

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

CENTRAL HIGH CLASS OF 1964:
THE VOICES OF OUR BLACK GRANDMOTHERS

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Norman, Oklahoma

2026

CENTRAL HIGH CLASS OF 1964:
THE VOICES OF OUR BLACK GRANDMOTHERS

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

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Acknowledgement

This journey has stretched me in ways I did not anticipate. It has required discipline, reflection, and a level of endurance I am still learning how to name. What began as a question grew into something much deeper, shaped by the people who stood beside me and the ones who trusted me to carry their stories forward.

To the Storygivers, there are not enough words. You welcomed me into your lives, trusted me with your memories, and allowed me to sit with stories that carry generations. You did more than participate in this work, you shaped it. This dissertation exists because of you. I carry your words with care, and I remain accountable to the responsibility that comes with holding them.

To my family, my mother Robin, my sisters Trinity and Jada, and my son, Jayden Lee, you are the foundation of who I am. Everything I bring into this work is rooted in you. Your love, your presence, and your support have carried me through every stage of this journey. To my Grandmommie, you are my person. Your steady presence, your care, and the way you have always held me close have meant more than I can fully express.

To my CHOSEN family, thank you for standing with me through every season. You showed up when I needed support, when I was stretched thin, and when I questioned if I could keep going. You stayed. That matters more than words can capture.

To my advisor, Jenny, whose belief in me never wavered, even in moments when mine did. Your guidance, patience, and willingness to hold space for possibility allowed this work to take the shape it needed. To my committee, thank you for your openness, your flexibility, and your willingness to engage this work with care. I also want to acknowledge Jessie Butler King, who spoke something into me early on. In my first year of my master's program, you encouraged

me to pursue a PhD without hesitation. That moment stayed with me. To Dr. Wiskur, thank you for being my “WhiteHype,” for your encouragement, and for showing up in ways that made space for me to keep going.

This work is not just a milestone. It is a continuation. It carries the voices, the memories, and the lives of those who made it possible. I move forward with a deeper understanding of what it means to listen, to hold, and to honor.

For my father, John F. Small, though you are not here, your legacy lives on, strong and unwavering.

Dedication

This research is my offering. It is a tribute to my grandmother and the Storygivers who trusted me with their truths. It is a call to remember the voices we need are already here, rooted in kitchens, front porches, church basements, and living rooms like my grandmother's. As Audre Lorde (2020) wrote, "Our stories are not a luxury. They are a necessity of our survival." In honoring the lived experiences of these Blackgirls, and in reckoning my own experiences, I offer these stories as a living practice of remembrance, cultural responsibility, and radical care

Abstract

Educational history has consistently been told through the viewpoints of others, shaping narratives about Blackgirls without making space for them to name their own experiences.

Historically, Blackgirls have been present but not centered, studied but not heard. This absence does more than leave gaps; it shapes what has been remembered, valued, and understood about education itself. This study responds to the absence by highlighting the stories of Blackgirls who attended Central High School in Kansas City, Missouri, as members of the Class of 1964.

Situated within segregation, desegregation, and resegregation, this work begins from a different place than what is disseminated in history classes across the nation, not asking what happened to Blackgirls, but what becomes visible when they speak for themselves. Utilizing a methodology grounded in Ethnohistoric Storywork, storytelling serves as both method and meaning, honoring memory and lived experience as history. Through individual story sessions and communal gatherings, seven Storygivers reveal education as a collective experience shaped beyond the classroom, rooted in family, community, and shared expectations. Their stories surface three key understandings: education was honored through community support and efforts, identity was grounded in a clear sense of self and direction, and desegregation introduced both opportunity and loss, particularly through the erosion of Black educational spaces. These narratives challenge dominant portrayals of Black education as defined primarily by struggle. While racism was present, their experiences were also marked by joy, discipline, learning, and belonging. What emerges is not a missing story, but a fuller one. By positioning these women as knowledge holders, this study shifts how Blackgirls are understood in education, not as subjects of analysis, but as theorists of their lives. Their stories do more than fill gaps; they reshape the narrative, offering a foundation for reimagining educational spaces built with Blackgirls in mind.

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Part One: For the Academy

Oh, to be a fly on the wall as these women came together and just took off. They took off. I could see their household, I could see them walking up and down the street, I could see it; it was just like, oh, a time to be alive. It's something that we don't have. They were so passionate. Church, community, church community, and teachers, that's what this was, that's what was different. That's what helped them prosper, and everybody had their track. You heard the social butterflies come to life, you heard the silent ones in there, but they looked like they were enjoying it too. Some moments couldn't be heard, like Mayola drumming through the class theme song. When they broke out in song, I was floored. It looked like they were having a good time. You could see it; they painted such beautiful pictures of experiences in their lives. Looking at these black women at this table, oh my god, I don't even know it was it was such an empowering moment. It was such a beautiful, beautiful experience. Oh, to be a fly on the wall. There were so many personalities, and you saw all of them shine. Even simply hearing about not being able to go to school pregnant, say what?

It felt good to cater to them, to have them sit down and have a meal served to them. This was a moment only a few people get to experience; it was mind-blowing. I couldn't have got a better group of women. They made sure that I heard. They wanted to be heard. They had stories, so many stories, and they were passionate. They were passionate. Now, church isn't a big thing, but church was their centerpiece; churches are what held their communities together. You heard about moms and dads, even if they were married or remarried. It was always Mama or Daddy, and Daddy didn't play it. You know, if I went to this bar, everybody knew. As you grow older, they still keep tabs on you; you were important, I'm sad, right? I'm sad we don't have that. There are schools and groups with that kind of camaraderie because that's what I'm looking for. I

enjoyed making them feel they're important and that their voices are important because they are. My son got to be a part of it. He got to walk them down. He got to be that fly on the wall. I couldn't have asked for a better group. I couldn't have asked for a better experience.

Now, I only asked them a few questions initially during this time, but at the time, it didn't feel like I needed to. I started to ask them questions because they told me they could go on talking for a long while. In my mind, I thought, let it. I only got in, like, four, maybe five questions. It was perfectly fine with me. I just liked creating space with them, being present as they revisited the past. This work can be so impactful for girls to have insight. I'm so empowered right now. The sky's the limit, and to know I'm a granddaughter of one of these women!

- Transcript from audio debrief after group session, Kansas City, July 22, 2023

Chapter 1: Where Their Stories Begin: Centering Blackgirls' Voices

Introduction

Standing in the middle of the cozy kitchen of a charming AirBnB on 55th Street, nestled between Paseo and Troost in Kansas City, Missouri, on July 22, 2023, I found myself overwhelmed, not just by the task of cooking dinner for seven phenomenal women, but by the historical and emotional weight of what the moment represented. This may have been the most meaningful meal I had prepared to date. As I rummaged around for a pot big enough to boil my lasagna noodles and another to start my meat sauce, I cringed, knowing I would be presenting these women store-bought marinara sauce. The essence, I reminded myself, is in the details. Yet in the kitchen, it was more than a matter of ingredients; it was an act of intentional gathering, of stitching together memory, lineage, and story through the language of food.

This dinner marked the beginning of a sacred encounter, a communal gathering, with seven Blackwomen who were once Blackgirls navigating the Kansas City Public School system as members of Central High School's Class of 1964. Each woman represented decades of lived experience, generational wisdom, and unspoken truths about race, gender, and education in America. They entrusted me to hold space for them, to document, honor, and protect their stories. This work does not simply recount their experiences but positions them as crucial holders of knowledge who offer necessary insight into how Blackgirls have endured and resisted gendered and racialized inequities in public schooling.

As I fussed over my noodle situation and prayed the aluminum pan was deep enough to hold all the layers of lasagna, the doorbell rang, and my heart stopped. It was too soon. My grandmommie, Guyetta (Guy), and my son were still at the store. They were supposed to help greet the ladies. The lasagna hadn't made it to the oven, and I was still in lounge wear, braless

and covered in meat sauce. My first guest, Jessie, had arrived. I offered her a seat, poured her some tea, and excused myself to change into something more appropriate. I took a breath. The evening had officially begun.

Wait, let's go back to the beginning.

When was the last time you sat at the proverbial feet of your grandmother as she recounted the complexities of life during an era, you'll only ever understand through history books, newspaper archives, and Google searches? Did you realize she was more than your grandmother; she was a living historian, a griot, a keeper of collective memory? For many of us, our grandmothers were our first teachers outside of our parents. Our grandmothers became the embodiment generations of lived experience shaped not only their survival, but our very possibility to exist.

With each passing generation, the volume of their voices seems to diminish with the distance created by time and the way the world questions the relevance of ancestral knowledge. In an era of curated timelines and fast content, what space is left for Blackgirls who became Black Grandmothers to preserve and pass down their history? Where are their voices held? Where are they heard? Where are they cherished and honored?

By creating a platform for these women to speak in their own words, this project seeks to disrupt dominant, white-centric narratives of educational history of students in K-12th grade and make space for the overlooked truths of Blackgirls who grew up navigating a school system in transition. Their stories become both a record and a reckoning, offering us new ways to understand the past, critique the present, and reimagine the future of K-12th grade education for Blackgirls still moving through systems which too often fail to see them.

Using “Blackgirls” as one word is an intentional act of disruption. It refuses to separate their racial identity from their girlhood, challenging the fragmentation often imposed by traditional scholarship (Hill, 2019). As Hill asserts, writing it as one word allows Blackgirls to be recognized as “complex and whole,” rather than as isolated subjects of race or gender analysis. This framing offers both critique and care; it confronts the historical erasure of Blackgirls’ voices in educational discourse while honoring their fullness, creativity, and survival. Throughout this work, Blackgirls will intentionally be used alongside Blackwomen to build a sense of ownership for the writer and reader and to create space for the past, present, and future.

Educational research has historically ostracized Blackgirls into an invisible minority, where their lived experiences have been documented for them, privileging the voices of others to speak on their behalf. Over time, pieces of this reality have been named, studied, and revisited, yet never fully held together. There is a quiet familiarity in how Blackgirls can move through classrooms, complete the work, and meet expectations, yet still not be fully recognized, understood, or affirmed. When recognition does come, it is often tied to moments of correction rather than curiosity, behavior rather than brilliance, a pattern reflected in how invisibility shows up in everyday school experiences (Henderson, 2026).

Even when attention is given, it does not always lead to understanding. Being seen does not guarantee being known. There are ways of being present in a space and still misunderstood, still engaged through assumptions instead of truth, where what is visible is only a fraction of who Blackgirls are and what they carry into the classroom (Brown, 2025). This partial seeing creates an experience where presence exists without full recognition and participation does not always translate into belonging.

Inside these spaces, patterns begin to surface. Attention is not neutral. It leans. It shifts. It shows up more readily in discipline than in care, more often in surveillance than in support. Behaviors interpreted as curiosity or individuality in others are often read as disruption or defiance when expressed by Blackgirls, as their actions are filtered through assumptions about behavior and belonging, shaping how they are engaged and understood in educational settings (Haynes et al., 2016).

Context changes the weight of all of this. In environments where Blackgirls are one of few, particularly in predominantly white schools, visibility takes on a different meaning. It becomes something to manage and to measure. Blackgirls are forced into a constant awareness of self, of space, of how to move, when to speak, when to hold back, all while navigating a setting where belonging is never assumed (Markwart, 2024).

Even with these insights, educational literature continues to inadequately represent the academic experiences and historical presence of Blackgirls in K-12th grade, leaving them pushed to the margins of conversations where they should have always been centered (Thompson, 2019). What remains is a narrative leaning heavily on resilience, highlighting moments of success while leaving the surrounding conditions largely unexamined.

How can we truly understand the present and future needs of Blackgirls in K-12th grade education without first reckoning with how those in the past endured and resisted exclusionary practices in the U.S. public school system?

This disconnect shows up not only in practice, but in preparation. How educators come to understand culturally relevant pedagogy, and whether they see it as essential or optional, shapes the environments students encounter. Perceptions of what it means to teach “well” continue to influence how, or if, culturally responsive approaches are implemented, often leaving them

unevenly applied or misunderstood in ways limiting their impact (Nash, 2018). Even among educators who share racial or cultural identities with their students, there is variation in how these understandings take shape because they are influenced by personal beliefs, experiences, and internalized frameworks about teaching and learning (Mustafaa, 2023).

These encounters increasingly piqued my interest in how educational systems reward conformity and ensure students who d The foundation for understanding the plight of the Blackgirl is viewed and interpreted through my personal journey as a Blackgirl. My earliest memories of school begin in a small, predominantly Black Christian school in Los Angeles, California, where I was surrounded by Black teachers and children who looked like me and came from homes mirroring my own. My first teacher outside of my parents was my grandmommie, who nurtured my love for reading and showed me you can experience and excel at anything if you first cultivate and enrich your mind. She made sure I was introduced to Black authors like Alice Walker at a very early age. At home, my parents made it clear education was never optional; it was mandatory, the underlying script of who I was to become and the pathway to a limitless future.

Academically, I thrived. I often performed ahead of other students in the classroom. Where I struggled was in controlling my tongue and being mindful of the space I occupied, both physically and metaphorically. There was always a persistent reminder of how to speak, when to speak, how to share space, and how to co-exist in environments which were not built for girls like me in mind. Being “smart” was never enough; I still felt misunderstood, undervalued, and most times, invisible. I still remember my first-grade teacher, Ms. Chapman, at St. Michael’s Catholic School. She was the last Black teacher I would have until my first year of graduate school, decades later, at the University of Oklahoma in the Master of Social Work program. Ms.

Chapman saw both intelligence and immaturity in me and often kept me seated close to her, quietly guiding me on how I should take and create space, or maybe just to keep me from talking to everyone else around me, including myself.

The summer between my first and second years of elementary school marked a turning point. My grandmommie relocated back to her home state of Missouri, and I spent the summer with her in Kansas City while my parents prepared to move. The summer would become the first of many spent in Kansas City, a place which invited me to speak loudly, to move freely, and to take up as much space as I could fill.

Kansas City was an entirely different world, one rooted in familiarity and deep familial ties. It felt like coming home. I enjoyed days with my great-grandmother while my grandmommie worked. I played with my older cousin at the Boys and Girls Club, splashed in the pools at Swope Park, read books at the library, and went on spontaneous creative adventures only my grandmommie could conjure. There, I never had to dim my light or conceal the fullness of who I was. Kansas City gave me a sense of safety and cultural belonging I did not yet know how to name. It was my community. It was a taste of freedom. It was a taste of acceptance.

This stood in stark contrast to the messages I received everywhere else, shaping my understanding of education. My experiences across various educational systems profoundly shaped my inherent understanding of education. These lived realities provided me firsthand insight into how societal structures, cultural norms, and institutional expectations collide to form a narrow blueprint for belonging, which often demands Blackgirls change or diminish themselves in order to “fit.” Starting at Marie Faegen Preschool in Los Angeles, CA, and through the various pathways leading to the halls of the University of Oklahoma, the messages echoed around me: *success requires silence, the prerequisites for education are to be quiet, meek, and*

non-confrontational. These messages were not always spoken directly, but they were felt in correction, in redirection, in the subtle shaping of how I was expected to show up in the classroom.

Over time, it became clear this was not unique to me, but part of a broader pattern embedded within schooling itself. What is often presented as “good behavior” or “appropriate engagement” carries an unspoken expectation of compliance rooted in norms failing to account for the cultural identities and expressive ways of Blackgirls. This implicit pedagogy of complacency has persisted as the hidden curriculum of public education (Anyon, 1981), reinforcing ideas about who belongs and how belonging should look, even when those expectations require a quiet distancing from self.

While educational spaces have begun to name the need for culturally relevant and responsive teaching, there remains a gap between what is said and what is practiced. Teaching framed as “good” or “effective” has long been positioned as neutral, yet neutrality often masks an alignment with dominant cultural norms rather than an intentional engagement with the diverse identities present in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995). What is affirmed as standard practice does not always reflect the realities of students whose ways of knowing, speaking, and being fall outside those norms, and those who do not or cannot conform are often labeled as problematic (Morris, 2016).

It seems what begins as correction slowly reveals itself as conditioning, a quiet shaping of how to sit, how to speak, how to be. Over time, it becomes less about what you are learning and more about how well you have learned to exist within the boundaries set for you.

For many Black students, this shows up through adaptation, shrinking, and code-switching. Students are forced to learn when to soften their voice, when to shift their language,

when to hold parts of their self back just enough to be received. Code-switching is often framed as a skill, something preparing students for success, but living it feels different. It is a constant negotiation, a back-and-forth between worlds, where language becomes less about expression and more about survival (Morton, 2014).

Underneath all of this sits a set of beliefs rarely named out loud. Ideas about what “proper” language sounds like. It posits who sounds intelligent and who sounds professional. These beliefs shape how students are heard before they are ever understood, filtering Black students’ voices through assumptions long before meaning is considered (Daniels, 2018). In this way, speaking becomes risky. Expression becomes calculated.

Even when these dynamics are acknowledged, the response does not always disrupt the pattern. Teaching students to code-switch can reinforce the idea one way of speaking holds more value than another, positioning dominant language as the destination rather than questioning why it holds that power in the first place (Williams-Farrier, 2017). This aligns with broader critiques of schooling as a space prioritizing compliance over liberation, where success is often tied to how well students learn to navigate and survive oppressive structures rather than challenge them (Love, 2019).

Carrying this across spaces requires a constant awareness, of self, of audience, and consequence. It is not just about learning content; it is about learning how to move and belong without fully belonging. It forces students to navigate multiple discourse communities while trying to hold onto a sense of self, even when that self is being reshaped in the process (Slagle, 2024).

Almost abruptly, a shift comes. When a child enters higher education, after years of learning to quiet certain parts of himself, to adapt and to fit, there is an expectation to think

critically, to speak freely, and to bring your full self into the room. The very things once disciplined become the very things now required (hooks, 1994). This produces a clear discordance, where years of conditioning to hold parts of oneself back directly conflict with the sudden demand to show up fully.

Blackgirls are often left out of how schooling is remembered and retold, their experiences reshaped through expectations of compliance and alignment with dominant norms. What is framed as “good behavior” becomes a quiet conditioning, teaching when to speak, how to move, and how much of oneself to bring forward. Over time, this shows up through code-switching, where expression shifts not for connection, but for survival, requiring constant negotiation between who one is and who one is expected to be.

Entry into higher education introduces a new set of expectations, calling for critical thought, voice, and presence, often from those who have spent years learning to restrain those very things. The result is a sense of discordance, where the demand to show up fully stands in tension with the ways one has been taught to exist within educational spaces. What emerges is a need to move beyond simply naming these patterns, and toward a deeper interrogation of the systems producing them and the possibilities for something different.

Purpose

The research I propose centers Blackgirls, specifically a group of Blackgirls from Central High School’s Class of 1964, in education and begins from a place I know to be true: their voices have always held knowledge, even when systems refused to recognize it. While many accounts of this period are often told through the South, the conditions shaping Black education during Jim Crow extended far beyond it, influencing how Black children experienced school, community, and opportunity across the country. Kansas City is part of that broader landscape,

where segregation and inequality shaped the quality of education. This work leans into storytelling as a way of knowing, not as something extra, but as something necessary. Blackwomen have always made meaning out of what they lived, what they carried, what they passed down, long before it was named as theory (Collins, 2000). When I think about how to approach this work, I am drawn to ways of honoring more than what can be written down and holding space for memory, spirit, and the pieces of ourselves often left out of traditional research (Dillard, 2006).

Utilizing ethnohistory, endarkened storywork, and counter-narratives, space is created to sit with how Blackgirls navigated educational systems while still supported and validated by the communities surrounding them. Story here is not just something collected. It is something connecting, something carrying us between past and present, between individual experience and collective knowing (Toliver, 2022). What is shared is not treated as isolated moments, but as knowledge layered with history, culture, and meaning.

Everyone should have a voice in the telling of history, as the past and present do not exist independently. What we come to know, what is remembered, and what is passed forward is never neutral. It is shaped, selected, and at times withheld. The process of creating what we call “fact” has never been equal, often producing as many silences as it does records (Trouillot, 2015). Those silences do not happen by accident; they are tied to power, to whose stories are preserved, and whose are pushed aside or left unnamed.

This way of approaching the work pushes back against the long-standing habit of defining Blackgirls through what they lack, how they struggle, or where they fall short (Valencia, 2010). Instead of trying to interpret their experiences from the outside, this work stays

close to what has been lived, recognizing knowledge does not need to be filtered or translated to hold value (Tuck & Yang, 2014).

For Blackgirls, these gaps are especially pronounced. Their experiences have rarely been centered within educational narratives, even as they have always been present within them. When their stories do surface, they are often filtered through frameworks unable to hold the full weight of their lived realities, particularly at the intersections of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1991). This absence is not simply about missing voices, but about a long-standing pattern of overlooking knowledge produced in spaces outside of dominant recognition, whether in homes, communities, or everyday lived experience (Collins, 2000).

There has been a shift in academic discourse, with growing efforts to implement culturally sustaining pedagogies capable of resisting the assimilationist purpose of state-sanctioned schooling. Such schooling has historically demanded Black and Brown children reject integral parts of their identities in exchange for success within white-dominant institutions (Paris & Alim, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally relevant and abolitionist educators, like Gloria Ladson-Billings and Bettina Love, call for pedagogies to affirm Blackness, honor lived experience, and seek educational freedom, not just inclusion within broken systems (Love, 2019). New pedagogies cannot fully manifest without reckoning with the past. People of color did not ask for a room in a burning house; we asked for safety, liberation, and equity on our terms (Baldwin, 1968). Our terms must require access to history told by and about us.

Documenting the recollections, insights, and wisdom of these seven women who participated in this current study aims to disrupt dominant white-centric narratives about the history of education. It interrogates how educational systems continuously ignored or distorted the contributions of how Blackgirls and Blackwomen have recounted history. In doing so, this

research contributes to a foundation which can be used to transform how we engage with the past in order to better serve the needs of Blackgirls in today's public-school systems and those of the future.

