventions, but also for extending our attention to issues of representation, language, pedagogy, and power, all of which merge in play. Critical literacy highlights the significance of conceptualizing literacy as a social practice through which people “learn through language to co-construct their worlds with others” (Lee 100). In practicing critical literacy, we initiate a deep engagement with our personal experiences and identify the sociopolitical and intersectional inequities that are operating within and on these experiences. In the process of deconstructing the oppressive ideologies that undergird inequities, we can use multimodal and multi-sensory literacies to imagine alternative realities. For Black children, this imagining occurs most prevalently within the unregulated common spaces in which Black families are exchanging knowledge both verbally and kinetically. Their collective practices, therefore, constitute an informal community literacy project as their literacy work exists beyond mainstream educational and professionalizing institutions.

Arguably, the most value an educator can offer their learning space will come via the

practice of culturally sustainable pedagogy that “positions dynamic cultural dexterity as a necessary good, and sees the outcome of learning as additive rather than subtractive” (Alim and Paris 1). Yosso’s community cultural wealth reveals and builds upon the multiple forms of intelligences that are applied and performed by Black children who, having received them from their families and kinship networks, infuse them into the various spaces, institution and contexts they traverse within and beyond their communities. This framework supports diverse cultural capital by investing in and sustaining students’ relationships to the culture of their respective communities.

For example, one form of linguistic, navigational, social, and familial capital practiced by the students is a racially and culturally informed socioemotional intelligence. Through the play and care practices that situate them amidst intergenerational contexts, they learn to assign language and phrases to the emotions and sensations they experience in their bodies. I often heard, “Dang. Leave me alone. You play too much,” from one kid to another; from the tone, the relationship and environmental context, the child was clearly communicating frustration and demanding they and their feelings be taken seriously (another, more age-appropriate way of saying “Now is not the time...”)—in a different context with a different tone, the phrase may communicate a different emotion or indicate a different type of relationship.

Through repetition, exposure, and occasional risk-taking, Black children learn to feel vibes and read body language as they exist in body-to-body relationships with their peers, kin, and families. Their positionality allows them to practice utilizing specific linguistic skills that speak to their social experiences and enable them to navigate certain situations and institutions. This navigational capital is critical as Black children must practice a culturally specific form of socioemotional intelligence with and within their Black peer and kinship networks, while

maintaining a mindfulness of white folks' emotions and behaviors. As Beverly Daniel Tatum explains: "The truth is that the dominants do not really know what the experience of the subordinates is. In contrast, the subordinates are very well informed about the dominants." In addition to white cultural norms saturating popular culture (Tatum), Black children learn to perform (or at least acquiesce) white normative standards as part of their survival practices.

Like their linguistic skills, their socioemotional intelligences are often extremely complex, but because these skills cannot be measured or assessed by standardized assessments or commodified for commercial gain, the skills and practices are denigrated within their schools along with the cultural connections to their communities. Nevertheless, their familial and neighborhood communities nurture these forms of capital as pathways through daily survival and the foundation for experiences of Black joy.

This understanding of the connections among play, multiple intelligences, and diverse literacies should highlight the value of play breaks in our academic, professional, and community spaces so that we may "[rupture] fixed notions of learning" (Kynard). Play-based learning and unstructured play breaks should occupy the space and curate the thinking between people and concepts as breaking for play amidst the structural formalities of institutionalized learning and corporate professionalism is an insertion of the community-building practices of recognition, intimacy, and agency. Play breaks become joy-producing literacy praxes as they generate humanizing interactions that crystalize how literacy is a quintessentially human project. In these breaks, we are literate and playful beings acting on the impulse to use our senses to make sense of our shared realities.

Play forms and games can serve as modes of inquiry and methods of measurement within the learning space. Promoting anti-racist principles through communal play reveals and reinforces

the grassroots organizing skills students already possess, while imagination- and dialogue-based instruction fosters a safer and more confident space for the critical inquiry, peer collaboration, and review of student projects that will eventually become public projects. Anti-racist play constructs learning spaces that can become Black youth-oriented sites of cultural emergence and merging. The multi-sensory experience of the joy that is produced in acts of play, collaboration, and learning can make enacting freedom in their bodies and their neighborhood communities more real, and consequently, urgent. By mobilizing the knowledge and organizing practices of those impacted most severely by institutionalized racism, we can center and amplify Black children's voices and experiences. This collective work is necessary to shift the culture of school-based and welfare institutions from punitive to restorative with a youth-led, anti-racist lens.