The year 1964 was the year my grandmommie graduated from high school in Kansas City, MO. This woman is not only a key contributor in this study but also the person who first cultivated my love for reading, seeking knowledge, and having pride in my history. Her voice, amplified in tandem with the voices of her classmates, offers rich historical context into how Blackgirls resisted, reimagined, and redefined education during a pivotal time in American history. These stories are the beginnings of bridging the gaps in educational history, and they provide a framework for understanding Black girlhood across generations.

Following gridlines set by bell hooks (1994) and Ruth Nicole Brown (2013), this literature provides affirmation of the foundational necessity for Blackgirls narratives. When we listen to Blackgirls, past and present, we gain the tools to challenge educational injustice and build liberatory learning spaces where Blackgirls no longer have to shed pieces of themselves to exist.

My journey into their history began in the Spring of 2023 during a time in my doctoral program when I was longing for coursework reflective of my Black heritage. I had enrolled in courses such as *Contemporary American Education*, *Latina/o/os and Education*, *Latina Feminist Epistemologies*, and *Contemporary Critical Thought*, which focused on the experiences of Latina/o and Indigenous populations. These classes were powerful, exposing how schools and society are mutually constitutive. Yet, they left a gaping hole: the history of Black people, specifically Blackgirls, in education was missing. My people were missing, and I could not see myself rooted in the pages, only in inferences rooted in other populations' cultural history.

Looking through the course catalog, I quickly realized no such course existed within the education department. On January 30, 2023, I began this study with James Anderson's *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935*. My research quickly raised a set of fundamental questions: Why do we hear about Black men and boys in historical narratives but so rarely Blackgirls? What did Blackgirls experience? What did they have to say? Where are their stories housed?

A turning point came on a Sunday in my grandmommie's living room. I was surrounded by my son, my sisters, and my grandmommie, Guyetta. As I eagerly shared historical knowledge gleaned throughout the semester, my grandmother shared about her past and specifically her time in Los Angeles, CA. She proudly reminisced about her afro, the leather jackets, and the Black Panthers' critical role in feeding the community's basic needs and knowledge. This moment revealed to me my grandmother as a living historian, a holder of educational and cultural memory. I realized her stories, and those of her classmates, could illuminate the past in ways textbooks never could.

By March 17, I recognized an unmistakable void in the literature. When I asked my professor about research centered on the experiences of Blackgirls in education, they responded candidly: there was not much, none she was aware of. The realization sparked a shift in my mindset. Rather than simply searching for this work, I could create it. I asked myself: What if I could give my grandmommie a voice in the historical record? What if the lived experiences of her and her classmates could transform how we understand Blackgirls in education today?

The aim of this research was not just to contribute to the literature; my motivation was centered around paying homage to those who came before me. It was about building something meaningful within one of the communities which raised me, Kansas City, Missouri. My

grandmommie often said people never listened to her. This study would ensure her voice, and those of her peers, were preserved and honored.

I presented my idea to my professor at the time and leaned into storytelling as the foundation of my methodology. Who were the participants? Where and when did they attend school? What would it look like for me to approach gathering their stories in ways that honor and preserve their voices? I grounded my approach in Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000), Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), and Narrative Inquiry (Dillard, 2000).

Keeping these frameworks at the forefront made space for Bettina Love's (2019) call toward abolition, truth-telling, and honoring the lived brilliance of those silenced by oppressive systems to remain central to this work. As Love (2019) urges for a refusal of the narratives imposed on Black students and work towards building new systems grounded in Black joy, truth, and care. Her work reinforced I was not just collecting stories; I was building lenses and frameworks to encapsulate the complexities of Blackgirls fully.

The most intimidating part of this experience was calling women over 70 and explaining my research. Older Blackwomen do not often hold their opinions to themselves, and they do not offer their trust easily. I hoped they would believe in me and the vision I held. I wanted to create a space where they could share even a sliver of their stories, a space where they could stand in history. To my surprise and humility, they were not only willing, but they were also eager. My grandmother, the lynchpin to my access to these women, had maintained contact with several classmates. When I asked if she knew five or six women who might participate, she responded with excitement and began making calls immediately.

I scheduled individual interviews and planned our first collective gathering for the summer of 2023. Initially imagined as a traditional focus group, I quickly reframed it: this was not about data collection in the academic sense. Conducting these sessions was an opportunity to metaphorically sit at the feet of grandmothers and honor the legacies they built and the streets they walked those which allowed people like me the opportunity to run. It was a sacred invitation into the circle, not a sterile research environment only concerned about documenting data. It was a space of intergenerational remembering and radical care.

In offering this work, I have chosen to present the narratives shared by these Blackgirls with intentional care, grounded in Endarkened Storywork and the responsibility carried in holding other people's memories. Story, in this space, is not something to be collected and taken apart. It is something to sit with, something to feel, something carrying us between moments, between generations, between what was and what still is. Story becomes more than method; it becomes a way of knowing, a way of remaining in relationship with what has been lived and what continues to shape us (Toliver, 2022).

Blackwomen have always made meaning in the spaces where life unfolds, in kitchens, in living rooms, in conversation, and in memory. What has been lived has always carried knowledge, even when it was not recognized as such (Collins, 2000). Sitting with these stories makes it impossible to separate experience from the layers shaping it. Race and gender move together here, shaping how these women understood school, community, and themselves in ways that cannot be pulled apart without losing what is true (Crenshaw, 1991).

There is a felt sense, an intuition, a knowing living just beneath what is spoken, what we can call history. Holding these stories requires space for what is remembered, what is carried in the body, what shows up in pauses as much as in words (Gumbs & Lindsey, 2021). These stories

are grounded in real places, real systems, real interactions, where identity and belonging are continuously shaped through schooling, community, and relationship (Porter et al., 2020). History is positioned within a broader conversation still unfolding, one asking how Blackwomen's knowledge can live within spaces not always designed to receive it without being reshaped or reduced (Adeniyi-Ogunyankin et al., 2020).

Blackgirls continue to navigate spaces where they are seen “too much” when something goes wrong, yet “not enough” when they need care, protection, or understanding. This is not new. It is tied to a longer history shaping how Blackwomen and Blackgirls have been positioned, where their humanity has been questioned and their presence has been defined before they ever had the chance to define it for themselves. What these stories offer is not only reflection, but a way to feel that history, to understand it more fully, and to recognize how it continues to live on.

Chapter Summary

Intentionally centering Blackgirls' voices by grounding the work in lived experience, memory, and storytelling as knowledge, Blackwomen who once Blackgirls are positioned as living archives, carrying histories shaped through schooling, community, and intergenerational connection. Their stories are honored as whole and meaningful accounts, offering insight into how Blackgirls have navigated and made sense of educational spaces across time.

The chapter traces how educational systems have required Blackgirls to move within conditions shaped by racialized and gendered expectations, where invisibility, misrecognition, and conditional belonging become part of everyday school experience. These patterns reveal how presence does not always lead to understanding, and how success is often tied to compliance rather than full expression. What emerges is a recognition of how Blackgirls learn to navigate, adjust, and carry themselves within spaces not designed with them in mind.

Chapter 2: Foundational Scholars in Conversation

History of Black Education

Before education became something debated in courtrooms or tracked through policy, it lived in everyday moments. It lived in homes, in churches, and in school buildings where hope often outweighed available resources. Books were worn. Supplies were limited. Still, something steady was happening.

Children were expected to learn not as an option but as a responsibility. It was a responsibility carried by families, by teachers, and by the community as a whole. Education was never separate from life. It moved through it. It shaped how children saw themselves and how they prepared to move through a world often asking more of them than it was willing to give them.

Learning in these spaces reached beyond reading and writing. It showed up in posture, in tone, in discipline, and in awareness. Children were being prepared for what they would face, even when those realities were not spoken aloud. There was a quiet understanding moving through these spaces. What happened inside those classrooms would follow them everywhere. Too often, this history gets reduced to what was lacking: underfunded schools, outdated materials, buildings needing repair. All were truly lacking. Still, stopping there flattens the story. Because alongside limitation, there was intention.

Black communities built educational spaces with care and precision. Not hoping systems would correct themselves. They organized. They funded. They supported teachers. They set expectations for children grounded in both discipline and belief. What was being built in these spaces did not begin in isolation. It carried forward a longer tradition of Black education shaped in response to exclusion and control. Woodson (1933) names how schooling has long been used

to shape how Black people see themselves, while also calling attention to the need for education grounded in truth and self-understanding. In a similar way, Givens (2021) shows how Black educators moved within constrained systems while still creating spaces of resistance, teaching in ways which protected and affirmed Black life even when conditions attempted to limit it.

What scholars later document as the development of Black education in the South reflects what communities were already doing, organizing, building, and sustaining schools in the absence of equitable systems (Anderson, 1988). Education was shared work. It belonged to everyone. This broader commitment to education as community investment and cultural transmission is echoed across scholarship examining African American educational traditions, where schooling functioned as both preparation and preservation (Lomotey, 2010).

These spaces were deeply relational. Schools were not isolated institutions. They were extensions of community life. Teachers knew families. They understood students beyond the classroom. Expectations were firm, still carried out with care. Students were held accountable, not pushed aside. Walker (1996) brings this into view by illustrating how these relationships took shape in everyday life. Care did not replace expectation but held them up. Teachers were not lowering the bar because they knew their students. Instead, they were holding expectations steady and walking with students as they worked to reach them. They knew who needed a push, who needed time, and who needed to be reminded of what they were capable of. Correction did not come with dismissal. It came with presence. Expectations were clear still, and carried through relationships, allowing students to feel seen, not singled out. In that way, accountability was never separate from support, and being pushed to grow did not mean being pushed away.

This kind of schooling did more than transfer knowledge. It shaped identity.

It shaped how children understood themselves long before they had the language to explain it.

Du Bois (1903/1994) captures this tension through the idea of a double consciousness where Black children learn to see themselves through their own understanding while also being aware of how they are seen within a society structured by race. Education, then, becomes a space where identity is not only formed, but negotiated. Ladson-Billings (1995) argues education must not only prepare students academically but also affirm their cultural and social identities in ways allowing them to see themselves fully within what they are learning.

Still, these spaces did not exist outside of larger systems shaping how Black children were seen. Even within environments built with care, students were being prepared to navigate a world holding different expectations for them. A world where their intelligence could be questioned, their opportunities limited, and their presence misread. Preparation did not always come through direct instruction. It showed up in the pauses, in the looks, and in the quiet understanding students would have to move differently once they stepped outside those spaces. Schooling has never been separated from the world surrounding it; it has always carried the weight of broader social structures shaping how students are seen, what is expected of them, and what becomes possible in their lives (Ogbu, 2003).

Some students are expected to prove what others are allowed to assume. Moments of behavior are read before brilliance is ever considered. This shifts how students are positioned before they even have the chance to show what they know, a dynamic which is clear when observing how Blackgirls are often engaged through discipline rather than through their intellectual presence (Morris, 2016). Even when they are present, engaged, and doing exactly what is asked of them, recognition is not guaranteed. There are ways of moving through

classrooms without being fully seen, where presence alone does not ensure acknowledgment (Henderson, 2026). Being noticed, however, does not always resolve this. Visibility can still come without understanding when Blackgirls are seen but only through partial or distorted readings of who they are and what they bring (Brown, 2025).

The space itself further complicates the matter. In environments where Blackgirls are one of few, there is a constant awareness of how they are being read, how they are being interpreted, and how much of themselves can be brought forward without consequence (Markwart, 2024). Attention in these spaces is rarely neutral. It can lean toward scrutiny, manifesting in correction more quickly than in support, reinforcing a sense of feeling watched rather than feeling known (Haynes et al., 2016).

The way students speak, carry themselves, and respond shapes how they are received, as their words and actions are filtered through assumptions about intelligence, behavior, and belonging before meaning is ever fully considered. This pattern requires constant self-monitoring and adjustment, traveling with them and shaping how they move, speak, and understand belonging as something to be managed rather than freely given (Slagle, 2024). Language is not just communication in these moments; it becomes something managed, something adjusted, and something shaped in response to how it will be interpreted (Daniels, 2018). What is often framed as code-switching reflects this reality; there is a constant shifting between ways of being in order to be accepted across different spaces (Morton, 2014). Even attempts to teach this as a strategy can quietly reinforce the idea suggesting some ways of speaking hold more value than others, leaving students to carry the responsibility of adjusting rather than questioning the system itself (Williams-Farrier, 2017).

None of this happens in isolation. The way Blackgirls are seen, heard, and responded to is shaped by race and gender always moving together, influencing how their actions are interpreted and how they are positioned in educational spaces (Crenshaw, 1991). These moments, while they may feel small on their own, connect to something much larger, a pattern shaping how Blackwomen and Blackgirls are understood, valued, and responded to across contexts (Collins, 2000).

Access to schooling did not resolve those questions. Being allowed into a system did not guarantee being valued within it. This is where Du Bois presses hardest, pushing beyond the idea that education should only equip Black children for labor and instead arguing for an education rooted in dignity, critical thought, and possibility (Du Bois, 1903/1994). Later interpretations of his work continue to hold this tension, asking what education is doing and who it ultimately serves (Aldridge, 2008).

Schools operated within broader systems where inequities in funding, resources, and opportunity were patterned rather than accidental (Fairclough, 2001; Anderson, 1988). What was created within Black communities pushed against those limits but did not remove them. While education held possibility, it still required negotiation. It asked Black children to move within boundaries while preparing to move beyond them.

Within all of this, inside the building, the teaching, and the preparing, Blackgirls were there. Not on the margins, but fully inside these spaces. They are constantly learning, leading, watching, and figuring things out in real time, all while meeting expectations and reading what is never said out loud. Their presence runs through this history, even when the words used to tell it do not fully hold them. Historians of Blackwomen's lives have been naming this for a long time.

They ask how you can be present, fully present, and still not be seen in the way history remembers (Hine, 1994).

Examining this makes something clear. This was never about absence. Blackgirls were not missing. What was missing was their inclusion in the recording process. The way their experiences were held was not considered. Some scholars have gone back looking for them, not in obvious places, but in what was left behind, in diaries, in school records, and in pieces of everyday life. When you start to examine this work, you begin to see them differently. You see how they moved between school and home, how they made sense of what was happening around them, and how they grew into themselves while carrying what was expected of them (Simmons, 2015).

In other moments, place begins to matter. Where they were, shaped how they learned to move. Stories of coming of age during Jim Crow show how early Blackgirls learned to read a room, to understand what was required without it needing explanation (Thomas, 2025). Reaching back, you begin to see them in some of the earliest schools created for Blackgirls, already present, already thinking, already learning, even when the record did not always stop to notice them (Lupano et al., 2025).

What continues to surface, even in more recent work, is this tension. School can be a place of possibility and a place of limitation at the same time. Blackgirls have always navigated both learning and growing while carrying an awareness of how they are being read and responded to in those spaces (Katz & Acquah, 2024).

The foundation of Black education is not a story of struggle or access, but as one of intention, care, resistance, and belief. A foundation built through community, sustained through relationship, and carried forward by children learning how to move through both possibility and

constraint. When we talk about what is remembered, what is recorded, what is centered, we are not just talking about what is there. We are also talking about what was overlooked: what was not fully held. Blackgirls have always been part of this story. The work now is learning how to see them more fully.

School Before Integration

Prior to integration, Black schools operated within systems designed to deny them equitable resources and keep them oppressed. School buildings were often overcrowded or poorly maintained, and instructional materials frequently consisted of outdated textbooks and supplies discarded by white schools, which received the most current materials and funding (Anderson, 1988). Educational experiences for Black children, specifically during Jim Crow, unfolded in deeply unequal systems which were tightly segregated, formed by anti-Black racism with gendered expectations and the structural oversight of white supremacy. The broader Jim Crow project was designed to deny Black people access to social mobility, and education was at the forefront of that goal (Walker, 1996).

Black educators played a central role in sustaining these environments. Teachers were not distant authority figures. They were deeply embedded members of the communities they served (Walker, 1996). Many lived in the same neighborhoods as their students, shopped in the same markets, and attended the same churches. Their presence did not end at the classroom door. It followed students into everyday life, into conversations, and into moments where guidance, correction, and care were needed. Students were known, not just as learners, but as whole people, which shaped how they were seen and how they were held accountable.

Teaching was never just about content. It was about relationship. Learning stayed connected to lived experience, to memory, to something deeper than what could be written on a

board (Dillard, 2006). What was being built in these classrooms reached beyond academics. It was about shaping how students saw themselves, what they believed was possible, and how they would move through a world not always prepared to meet them with care (Anderson, 1988).

Black women stood at the center of this work. In many of these schools, they made up the majority of the teaching force. Still, their role stretched far beyond instruction. They modeled what it looked like to show up with purpose. They taught students to carry oneself with intention. Their classrooms held structure, still also held care, allowing students to be pushed without being pushed away (Foster, 1997). What they were doing, even if it was not named this way at the time, reflected a way of knowing grounded in lived experience, in relationship, in a deep understanding of what it meant to teach Black children in a world shaping how they would be seen (Collins, 2000). It was not about removing who students were to make them fit. It was about holding onto it, carrying it forward, even as they prepared to move through spaces where it might not always be valued (Paris & Alim, 2017).

These schools were not simply getting by. They were creating something. Spaces grounded in expectation, in connection, in a sense of responsibility extending beyond the individual. There was always an awareness of what existed beyond those walls. The care present did not remove the need to navigate. It sharpened it. Coming of age during Jim Crow shows how early that awareness came, how quickly Blackgirls learned to read a room, to understand what was required without it needing to be explained and still find ways to remain themselves in the process (Thomas, 2025). Students were learning academics but were still also learning how they would be seen once they stepped outside of those spaces, how they would need to move in response to it (Ogbu, 2003).

Curricula in segregated Black schools placed an emphasis on racial pride, civic responsibility, and collective progress. Black students were required to learn about Black history, Black achievement, and Black struggle in ways which affirmed their humanity and connected them to broader freedom movements (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Churches served as classrooms when school buildings proved inadequate, and community members regularly contributed resources and labor to maintain educational spaces. Students grew up within educational environments where belief in their potential remained unwavering. Their aspirations were not limited by the scarcity of materials but shaped by the expectations and encouragement of teachers and community members who viewed education as a communal investment in the future.

Despite these material inequities, Black educational communities refused to allow structural neglect to define the limits of their children's potential. Rather than functioning solely as under-resourced institutions, Black schools developed into spaces of cultural transmission, community investment, and collective responsibility (Anderson, 1988).

Walker's (1996) work reveals the profound impact of educational environments grounded in community belief and advocacy. When teachers, families, and neighbors collectively invested in a child's progress, education became more than a pathway to individual advancement; it became a shared project of community survival and possibility.

The loss of Black teachers became one of the most profound sacrifices made in the name of integration. When the Supreme Court issued its decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* and began implementation of *Brown v. Board of Education II*, the nation began dismantling legally segregated school systems. Yet desegregation did not unfold in ways many Black communities had envisioned. While integration permitted Black children to attend previously white schools,

white communities and school districts often resisted placing Black educators in positions of authority over white students. In practice, this resistance resulted in the widespread displacement of Black teachers and administrators.

Brown v Board of Education

The educational landscape was disrupted with the passing of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which declared segregated schools unconstitutional. However, Black educators and community leaders expressed deep concerns about what integration would mean in practice. James T. Patterson's *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy* (2001), uncovers the complexities of the intended impact, the suggested promise of *Brown*, and the reality of the resistance of White communities. Patterson documented how implementation was slow, inconsistent, and often met with fierce resistance from those who did not want their children to attend the same schools as Black children. Black students entering previously segregated schools frequently encountered racial hostility, low standards, and a disconnect from culturally affirming educational practices. Patterson underscores how the intended legal victories, while symbolically powerful, did not dismantle the structural racism embedded in educational systems, a truth which continues to reverberate in today's debates about equity and access.

Would white teachers, many of whom had never taught Black students, value their potential, or would they perpetuate harmful stereotypes? Would the dismantling of Black-led schools erode the culturally affirming environments which had sustained generations of students? The simple answer for many was, yes. The root of these questions lived in experiences of racism, exclusion, and the devaluation of Black educators, particularly Black women who were often among the first to lose their jobs in the aftermath of desegregation (Tillman, 2004).

Anderson (1988) outlines how opposing philosophies from two historical contributors to Black educational thought, Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, shaped the foundation of how education was pursued as a form of advancement within Black communities. Booker T. Washington, who delivered the Atlanta Exposition Address in 1895, emerged as a prominent advocate for vocational and industrial education as a pathway toward economic self-sufficiency. In his address, Washington encouraged Black communities in the South to pursue industrial education, economic independence, and practical skill development. He urged white Southerners to support Black labor and education, promoting racial cooperation and gradual progress rather than immediate demands for full social and political equality.

Amid these conversations, the legal mandate of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) codified the doctrine of “separate but equal,” institutionalizing a system in which was meant to counter the way Black children were routinely given inadequate access to quality educational resources, including outdated textbooks, dilapidated school buildings, and limited curricular offerings (Fairclough, 2001).

A few years later, W. E. B. Du Bois argued that political rights should not be delayed and posited Black communities required access to higher education and intellectual leadership. Du Bois emphasized the importance of liberal arts education and the development of the “Talented Tenth,” a group of educated Black leaders who could guide the race toward full equality (Du Bois, 1903).

These competing philosophies shaped how education was perceived and pursued within Black communities, influencing whether schooling was understood primarily as preparation for economic survival through skilled labor or as a pathway toward intellectual leadership, civic engagement, and racial advancement.

The question remaining at the time was what did the communities want? Did they want separate but equal? Did they want equality? Did they want integration? What they wanted was a thriving community where their voices would be exalted, their culture enriched, and their communities prosperous. Bringing us back to *Brown v. Board*. Du Bois commented on these 20 years prior to *Brown vs. Board*. In his 1935 almost 20 years prior Du Bois delivers an essay *Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?* he argued the quality of education, and the ethos in which it was delivered, mattered more than the mere fact of integration. Without schools with curricula constructed with dignity, affirmation, and high expectations, Black children risked receiving inferior education in hostile environments. Was he wrong? Or did he have uncanny foresight?

Patterson (2001) highlights what Walker, Anderson, and Du Bois questioned before him. He argued, segregated schools were not a positive implication for Black children. Black schools were a way for white people to maintain control of the dissemination of education. However, because it was never allowed, the outcomes possible if Black people were allowed ownership of their own education with equitable resources can never be known.

Historical scholarship documents the scale and impact of this loss. Walker (1996) explains that desegregation frequently dismantled the very educational communities' Black families had spent generations building. As Black students entered newly integrated schools, the teachers who had raised them academically and socially within their own communities were often removed from classrooms or pushed out of the profession entirely. The educators who replaced them frequently had little experience teaching Black students and limited understanding of the cultural environments shaping their lives.

The consequences extended beyond the loss of individual jobs. Black principals and school leaders, figures who had overseen the development and success of Black schools, also lost positions of authority. Their displacement removed important sources of mentorship, cultural affirmation, and community leadership from educational spaces. Schools that had once functioned as centers of community life lost much of the relational infrastructure sustaining student success. Teachers who lived in the same neighborhoods as their students, attended the same churches, and participated in the same community life were replaced by educators whose professional and personal experience often centered exclusively on white students. In this shift, many Black students lost educators who understood their cultural worlds and believed deeply in their potential.

While integration opened doors to new educational spaces (Walker, 1996), it also produced unintended consequences. The cost included the dismantling of Black educational leadership and community-centered schooling, which altered the environments in which Black children learned. Additionally, the loss of Black teachers represented not only professional displacement but also the erosion of educational ecosystems rooted in care, accountability, and cultural knowledge.

Within all of this, within the building, the teaching, the preparing, Blackgirls were there. Not on the edges. Not waiting to be included. Fully present.

What becomes clearer when sitting with the historical record is how often their presence existed without full recognition. Ihle (1988) brings this into focus by tracing the educational experiences of Black girls and women in the South following emancipation. Black girls were not only students moving through these early educational spaces. They were also being prepared, formally and informally, to become educators themselves. Teaching became one of the few

professional pathways available, placing Blackwomen at the center of sustaining educational communities across generations.

Even with this level of presence and contribution, their experiences were not central as education was documented or understood. Even though their labor and impact were visible, their intellectual lives, far less so.

In these spaces built with intention, supported by community, and sustained through care, something else remained incomplete.

Blackgirls were learning how to move through education.

However, education had not yet learned how to see them.

Even within this history, even within spaces built with intention and sustained through community, something remained unspoken. Blackgirls were present, learning, contributing, preparing, yet their experiences were not fully named or examined in ways capturing the complexity of how they moved through these environments. The structures shaping education were visible. The outcomes were visible. The specific ways Blackgirls navigated these spaces, far less so.

At some point, it becomes necessary to ask a different question.

Not simply what education has done, but how Blackgirls have experienced, interpreted, and responded to it.

This is where the work begins to shift.

Black Girlhood Studies

The women who have made space for Blackgirls to be seen, fully seen, begin to offer language for what had long been lived. These conversations have happened since the beginning of time, but the frameworks to bring about change are important to the literature. The first time I

heard of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) she gave a voice, language, to something already lived and understood in kitchens, classrooms, and quiet moments Blackwomen carried with them. She names it intersectionality, but what she really did was give the rest of society a word to help progress the conversation. Oppression does not arrive one piece at a time. It does not wait its turn. It folds in on itself when race meets gender, gender is shaped by class, class moves through place, language, and access. None of it can be pulled apart without losing the essence of identity.

As Crenshaw navigates the legal system and feminist movements, she is not just pointing out gaps, she is pointing out lapses in comprehension. She challenged where Blackwomen are meant to reside in advocating for equality and equitable pursuits of happiness. She challenged the notion of Blackwomen being too Black for gender claims and too woman for race claims. Why did they need to choose a side when their lives have never been void of either claim? Her work does not just critique systems; it insists on wholeness. She reminds us Blackwomen have always been carrying all of themselves at once, whether systems could recognize it or not.

Collins (2000) brings theory into lived experience, showing Blackwomen have long theorized through everyday practices of mothering, working, storytelling, and surviving. What the academy calls theory, Collins structures life as theory in the making. She names the “matrix of domination” to describe how power is structured and experienced across multiple, overlapping layers at once. Rather than viewing oppression as something operating in isolated categories, Collins shows how it moves through interconnected domains, shaping structures, guiding institutional practices, reinforcing cultural beliefs, and showing up in everyday interactions. It is what it feels like to move through a world that keeps layering expectations on top of you, asking you to be everything and nothing at the same time.

Here it becomes clear that Blackgirls are never just responding. They are creating, always.

Black Feminist Thought

Inherently, society seemed to have a problem with shaping the lives of Blackwomen and Blackgirls, which is not a small oversight but a structural gap. Frameworks for race existed. Frameworks for gender existed. Yet neither could fully account for how Black women and Blackgirls moved through the world. Something kept slipping through, misread, fragmented, or ignored altogether. Intersectionality was the starting point.

Black Feminist Thought emerges from the tension between what it means to live in a space where the tools used to explain oppression were never built with you in mind. It is not an addition, but it is a correction. It is a refusal to separate lived realities into categories unable to hold them.

Early attention to language and representation suggests identity takes shape well before formal theory enters the conversation. Monica C. Hopson (2009) brings this into focus by examining how Blackgirls encounter themselves through cultural texts, where language lays a central role in shaping their identity and self-perception. This matters because it places Black Feminist Thought in spaces often overlooked. This is not just in academic writing but in books, stories, images, and early moments where Blackgirls begin making sense of who they are.

From there, the conversation expands into questions of power and knowledge. Ana Cristina Pereira (2015) positions Black Feminist Thought as a disruption to dominant systems of knowledge production, centering marginalized voices as legitimate producers of knowledge. Around the same time, Minoo Alinia (2015) positions intersectionality as an analytical framework for examining oppression and resistance. Together, these shifts move Black Feminist

Thought into clearer territory. Not only naming oppression but also revealing how it operates while recognizing how Black women and Blackgirls respond within it.

This foundation is strengthened through Patricia Hill Collins (2000), defines Black Feminist Thought as a framework grounded in the lived experiences of Blackwomen, where everyday life becomes a site of knowledge production. Rather than positioning theory as something created at a distance, Collins situates knowledge within the ways Blackwomen make sense of their lives through work, family, community, and survival. She describes it as a dynamic and evolving form of knowledge shaped through lived experience and collective meaning-making

Knowledge is created in in response to power, shaped by the need to understand, navigate, and challenge systems organizing everyday life. What Blackwomen know comes from moving through these systems, naming them, resisting them, and sharing those understandings with one another. Black Feminist Thought, then, does not sit outside of experience. It moves with it, grows from it, and remains accountable to the lives producing it. Another layer begins to take shape around expectation and understanding. Alexis Pauline Gumbs and Treva Lindsey (2021) challenge the demand for constant explanation. They insist on the right to complexity, to opacity, and to refusal, framing mystery as a form of resistance against defined or contained. Black women and Blackgirls do not need to be fully explained to be valued. It explains complexity is not a problem to solve but a condition to respect.

As these ideas develop, their impact becomes more visible in lived experience. Ijeoma Opara et al. (2022) brings attention to how Blackgirls navigate being both invisible and hypervisible at once. She notes they are seen when discipline is involved and overlooked when

care is needed. They explain the influence gendered racism influences how Blackgirls are treated and how they navigate relationships (Opara et al. 2022)

What emerges across this progression is not a single fixed framework, but an orientation; a way of seeing shaped over time. It begins in language and representation, expands through power and knowledge, is grounded in lived experience, made visible in the body, and protected through refusal.

Black Feminist Thought names the gap.

It challenges the structure.

It centers lived experience.

It recognizes resistance.

It protects complexity.

More than anything, it affirms Black women and Blackgirls have always been theorizing their lives, regardless of whether the world chose to recognize it.

Black Girlhood Studies

The concept of Black Girlhood Studies gradually grew into something capable of holding the uniqueness Blackgirls experience in girlhood. This understanding did not begin with a formal field or a defined framework. It began much earlier, in places not always recognized as theory. Spending time in the archive with Nazera Sadiq Wright (2016) changed how I understood where this story begins. She reads diaries, letters, and school records in a way refusing to treat them as background. Instead, she treats them as evidence of Blackgirls already thinking, already interpreting, and already making sense of their worlds. Sitting with her work required me to adjust my own lens. These were not girls waiting to be understood. They were already naming themselves. Already becoming. It made me pause and ask how much of Black girlhood has

always been present while being misunderstood. I realized I had been conditioned to look for validation of Blackgirls' thinking instead of recognizing it had always been there.

Staying with the thought naturally led me into memory. Not memory as something clean or organized but memory as something lived. bell hooks (1996) does not tell her story in a way guiding you step by step. She gives fragments- sensations- moments arriving out of order. At first it feels scattered. Then it begins to settle. Memory is not disorganized. It is honest. Through her, the everyday begins to carry weight. What might be overlooked starts to feel intentional. What Wright uncovers in written form, hooks holds through lived experience.

Still, there are places where even memory cannot reach. There are silences- gaps. Moments where Blackwomen and Blackgirls do not appear at all. Saidiya Hartman (2008, 2019) exposes how to stay with those gaps instead of trying to fix them. She works within what is missing, refusing to treat absence as emptiness. Through her work, it becomes clear those lives did not disappear simply because they were not recorded. They were lived, carried, and felt. Survival begins to manifest differently here. Not as stillness but as movement. Not as silence but as something happening even when no one was writing it down.

Then LaKisha Michelle Simmons (2015) settles attention on what Blackgirls are doing every day as she traces them through oral histories and archival work, paying close attention to how Blackgirls moved through their environments. Walking, dressing, gathering, is no longer accepted as random anymore. It becomes intentional. At the same time, Kyra Gaunt (2006) observes Blackgirls in play, watching how they teach each other, rhythm, timing, and coordination through hand-clap games and jump rope. What looks simple begins to open. She notes there is structure, leadership, and learning happening in plain sight. Together, they make it hard to ignore how often Blackgirls are producing knowledge without it being named as such.

I started to recognize pieces of my own understanding in these moments. I recognized things I had seen before but had not yet named as knowledge.

This recognition deepens when attention turns to how Blackgirls move through spaces not built with them in mind. Spending time alongside Blackgirls, Aimee Meredith Cox (2015) attends to interaction, gesture, and the ways connection is formed, describing shapeshifting as the intentional shifting of self in response to context. Through this lens, it becomes visible how Blackgirls read a room before speaking, adjust tone, and find alignment in ways that are neither accidental nor passive, but learned, carried, and continuously refined (Cox, 2015). This work raises a deeper question of how often these forms of adaptation are misread as compliance, when they have always functioned as strategy.

Then the work becomes named. Not created but recognized. Ruth Nicole Brown (2008) brings language to something already in motion by calling it Black Girlhood Studies. Through *Saving Our Lives Hearing our Truths* (SOLHOT), she creates a space where Blackgirls are not being watched or interpreted from a distance. They are building together by speaking, creating, and defining themselves in real time. Black girlhood becomes fluid, intergenerational. What had been traced across archives, memory, and observation is now centered with intention. The question begins to sound different: what happens when Blackgirls are not asked to adjust, but are allowed to be?

This question stayed with me longer than anything else because it exposed how often the burden of change has been placed on Blackgirls instead of the spaces surrounding them which has happened across geography, across history, and across conditions shaped by colonialism and racial capitalism. Field and Simmons (2022) show Black girlhood is not tied to one place or one experience. It carries across contexts while still holding recognizable patterns.

Aria Halliday (2019) pulls attention toward joy, beauty, and pleasure, not as extras, but as essential parts of how Blackgirls understand themselves. Sitting with her work made me reconsider how often joy is minimized when, in reality, it has always been intentional.

Place begins to matter in a different way according to K. A. Sumner (2019) who brings attention to how belonging is never automatic. It is negotiated. Where you are shapes how you are seen and how you move. Black girlhood does not sit outside of these conditions. It moves through them. It responds to them.

It became harder to ignore how often Blackgirls are asked to make sense of spaces never designed with them in mind.

Moving into more recent work, the conversation begins to open toward what could be, not just what has been. Smith-Purviance et al. (2022) introduce (re)memorying as something building forward, not just looking back. Brown, Daley, and Hunt (2022) remind us disruption is sometimes necessary, not something to avoid, but something creating room for something else to grow. Jones (2022) shows Blackgirls defining themselves together in digital spaces, outside of institutional control. Rowe (2022) reframes language, where words like “unmanageable” begin to read as refusal instead of failure. Nyachae et al. (2024) carry this even further, into imagining worlds not yet built.

By this point, it no longer feels like something waiting to be recognized. It feels like something already building on its own terms. One realization becomes clear. None of this stands alone. This is a conversation is constantly building and expanding with each woman adding another intricate layer. One building on another. Expanding. Deepening. Each woman adding to something already in motion.

Black Girlhood Studies is not about discovering something new. It is about learning how to see what has always been there.

Black girlhood has always been political. It has always been intellectual. It has always been creative.

The difference now is there is language to hold it, space to honor it, and a field built to take it seriously.

Blackgirls in Education

Educational spaces have always reflected the larger world around them. They carry the same assumptions, the same tensions, and the same gaps in understanding. For Blackgirls, this means school is never just about learning. Schools are rarely discussed as sites of emotional and bodily regulation with the same urgency we reserve for courts, prisons, or policing. Yet for Blackgirls, they often yield similar results. School becomes a space where they are read, interpreted, and at times, misunderstood before a word is even spoken. The question becomes: what does it mean to move through schools when people given authority to protect, teach, support, and empower you cannot recognize harm while it is unfolding?

To answer this, one must examine how Blackgirls are experienced in these spaces. Not just what happens to them, but how they are seen. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) helps name what is happening here. Blackgirls are not moving through school as only Black or only girls. They are navigating both at once, and those identities do not separate themselves neatly. They overlap, shaping how teachers respond, how peers engage, and how behavior is interpreted in real time.

Blackgirls are expected to be composed, still not too assertive. Visible, still not disruptive. Confident, still never too much. These expectations do not line up. They shift depending on who is watching, what is being noticed, and how a moment is being read. What it

creates is a constant negotiation, where Blackgirls are moving in real time, adjusting, responding, trying to make sense of what is being asked of them without ever being given a clear set of rules (Miller, 2025).

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) pushes this further by reminding us these interpretations are not random. They are learned. They come from a larger structure shaping expectations long before a Blackgirl walks into a classroom. There is already an unspoken understanding of who she is supposed to be: respectful but not assertive and engaged but not loud. They are to be capable but not too confident. These expectations do not just guide behavior, but they quietly define the boundaries of belonging.

What becomes important here is how quickly ordinary moments shift. A question can become an attitude. A reaction can become defiance. A moment of frustration can be read as disrespect. The same behaviors, when coming from others, are often seen as developmental or advocating for self. For Blackgirls, they are more likely to be seen as intentional and problematic. Research on adultification speaks directly to this, showing Blackgirls are often perceived as older, more responsible, and less innocent than they actually are (Epstein, Blake, & González, 2017). This shift in perception changes everything. It changes how grace is given, how patience is extended, and how support is offered, or how it is not.

Simone Browne (2015) helps us understand this is not new. Schools did not create these patterns; they inherited them. The monitoring of Black bodies, the attention to tone, dress, and movement, has a long history. She traces “racializing surveillance” across institutions, making clear watching, regulating, and disciplining Black bodies has always been embedded in the logic of this nation. In schools, this shows up in ways that may seem small in the moment but build over time. Dress code violations turn into suspensions. Repeated redirections lead to referrals to

the principal's office. Being watched closer than others adds up to more consequences. These moments accumulate, shaping how, as Nikisha Michelle Evans-Winters (2011) suggest, Blackgirls' identities are shaped in school through ongoing negotiations of respectability, behavior, and belonging, often requiring them to manage how they are perceived in order to remain safe. Blackgirls experience school as a space where they are constantly being assessed beyond their academic work. What begins to take shape here is not simply observation, but a pattern of scrutiny tied to how Black girlhood is understood long before a teacher ever responds.

To name what those patterns produce, Monique W. Morris (2016) challenges these interpretations and responses by highlighting their contribution to the criminalization of Blackgirls in schools. She exposes how schools become carceral spaces, where Blackgirls are positioned not simply as students trying to learn, but as bodies being read, managed, interpreted, and disciplined through a racialized and gendered lens. Lack of understanding for how to care for, support, and empower Blackgirls means in educational systems safety often comes at the cost of self.

Discipline, then, becomes a pattern, not because of who Blackgirls are, but because of how they are consistently read. Connie Wun (2016) reinforces this by showing punishment is not simply about individual behavior. It is tied to larger systems already structured to respond to Blackness in particular ways. Kimberlé Crenshaw (2015) further names this reality by describing Blackgirls as pushed out, overpoliced, and under protected, capturing the uneven balance between discipline and care. Studies by Epstein, Blake, and González (2017) deepen this understanding by showing how Blackgirls are consistently viewed as older, more mature, and less innocent than their peers. That distortion is costly. It holds them to standards no child should have to meet and strips them of the grace, softness, and emotional protection childhood should

provide. Nikisha Michelle Evans-Winters (2011) reminds us this expectation is not new; rather, it is part of a longer history where Blackgirls have been required to navigate schooling by managing both how they behave and how they are perceived at the same time.

Stopping here would only tell part of the story.

Bettina Love (2019) speaks directly to this tension by asking us to rethink what education is supposed to do. If the goal is only survival, then the system is doing exactly what it was built to do. If the goal is freedom, then something has to change. Love calls for an approach to education that does more than manage behavior. It must create space for joy, for imagination, and for full expression. For Blackgirls, this means being allowed to exist without constantly negotiating how they are being perceived. She demands we stop trying to make something harmful more comfortable and instead begin the work of dismantling it. Her abolitionist pedagogy insists Black students, Blackgirls, deserve more than inclusion in harmful spaces. They deserve communities grounded in support and uplift as the rule, not the exception.

What Blackgirls deserve are classrooms functioning as spaces of restoration, beauty, protection, and resistance, what bell hooks (1990) conceptualizes as homeplace. She calls for a space where care is not conditional, where presence is not questioned, and where being seen does not come with risk. In many ways, this is what Blackgirls continue to create for themselves when those spaces do not already exist.

If one were to look at this collectively, a pattern becomes clear. Blackgirls in education are navigating systems shaped by surveillance, adultification, and ongoing misinterpretation. At the same time, they are building, creating, and imagining within those same spaces. They are not passive in this process. They are active, aware, and constantly adjusting.

For example, within a predominantly white school, Lauren Leigh Kelly (2020) identifies a group of girls who claimed a corner of the library and transformed it into “I Love Us for Real.” I return to this often because of its simplicity and depth. A table becomes a geography of safety. A corner becomes a world. A temporary gathering becomes proof Blackgirls never passively accept conditions handed to them. They create space for one another to vent, dream, affirm, and breathe. Kelly reminds us Blackgirls resist in more ways than protest or refusal. Resistance also lives in protection, of self, of each other, of hope. They are architects of care long before institutions learn how to name it.

Even as Blackgirls create these spaces, the institutions surrounding them struggle to hold space for them in return. Tiffany C. Owens (2022) pushes this conversation into higher education, but what she reveals does not begin there. It is built over time. She names how Black Girlhood Studies itself does not sit comfortably within institutional structures because it requires constant negotiation simply to exist, to be recognized, and to be sustained. In her work, teaching Black girlhood emerges as something requiring ongoing navigation and resilience within systems never designed to fully support it.

What becomes clear is this tension does not suddenly appear in college classrooms. It is cultivated much earlier, in K–12 spaces where Blackgirls are already learning how to move through systems not built with them in mind. By the time they reach higher education, they are not encountering something new; they are encountering a continuation.

What starts to come into view is this tension, this sense of not quite fitting, and how the misfit carries this weight. There is something in that tension holding power, especially when what cannot be contained is often where Blackgirls are most fully themselves (Owens, 2022). The same qualities read as disruption in earlier schooling, voice, presence, refusal, begin to take

on a different meaning. Now, these same behaviors are now positive because they represent knowing, questioning, and pushing back. What is labeled as “too much” in one space becomes necessary in another.

These contradictions are not incidental. They are structural. The images used to define Blackgirls do not persist because they are true. They persist because they are useful. They give institutions a way to manage, to categorize, and to respond, all while maintaining the appearance of neutrality (Miller, 2025). Blackgirls are not simply moving within those frames. They are pushing against them. They are stretching them. They are refusing to sit neatly inside what has already been decided. What gets labeled and contained does not hold as easily as it is meant to. There is movement there. There is resistance there. There is a constant reshaping happening in real time, where Blackgirls complicate what has been placed onto them, even as they are navigating it.

The issue is not whether Blackgirls are capable of navigating these systems.

They always have.

The question is whether the systems are willing to recognize them fully, without distortion, without assumption, and without requiring them to become something else in order to belong.

Critical Race Feminism

What became necessary in this work was a framework capable of holding the full weight of Blackgirl experience without forcing separation. Race does not stand alone. Gender does not operate in isolation. Class does not sit quietly in the background. Each move with the other, shaping how Blackgirls live, learn, and are understood within educational spaces. Critical Race

Feminism (CRF) created room for all of this to exist together, not as competing conversations, but as lived reality.

Critical Race Theory (CRT), emerging in the mid-1970s and 1980s through scholars such as Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, provided an initial grounding. CRT challenged traditional civil rights approaches and liberal legal thought, insisting racism operates as a permanent and normalized feature of American life (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). It rejected claims of neutrality and meritocracy, centering counter-storytelling as a way to expose how dominant narratives distort lived experience. Through CRT, permanence of racism within U.S. institutions became undeniable (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Yet even within this clarity, something remained incomplete. Questions of gender often sat on the outskirts of these conversations.