12.2 Play as Restorative Justice

Broadly, play builds strong interpersonal connections by organizing them around a central task or goal that necessitates cooperation, collaboration, strategy, and communication. In striving towards a shared objective, people are bonded by struggle and through laughter (ATL). Play, then, can teach people to notice when others are treated unfairly as well as how best to adapt to changing circumstances and individual needs. Children can learn how play has divided people, and how play has brought people together. In the stories shared, they also learn how play created ways to survive, celebrate, love, and laugh. Stories and play are important for organizing communities because it gives a common ground on which people can see each other equally.

Play restores us to our bodies: Universally, play restores our selves to ourselves by reconnecting our minds to our bodies. When the two are firmly connected, they can better read,

respond, and affirm each other. Reconnected, we are better able to read the emotional and visceral reactions we are having to a conflict or an injustice. Therefore, we are more equipped with the kinesthetic and socioemotional knowledge to identify and respond to a trigger by identifying and responding to the *feeling* of being triggered within us.

Play restores us to community: while many favored games are rooted in a love for competition, many games have absolutely no element even resembling competition (and for those that do, the competition can generally be removed). So, play can better align us with and/or to the humans with whom we are sharing space as we identify a singular, universal rhythm to which we can move.

Play shifts culture by changing the way we think and establishing the grounds for peer-facilitation: Play reveals commonalities, makes space for differences, and can renegotiate normatively hierarchical power dynamics that are visibilized through the performance of identity politics. For example, while working with the multigrade combo group at PBSA Summer Blast Camp (mentioned in chapter two), most of the group enjoyed volleyball and kickball inside the gym. The group frequently had one student with a physical disability that necessitated crutches; while he often participated, he often sat out also. One day, he and I were sitting on the cheerleading mats when we started smacking a foam ball back and forth. Quickly, this informal game became a modified seated/crawling form of volleyball without all the rules or scorekeeping. We were having so much fun that the other kids joined. The teacher informed about two weeks later that the students had begun playing the floor game every day (even in my absence) and named the game after my fellow student initiator.

Play can address and/or ameliorate harm: Cooperative play necessitates shared vulnerability (to a degree) because the players and their movements are interdependent—in other

words, in cooperative play, we are accountable to all parties involved and to the shared agreements. Cooperative play means coordination, which involves dialogue, recognition, responsibility, accessibility, and intentionality. We must be conscious of our actions and their effect on other players in every moment of the game. Considering how so much of the harm we experience daily is rooted in miscommunication and/or are the consequences of an empathy gap, play can open doors to seeing others in new light. And, depending on the game, seeing ourselves in the other. Play creates windows, doors, and mirrors to meet people where they are.

Play invites a belonging: Personally, my favorite games involve circles.⁷⁷ In my research, I have learned how circles have a relationship to Indigenous American and West African spiritual practices, as circles are nonhierarchical with no beginning or end (a reminder that restorative justice is a daily practice, not a linear process); things, people, stories can be placed at the center as a space of safety and for a collective offering. Everyone belongs in a circle and the circle belongs to everyone. It cannot be owned. The energy that circulates cannot be capitalized—the circle is valuable because it and its products can never be replicated or appropriated even while its impact is concentric (it reverberates outward into the communities for which we nurture beyond this moment of play).

Through play we—humans—can experience the intense joy that is generated amidst the struggle as we struggle together in community.

⁷⁷ Some of my favorites include Little Sally Walker, Calling All My Friends, and the Mosquito Game.

12.3 ATL Parent Like A Boss, Inc.

Demonstrating how play can be situated at the intersection of culturally sustainable pedagogy, restorative justice practices, and strategic family engagement is at the center of my work in the 501c3 nonprofit ATL Parent Like A Boss, Inc. (Parent LAB). Burgeoning out of my community work with parents and families specifically in the Thomasville Heights community, Parent LAB was originally founded in August 2018 with the Thomasville Heights neighborhood as the initial focus site and with members of the Thomasville Heights community on our inaugural board with the goal to offer developmental opportunities for healthy community growth. Since our restructuring in September 2019, we have organized ourselves around the mission to enhance generational literacies through play in underserved Black communities:

Parent LAB is led by an intergenerational group of Black women with diverse experiences in community-based education. We care deeply about preserving the cultural legacies and traditions that joyfully sustain Black families. With and within our communities, we are creating a strengths-based approach to highlighting and extending the literacy-building practices Black families already possess. We collect and use physically interactive games to disrupt traditionally exclusive spaces. Through play we are celebrating and promoting opportunities for Black cultural expression. We work to do the following:

- 1) Center Black family voices and experiences in conversations with existing research on “best practices” for educational growth and family engagement;
- 2) Use a social-justice framework to learn, create and share research with Black families;
- 3) Enhance Black family and community literacy, as well as self/social awareness through community-based dialogue (“About Us”).

Two core Parent LAB initiatives are our #StoryTimeLikeABoss platform and our Parent LAB PLAY DAY Series. #StoryTimeLikeABoss seeks to increase the love of our stories and language by reading aloud books that reflect our culture, especially those written by Black authors and those reflecting Black and Brown children and people in positive ways. Constructed around a theme inspired by a selected book from our #StoryTimeLikeABoss platform, the Parent LAB PLAY DAY Series engages participants in interactive dialogue and games designed to connect the active body to brain development, and thus enhance cognitive learning experiences. During our PLAY DAYS, we celebrate Black cultural traditions *and* we invite everyone to reflect and share the traditions that have sustained their own diverse familial and ethnic traditions. Through our PLAY DAY Series, we are creating opportunities and safe places to play. As we promote active learning through our inclusive, strengths-based approach, we are collaborating with families and their community members in the expansion of extant literacy and advocacy skills by encouraging people to celebrate and invest in their respective community cultural wealth.

We use play to bring communities together into a collective moment of embodied theorization via our Parent LAB PLAY DAY Series, as well as our research- and play-based

workshops and presentations. Through this embodied praxis, and the resultant knowledge of the body, participants experience creative dialogue and cooperative play integral to a broader movement for the love and honor of Black lives. Parent LAB's core community-based initiatives and professional programming have allowed me to continue exploring and applying the implications of my research while equipping my local community and communities across public and private sectors throughout the country (via grassroots organizing spaces, conference presentations, professional development, and community-based workshops) with diverse approaches to culturally sustainable literacy enhancement and community organizing. Parent LAB is one pathway to accessing the value of my research: everyday community members must be able to engage and apply my research in order to be reminded and/or made conscious of their own involvement and significance in a history, restructuring, and sustaining of a homeplace for Black children.

Inspired by the vision I also hold for my research, I envision Parent LAB serving many purposes with the two, most foremost being its existence as a public archive and community platform for the everyday womanist practices and traditions of Black communities, the joyful practices of Black activist mothers in particular.⁷⁸ Centering, storying, and learning these seemingly ordinary narratives becomes a method of documenting and investing in various communities while uplifting cultural diversity. Moreover, we are striving for Parent LAB to become the foundation for an intergenerational kinship community network that is dedicated to exploring, playing, and innovating with Black joy in antiracist pedagogies. We will learn and

⁷⁸ #StoryTimeLikeABoss examples reveal these practices in the books we share. For example, many of our workshops feature *Sewing Stories: Harriet Powers' Journey from Slave to Artist* by Barbara Herkert as a narrative example, textual tool, and immediate resource for educators, facilitators, and families seeking to practice play-based, culturally sustainable family engagement.

experience the possibilities of being “radically engaged and committed, body-to-body” (Madison 826) as we condition ourselves to “put our bodies where our hopes and aspirations are” (Crenshaw). Parent LAB will remind, restore, and equip Black people with the experiential knowledge of freedom encased in our bodies as we unlearn internalized oppressions and respond to the visceral impulse to employ our entire bodies in the liberatory acts of imagining and freedom dreaming.

12.4 Coda

While I was hanging out at after-school care (2018), Kaden, a six-year-old student at Thomasville, and his older brother Odale, a seven-year-old student, attempted to convince me that they can outrun me in a race to one end of the cafeteria and back. Even though I beat both of them in the actual race, Odale’s provocative comment that ignited the race, “Kids have more power than grown ups [...] That means kids don’t get more tired than grown ups,” is a striking reminder of the presence and potential of Black children and youth’s freedom fighting techniques and their singular ability to catalyze and invite collective action. As Love states, “Freedom, therefore, is ultimately a practice, rather than a possession or a state of being.” Kaden and Odale reinforce the fact that “to want freedom is to welcome struggle” (Love 9), and we can never tire or shirk our commitment to that struggle.