Feminist theory opened space for gender critique, still much of this work centered white women, overshadowing the experiences of Blackwomen (Lorde, 1984). What was being named as “womanhood” did not hold what Blackwomen were living. Something was off. Not just who was missing, but how the story itself was being told. The frameworks in place could not hold lives where race, gender, and class were always showing up together, never separately (Few-Demo, 2014). Breaking those experiences into parts left something unfinished, because this is not how life was being lived.

Critical Race Feminism begins to take form in that space, not as an add-on but as a different way of seeing altogether. It does not pull things apart in search of clarity. It stays with the fullness and feels what overlaps and refuses to separate. This becomes a quiet resistance, rejecting fragmented ways of knowing and forms of selective recognition that present themselves as understanding while leaving critical parts unacknowledged, and instead holding the full,

interconnected reality of Blackgirls' lives (Alexander-Floyd, 2010). This same resistance presses against educational spaces organized around order and reform and labels them as spaces not always able to sit with the complexity of Blackwomen's and Blackgirls' lives without trying to simplify them (Childers-McKee & Hytten, 2015).

Bringing Black girlhood into focus makes this feel even more real. Moving through school is never just about learning content. It is about reading the room. Adjusting. Carrying awareness from one moment into the next (Sumner, 2019). Still, the contradictions stay close. Expectations shift. Interpretations shift. What is being asked does not always line up, leaving Blackgirls to figure it out in real time (Miller, 2025). Critical Race Feminism remains in motion, stretching understanding without reducing it, holding space for Blackwomen's and Blackgirls' lives in ways refusing simplification (Henry, 2021).

Intersectionality, as articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), brought this into sharper focus. Blackwomen and Blackgirls cannot be understood through isolated categories. Their experiences are formed at the intersections, where systems of power meet and compound. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) extended this understanding through the matrix of domination, identifying how oppression functions across structural, disciplinary, cultural, and interpersonal domains at once. These contributions grounded CRF not only in theory, but in lived application. Power operates in layers. Resistance does as well.

Within educational spaces, CRF brings clarity, revealing how Blackgirls' intellect is questioned, their speech monitored, and their bodies regulated through racialized gender expectations (Epstein, Blake, & González, 2017). CRF shifts the questions entirely. Rather than asking what Blackgirls lack, it asks what becomes visible when they are centered. Rather than

requiring proof of worth, it asks what knowledge already exists within them, what they carry into classrooms long before instruction begins.

CRF does not isolate Blackgirls even as it centers them. It extends outward, creating space for Indigenous girls, Latina girls, and others navigating overlapping systems of oppression (Wing, 1997). This expansion reflects an understanding of liberation as a collective built through shared struggle and interconnected realities rather than singular experience or struggle.

Connections between CRF and pedagogies rooted in love and cultural affirmation became increasingly clear. Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy and bell hooks' (1994) vision of teaching to transgress both echo these commitments. The claim education cannot remain unchanged while attempting to include those historically excluded. They require transformation as necessary. CRF calls for different approaches to research, different modes of listening, and deeper accountability to the stories Blackgirls tell.

CRF operates here as both lens and compass. It allows tracing of power across everyday interactions, between teachers and students, administrators and families. It also guides interpretation of those moments. It forces examination of a dress code policy, a disciplinary referral, or even a seating chart because it recognizes neither function as neutral structures. Each reflects histories of race and gender shaping how Blackgirls are positioned within schools. CRF grounds this work in care, accountability, and transformation, insisting understanding alone is not enough.

Situating Black Girlhood Studies and Critical Race Feminism

My goal is to create the space and the structure, to merge realities and concepts without sacrificing the pieces. No single framework could do this work alone. Black Girlhood Studies alongside Critical Race Feminism created a way forward. Together, they resist flattening. They

refuse neat, digestible stories. They make room for complexity, contradiction, and joy existing alongside harm. Race and gender are not separate threads to be pulled apart. They move together, shaping every space Blackgirls enter and every opportunity offered or denied.

Early in this process, I kept returning to Deborah King (1988). Her work on multiple jeopardy challenged the existing narrative surrounding oppression. Oppression could not be solved with simple addition, race plus gender plus class, as if each could stand alone. Instead, she made clear these forces intersect, overlap, and intensify one another, demanding layered ways of knowing. This mattered as I continued to reimagine what Blackgirls in schools could look like. Anything attempting to isolate one part of their experience would always fall short. Critical Race Feminism carries this forward, insisting any framework ignoring complexity will miss the reality entirely.

My understanding of what counts as theory shifted as I encountered Gina Dent (1995). Her work pushed me to continue to look further beyond traditional academic boundaries. Her work pushed me to look beyond traditional academic boundaries, recognizing theory as something created outside of texts and formal scholarship, lived and expressed in everyday practices. Black women and girls create theory every day, through survival, through style, through art, and through resistance. Within Black Girlhood Studies, what might be dismissed as small moments, stories, silences, laughter, play, carry intellectual weight. These are not side notes. These are critiques. These are blueprints. These are ways Blackgirls make sense of the world while imagining something beyond it.

The narrative brought me back to Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) and her work on culturally relevant pedagogy. Her insistence felt grounding: teaching cannot remain neutral. It must affirm cultural identity, support academic growth, and build critical consciousness. For

Blackgirls, this means classrooms recognizing them as thinkers, not problems. It means creating spaces where culture is sustained rather than erased. Her framework sits in conversation with Black Girlhood Studies and Critical Race Feminism, reinforcing an understanding school are not passive environments. They are active sites where identity, culture, and power are constantly negotiated and formed.

Blackgirls are not helpless in creation or liberation. Deborah Britzman (1995) suggests this plausibility as she encourages researchers to consider how voice and silence operate within education. When placed alongside CRF, her work sharpened how I think about engaging Blackgirls' stories. These are not pieces of data waiting to be collected. They are expressions of lived experience, layered with meaning, shaped by context, and deserving of care. Blackgirls are not subjects of study. They are the researchers of their own lives. They are working on hypothesizing daily, and they are contributing to the literature about them. Engaging their stories requires intention, respect, and accountability.

Bringing these frameworks together clarified what had been building throughout this work. Critical Race Feminism traces how systems of power operate across educational spaces. Black Girlhood Studies ensures those same spaces are also understood through joy, creativity, and cultural production. One names the structures. The other honors the life lived within and beyond those structures. Together, they move us away from deficit thinking and toward an understanding recognizing Blackgirls as central to conversations surrounding education, culture, and liberation.

What remains most important is how these frameworks shape my approach moving forward, not as theoretical anchors, but as guides for how I listen, interpret, and write. Multiple, overlapping forms of oppression shape the lived realities of Blackwomen in ways that cannot be

understood in isolation (King, 1988). Everyday practice holds theory, as lived and expressed through the daily experiences of Black women and girls (Dent, 1995). Pedagogy must move beyond inclusion toward sustaining culture and identity within educational spaces (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Engagement with voice requires an ethical responsibility to listen, interpret, and represent without distortion or control (Britzman, 2003). Together, Critical Race Feminism and Black Girlhood Studies do more than shape the questions guiding this study. They shape how I honor the Storygivers whose lives make this work possible. This ethical grounding takes shape in a specific place, where these frameworks meet lived experience: Kansas City, Missouri.

Kansas City, Missouri

Kansas City, Missouri offers a clear example of how communities across the United States resisted the full realization of *Brown v. Board of Education*. On the surface, the city appeared to comply with the Supreme Court's mandate. School districts drafted integration plans, policies changed, and the language of desegregation entered official documents. Beneath the surface, was a different story. Compliance often existed in form not substance. Historians studying Kansas City's educational history repeatedly show desegregation unfolded less as a transformation and more as a negotiation, one where existing racial hierarchies were protected even while the law demanded change (Benson, 1995).

Bradley W. Poos (2022) illustrates this tension through the story of Central High School in Kansas City, Missouri. Once a highly regarded all-white school located in the center of the city, Central High quickly became a symbolic site for integration after *Brown*. District leaders moved swiftly to create policies that technically satisfied federal expectations. On paper, Kansas City appeared ahead of the curve. Poos shows a different version. These early plans were designed to introduce integration without disturbing the racial structure of schooling too

dramatically. White residents resisted deeper changes, often with quiet encouragement from local political leadership. The result was a pattern that appeared across the country: schools were labeled “integrated,” yet the educational experiences of Black students remained deeply unequal.

Other historians examining Kansas City reach similar conclusions. Peter William Moran (2019) and K. F. Gotham (2002) demonstrate federal pressure alone did not guarantee meaningful change. Even when the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare threatened to withdraw federal funding, local officials found ways to appear compliant while preserving segregation in practice. Attendance zones were redrawn. Transfer policies were selectively applied. White flight reshaped school demographics. Housing segregation reinforced educational boundaries. These dynamics reveal desegregation in Kansas City did not dismantle the racial order of schooling, it simply reorganized it.

Students found themselves navigating these shifting systems in new and often unsettling educational environments. Early studies conducted by Norman Fiddmont and Daniel U. Levine (1968, 1969) provide insight into how Black high school students in Kansas City experienced this transition. Their research documented skepticism, alienation, and heightened racial tension inside newly integrated schools. Students described environments where their presence signaled progress to outsiders, yet meaningful changes inside classrooms were far less visible. Black teachers remained scarce, Black histories rarely appeared in the curriculum, and many students felt they had entered spaces where they were physically present but not fully valued. The presence of Black students in white schools often masked the absence of deeper institutional change (Patterson, 2001).

The internal dynamics of Central High School reflected these broader tensions. V. D. Martin’s (1966) study of a team-teaching initiative at the school attempted to introduce

collaborative instruction and individualized learning opportunities. In theory, the program represented a progressive approach to teaching. In practice, Martin found that its success was limited by unresolved racial tensions and inconsistent administrative support. The study reveals a pattern that would become familiar in later educational reform efforts: innovative teaching strategies struggle to succeed when they are implemented within systems still shaped by racial inequality.

Now place these Kansas City histories alongside broader scholarship on Black education, and a deeper pattern becomes visible. Anderson (1988) documents how Black communities had spent generations building educational systems grounded in collective investment and leadership. Walker (1996) demonstrates the strong cultures of expectation and care cultivated within segregated Black schools. The transition to desegregated schooling often disrupted these systems without replacing them with environments equally committed to Black students' success. Legal victories opened doors, however, the foundations of relational and cultural infrastructure created to support Black students was fractured in the process.

For Black students entering institutions such as Central High School, integration unfolded within environments still deeply influenced by racial hierarchy. These environments may have acknowledged their presence, but their histories, cultures, and intellectual potential were not always fully recognized.

Central High Principal Anthony Holland Jr.: An Intergenerational Bridge

Understanding the historical conditions shaping Central High School requires more than archival records or policy analysis alone. It requires the voices of those who carry the memory of the institution forward. Principal Anthony Holland Jr. represents a bridge between past and present. As a school leader and a self-described historian of Kansas City, Holland situates

contemporary educational realities within the longer historical trajectory of the city. His reflections illuminate how the structural forces documented in historical scholarship, segregation, housing policy, school integration, and demographic change, continue to shape the lived experiences of students and educators today. Holland's narrative does more than recount history; it connects the institutional memory of Central High School to the broader scholarly record documenting Kansas City's contested path toward educational integration.

Anthony Holland Jr. has been at Central High School for six years as of Summer 2024, serving as the head principal for the last two years and as vice principal for the four years prior. Holland deemed himself a historian of Kansas City with keen knowledge of the history of Central High. He began his historical recollection by outlining the historical development of Kansas City, which was initially established as a downtown area and later annexed parts of Union and Jackson County, incorporating small city towns. Westport, for example, was once its own town before being annexed into Kansas City. Similarly, Hickman Hills and the area north of the river, known as North Kansas City (KC Proper), were also brought into the city through annexation.

During the late 19th century, Kansas City expanded its borders, stretching from downtown to Jackson Van Brundt and south to 30th Street. The Kansas City School District was established in 1867, with a single two-room schoolhouse Central High School held its first commencement in 1873. Initially, Central High School and Kansas City Junior College were located at 11th & Locust. However, as the school population grew, the land was purchased to establish the current location of Central High. Kansas City Junior College became a precursor to Penn Valley Community College, which later integrated Black students.

Initially Central High School was an all-white school. The Black students were relegated to Lincoln High School. Public libraries at the time were housed within high schools; however, Lincoln did not have a public library, further highlighting the segregated educational landscape. After its predecessor, located at 3221, was expanded on four occasions, the current Central High School building was constructed in 1912. The landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling (1954) forced brought the first junior high building with integrated 7th, 8th, and 9th graders in Kansas City and also coincided with , marking the school district's 100th year. Newspapers celebrated the 10th anniversary of integration, portraying it as a milestone achievement. Holland points out infrastructure projects, such as the construction of highways under President Eisenhower's administration, often disrupted Black communities. For instance, Askew and Indiana, near Truman Road, were impacted by the highway cut through the city, forcing many Black families to sell their homes and relocate. By the mid-to-late 1950s, as Black communities expanded, Lincoln and Cole Schools could no longer accommodate the growing Black student population.

Holland's recounting of these early developments mirrors the patterns historians have documented regarding the structural organization of segregated schooling in Kansas City (Poos, 2022; Moran, 2019). Yet his narrative also situates these institutional histories within the geography of the city itself. Housing segregation, he explains, played a significant role in Kansas City's racial divide. Black families were restricted from purchasing homes south of 27th Street and west of Troost Avenue due to racially restrictive covenants among homeowners. While many believe segregation was enforced purely through legal ordinances, much of it was upheld through unwritten agreements among white homeowners. Kansas City passed an ordinance in

1963 or 1964, but by 1954, Black families began gradually moving north beyond 27th Street. This shift coincided with the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Segregation shaped neighborhoods like Santa Fe between 27th and 31st Streets, as well as Benton and Indiana Avenues. Many homes in these areas were over a century old, built alongside schools and new developments. Black families moving north beyond 27th Street into the 30s and 40s was a major milestone, mirroring the growth of prominent Black historical figures like Satchel Paige, the renowned Negro League pitcher for the Kansas City Monarchs.

The boundaries of racial segregation were also evident in public spaces. Black residents were only allowed to visit Fairland Park, located at 75th & Prospect, on Sundays until 1973. Similarly, they were prohibited from swimming in Swope Park Pool. As Black families moved into new neighborhoods, James B. Miller's Mortgage Company became well known for providing loans to Black homeowners, giving him a significant market share. Miller and his father both attended Central High, but Holland highlights a complex racial dynamic: white advocates for Black communities often had underlying financial incentives. Some white homeowners perpetuated fear-based narratives, urging others to sell their homes under the pretext of an impending Black influx.

This fear-driven real estate strategy led to white flight, with many white families relocating to Hickman Hills, where similar homes were mass-manufactured. The development of suburban highways facilitated suburban expansion, allowing white residents to leave urban centers while maintaining economic ties to the city. Holland emphasizes understanding Kansas City's history requires considering its geographical context. White flight was not just a racial phenomenon but also a financial strategy. Real estate developers and speculators capitalized on

fear, using it to manipulate housing markets and extract profits. He describes racism in America as a construct designed to instill fear among those in power to maintain financial control.

Holland points out racial tensions within Central High were not as openly documented as those seen in housing discrimination. Systemic racism was often more insidious, manifesting through housing policies allowed white real estate investors to profit from selling homes to Black families. Black homeownership was a source of pride, but as homeowners aged or passed away, properties often fell back into white ownership.

Kansas City's stone quarry-style homes, my favorite, were built between the 1890s and the mid-20th century, have withstood the test of time. Holland believes the city should reinvest in renovating these historic homes, as Black wealth is tied to homeownership. Without ownership, he argues, there is little incentive for maintenance, which in turn affects community stability and educational outcomes.

During the late 1960s and 1970s, Black professionals began purchasing homes in previously white neighborhoods, leading to a rapid racial transition. By the Class of 1964, families directly affected by integration saw a dramatic shift. Neighborhoods previously predominantly white turned Black almost overnight. Some white families stayed and welcomed integration while others resisted. Many who remained were either sensible outcasts within their own families or lacked the financial resources to move.

By 1964, Central High School was fully integrated, competing against other schools in athletics and academics. However, demographic shifts within the district also impacted teachers. Some white teachers left rather than teach Black students, and Black teachers, who had historically pursued education due to a lack of professional opportunities elsewhere, became an increasingly prominent presence. Although Black teachers' salaries were not as desired the

highest, the profession provided financial stability and status within the Black community. Many Black teachers lived in the same neighborhoods as their students, reinforcing community ties.

Kansas City's systemic expansion and annexation played into this larger racial and economic strategy. Schools like Hickman Hills and Ruskin High School were consolidated, while formerly segregated Black schools were absorbed into integrated institutions. Holland argues racism is often cultivated through fear, and education systems played a key role in sustaining racial biases. He notes implicit biases against Blackboys, for example, have deep historical roots.

Holland depicted the graduating classes of 1963, 1964, and 1965 produced trailblazers, many of whom were among the first Black students to integrate colleges. Their parents and grandparents had prioritized education and sacrificed to create opportunities for the next generation. At the time, an 11th-grade education was often sufficient for securing high-quality jobs, but many Black students pursued higher education to break new ground. Many became teachers, understanding the critical role they played in shaping the next generation.

Unlike many white women of their generation, Holland reflected, Black women were often expected to balance work and family responsibilities. While Black men sometimes benefited from higher wages and societal privileges, Black women faced both racial and gender discrimination, realities resonate with intersectional analyses of Black women's labor and social positioning (Collins, 2000). He acknowledges Black men, at times, were complicit in marginalizing Black women.

Highlighting issues within education, Holland emphasized the generational divides' impact on teacher-student relationships. Older Black teachers sometimes struggled to connect with younger Black students, particularly Blackgirls. Holland argues every previous generation

has critiqued the next, often blaming them for their struggles rather than acknowledging the role of past generations in shaping the present. Respect, discipline, and intergenerational dialogue remain crucial. Holland believes older generations must take responsibility for preparing the next rather than simply lamenting changes in youth behavior. He stresses the importance of teaching manners, bridging generational divides, and fostering respect for elders, all of which contribute to the resilience and success of Black students.

Holland's account offers a living narrative that complements the archival record and published scholarship on Kansas City's desegregation. While historical research has documented how policy decisions, housing segregation, and white flight structured educational inequality, Holland situates those dynamics within the everyday realities of school leadership and community memory. His reflections illustrate how macro-level policy decisions translated into micro-level social tensions inside schools, revealing the enduring connections between housing patterns, economic opportunity, and educational equity.

His observations also foreground the intersectional experiences of Blackgirls within these shifting educational landscapes. While many desegregation narratives focus primarily on race, Holland's reflections reveal how generational expectations and gendered experiences shaped how Blackgirls navigated school environments.

What it all boils down to is: given archival studies, demographic histories, and Holland's lived expertise reveal a complex and often contradictory story of educational change in Kansas City. Legal mandates promised integration, yet structural inequities continued to shape where Black students could live, learn, and thrive. Holland's narrative reminds us that the history of desegregation is not only found in policy decisions or court rulings but also in the lived

experiences of communities, educators, and students who continue to navigate the legacies of those decisions today.

Within this historical landscape, the experiences of the Blackwomen in this study emerge not simply as individual memories but as reflections of broader structural shifts shaping education in Kansas City during the mid-twentieth century.

Chapter Summary

The historical and intellectual foundations shaping Blackgirls' educational experiences traces Black education as a communal and intentional practice grounded in care, expectation, and collective responsibility. Recognizing the structural conditions shaping how Black children were prepared to move through the world.

As the chapter unfolds, it highlights a persistent tension: Blackgirls have always been present within these spaces yet not fully seen or accounted for in dominant narratives. This absence reflects not a lack of participation, but a gap in how their experiences have been recognized and recorded.

Black Feminist Thought, Black Girlhood Studies, and Critical Race Feminism provide frameworks to name and hold this complexity, centering lived experience, relational knowledge, and the ways Blackgirls navigate, create, and make meaning within educational spaces. Grounded in Kansas City, Missouri, the chapter further reveals how desegregation unfolded alongside continued structural inequities, shaping the conditions in which these experiences occurred.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Before Black history ever reached the limited confines and diluted representations in textbooks, it was shared through stories. These stories were shared around kitchen tables as mothers and grandmothers pressed and flat-ironed their daughters' and granddaughters' hair. Stories inhabited living rooms during the gathering of siblings and cousins as they retreated to their grandmothers for the weekend. History was passed down in the form of stories, love, connection, belonging, and a promise for a better tomorrow for generations to come. It has always been imperative to not only know who you are and where you come from, but also who you belong to. We learn this by sitting, watching, and listening to what these offerings of love and heritage have to teach, allowing generations to teach those who come after us. This study embodies this space for me as I share it with you.

Methodological Overview

This chapter is anchored in qualitative inquiry seeking to understand how people make meaning through their lived experiences shaped by cultural and historical contexts, rather than reliance on measuring or testing hypotheses. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) qualitative research situates the observer within the world being studied, recognizing inquiry as a set of interpretive practices. It brings experiences into perspective while recognizing meaning grows through context and relationship. Within this orientation, this study emerges as what I describe as ethnohistoric storywork, a methodology honoring the ways Black communities have long preserved history through memory, storytelling, and relationship. In the following sections, I trace how this study took shape, beginning with the evolution of the research questions and the relational and ethical commitments that guided the work from its earliest stages. The chapter then introduces the Storygivers, the seven women who shared their lived educational experiences

as Blackgirls during segregation and desegregation. Throughout this work, these women, labeled as Storygivers- a term honoring their roles as narrators, elders, and knowledge-holders, describes how they were identified and invited to co-create this work with me. I distinguish what represents data in this study and how multiple sources -- individual story sessions, communal gatherings, memoing, and archival materials -- work together to reconstruct a specific historical moment. The chapter then explains how stories were constructed based upon my experience with each Storygiver as they recollected their past. Collectively, this chapter establishes ethnohistoric storywork as the foundation of the study, shaping how stories were gathered, interpreted, and honored as historical knowledge.

Ethnohistoric Storywork as Methodology

Utilizing Ethnohistoric Storywork as methodology brings together ethnographic interviewing, storytelling, endarkened storywork, and historical inquiry to reconstruct the cultural and educational landscape of Central High School's Class of 1964. At its core, this approach understands history as an ever-evolving occurrence carried through memory, voice, and tradition. It moves between written records, oral testimony, and cultural practice, holding each as a valid site of knowledge. Here, archives serve as contextual grounding, offering pieces of history documented over time. Long before cataloging and archiving, history lived in our bodies and souls, carried through memory, voice, and connection. These women mark a return to those living archives, passing history through their bodies, their voices, and their presence.

Building from this understanding of living archives, ethnohistory offers a way to hold what is remembered alongside what has been recorded. Early work in the field describes ethnohistory as a weaving together of archival records, anthropology, oral tradition, and cultural analysis, an approach shaped in response to histories where dominant archives failed to hold the fullness of marginalized lives (Axtell, 1979). What began in Indigenous and colonial contexts

opens a pathway for thinking about Black historical traditions, where storytelling, embodied memory, and intergenerational sharing have long carried what formal records left behind.

Oral history lives within this same space in that it shifts authority of recounting history back to people who lived through the experience. Framed as a democratizing practice, it centers testimony as a site where meaning is shaped and shared rather than extracted (Thompson, 1988). Memory, then, holds its own kind of authority, offering insight into how experience is carried, interpreted, and understood over time, not for correction, but for what it reveals (Portelli, 1991).

Oral history and ethnohistory work together to position narrative as history, not something secondary. This way of knowing aligns with traditions in Black communities where remembering happens through relationship, story, and communal gathering. Ethnohistory does not replace those practices; it gives language within academic spaces to name what Black communities have long carried as history. Oral history holds interpretation and meaning, while ethnohistory situates those memories within broader cultural and historical contexts. Together, they move beyond documenting events, reaching into meaning-making, ritual, and how people come to understand their worlds (Harken, 2010).

Long before ethnohistory was named as a field, this work was already happening within Black communities. Formal archives rarely captured the full story, often narrowing history in ways centering white institutional power while distorting or erasing Black labor, resistance, and knowledge. What remained was not absence, but silence shaped through selective documentation, a point long raised in critiques of traditional archives (Du Bois, 1935). In response, history lived elsewhere, grounded in lived experience and carried by those who understood themselves as both witnesses and authors of their own stories.

History did not wait to be written down to exist. It was carried with intention, even in the face of systems designed to distort or erase it. Formal schooling functioned in ways shaping how

Black history was understood, often misrepresenting or devaluing it rather than preserving its fullness (Woodson, 1933). In response, preservation became a deliberate act, held within families, churches, and community spaces where knowledge could be protected and passed forward. History, then, was not left to institutions to define; it was safeguarded, shaped, and sustained through collective responsibility.

Reconstructing the past requires more than returning to the archive. It calls for listening to those who lived it, allowing memory, testimony, and community knowledge to bring entire worlds back into view. Work centered on Black schooling has shown how these approaches reveal networks of care, expectations of excellence, and culturally grounded practices often left out of official records (Walker, 1996). What emerges is not a correction of history, but a fuller telling, one grounded in community perspective and aligned with an understanding of history as living knowledge, continuously carried and made meaningful across generations.

Storytelling as Knowledge and Intervention

This methodology centers relationship and lived experience, treating knowledge as something developed through connection and accountability (Dillard, 2006). The work unfolds through relationship, shaped by histories, connections, and responsibilities carried alongside these stories. Endarkened Epistemology names this way of knowing, centering lived experience, ancestral knowing, and the fullness of Blackwomen's lives as sites of theory (Dillard, 2006).

From this grounding, story takes on a different meaning. It is living, moving through memory, spirit, and lived experience (Dillard, 2006). (Re)membering becomes part of the process by reconnecting what had been pushed aside. Knowledge continues to move across time, carried through oral tradition, storytelling, ritual, and intergenerational memory (Dillard, 2006).

In this same movement, Endarkened Storywork brings these ways of knowing into alignment, positioning story as method, epistemology, and practice (Toliver, 2022). Blackgirls stand as knowledge producers, engaging the world through imagination, memory, and lived experience. Dreaming moves as part of this process, holding memory, desire, fear, hope, and refusal at once, offering a way to move through present realities while reaching beyond them.

Dreamwork, as defined in this study, names how this dreaming becomes part of meaning-making. Toliver (2022) centers dreams; Dreamwork extends this by naming how those dreams are engaged as method and understanding. Dreaming reaches forward, allowing Blackgirls to imagine beyond present conditions, while story in this study reaches back, tracing how Blackwomen remember, interpret, and make meaning of what no longer exists. Both move through imagination, memory, spirit, silence, and emotion while holding knowledge as lived, carried, and continuously unfolding.

As these understandings take shape, story also begins to show what it does in lived spaces, especially in places where harm has been carried and left unaddressed. For Blackgirls in school, storytelling takes shape in how experiences are named, shared, and held, whether spoken aloud, carried in silence, or expressed in ways not always recognized within classroom spaces. These stories hold both what has been endured and what has been sustained, revealing how Blackgirls make sense of their experiences within environments shaped by race and power.

Schools carry racialized and emotional weight, shaping how Black children and Blackgirls move through education (Sealy-Ruiz, 2016). Story creates space to name these experiences without reducing them to harm alone. Through testimonio and counter-narrative, storytelling allows truth to surface while holding space for affirmation, reflection, and repair. In this way, storytelling moves beyond expression. It interrupts, calls attention, and creates

openings for something different, shifting understanding beyond awareness and toward responsibility and care.

As a Blackgirl in research, I found that my dreams depicted absences in my educational spaces led me on a journey to seek out Storygivers whose lived experiences and shared knowledge allowed me to envision a past that would become fluid within our collective future. Dreams do not remain as only future-oriented; they fold backwards through lived experiences, remembered moments, ignored silence, and intergenerational echoes. Story becomes the place where imagination, memory, emotions, and spirit meet. Storywork holds what dreaming started.

In this work, I was invited to co-dream alongside the Storygivers, enhancing the Storywork as a relational process, allowing my imagination, longing, and questions to function as part of the knowledge-making process. Through epistemological transparency, fluidity allowed me to be a dreamer, a listener, and a carrier simultaneously without contradiction. Ethnohistory enabled the reconstruction of a historical time period that no longer exists, storywork served as the relational bridge that carried the reconstructed world forward, and dreaming was my ethical offering towards futures still unfolding. Within the methodological framework of Ethnohistoric Storywork, simply put, Dreaming named what was missing, Storywork made it findable and ethnohistory made it reconstructable.

Story-Guided Inquiry: Research Questions

Research question development was guided by a desire to understand how Blackwomen from the Class of 1964 made sense of their educational experiences during a time of immense social and political change. The questions expanded the scope by tracing the emotional and everyday impact of these changes, as well as how it manifested in classrooms, friendships, discipline, and self-worth. The inquiry centered around how these women, reflecting decades

later, interpreted their journeys: the strategies they leaned on, the lessons they carried, and the people and places that shaped who they became.

The questions shaping this inquiry have evolved and matured as the study acquired form, expanding as the Storygivers' voices revealed the depth and texture of their experiences. At the heart of this work lies a desire to understand how this group of seven Blackgirls not only endured or resisted, but also, more importantly, how they *lived*. This study explores how they learned, created, imagined, and navigated educational spaces marred by segregation and the uncertain promise of desegregation, and even resegregation. The unfolding research questions are:

1. What memories do Storygivers hold and what do those memories contribute to the understanding of the world inhabited by Black girls?
2. What forms of care, community, and cultural inheritance sustained them?
3. How do their stories complicate, disrupt, or reframe the timelines and progress narratives often shaping histories of desegregation?

IRB Approval Process

To proceed with this study, approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was required. The IRB process served as an essential safeguard, ensuring this research adhered to ethical standards and prioritized the dignity, safety, and well-being of the Storygivers involved. What I initially expected to be a straightforward procedural step became a formative part of the research journey. Developing recruitment scripts, articulating harm-mitigation strategies, and thoughtfully defining participant inclusion pushed me beyond theoretical preparation and into the lived, relational realities of ethical research practice. The IRB process demanded patience, reflexivity, and humility - qualities I attempted to learn alongside the work itself. While theory provided an initial foundation, it was through engaging the IRB process that I came to more fully understand the responsibilities of conducting research rooted in care, accountability, and respect

for lived experience. Upon receiving IRB approval, I proceeded with participant outreach and recruitment.

Storygivers

To call the women in this study Storygivers is to locate them within a genealogy of Blackwomen who have always carried the responsibility of memory and truth-telling. Their testimonies echo Audre Lorde's (2020) reminder that speaking one's truth is both dangerous and necessary, and they expand on Patricia Hill Collins's (2015) assertion that lived experience must be valued as legitimate knowledge. Blackwomen educators, activists, and cultural workers sustained schools, churches, households, and social movements with the conviction that their experiences mattered, even when denied by formal institutions, which changed the perceived trajectory of Blackgirls in the future.

Inviting Storygivers into Relationship

The selection process focused on identifying Black women who entered Central High School in Kansas City, Missouri, as members of the Class of 1964. Storygivers were recruited using a snowball sampling method, utilizing interpersonal relationships to access a deeply interconnected and historically rich community (Noy, 2008). This approach was pivotal in ensuring that trust and shared context remained central to the storytelling process. As the granddaughter of one of the Storygivers, I began with an intimate point of entry, or as Patton (2002) describes as purposeful sampling informed by relational knowledge. My relationship with my grandmother granted opportunity, or access, not only to other Storygivers, but also to a living archive of memory, legacy, and intergenerational connection.

From there, connections unfolded organically. Women who had shared school, church, and neighborhood ties with my grandmother, and often with one another, said yes to the ask and, I believe did so with genuine excitement to share their stories. The seven Storygivers ultimately

included in this study represent a range of family dynamics, socioeconomic backgrounds, and educational trajectories. Their inclusion was not based solely on demographic eligibility, but on their willingness to reflect deeply and offer their narratives as historical insight and cultural testimony. Collaboration in this work required several elements to be true (e.g. participant inclusion criterion). Storygivers needed to self-identify as Black/African American females. They needed to have graduated from Central High School in 1964. They needed to agree to participate in one-on-one story sessions with me, as well as participate in a communal session with other Storygivers. The seven Storygivers in this study offer a textured and varied account of life as Blackgirls navigating education, segregation, and family in mid-century Kansas City. Each Storygiver carried a distinct history shaped by family structure, neighborhood geography, labor, migration, and schooling across segregation and desegregation. What follows are brief snapshots that help situate their educational lives within households, streets, and community ecosystems that shaped how schooling was experienced and remembered.

Situating Storygivers: Marvinna, Brenda, Donna, Jessie, Joyce, Guyetta & Mayola

Marvina graduated in 1964, though originally aligned with the Class of 1963. Raised in a two-parent household on Wabash, she grew up watching her mother labor as a domestic maid for a Jewish family, and her father work in construction. She entered Central in seventh grade and experienced school segregation, the impact of *Brown v. Board*, and the shifts produced by white flight firsthand.

Brenda arrived in Kansas City at thirteen, in 1954, following her parents' divorce. Her mother worked as a dietitian at a veterans' hospital, while her father, a physician, remained intermittently present. Living on 31st Street, she attended Central schools from seventh through twelfth grade, navigating adolescence within changing family and educational structures.

Donna's schooling unfolded within a family shaped by professional labor and racial displacement. After her biological mother relocated to Montreal in response to discrimination, Donna lived with her father, a practicing psychologist, and her stepmother, a school counselor. Her entire educational journey occurred within the Central school system.

Jessie grew up in a two-parent household with siblings. Her father initially worked at Kansas City Structural Steel before changing careers, and her mother remained home. She attended DA Homes for grade school and, due to boundary changes, became one of the first Black students at Milton Moore before enrolling at Central High School.

Joyce spent early childhood years in Oklahoma with grandparents before moving to Kansas City. Raised within a large, blended family, she completed all four years of high school, graduated at sixteen, and earned recognition as an honor student.

Mayola moved across multiple homes within the Kansas City metro area. Her father worked in foundry and metalwork, and she grew up alongside five siblings. She attended Central High School from ninth through twelfth grade.

Guyetta lived on Paseo with her mother, a domestic cleaner, and three younger siblings, a brother fourteen months younger, and twin sisters three years younger. Summers included time with her father. She attended all four years at Central High School.

Together, these seven snapshots provide essential context for understanding the Storygivers' perspectives. Their lives reflect the diversity and the collective experience of Blackgirls coming of age during a pivotal moment in American educational history. These early details help situate their narratives within the social, familial, and geographic realities defining their experiences.

Detailing the Story Collection Process

A layered approach brings together ethnographic interviewing, storytelling, counter-narratives, and historical inquiry. While each of these approaches carries its own roots and orientations, they meet here through shared values, relationships, truth-telling, and care. Storytelling and counter-narrative sit at the center of this work. They are how I enter and hold these women's stories, how I make sense of what it means to remember. Guided by Black Feminist Thought and Endarkened Storywork (Collins, 2000; Toliver, 2022), I understand storytelling not as a tool for collecting data, but as a living exchange, something that moves between us, shaped by memory, spirit, and trust.

Ethnographic interviewing became the bridge allowing these exchanges to unfold naturally. Rooted in qualitative and anthropological traditions, ethnographic interviewing emphasizes open-ended, conversational dialogue that privileges participants' meanings, rhythms, and ways of telling, rather than imposing predetermined structures or extractive questioning (Spradley, 1979). This approach supports relational knowledge-making by allowing stories to emerge through trust, context, and shared understanding rather than formal interrogation. It created space for conversation, for laughter, and sometimes for silence. The stories were not linear; they were layered, returning to moments that mattered and circling around truths still carrying weight. This process was never about extracting information; it was about being present, listening, and allowing what needed to be shared to be given willingly.

Historical inquiry helped to anchor these stories within a broader landscape, connecting personal memory to the social and political shifts that shaped Kansas City's educational history. Drawing from ethnohistorical traditions (Anderson, 1988; Walker, 1996), I used archival research, collecting photographs and local historical pieces that helped contextualize the women's narratives. This was not to verify them but to show how their lived experiences expand

what history has often left unsaid. These approaches don't blur into one another so much as they lean on and inform each other. Together, they honor both the intimacy and the magnitude of what it means for these women to remember and for us to bear witness.

While each conversation unfolded through Storywork, there were guiding questions that helped shape our time together. These questions were not rigid scripts but gentle invitations, designed to open space for memory, reflection, and connection. These questions were centered around community, schooling, family, and the everyday moments that shaped who these women were as Blackgirls. Having a set of pre-thought-out questions provided structure, but the flow remained fluid, allowing the Storygivers to lead the direction of our dialogue.

In many ways, these prompts acted as doorways rather than destinations. They helped spark recollection, but it was the Storygivers who determined where we went and how long we lingered. Some questions were answered directly, while others dissolved into laughter, pauses, or tangents that revealed deeper truths.

In this study, I name what are traditionally called *interviews* instead as *story sessions*, spaces where memory, meaning, and emotion were invited to emerge through conversation. These sessions honored the agency of the Storygivers to direct the flow, depth, and rhythm of their narratives. Each session unfolded as a shared act of remembering, where I, too, was a participant in the storytelling process, listening to witness and understand.

As the research unfolded, so did the questions around how to ethically and lovingly structure the storytelling space. The concept of interviews and focus groups seemed like a stale way to gather stories. Each woman has a story to share, and it exceeds simple data. Additionally, each story is a part of a greater narrative of how history was experienced. To have one without the other lacked the necessary depth. Thus, the idea of conducting individual story sessions followed by a communal brunch or dinner fostered more meaningful practice, one that aligned

with Black cultural traditions of gathering around food to share stories, affirm relationships, and build collective wisdom (hooks, 1990; Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). What I sought to create is similar to what hooks (1990) referred to as “homeplace” taking on the creation of a safe space offering opportunities to heal wounds, speak truths, voice unheard narratives, and affirm each other. We created this space through the preparation and sharing of meals across generations, where storytelling functioned as a way to affirm our being, our Blackness, and our love for one another as necessary acts of resistance (hooks, 1990).

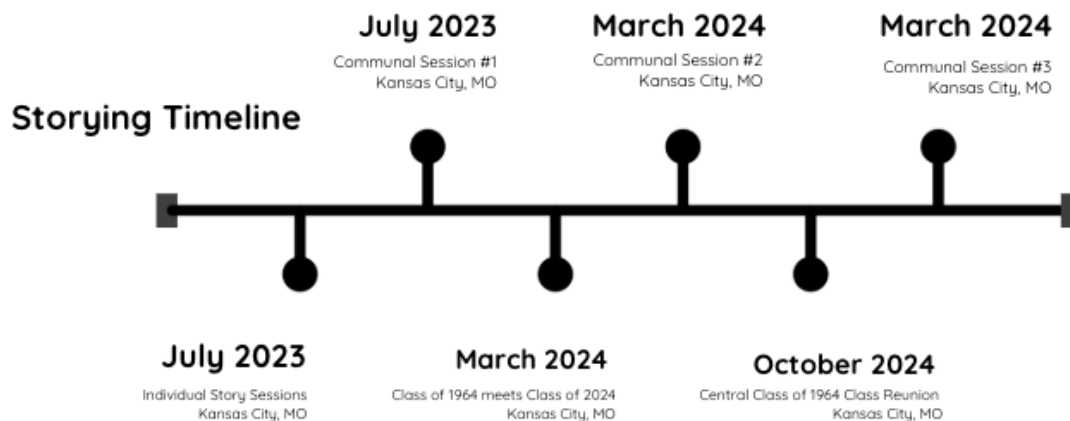
There were three opportunities for me to sit and share my individual story sessions and research. These opportunities invited these women to reflect on their shared realities and interact with themes. What is often referred to as a *focus group* in traditional research is reframed here as *communal sessions*, a space of community dialogue and co-construction of meaning. Story Sessions and Communal Session 2 question guides can be found in Appendices C and D. In contrast, Communal Session 1 was intentionally unstructured, guided by emergent themes from the interviews and shaped through real-time conversation. This allowed Storygivers to engage each other in layered and responsive dialogue, affirming collective memory and co-constructing meaning in community (Dillard, 2000; Paris & Winn, 2014). These questions were crafted to uncover the often-overlooked layers of Blackgirls’ educational journeys and to challenge dominant narratives that silence their voices. Since Storytelling in Black communities is a methodology of resistance, a refusal to forget, and a way of imagining otherwise (Tolliver, 2022), the focus was not only on barriers but also on strategies of resilience, cultural affirmation, and resistance. The protocols invited Storygivers to reflect on personal milestones, disruptions, and support systems, while also offering their wisdom for younger generations navigating similar paths. This recognizes these stories are not just individual memories, they are blueprints of survival, healing, and collective power.

At each of these *communal sessions*, meals were provided fostering a sense of communal processing and generational exchange. Preparing food for the women who helped raise me, and for those who helped raise them, was more than a gesture; it was an offering. Cooking for your grandmother is its own kind of vulnerable love, but it is also a grounding type of love. In those preparations, I was reminded that research rooted in Black communities must also be rooted in humility, reciprocity, and care. As Paris and Winn (2014) note in their work on humanizing research, the methodologies we use must reflect the values of the people we are in relationship with.

The story sessions and communal sessions were intentionally designed to move beyond simple data collection, creating space for Storywork that invited both personal reflection and intergenerational dialogue. While I entered each session with pre-developed guiding questions, these served as openings rather than boundaries, prompts meant to encourage storytelling, memory, and connection. The intention was not just to gather recollections, but to nurture a shared remembering about how Blackgirls made sense of their schooling, their communities, and themselves across time. This process unfolded across a series of individual and communal engagements, illustrated in Figure 1, which traces the movement from personal story sessions into shared spaces of dialogue, making visible how meaning developed through both individual reflection and collective remembering over time.

Figure 1

Storying Timeline



Storying Timeline: This figure provides a visual outline of the study's storytelling process, tracing the movement from individual story sessions to a series of communal gatherings across time.

Historic (Re)Collections: Where Memory, Story, and Generations Meet

As this study took form, I centered relationality and approached the work with cultural responsibility and care, grounded in Endarkened Storywork and Black feminist methodologies. Space was created for these women to meet and come together in Kansas City during a July weekend in the summer of 2023. After presenting the idea for the study to these amazing women and establishing baseline rapport, I began a sequence of story sessions with humility coupled with nerves as I was becoming a thread within the living textures of their histories, homes, and community. Each woman held an individual story session ranging from one hour to two hours in person at a location of their choosing within Kansas City, MO on the weekend of July 20th-July 22nd. This was followed by a communal gathering that took place on 55th St., in the city, creating

space to reflect on points of overlap in the story sessions and an opportunity to seek clarity if needed. Each session was recorded utilizing a small recording device and shorthand notes were taken within the blue notebook. What follows is a chronological account of these encounters, showing how conversations unfolded, relationships developed, and the research extended beyond interviews into community gatherings, archival work, and intergenerational connection across sixty years.

Summer 2023

My first story session began on a Thursday morning July 20, 2023, at 10:30am as Ms. Marvinna graciously welcomed me into her home. She invited me to make myself comfortable at her dining table, offering pastries she graciously served on impressive China. For me, it did not feel like simply an opportunity for her to kindly feed me; it was an initiation into her family's history, the home she and her husband built, where their children were raised, left for adulthood, and where she continued living after her husband passed. Sitting with her, I felt myself being folded into a lineage, treated not as an outsider but as someone entrusted with memory through the telling of her story. As we wrapped up the session, I eagerly returned to my car with the pastries in tow, a souvenir for my grandmother and son waiting back at the Airbnb.

Later in the afternoon around 2:00pm, I met Ms. Jessie after hours at her workplace in the heart of Kansas City. As she recalled walking those same streets as a child, she spoke about her niece navigating high school and how family dynamics had shifted across generations. Her ability to move between past and present, between herself as a Blackgirl in the 1960s and as an elder guiding a new generation, she set the tone for the intergenerational journey of this project.