Conclusively, my research catalyzes a repositioning of Black children as community gatekeepers and activists. It is through this repositioning that we simultaneously redefine and redistribute representational power, as well as recognize and celebrate the subversive intellectual and cultural practices exhibited by Black children. Black child play is the original generator of

#BlackGirlMagic and #BlackBoyJoy. Therefore, by recognizing the intergenerational, grassroots, and disruptive aspects of Black child play as an embodied form of resistance, we open the possibility of participating in and extending the collective struggle against oppressive forms of power that seek to violently contain Black child agency. This form of collaboration and collectivity can provide important contributions to grassroots solutions to local challenges.

In the following bullets, I offer basic recommendations for how this research might be considered and applied:

- Folks must commit to recognizing and honoring Black folks at play and in motion. Black children are being criminalized for exploring their physiological and kinesthetic abilities (e.g. dirt bike and four-wheeler riding); for responding to their socioeconomic realities by applying themselves and their literacy skills towards entrepreneurial endeavors (e.g. selling water; stacking paper); for expanding their imagination to comprehend what they are witnessing and/or escaping into the alternate realities they see in popular media (e.g. playing with toy guns and engaging role play); and for fellowshiping and creating communities in the flamboyant, bold, and joyful ways they have been taught and in which they have been brought up.
- In the words of my mama, “If the pedagogy isn’t culturally sustainable, it’s not developmentally appropriate.” If our connectedness to our students does not prioritize and seek to extend their Black joy, sense of self, and cultural identity, then we are liable to continue reproducing the same systems of deprivation that seek to trap Black and Brown students. *Cultural*

sustainability is about preserving the “lifeways of communities” (Alim and Paris 1), and reflecting the extant love in our students’ communities back to them. *Anti-racism* connotes an undoing of the authoritarian regime that operates via external and internalized policing. *Abolition* is about “building the world we want” by experimenting and imagining new collective structures that generate new possibilities (Kaba). None of these pedagogical and organizing strategies—these ways of being in relationship with others—can exist without the joy and culture that is produced through play.

- Reports on housing policies and gentrifying developments must conscientiously use an asset-based approach informed by racial socioeconomic histories to situate existing communities and their cultural wealth at the center of discussions. Media reports reinforce public perception, opinion, and policy that have a bearing on residents’ individual and communal wellbeing. The policies and news coverage about housing, education, employment, and so forth cannot be severed from the systems that perpetuate deficits and deprivation which precipitate interpersonal violence and reinforce the school-to-prison pipeline in its myriad micro and macro manifestations.
- Conversations about educational equity cannot merely focus on diversifying educators and administrators. Parents/guardians and families must be recognized and valued as educational partners with the largest and most meaningful investment in their children’s livelihoods and future successes. Co-constructing pathways for entire families to be seen for their assets,

contributions, traditions, and aspirations, as well as a practice of respecting their role as experts in and gatekeepers for their families and communities nurtures a “culture of possibility” (Yosso 78) that moves against further marginalization by centering the children inside of their communities. (Think: concentric circles). This is the collectively constructed culture for which every institution should be striving.

Black folks are gona play because in and through their play, they are offering their children a “[c]ommunity of people with whom—not just against whom—to define [themselves]” (McClain 103). In play, children experience the fruits of womanism, they can rest from the constancy of resistance and violence of marginality, they can be defined by the identities that reflect a profound interiority and potential, and they can indulge the ratchet Black joy that ensures their survival and promises overlapping networks of care. In play, children are offered and can offer each other a security that exceeds systemic barriers as these moments of Black joy become engrained in their kinesthetic memory, alongside and as a key to their embodied knowledge of freedom. We must start with this idea of community and Blackness in order to found a conceptualization of childhood that is inclusive of Black children and their historical identities.

To answer my own research questions: How does a Black child come to know and be known by their own community? Through play. How do we live in such a way that Black children can lovingly own their Black child bodies? We see their play; we celebrate their play; we respect their play; we honor their play; we care for them in their play; we meet them in their play; we extend their play; we recognize the culture in their play; we love their play; we love them for their play. We love them.

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