My last story session of day one was with Ms. Joyce at approximately 6:00 pm in the living room of her home. She spoke with a passionate precision, describing her journey as an artist to being engulfed in the field of IT at a time when women were the exception, not the rule,

to her landing as a teacher and her continued involvement with Central High School, even now. I found myself holding back layers of questions as she narrated a story shaped by pride, responsibility, and an unwavering commitment to Black educational excellence.

Friday July 21, 2023, began with Ms. Mayola's story session starting at 9:40 am. She offered laughter, joy, and tears in a way that felt spiritually grounding through her story. Her vulnerability was not fragile; it was a knowing. She moved through memories of school, family, community, and becoming, with a clarity and kindness that was nothing short of a gift.

On Friday afternoon at 2:00 pm, I sat with Ms. Brenda in her home, which she proudly shared was the same one she grew up in, held within her family for more than seventy-five years. Her story session was like walking into a living archive. Sitting in the living room listening to the traffic and the community life vibrant outside of her front door, I could feel the history in the walls, the longevity, and the continuity.

My grandmommie was scheduled on Saturday July 22, 2023, at 9:30am. She had been traveling between family members during our time in Kansas City, and I intentionally scheduled her session for last. Turning on the recorder, opening my blue journal, and listening to my grandmother describe the little girl she once was, and acknowledging how that little girl shaped who I became, was one of the most intimate and transformative moments of this research. Her story session could not be merely labeled as data collection; it was a homecoming.

Ms. Donna, who had flown in from California, missed her initial flight and became the last individual story session on July 22, 2023, at 1:00pm. Because her story session was rescheduled, she arrived prepared with pre-typed answers to ensure she would not forget anything. She read them, but quickly moved beyond them, digging deeper, animated by memory, humor, and reflection. Her intentionality demonstrated the honor she felt in participating. The joy and pride she felt within me was a feeling I was not prepared to receive.

After the individual story sessions, the focus transitioned into communal dialogue. The communal session was held on July 22, 2023, at 6:00 p.m. This gathering created space for the Storygivers to interact with one another, remember collectively, and engage with questions differently than in the one-on-one setting. Their interactions began shaping overlapping stories, clarifying what resonated across stories and highlighting where experiences diverged.

In many ways, this gathering reflected what has become popularly referred to as “Kitchen Table Talks.” While tracing the origins of this concept, I encountered *A Press of Our Own: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press* (Smith, 1989), which describes the formation of the Women of Color Press as Black women sought autonomy over their work and authority over what was written and published about them. Smith invokes the kitchen table as the symbolic center of the home, a place where women gather to work, talk, and share ideas. In this sense, the press itself embodied the spirit of the kitchen table: collective dialogue, shared knowledge, and community accountability. As the concept of the kitchen table has evolved within Black intellectual traditions, it has come to represent spaces where scholars and community members exchange ways of knowing outside traditional academic structures. During our communal sessions, “Kitchen Table Talks” were incorporated as a way of understanding our communal sessions: gatherings of generations around a literal kitchen table where stories are shared, memories surface, and history was collectively remembered.

Spring 2024

Intergenerational Gathering Central Classes of 1964 & 2024

On March 21, 2024, I was invited back to Kansas City to attend an event where Central High School’s Class of 1964 met with the graduating Class of 2024. The gathering took place inside Central High School’s library, which was recently reopened after three years, with the library having previously been used as storage.

The most powerful moment occurred when both classes, 1964 and 2024, joined voices and sang the school song together on March 21, 2024. The Class of 2024 did not initially know the words, but with guidance from the elders in the room, the song became an intergenerational bridge, merging past and present in a single moment.

This opportunity was made possible by the Class of 1964 alumni committee, who were intentionally seeking ways to pour back not only into their community but into Central High School itself. In partnership with the current principal of Central High, Dr. Holland, they organized an event inviting members of the Class of 1964 to return to Central for a mentorship session with the senior class of 2024. Prior to the gathering, the seniors submitted fifteen questions they wanted the Class of 1964 to reflect on and respond to.

The gathering took place during the seniors' first-hour class period. During that time, twelve alumni from the Class of 1964 were each paired with small groups of approximately five students, creating space for conversation and reflection. The students began with their prepared questions, but the conversations quickly expanded into discussions about life experiences, lessons learned, and the realities the students would soon face after graduation.

The session became a beautiful intergenerational exchange. As I quietly observed the groups, I watched a generation of women who once walked the same halls share their wisdom with students preparing to leave them. The pride and concern expressed by the alumni after the event were deeply impactful. Many reflected on how much the experience meant to them and spoke about the continued need to pour back into their community. In that moment, the past was not simply remembered; it was extended forward through relationship, responsibility, and hope for the generations that follow.

Following the school event, I had the pleasure of meeting with Principal, Anthony Holland Jr on March 22, 2026. He shared he enjoyed the history of Kansas City. This was his 2nd

year as head principal of Central High. He took me through the history of central over the course of an hour and a half. He helped understand the redistricting, white flight, the desegregation of Central High School. He spoke on the societal norms and how racism helped develop surrounding areas. At the end of his session, he directed me to the Mid-America Archives where I could find the archival history of Central.

Communal Session #2

On March 22, 2024, the second communal session took place in KCMO. This session brought together six Storygivers: Joyce, Mayola, Guyetta, Marvinna, Jessie, and Brenda, while Donna joined virtually. This session allowed me to talk to the women regarding new questions brought about as the research grew. Prior to the session, the questions were emailed for their review. Due to the depth of the response to the first few questions, we did not make it through all of the questions. There was a shift in whose voices led the discussion and who stayed silent. In this session, there was more collective participation from the entire group. Although we did not make it through every question, the session illuminated key points of resonance and tension. These interactions directly informed the initial stage of coding.

Fall 2024

I returned to Kansas City in October for the weekend of their 60th class reunion to share the connections I had made between their stories with the Storygivers. The reunion weekend began with a meet-and-greet on October 4, 2024, and yearbook signing at the Mid-America Archives. This was the first time I got to stand among the collectives in their rawest forms. They were classmates who were excited to see each other. There were women in this room whom I had known my entire life.

The Central High School Class of 1964 class reunion took place at the Bruce R. Watkins Cultural Center the following day, Sunday October 5, 2024. Their class motto, “We did more

64.” Walking into this moment was such a privilege. The pride they had for Central High was palpable in this moment. I was a fly on the wall observing everything from the outskirts with my unique invitation to the proverbial table with my little notebook in tow.

Spring 2025

Sitting on a porch swing at the end of March 2025 at the Airbnb on the corner of W 47th Street and Booth Avenue in Kansas City, Kansas, mere minutes from the Kansas City, Missouri border, I let the breeze, the low gray clouds, and the birds carry me back through everything that unfolded. This time in Kansas City felt different.

We arrived on March 21st as a unit, my child, my Grandmommie, and my support for the trip, Jacquar, each of us carrying our own responsibilities while I carried the weight of what I believed would be my final gathering with the Storygivers. What followed was a masterclass in trust, flexibility, and community. As reminders went out, confirmations trickled in, and cancellations landed heavier than expected, everything began to feel like it was unraveling. Ms. Joyce could not travel the distance, Ms. Brenda was not going to be in attendance, and Ms. Donna would join from California, and suddenly, the location I had carefully planned no longer worked. In the middle of this, my family stepped in without hesitation, my cousins rearranged their lives, doors opened, and plans shifted. My Grandmommie worked on the phone from the backseat, Jacquar drove while I problem-solved in motion, and what felt like a crisis slowly turned into a reminder that I was not doing this work alone.

The day before our gathering blurred into archives, history following us everywhere, last-minute lists, missed calls, and questions that revealed how close I was to forgetting the basics, food, Zoom links, and simply a realistic view on timing. Still, somehow, the morning came. Late starts, store runs, improvised plans, and trusted elders filled the space. Ms. Jessie arrived right on time, and Ms. Joyce found her way. Ms. Donna was present on screen, and Ms. Mayola arrived

courtesy of Jacquar as her chauffeur for the day, with donuts and laughter. My auntie, God bless her, took over the kitchen like she was always meant to be there. Coffee showed up in cups instead of containers, food filled the counters, and my Grandmommie sat comfortably among women she had walked alongside for decades. When everyone finally arrived, the room shifted. The chaos faded. The stories settled into place. What I had imagined as terrifying became sacred. We gathered not because everything went according to plan, but because the community made room. As we sat around that beige circular table, seven chairs holding decades of history, I knew exactly why I had asked these women to come together one last time.

This time, I would share what I had learned from the stories they shared, coupled with the research I conducted with the Storygivers, as a way to reflect back to them what their experiences taught me, as well as ensure I got it right. I opened by thanking the Storygivers and naming my purpose plainly to give them space to add, correct, or deepen anything I might have missed. I summarized what I was hearing across their stories: strong educational foundations across school, home, and community; a strong sense of self, identity, and goals; and complex experiences of desegregation with both positives and losses. I also shared that I was rethinking how I used the phrase “Pocket of Resilience,” explaining that Blackwomen are often labeled as resilient in ways that can become reductive, and I invited them into a conversation about how to frame that idea differently while still honoring the strength they described. Later, understanding it was more than a Pocket of Resilience, but Endarkened Conditions for Flourishing

When I asked about viewing their teachers as advocates who represented protectors, motivators, and disciplinarians who demanded excellence, the group responded quickly and with conviction. Ms. Donna emphasized that their teachers were able to advocate for them because they were part of the Black community: they understood Black children’s needs, backgrounds, and strengths in a way many educators today do not. Ms. Guy supported this, explaining that

their teachers lived nearby and were woven into everyday life; teachers saw parents at the store, knew families personally, and accountability followed children beyond the classroom. The closeness created affirmation and consequences, allowing praise to travel home just as fast as correction. Ms. Joyce added that this advocacy often went as far as teachers coming to students' homes. She shared specific examples of Black educators visiting her father to explain scholarships and help him understand that college would not necessarily be a financial burden. For her, that kind of teacher investment was a clear marker of what changed between "then and now."

One thing was evident: this group repeatedly returned to respect, discipline, and community standards as their foundation underneath everything. Ms. Guy described classrooms with forty students where absolute quiet fell the moment a teacher entered, because respect was taught early and reinforced everywhere. Ms. Jessie and Ms. Mayola echoed this strongly, naming what they saw as a major "loss of respect" today: students not standing, not acknowledging elders, not understanding the meaning behind traditions or history. Several of them connected this to historical knowledge, emphasizing that many young people don't know their own family history or broader Black history, which makes it harder to value what earlier generations carried and fought for.

When I shifted the question to the role of Black teachers in Black schools and what it meant to lose cultural anchors after desegregation, the group expanded the conversation with lived examples. Ms. Jessie shared a contrasting experience from elementary school in a predominantly white setting, describing both racism and a kind of rigid commitment from white teachers who still showed up, rode the bus, and taught consistently, yet the cultural violence of racist language and ignorance followed her there. Her story made space for nuance: the Storygivers could hold "commitment to teaching" and "racial harm" in the same memory. When

I clarified that I was asking about Black teachers specifically, Ms. Joyce and Ms. Guy noted they did have Black teachers, while Jessie did not, while confirming that experiences were not identical across the group, even within the same generation and city.

This experience was confirmation and an expansion. They affirmed that I had accurately captured the central role of teachers, community, and home life in shaping their educational journeys, and they deepened the conversation by stressing that what made advocacy possible was closeness. It was impactful when teachers were part of the same community, sharing the same standards, and being willing to cross the boundary between school and home. Their responses also made clear that “education” in their lives was never only academic; it was moral, communal, historical, and disciplined. Education was built on standards that were reinforced everywhere, not just in the classroom.

Gathering of Stories

After the individual story sessions and communal sessions were complete, I began the process of thinking about what constitutes data and how it fits into the narrative I was intent on creating. Making sense of the stories shared by these women of Central High School’s Class of 1964 was not merely a technical process for me it became a personal, relational, and mildly spiritual journey. The stories collected and the lived experiences throughout the processed were the primary source of “data.”

I approached every recording, every note jotted down in my little blue journal, every memory from an interview with the understanding that these Storygivers were offering me pieces of their lives that were never meant to be reduced to simply “data.” Their stories carried history, emotion, humor, pride, frustration, and wisdom, and I approached them as such. I didn’t sit down with transcripts, trying to “code” them in a mechanical way. Instead, I listened and replayed certain moments over a dozen times to ensure I captured the framing just right. I read slowly. I

let their voices sit with me. I allowed myself to return to the moments that caught my breath, made me laugh, or made me pause and rethink everything I thought I knew about Black education and desegregation. My analytic approach was grounded in listening for the meaning beneath the surface, sitting in the silences, the smile that always appears as laughter accompanies the recollection, the pauses, and the things they assumed did not need explaining because “we” understand pulling on Portelli (1991) utilizing the oral sources to reveal how this group of people interpret and give meaning to their lived experiences. As well as the many times they so graciously looked at me with amusement as I read the questions so eloquently crafted and asked me to reframe for a better connection. As I moved through individual story sessions, communal sessions, and observations at Central High School, I kept coming back to the same questions: What did schooling feel like for Blackgirls in 1964? How did they survive it, grow in it, and even thrive in ways that contradict the stories we often hear about desegregation? And what do their lives teach us about supporting Blackgirls today? The main question was, why didn’t my schooling experience feel as richly supported? This is where Toliver (2022) references how Dreams show the gaps in the educational spaces, allowing me to dream through their experiences to help shape understanding.

The more time I spent with their stories, the more one central truth came forward: these women were raised inside what I now understand as *Endarkened Conditions for Flourishing*, pulling on Dillard (2006) to help provide ways of knowing to create spaces where Black knowledge, discipline, care, and imagination were centered, allowing Blackgirls to develop a strong sense of self without having to justify their humanity. This was a space that was a combination and an interweaving of the physical, cultural, and even the foundations for spiritual, where these girls were protected, encouraged, held accountable, corrected with love, challenged intellectually, and reminded daily that they mattered. These Endarkened Conditions were not

created by chance. It was built by families who expected excellence, teachers who believed in them, churches that grounded them, communities that watched over them, and a culture that taught them to stand tall.

These intentional spaces sparked a concept of the Blueprint for Blackgirl Success, building on the principles that shaped their lives and can help guide the next generations of Blackgirls. Drawing on the conversations surrounding the rigorous teaching habits and expectations they were expected to adhere to in the classroom. The importance of knowing their place and showing respect, because respect was the bare minimum. They even had the teachers who pushed them and did not let them skirt by. They described homes where education was a priority, even if their parents or the generations prior had limited or no education, they were insistent on high achievement. They spoke about the impact of walking home with friends and being looked after and cared for by their neighbors and their neighborhoods. These pieces come together to create a foundation strong enough to carry these Blackgirls into their adulthood.

When they spoke about the impact of desegregation, they did not speak about the time that has often been highlighted in the textbooks. They did not reference a moment when the world turned against them, and walking into school became a battleground, and the most they could do was endure and survive. Desegregation was not a moment that suddenly improved their lives, and it was not a moment that drastically shifted their trajectory. Many of the Storygivers felt their strongest and had the most affirming educational experiences when they were in predominantly Black schools with Black teachers, where Black culture was embedded into the curriculum. They referred to intelligent teachers who were highly educated and committed to their calling as teachers and mentors to the students they taught. In these schools, they did not have to prove their intelligence or justify their presence. While integration may have brought new opportunities, it also brought a loss of connection to Black teachers, community-centered

schooling, and the loss of the cultural foundations. They did not lose their identities in the transitions; those remained intact along with their confidence and self-worth.

Across their stories, it became clear these women were not navigating school in isolation; their communities were wrapped around them. Their communities consisted of their church, neighbors, siblings, extended family, and the guy working at the market. They formed a hedge of protection that kept these girls safe, focused, and held them accountable. Sometimes the support felt a bit overwhelming, but it came from a pure place that was loving and intentional. These girls had the pathways led for them by the generations before them that included their grandmothers, mothers, aunts, and churchwomen. They were led through stories, advice, correction, and mostly by example. This community support grounded the Storygivers in the history of survival, faith, and perseverance that solidified the importance of education not only for themselves but for the generations that preceded and followed their own.

Education became a motivation because they knew they were gifted with the dreams of a generation of people who had been denied access to educational spaces and opportunities. Their success was communal and ancestral, with teachers playing a pivotal role in this. Teachers were not just instructors; they played the roles of advocates, disciplinarians, counselors, and protectors who taught them academics alongside posture, confidence, respect, and Way. Even as desegregation brought changes where Kansas City, along with the nation, experienced white flight, school closures, and the loss of Black-led educational spaces, the values and expectations instilled in them had taken root and continued to guide their way forward.

Interpreting Storywork

Interpreting Storywork served as the analytic process where stories were honored as intact narratives examined across time, relationship, and place to reconstruct meaning and experience. To situate how Storywork functioned analytically, it is important to clarify what this

process does not entail. This study did not rely on coding for frequency or the extraction of themes divorced from the story, and it did not prioritize factual accuracy over meaning. Instead, storytelling functioned as data, with stories understood as theories-bearing text.

Meaning emerged through deep listening and ethical attentiveness guided by the work of Cynthia Dillard, positioning the researcher in the role of witness, steward, and interpreter rather than a detached analyst. Trustworthiness in this study does not embody the traditional notions of validity but was established through relational accountability strengthened by the sustained relationships, ongoing dialogue, and member checks with the Storygivers. This allowed interpretations to be confirmed, complicated, and expanded.

Analytically, this work is influenced by other methodological approaches that focus on narrative like narrative analysis and narrative inquiry by Catherine K. Riessman (2008) and Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (2000). Riessman frames narrative analysis as meaning-making in action, revealing how individuals understand their lives, assign meaning to experiences, and position themselves within social worlds. Her approach preserves narrative integrity while emphasizing ethical reflexivity and attention to power, representation, and consequences.

Clandinin and Connelly's three-dimensional narrative inquiry space guided interpretation across temporality (past, present, and future), sociality (relationships among self, others, institutions, and researcher), and place (the location where life unfolds and meaning is made). Together, Riessman's framework informed how stories were held as intact narratives, while Clandinin and Connelly's framework guided how stories were interpreted across time, relationship, and space.

Through the process of interpreting Storywork, patterns of meaning across shared stories were synthesized into Ways. These figures are not fictionalized representations, but analytic constructions grounded in Storygivers' narratives that hold collective patterns of experience

while preserving relational and historical integrity. Creating Ways was a more ethical approach to sharing the stories given than summarizing them in containers and labeling them with themes.

Creating Space

There was a moment I was lying in bed and was trying to imagine how to make the themes mesh while honoring the voices that were shared, when it became clear that a traditional presentation of findings would not be enough to hold the depth, texture, and relational nature of the stories shared. In revisiting Toliver's work, I was reminded that while she created fictional, futuristic stories to imagine new possibilities, my responsibility was different. I was not seeking to invent worlds, but to honor the one these women had already lived. Instead of creating fiction, I chose to create space, space to hold their stories as they were told, shaped by memory, laughter, correction, and care. What I will present is my attempt to recreate their stories in what I hope is their purest form, not polished or simplified, but relational, layered, and true to the women who shared them. This approach involves the creation of stories merging historical context with the lived experiences the women entrusted to me. These stories are not fictional inventions, but carefully constructed composites formed from overlapping memories, shared language, and collective experiences that surfaced repeatedly across interviews, communal sessions, observations, and community gatherings.

The intent of this narrative method is twofold. First, it allows for the purest form of storytelling, honoring the words shared while ensuring each woman's voice remains her own rather than being condensed into a collective thematic analysis. Each story is constructed from the real stories shared by the Storygivers, and through my lens and lived experiences these narratives become interpretive reconstructions of historical moments grounded in their memories and reflections. Second, this approach reflects a culturally grounded way of knowing, one that mirrors how Black history and Black girlhood have long been carried through storytelling,

memory, and shared understanding. By constructing narratives around each woman individually, I preserve the integrity of what was shared while resisting the fragmentation of their lives into isolated data points or detached analytic categories.

In these stories, the histories and lived experiences will become interwoven intentionally. While these seven women cannot speak for every Blackgirl who was in attendance at Central High between 1960 and 1964, they provide an opportunity to glean a sort of historical perspective. Broader historical moments, including segregation, desegregation, neighborhood shifts, and educational policy, will act as the backdrop setting the scene as the Storygivers move through these events as young Blackgirls navigating classrooms, homes, churches, and communities. This allows readers to encounter history not as distant or abstract, but as something embodied and lived. The stories do not aim to sanitize hardship or romanticize the past; instead, they center agency, discipline, cultural pride, and the everyday strategies these women used to navigate their educational worlds.

This narrative approach is grounded in relational accountability. The stories were shaped in conversation with the Storygivers, informed by their approval of themes, and guided through their affirmations, corrections, and additions. Rather than assigning pseudonyms, the Storygivers' names are preserved to honor their lived experiences and the contributions they have made to this work. What emerges is not a collection of isolated accounts, but a series of lived experiences shaped through both individual story sessions and collective memory.

The goal is not to speak for them, but to create space where their voices move in ways that honor how they speak, remember, and make meaning. Rather than presenting each woman's story in full and separate form, the narratives are arranged across moments in time, allowing their experiences to be encountered together. This decision reflects the understanding that

meaning does not sit within a single story alone, but forms through resonance, overlap, and divergence across their shared lives.

As a result, the reader moves through time with them, not from one person to the next. Their memories meet, stretch, and respond to one another, creating a collective understanding of Black_girlhood as it was lived and remembered within community. Through this method, the narratives hold complexity while offering insight grounded in experience, shaped not only by what was lived individually, but by what was carried, remembered, and made meaningful together.

Chapter Summary

This study employed Ethnohistoric Storywork as a relational, interpretive methodological framework grounded in Black epistemologies and community-held knowledge. Here, history becomes living memory carried through story, relationship, and place. This work began by listening carefully to the stories of Blackwomen who once Blackgirls were, honoring their stories as whole, meaningful accounts rather than fragments to be sorted or extracted.

Ethnohistory supported the reconstruction of a historical period that no longer exists by situating memory within lived social and educational worlds. Storywork served as the connective practice through which memory, meaning, emotion, and spirit were held with care and accountability. Dreaming and Endarkened Epistemologies functioned as both an epistemological orientation and ethical offering, naming what was missing from dominant narratives, guiding inquiry, and extending the work toward futures still unfolding.

Stories were engaged as intact, theory-bearing narratives through Interpreting Storywork, guided by narrative inquiry attending to time, relationship, and place. Trustworthiness was established through relational accountability, ongoing dialogue, and member checks, positioning Storygivers as co-constructors of knowledge.

What follows moves methodology into experience. Part Two, *For Thoe Who Led the Way* with Chapter 4, *The Stories We Tell*, where these narratives take form through conversations, memory, and shared space. You are invited to move alongside these women as witnesses to stories unfolding across time. These stories represent lived encounters, shaped through intergenerational connections and the ongoing work of making meaning from what has been, emerging through my experience in conversation with the Storygivers reflecting on what has been lived and remembered.

Part Two: For Those Who Led the Way

Chapter 4: The Stories We Tell

March 16, 2023 - Me, Jasmine

Sundays are those days I begin to look forward to right around Thursday of each week. It's a day of reset spent with my Grandmommie. When I was little, we used to have our own little thing, we would call it "girls' time." She would make apple cider and a sweet treat, and we would lay in her bed and watch movies, and it was just a time with her that was simply mine. As the years passed, the time transformed into something, how do I put it, simply more. Girls' time became Sunday dinners accompanied by an adult beverage.

On this particular Sunday, on my way to Grandmommie's house, my mind was playing hopscotch between different ideas. The frontrunner was the hope for cornbread, regardless of whatever was served as sides. The kind with the crisp edge where the pan held it just a second too long. The kind you split open with your fingers because a knife would be disrespectful. Butter melting before you even finished your grace. Please Lord, let there be cornbread, maybe a salad.

In the midst of my imagining cornbread, my mind kept circling back to school as it so frequently did. It always does. In this moment my mind detoured to the book that had taken up residence in my passenger seat: *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935*, by James D. Anderson.

The book was not just an idle passenger. It felt like it was watching me. Pressing against everything I thought I understood about schooling, about access, about who education was built for and who it was built by. Were the Northerners really as liberated as the texts suggest.

This semester has been a unique one. My course schedule: Ethnography & Education, Historical Research Methods in Education, and an independent study I boldly titled *Blackgirl*

History in Education. That independent study is where I am slowly working my way through Anderson's text. Slowly, because this is the part of history I don't recall learning about. It has illuminated gaps I was vaguely aware existed.

Anderson does not romanticize education in the South, but he refuses to let the narrative be reduced to deprivation alone. He lays bare the truth: that formerly enslaved people did not wait to be invited into education. They organized it. Funded it. Demanded it. Built schools with hands that had only recently been unshackled. They viewed literacy not as a luxury but as a weapon and a shield.

The shift has been unsettling in the best way.

Pulling into her driveway, I put my car in park and instead of taking my key out the ignition and heading into the house I reach into my backseat, hand mindlessly searching for my backpack. When I finally obtain it I reach in and pull out my yellow composition book and purple pen, you should always write in color if you can help it. There are a couple of things I want to get out of my head before I head into dinner with Grandmommie. Flipping through my notebook with the first page dated March 2021 titled: "The Path to Enlightenment =)" with the letters outlined in blue and orange. Locating a blank page I jot down my thoughts. Reading about the men in history, the fathers who fought, the community refusing to be complacent with the scraps of freedom and belonging. Reading about the culture recalling all of the history I have continuously sifted through with an urgency trying to find belonging. One question persisted: where were the women? Where were their voices? Where were their stories?

I recall the words of Amoni Thompson-Jones (2019) when she said, "...can't nobody tell the truth 'bout black girls like black girls..." (Pg. 9). In that moment the thoughts are no longer able to be contained. Pen to paper. What piece of yourself are you willing to sacrifice for the opportunity to be free and protected. Are you willing to sacrifice the history of your ancestors,

the passion of your language, defiance of your gaze, arrogance of your hair, or the beat of your heart? What is worth sacrificing for the agency of self-determination? For safety? For the right to belong? Where do you go to learn about the people who look like you? Little Blackgirl, where do you go to be you?

Sitting in the car, all I can see is the purple ink imprinted on the paper. Silence, until I notice the vibrating of my pocket. How long had I been sitting here. Grandmommie was on the phone, “I saw you pull up; cornbread just came out the oven.” I was out the car before she finished the sentence. The yellow notebook now taking up residence in the passenger seat next to Anderson.

Fried chicken, broccoli, rosemary-laced mashed potatoes, and the coveted cornbread filled my stomach as we sat on the screened porch, the sky turning blues, pinks, and purples. I was contemplating all of the things and I looked at Grandmommie, drink in hand quietly enjoying the moment the connection the time and space we created with each other. I gave here Anderson. I gave her the ways the community fought back. I asked her if she knew, knew that the Blacks in the South fought and demanded education. They protected each other they created in love what would last for generations. I gave her my thoughts, my revelations, my understandings and connections. I was so proud of myself. I thought I was having a historical moment with my Grandmommie I was sharing knowledge. True to her fashion she sat there and listened for a while, then she gave me the truth of her time, the plight of the Black Panthers, the protests, the rebellions, the long walks to school, the interactions with the white folk. What she gave me was a piece of my story that I didn’t realize remained untold. I sat there and with all sincerity asked her why she had never shared any of this with me before. She laughed and simple nodded. She had shared this information with not only me, but those around me, our family, but no one ever bothered to listen. There was something in me that broke a little, something that

shifted, something that grew, I was listening now. Not because I felt bad, I did, but because I knew she was a part of the history I was missing, she was a part of the knowledge I was seeking. Not just history. Hers.

My Grandmommie got up slowly as age had taken a toll on her step and walked in the house. I sat there on the porch swing once again with my head in the sky the endless visibility of a clear myriad of colors and just wondered, pondered, reimagined for a second. I almost didn't hear the soft creak of the screen door as it opened, and I turned to see my Grandmommie walk out with a thick hand stitched book stitched in blue and white fabric resembling the photo albums I had spent my entire life entranced by the memories captured in still frames. She sat down and placed the book in my lap without saying a word. I flipped to the first page expecting a picture or two of her back in the day, that's the reason she handed it to me, was it not. There were no photographs behind thin plastic sleeves. Only pages of handwritten script. Different handwriting. Different ink. I looked up at her with silent question in my eyes.

These are the words of my friends. Blackgirls who grew up with me. We wrote down pieces of our stories and we stored them here. It looked like you were ready. I gaped at her as I noticed the first piece of parchment was dated back to 1949. I didn't look up for a while.

May 1949

Mayola Grade: Pre- Kindergarten

I was born in Holly Grove, Arkansas. A small place where the roads stretched long and flat and the sky seemed bigger than anywhere else. The kind of town where everybody knew who your people were before they knew your name. I lived there with my grandmother. Her house sat steady, like it had been planted there on purpose, with a wide porch that caught the evening breeze and wooden steps that creaked when you ran up them too fast. The mornings

smelled like coffee and biscuits. The evenings smelled like dirt and grass and whatever was cooking on the stove.

I was a quiet and laid-back child, I was friendly, but I didn't talk a lot. I liked to watch. I liked to listen. I would sit close to my grandmother, close enough to feel the warmth of her arm against mine, and just take everything in. I wasn't shy exactly. I just didn't feel the need to fill the air with words. My eyes did most of the talking for me.

Going into town with my grandmother was a time I cherished. It wasn't just errands. It was an event. She would get dressed, not fancy, but neat. Pressed dress. Hair just right. Pocketbook tucked under her arm. I would walk beside her, trying to match her stride, holding onto her hand when the gravel shifted under my shoes. The town had that slow hum to it, screen doors slamming somewhere in the distance, a truck rumbling down the road, somebody calling out a greeting from across the street.

The white people down there treated us really nice. They would tip their hats at my grandmother and call her by name. Some would lean over counters and ask about me, their voices soft and almost sweet. We got to walk around to the different stores the people owned. The bell above the door would ring every time we stepped inside, announcing us like we were important. The floors were wooden and worn smooth from years of footsteps. Shelves lined the walls with canned goods, fabric, candy jars sitting right at eye level for children like me.

Walking to one store I really like because the owner always asked for me and would give me a big smile and a hug when I went. I could smell something sweet every time we opened the door, maybe candy, maybe something baking in the back. The store felt warmer than the others. Brighter somehow.

This time when we went into the store I was hiding behind my grandmother. I don't even remember why. Maybe I just wanted to see if she would notice. Maybe I liked the suspense of it.

I pressed myself against the back of my grandmother's dress, peeking out just enough to see the counter. I heard her ask, "Where's Millie?" that's my nickname, short for Millicent. Her voice stretched my name out like it was something precious.

When I heard her ask about me I jumped from behind my grandmother with a laugh, the kind that bubbles up before you can stop it. She gave me this great big smile and wrapped me up in her great big arms for a hug. Her apron brushed against my cheek. She smelled like flour and something sweet. Her hug was tight and warm and easy. Like she had been waiting just for me to appear. For a moment, I felt like the center of the whole store. Like I mattered there.

My grandmother would stand close, watching, but she would smile too. Not big, but enough to let me know she saw it. Saw me.

I stayed with my grandmother in Holly Grove, Arkansas until I was 5 years old. Long enough for that porch to feel like mine. Long enough for those store bells to sound familiar. Long enough for the dirt roads and the warm hugs and the way my name echoed through that little town to settle into me.

October 1950- Marvinia Grade: Pre-Kindergarten

I would describe myself as outgoing and friendly, to some extent. I had long curly hair, and I was what you would call chunky. That didn't bother me none. I thought I was cute. I had thick skin. I was an only child, but not really. You see, I was the only child my mother and father had together. My siblings were quite a bit older than me, so by the time I came along they were already grown with the youngest on the way out of the house. That meant I spent most of my time growing up in the house by myself.

That didn't make me no difference because our community was tight-knit, and we lived in what the white people called "the hood". To us, it was just home. It was the way our neighborhood worked. One might think it could be lonely when you're the only child in the

home, but I wasn't lonely or alone, not one bit. Our neighbors were our family. I had plenty of aunties, uncles, and cousins who shared a different bloodline but treated me like I belonged to them all the same.

Doors were always open, and kids were always out in the neighborhood. From early morning until the streetlights came on, the sidewalks and yards were full of laughter, bikes, jump ropes, and somebody always calling somebody's name. The adults made sure we all were on our best behavior and safe, so our parents wouldn't have to worry when we went out. They trusted each other. Trust meant something. This also meant when you got out of line, the closest grown person would get to you first. They didn't wait around for your parents to come home. You might get a sharp word, a look, or a quick swat depending on what you had done. And you already knew when you got back to your momma and daddy they were gonna get to you too. Word traveled fast in that neighborhood. Before you could even get the front door open, they already knew what you had done.

Discipline came wrapped in love. We had love in our neighborhood. Real love. The kind where people looked out for one another, shared food when somebody was short, and made sure every child felt like they belonged somewhere. The kind of love where the whole block celebrated your victories and held you accountable when you messed up.

I know the white folk discriminated against us because of our skin, but I didn't give a damn. In my world, in that neighborhood, I was surrounded by people who loved me, protected me, and reminded me every day that I mattered.

Playing jacks with Juliet was a fun time when my mother had to work. It was the one part of those long afternoons that felt like it belonged to me. See my mother was a domestic or maid whatever you want to call it. She cleaned other people's houses from top to bottom, made their

beds, scrubbed their floors, cooked in their kitchens, made everything shine like it was hers when it wasn't. I understood that even as a child. I may not have had all the language for it, but I understood.

This particular time me and Juliet were playing jacks on the floor while my mother was in the kitchen at the sink washing dishes or preparing lunch. The kitchen smelled like bleach and grease and something simmering low on the stove. The floor was cool against my legs as I sat cross-legged, the little metal jacks scattered between us, the red rubber ball smacking rhythmically against the linoleum. Juliet would laugh when I snatched them up quick, my fingers moving fast and sure. I was good at jacks. I liked games I could win.

Juliet's grandmother, Ms. B., was sitting at the table. She always sat straight, like her back never touched the chair. Her glasses rested low on her nose and she would peer over them when she spoke. She looks down at me and she says, "Marvina," to which I politely responded, "yes ma'am." I was raised to answer grown folks properly. No matter what.

And she continued, "don't you think you ought to, why aren't you watching your mother work, you need to be seeing what she's doing so you can get a job one day, you might be able to work for Juliet."

Her words slid across that kitchen floor slow and deliberate. Juliet stopped bouncing the ball for just a second. The air shifted. I could hear the water still running at the sink. My mother's back was to us. I could see the muscles in her shoulders tighten just a little.

I just kept on playing jacks and said, "How you know Juliet s not going to work for me, I'm not working in no white woman's kitchen."

I didn't raise my voice. I didn't roll my neck. I just said it plain. Matter of fact. Like it was the most reasonable thing in the world.

My mother's face, she was really upset and all she could do was to call my name, "MARVINA." The way she said it carried warning. It carried fear. It carried all the consequences I didn't fully understand yet.

Ms. B simply gave a half smile and replied, "leave her alone, I wanted to see what she said. She's not like you."

That half smile wasn't kindness. It was something else. Testing. Measuring.

I could see my mother's face in that moment; a flicker of anger mixed with embarrassment and frustration. Her lips pressed tight. Her eyes dropped for just a second before she lifted them back up. I knew what she said to my mother was degrading because she said, "she's not like you." It was said like my mother was something small. Something settled. Something that had accepted her place. And I was something else. Something unpredictable.

My mother went back to working around the house and I continued my game of jacks on the floor with Juliet as Ms. B. continued to watch on. The ball kept bouncing. The metal pieces clicked softly as I scooped them up. But I could feel eyes on me. Studying me. Wondering what I would become.

The walk to the bus stop that night was pretty quiet. The sun was dipping low, stretching our shadows long across the sidewalk. My mother didn't have much to say to me at the time, I assume she was tired. Her steps were slower than mine. Her hands looked worn when she adjusted her purse on her shoulder. I walked beside her, swinging my arms, not feeling the weight she was carrying.

As we got on the bus the bus driver looks at me and asks my mother, "how old is that gal." His voice wasn't gentle. It wasn't curious. It was something closer to intrusive. I was about four at the time and I looked at him and said to my mother, "he didn't tell us how old he was, momma come on let's sit down."

I didn't see the problem. If he could ask me something, I could ask him something. Fair was fair.

My mother was more humble than I was, I was always radical. She lowered her eyes in ways I never did. She swallowed words I let fly. I knew we were discriminated against because of our color, the color of our skin, but quite frankly, I don't have a nicer way to put it, I didn't give a damn. Even at four, something in me refused to bend easy.

I never respected boundaries at times it got my mother in a lot of trouble, she almost got put in jail several times because of me. I would speak up when silence was safer. I would question when obedience was expected. People said I was egotistical and arrogant, but I was obedient and kind, too. I said "yes ma'am" and "no sir." I helped when I was told. I just didn't take anything off white people.

April 1951- Donna Grade: Pre-Kindergarten

As a child I was loving, sweet, respectful, kind, and obedient for the most part. I had to be.

This was a complicated time in my life.

I was still in what many would call my innocent years, but I had seen enough to know something in our home was changing.

I come from a long line of educators. My mother and my aunt had their master's degrees in education. They were brilliant women. They first became interested in home economics, and later their studies moved into nutrition. Learning mattered in our family. Discipline mattered. Carrying yourself properly mattered.

My mother was a formidable woman. She worked in real estate and owned property. She had built a life for herself through intelligence and determination. The racism. She couldn't outrun the racism.

She was what people used to call “high yellow.” Her mother was half white and half Black, something that wasn’t uncommon among families whose histories traced back through Oklahoma where many formerly enslaved families had settled after being forced into sharecropping lives.

My grandmother’s own story carried that complicated history. Her mother was the sister of the white man who owned the property where they lived. That landowner married his sister to one of the African men who had been enslaved on that land. They had thirteen children together.

My grandmother was one of those thirteen.

From that family line came two daughters, my aunt and my mother. Like many families from Oklahoma during that time, they eventually left and moved to Kansas City hoping life would be better there.

In Kansas City my mother met and married my father, and they had me.

The racism followed.

My mother wasn’t happy, and we couldn’t make her happy no matter how hard I tried. I made sure to be loving, sweet, kind, and respectful. I tried everything a little girl could think to do. I tried to stay quiet when I was supposed to. I tried to help when I could. I tried to make her smile the way she used to. But none of it worked.

My father had stopped smiling when he used to laugh easily. His voice had a lightness to it, the kind that fills a house and makes everything feel safe. At one point the laughter disappeared.

We couldn’t make her stay. We couldn’t overcome her reality.

She couldn’t stand the way she was treated here, the looks, the comments, the blatant disrespect.

The racism made my mother leave.

I was four.

She decided to leave the United States and move to Montreal, Canada, hoping to find solace from the racism and the hardships she faced here.

She had to leave me behind.

She left me with my grandmother.

My grandmother loved me. I never doubted that. But her children were grown by then, and raising a small child was not something she had expected to do. Still, she did the best she could. She cared for me and made sure I was safe. In her home I learned patience, quietness, and how to watch the world around me.

It became clear that a different arrangement might be better for me.

That is when the decision was made for me to go live with my aunt and uncle in California.

Leaving Kansas City felt like leaving the only world I had ever known. I remember the long trip and the strange feeling of arriving somewhere new where the air smelled different and the streets looked wider. California felt bright and open, and the house my aunt and uncle lived in felt large and orderly in a way that was very different from the life I had known before.

Growing up in California, I grew up in what I would call a protected environment.

My uncle was a Lieutenant Colonel, a man who carried himself with quiet authority. His uniforms were always pressed. His shoes always shined. When he walked into a room, people noticed. My aunt was a well-known home economics teacher and a scientist. She was brilliant, organized, and carried herself with the kind of confidence that made people listen when she spoke.

In their household, respect was the standard.

There was a rhythm to their home. Mornings were orderly. Meals were structured. Expectations were clear. I was treated as a special child, and everyone around me made sure I knew I belonged in that space.

People of every ethnicity were very respectful to me.

I went to school. I got good grades. My teachers spoke kindly to me. The adults in my life expected excellence, but they also treated me with dignity. I responded the way I had been taught, with “yes sir” and “yes ma’am,” always speaking politely and carrying myself the way my aunt expected.

Everyone was respectful to me.

In that house, in that environment, I was treated like a princess.

My dresses were always neat. My hair was done properly. I was taught how to sit, how to speak, how to present myself in the world. My aunt believed that how you carried yourself mattered, and she made sure I learned that early.

For a time, California became a place where life felt stable again.

A place where a little girl could feel safe.

A place where respect was not something you had to fight for.

It was simply given.

September 1951- Guyetta Grade: Kindergarten

Quietly, I sat as I watched Mama press my dress. The room was warm from the stove, and the iron hissed softly each time she set it down. She was oh so gentle and precise as she moved the iron back and forth, ensuring no wrinkle was left untamed. She didn’t rush. She never

rushed when it came to making sure we looked right. The fabric smoothed under her steady hand, steam rising in small clouds catching the light from the lamp.

Tomorrow was the day I had been waiting for, the day I officially became a big girl like all of my cousins. I would be starting preschool in the morning. The thought made my stomach flutter. My mama continuously answered all my questions about what it would be like at school tomorrow. Would I have my own seat? Would there be toys? Would the teacher be nice? What would she do without me all day while I was at school? I couldn't imagine her in the house without me trailing behind her.

Mama laid my dress across the chair at the back of the room, next to my socks and shoes, ready and neatly arranged for me to quickly get dressed in the morning. Everything in its place. She looked at me and smiled, "It's time to go to bed, you will need your rest for your big day tomorrow!"

I was not ready to go to bed; I was too anxious. My mind was already at the schoolhouse. She helped me into my nightdress, and I climbed into bed with a kiss on the forehead and she wished me sweet dreams. The moment my head hit the soft pillow, I was asleep.

Mama woke me up quite early; the sun was still sleeping, and the sky was dark before the dawn. The house was quiet except for the low clink of dishes and the soft shuffle of her slippers across the floor. I knew the routine: brush my teeth, wash my face, and get dressed. Mama let me brush my teeth and wash my face by myself. I am a big girl now! I stood on my tiptoes at the sink, concentrating hard so toothpaste didn't drip down my chin.

She helped me put on my dress, the brown muted dress, like all the other girls wore to school, stopped at my knees. The fabric felt stiff and new against my skin. I could not wait to put on my black and white Saddle Oxfords with the orange soles. Finally, when they were laced and

my socks were neatly folded around my ankles, I tapped one foot against the floor just to hear the sound.

When I was done getting dressed mama sat me down in the wooden chair in front of the stove to do my hair as she did every morning. The hot comb lay over the stove as it warmed, and I sat patiently as my mother pressed my hair. I could hear the faint sizzle when it touched my strands, feel the careful pull as she worked from root to end. Today mama gave me two ponytails! This was the first time she allowed me to have two ponytails. They bounced lightly when I turned my head. I felt grown.

When she was satisfied, I looked presentable, I sat down at the table and had a small bowl of oatmeal to prepare me for my day. The oatmeal was warm and simple, but it felt ceremonial. I held the spoon carefully, not wanting to spill on my new dress.

For my first day of school mama walked with me, her pregnant belly round with the twins that would arrive in a few months' time, my little brother stayed back with my grandmother. She moved a little slower now, one hand resting at the small of her back, the other wrapped around mine. This time was just me and her as I held her hand as we walked up to the schoolhouse. The morning air was cool and fresh. The building stood tall and proud, bricks firm and familiar, like it had been there forever waiting for me.

When I walked through those doors for the first time, I saw my teacher, who had the biggest smile on her round face. Her eyes were warm and welcoming. The other students were a little older than I was. Some students were four, some were five, but I was three, a bit early to start preschool, but mama said I was ready, so I was ready!

My teacher smiled at Mama and showed us where I could put my lunchbox and schoolbag. The classroom smelled like chalk and crayons. Tiny wooden desks were lined up neatly. I remember Mama telling me bye and promising to see me after school was over. She

bent down to my level, kissed my cheek, and squeezed my hand just once more before she let go. I was a bit sad, I would miss her.

The faces of my classmates, some tearful faces as their parents left, others bright with joy and determination. Some clung to their mothers' skirts. Some ran straight to the toys. I sat down in my seat, feet not quite touching the floor, hands folded in my lap.

After we all sat down in our seats and the school bell rang, the bell echoed through the hallway, sharp and clear. We were instructed to stand. We all followed our teacher as we sang the negro national anthem, Lift Every Voice and Sing. I knew the song and belted the lyrics with confidence and pride. My little voice rose up with the others, filling the room. The words felt bigger than me, older than me, but I carried them anyway.

After we all placed our right hands over our hearts and recited the Pledge of Allegiance. We would do this every day throughout my elementary school days. Lift Every Voice and Sing, honoring the dreams of those passed and the promise of future tomorrows. And on that first morning, standing there in my brown dress and saddle oxfords, I felt like I was stepping into something larger than myself, a moment passed down I let my voice ring out to join the chorus of my classmates.

June 1952- Brenda Grade: 1st

I wouldn't describe myself as outgoing, shy, strong-willed, or independent. Just quiet.

I loved being a kid. I loved being around children my own age. Back then, when we got together outside, we got to just be kids. We ran around the neighborhood, played games in the street, laughed too loud, and stayed out until someone's mama leaned out a window and called us home.

I simply liked being around kids.

Back then there were no bad kids. At least that's how it felt to me. Kids were just kids trying to make their way through the day the best way they knew how. Some were louder than others, some were rougher than others, but we all shared the same sidewalks, the same streets, the same patches of grass where we played tag and hide-and-seek until the sun started to dip down low.

One thing for sure though, I didn't like being bullied.

At the time we lived in a little place called Little Italy down on 5th Street. It was called Little Italy because there were a lot of Italians who lived there. Their families had been there for a long time, and the neighborhood carried their presence in everything—the smells of food drifting out of kitchen windows, the loud voices that echoed down the sidewalks, and the groups of boys who always seemed to be gathered on the corners watching everything that passed by.

They would kind of jump us.

Not always in a big dramatic way, but enough to make you watch yourself when you turned a corner. Enough to make you think twice about which street you walked down and who might be standing there when you got there.

So, we did what we knew how to do.

We tried to avoid them at all costs.

If we saw them gathered up ahead, we crossed the street. If we heard their voices coming from around the corner, we slowed our pace or found another way to go. My friends and I learned quickly how to move through the neighborhood without drawing too much attention to ourselves.

We kept to ourselves.

Most days we stayed close to the houses where we felt safe, playing in yards where the grown folks could see us from the windows. Sometimes we played jacks on the sidewalk, sometimes hopscotch chalked out on the pavement, and sometimes we just sat on the steps talking about nothing in particular.

I never really knew why they bothered us.

Was it because we were different?

Was it because we were colored?

I couldn't say.

At that age I didn't yet understand how people could decide they didn't like you before even knowing your name. All I knew was that when their group came walking down the street, our group got quiet. The laughter faded a little. The games slowed down. Everybody kept an eye on where they were and where we were.

Me and my circle did our best to avoid them at all costs.

There was an unspoken understanding between us. Nobody had to say it out loud. We all knew that keeping our distance was the safest thing to do.

I was still little, so they didn't bother me as often as the other kids. Sometimes they barely noticed me at all. I was small and quiet, the kind of child who could blend into the background if I needed to.

Even then I knew something important.

I needed to keep my distance.

So I watched. I learned which streets were safer to walk down. I learned how to move quickly when I needed to and how to stay close to the people who made me feel safe.

And most of all, I learned how to stay quiet and keep my eyes open.

Because sometimes being quiet was the best way to make it through the day.

September 1952- Joyce Grade: 1st

I began my school career in Oklahoma, in the Ardmore School District.

School was segregated then. That was just the way things were. And I experienced that segregation in ways that made themselves known even to a child. When the white schools were finished with their textbooks, the ones that were already torn up and worn down, they would ship those books over to our school. Those became our new textbooks. Pages already bent, covers loose, sometimes writing in the margins from children who had used them before us.

That was what we had, so that was what we used.

Even as a child I understood something about that arrangement, even if I didn't yet have the language to explain it.

was a very fortunate child in that school though. I was also what people called a precocious child. At the rightful tender age of four, I was already reading. I could tie my shoes. A lot of that came from being raised around grandparents and aunts and uncles who were only several years older than me. I grew up in a house where people were always teaching something. Somebody was always correcting you, showing you something new, expecting you to learn.

So learning wasn't something that only happened at school. It happened at home every day.

My teacher's name was Gladys Thompson, and the superintendent was Miss Ainsworth. I will never forget either one of them.

They were the ones who put me in school in Oklahoma.

In those days you had to be seven years old to begin school. That was the rule. But they saw something in me. They could see that I was already reading and doing things most children my age had not yet begun to do.

They decided to let me start anyway.

I never went to kindergarten. I began school early, and during that first year I actually turned five while I was already attending classes.

The school itself operated differently. We lived in a rural community, and the rhythm of school often followed the rhythm of the land.

Sometimes they would shut the school down entirely.

When cotton season came, the older children were expected to go out and pick cotton. The school would close so families in the community could work the fields. That was simply part of life then.

The schedule of learning bent itself around the work that kept the community going.

Eventually I moved to Kansas to live with my mother. When I arrived there, I enrolled at Dunbar North. Sephora Anderson was the principal.

When I first entered that school, there were some doubts about me. The teachers wondered whether I would be able to keep up academically with the students who had already been attending school in Kansas.

Those doubts did not last very long.

I excelled.

Before long it became clear that I could do the work just fine. Eventually they moved me over to Dunbar South after they built the new school because there were so many children attending that they needed another building.

During those years, all I was exposed to were Black teachers.

That was all I knew.

Black teachers who expected excellence, who believed their students were capable, and who carried themselves in the classroom with authority and pride.

Even within that space, there were moments that stayed with me.

Miss Jones saw something in me as well. Even though she did me wrong, she still saw something.

There was a citywide contest for traffic safety. Students were supposed to design posters encouraging children to be careful around the streets and crossings. I remember working hard on mine. I painted a mother duck with her little ducks crossing the street, with a crossing guard standing there to guide them safely across.

It was a beautiful poster.

I had done it myself, carefully painting every detail.

While I was working on it, Miss Jones came over and said, “Let Linda help you with that.”

I told her, “I don’t need any help.”

She said again, “Let Linda help you.”

I told her again, “I really don’t need any help.”

I knew the work I had done. I knew what I was capable of.

When the posters were submitted to the city, mine was sent in along with the others.

Later they announced the results. My poster did not win the contest, but it received an honorable mention. Fourth place across the city.

I was proud of that.

When the posters came back to the school after the contest was over, I pointed out to Miss Jones that my name had not been placed on the work the way it should have been.

She looked at it and said, “Oh, you can add your name to it.”

This was after the contest had already ended.

After the posters had already been judged and returned.

Moments like that stay with you.

That is what you call favoritism in a classroom. You learn early when recognition is given freely and when it is quietly withheld.

March 1953- Jessie Grade: 2nd

I really do enjoy school.

Every morning when I get up and get ready, there isn't a single part of me that wishes I could stay home. I hear some of the other children talk about not wanting to go, dragging their feet or hoping for a day off, but I can't remember ever feeling that way.

I want to go.

I'm eager to get there.

People ask why sometimes, and I don't know that I have a big explanation. It just feels like the thing I'm supposed to be doing. What else would I be doing? I don't want to spend the whole day at home running up and down the sidewalk, roller skating, or playing games.

Learning is interesting to me.

When I walk into the classroom, I'm curious about what we're going to talk about that day, what the teacher is going to write on the board, what new thing I might understand before the bell rings again. I enjoy the classes we get to take and the way the teachers show us things we didn't know before.

There are all kinds of things we learn in school.

Right now, we are learning how to write in cursive, or as like to call it, curtsy, and I like that very much.

The teacher stands at the front of the room and writes the letters across the chalkboard in long smooth loops. Each letter connects to the next one, flowing across the board like a ribbon.

We sit at our desks with those big red tablets in front of us. The pages have wide lines printed across them, so we know exactly where our letters are supposed to sit. The teacher tells us to keep our writing between those lines, and we practice again and again.

My pencil moves slowly across the page.

First the curve of the letter, then the little tail that leads into the next one.

Sometimes I stop and look at what I've written, trying to make it look just as neat as the example on the board. There's something satisfying about getting it right, about watching the letters come together into words.

Moments like that are why I enjoy school so much.

Every day there is something new waiting to be learned, something else to figure out. And when the bell rings at the end of the day, I already know that tomorrow morning I'll be ready to come right back and do it again.

April 1953- Brenda Grade: 1st

It's a warm spring afternoon, the kind of day where the sun sits just right in the sky and the breeze carries that fresh smell of grass and trees waking back up after winter. Church just let out, and the women are still standing around outside talking while the men lean against the cars finishing their conversations. The pastor steps outside the church doors and kindly reminds

everyone of the church picnic is over at Swope Park, and before long people are loading dishes into the trunks of their cars.

My mother tells me to come on.

I climb into the car beside her while she balances a bowl wrapped in a dish towel on her lap. As we drive, the car fills with the sound of people laughing and talking about who brought what, fried chicken, potato salad, pound cake, and of course watermelon. When we finally pull into the park, the place looks enormous. Trees stretch up tall and green, and the grass rolls out in wide open spaces that seem to go on forever.

For a moment it feels like we could go anywhere.

We can't.

The cars keep moving until they reach one particular hill. One by one they pull over, and everybody starts climbing out carrying baskets, coolers, and folding chairs. My mother takes my hand and leads me up the slope with the rest of the church families.

"This is where we stay," she says, like it's something everyone already understands.

Soon the hill fills up with Black families from different churches. Blankets are spread across the grass. The older women set their dishes out in neat rows. Men gather in small circles talking about work, baseball, and the news. Children run back and forth across the hill, their church shoes kicking up little clouds of dust as they chase one another through the grass.

Somebody cracks open a cooler and starts passing out bottles of red soda pop. Another person lifts the lid off a big pan of fried chicken. Then someone slices open a watermelon, the knife cutting through the green rind as the bright red inside glistens in the spring sunlight.

Juice runs down people's fingers as the slices are handed around.

To me, it feels like a celebration.

The breeze moves softly through the trees, carrying the sound of laughter across the hill.

Mothers call after children who wander too far. Fathers sit back in their chairs watching everything unfold.

I don't question why we are all gathered on that one hill.

That's just where everybody is.

That hill isn't very big at all.

They piled us up there in that little section and called it, Watermelon Hill.

Said that's all we did up there, eat watermelon and drink red soda pop. We did in fact eat watermelon, and drink red soda pop. That's what we could afford.

Yes, they kept us on that hill.

On that hill we had our churches, our families, our laughter, and our food. We had children running through the grass and the voices of mothers calling them back.

It may have only been one small hill in that whole big park.

On those spring Sundays, to us, it felt like the whole world.

July, 1954- Brenda Grade: 3rd

I really didn't think about being Black. It never crossed my mind. I just knew they said I was "colored."

That was the word people used back then. It was just something said in passing, the same way someone might say where you lived or who your parents were. It wasn't something I sat around thinking about. I was just a child living my life.

Most of the Blacks had their own businesses, and most Blacks catered to their own people. There was a rhythm to our community. People worked hard, opened their shops early, and knew the families who walked through their doors.

I remember Vine Street, 24th and Vine to be precise, and all down there.

If you walked down that street you could feel the life in it. The sidewalks stayed busy with folks coming and going, people stopping to talk, children running errands for their parents. Everybody down there was Black owners. You could walk from one end of the street to the other and see people who looked like you running their own businesses and taking care of their neighbors.

My uncle had a cash stand down there.

I remember standing near the counter sometimes, watching people come up and place their money down, hearing the sound of the register opening and closing. Folks would stop and talk a little while before moving on to the next place down the block. It felt like everybody knew everybody or at least knew somebody who knew you.

There was a grocery store where people came to pick up the things they needed for supper that night. The shelves were always full, and the smell of fresh produce and paper sacks filled the air. There was a Black pharmacist who knew the families who walked through the door and asked about your mama or your grandma while he filled prescriptions.

There was a lady who made pies and cakes and rolls.

You could smell her bakery before you even reached the door. The sweet smell of sugar and warm bread would drift out into the street, and people would stop just to breathe it in. Sometimes folks would buy something just because it smelled so good.

Everything down on Vine Street, starting at Phillips Elementary School all the way to 18th, it was just like a big community.

People watched out for one another. If a child got out of line, somebody would speak up. If someone needed help, somebody would step in. The stores, the sidewalks, the churches nearby, it all worked together like one big neighborhood where everybody had a place.

I didn't feel different.

I just felt like I was regular.

There weren't that many white people around. Most of the faces I saw looked like mine. Most of the voices I heard sounded familiar. When I walked down the street, people called me by name or asked about your family.

It wasn't something you had to think about.

It was just life.

The sun felt real good beaming down on my face as I sat in the drive of our new house playing with my dolls. It was the kind of warmth that made you tilt your head back just a little and close your eyes for a second. A rare July day, it wasn't too hot with a slight breeze in the air created by the traffic lulling by the house.

Our new house still felt unfamiliar. The grass had been cut short and neat. The driveway seemed wider than the one at our old place. I had claimed my little patch of it like it was my own living room. My dolls were lined up carefully, propped against each other, their plastic faces shining in the sunlight. I had given them names. Given them voices. Given them whole lives in the span of an afternoon.

I looked up to find my neighbor Susie standing there. She had that curious look kids get when they're deciding whether they want to join in or not. "What ya doing," she asked.

"Playing," I responded simply, "you want to play with me?"

I didn't think much of it. It felt easy. Natural.

I saw the smile spread across her face as she ran back to her house to collect her blanket and her own dolls. The screen door on her house slapped shut behind her, and I could hear her calling something inside, her little feet pounding against the floor. A few seconds later she came flying back out, arms full, almost dropping her things in her hurry.

We sat there, me with my blanket and my dolls a deep shade of brown like me, Susie with her dolls, same pale shade of pink like her. We arranged them in rows, made up stories, made them talk to each other using tiny high-pitched voices. We laughed when one fell over. We traded them back and forth like we were exchanging treasures. We were having fun just the two of us on that beautiful July day. No rules. No grown folks. Just dolls and imagination stretched out under the open sky.

As we were playing I hear, “get away from that nigga,”

The words didn’t sound like they belonged in that soft afternoon. They cut through it. Sharp. Loud. I turned to find Susie’s mom red-faced, looking straight at me. Her eyes weren’t confused. They weren’t playful. They were hard. Her face looked like she had bitten into something bitter.

Susie quickly jumped up, collected her dolls and blankets, said a quick “bye” with a look of confusion and regret in her eyes, and ran to her mother, who grabbed her and quickly walked Susie into their house. Susie didn’t look at me long, just enough for me to see that she didn’t understand either. Or maybe she did and didn’t know how to explain it.

The screen door slammed again. This time it didn’t sound playful. It sounded final.

I sat there alone and confused, I had never heard that word before, and the way she said it and looked at me. It wasn’t just a word. It was the look. The way her face twisted when she said it. Like I was something dirty. Something dangerous. Something that didn’t belong in the same sunlight as her child.

The dolls were still sitting where we left them. One had fallen over when Susie jumped up. I stared at them for a moment, trying to make sense of what just happened. The breeze still moved through the driveway. Cars still passed. The sun still shined. But it felt different now. Like something invisible had been placed between that house and mine.

I went in the house looking for my daddy. The cool air inside hit my skin as I stepped through the door. I knocked on his office door. He kept it closed when he was working, like whatever happened inside that room was important.

When I heard him say, “come in,” I opened the door popped my head in and I said, “daddy what’s a nigga?”

The word felt strange leaving my mouth. Heavy. Wrong.

He looked at me with such anger and confusion. His eyebrows drew together to form a deep V. “Where did you hear that word?” he asked. His voice wasn’t loud yet, but it was controlled in a way that made it feel serious.

I replied, “The lady next door told Susie to get away from that nigga.”

My daddy jumped up so fast, and the next thing I knew, he was out the door. The front door swung open hard against the wall. I followed as far as the doorway, but I stayed inside and watched as his fist pounded on Susie’s door.

When the door opened, I could see Susie’s mom standing at the doorway safely behind the screen door. I couldn’t hear everything my daddy said to her from where I was standing, but I think I heard him call her a “peckerwood” or something. His voice was low but forceful. Not begging. Not asking. Telling. There was no confusion in his stance. No shrinking.

Then he walked back to the house, and he said to me, “She won’t be calling you that again anymore.”

He didn’t tell me what the word meant.

October 1954- Brenda Grade: 3rd

I did a half twirl as I watched the pretty dark blue dress flow back and forth. My hair was done up real pretty, pressing it smooth and neat, and my skin seemed to glow from the amount of cocoa butter I generously applied, making sure no speck of ash was left untended. I turned this way and that in front of the mirror, admiring the way the dress moved when I did.

My daddy knocked lightly on the door and then opened it. He smiled when he saw me admiring myself in the mirror.

“I hope she left some cocoa butter for us,” he said as he chuckled softly.

I simply giggled as I returned to the foreign image of myself in the mirror, taking in every detail as if I were looking at someone new.

“Are you ready?” he asked me.

“Yup!” I replied, my pride showing as I eagerly nodded my head.

“Grab your coat. Let’s go. I’ll meet you in the car.”

I hurriedly ran to grab my coat and dashed down the steps toward the front door. By the time I reached the back seat of the car, my daddy was unlocking his door.

Tonight₂ would be just me and Daddy.

Parking downtown was an interesting experience, and we had to walk some time before we made it to the line. I was in awe of all the large buildings and the bustling atmosphere. The sidewalks were full of people, mostly white folks, moving quickly from one place to another. There were not many I could see that looked like me and my daddy with our deep brown skin.

The entire time I held my father’s hand as Daddy guided me through the dense number of people lining the sidewalks. The line seemed to go on and on. I do not know if that was a factual statement or one rooted in excitement and impatience.

We were outside the biggest building I had ever seen up close. As we got closer to the front, I could read the letters on the white backdrop framing the front of the theater.

A Star Is Born.

The sign was lit up with lights that looked like the stars of the night sky. The glow from the marquee stretched out across the sidewalk, shining down on the crowd gathered below it.

As we made it closer, I could smell the tantalizing scent of popcorn drifting through the air, buttery and warm. I could see the crowds of white people occupying the space around the entrance, laughing and talking as they waited their turn.

Then I did notice the Black people.

We were guided to the balcony.

The farther we went up, the darker the faces became.

I followed my daddy, excitement overflowing as I climbed the steps behind him. I was excited all the way up to our seats in this tiny little spot at the top. But the higher we went, the more my excitement dimmed. The seats were close together, and they looked a lot less comfy than the ones we could see on the lower levels.

I looked up and smiled at my daddy.

I could feel the tension coming off him.

He smiled back down at me, but it wasn't the same happy smile he gave when he first saw me admiring myself in the mirror. It was the smile he gave when I walked into a room, and him and Mama used to argue, and he didn't want me to know.

This wasn't the first time we were treated differently because of the color of our skin downtown.

I could recall not being able to sit down at Krusty's with their hoagie sandwiches and good chili dogs. We had to stand and eat, and they weren't even that good. There were even stores that would refuse to let me try on shoes because I was colored.

Tonight, I sat in the colored part of the balcony with my daddy, and I wanted to enjoy my night. This wasn't the first or last time this was going to happen, but it was the first time I got to see a movie up on the big screen!

I couldn't wait to get back to school to tell my friends I got to go see a movie downtown

November 1954- Jessie Grade: 2nd

In my house I was the firstborn of my momma and daddy. I wasn't a boy, but among my siblings I was the leader, the top dog. My mom was a Black woman married to a Mexican man, and I enjoyed being a mix of the two. It was important for us to know our Mexican family and culture. Being Black was also important to me. I was aware there were people who did not like us because we were Black. I was mixed, but in the eyes of society I had a Black mother so I was Black. Racism was a part of our everyday life, but I've never had any issue with who I am.

We moved from Kansas City, Missouri, in November. The school year was already well on its way. First day I walked into D.A. Holmes Elementary School I remember how big and intimidating the school seemed. The building stood tall, the hallways wide and busy with children moving in every direction. Kids of all shades of brown filled the halls, scuttling along the floors trying to get to their classrooms before the bell rang. Their voices bounced off the walls in a mixture of laughter, chatter, and hurried footsteps.

Me and my Mama were headed to the office so I could get enrolled.

I held close to her side as we walked through the hallways. Everything around me felt new and unfamiliar, the sounds louder than what I was used to, the building bigger than any

school I had seen before. I remember looking up at the ceilings that seemed so high and watching the older kids move with confidence like they already knew exactly where they were supposed to be.

On the way to the office there were several teachers who stopped and smiled at us. They greeted my Mama politely, asking if we needed help finding our way. The smiles on their faces felt welcoming, and the smiles on the children's faces as they passed by gave me a unique sense of comfort. It felt like a place where people recognized one another, where children belonged.

By the time I was done with enrollment and the counselor showed us to my new classroom for my first day, my nerves had started to settle a little. My Mama got to walk me to my class, which made the moment feel a little less frightening. Having her beside me made the long hallway feel smaller somehow.

The counselor knocked gently on the door before entering.

Inside the room, rows of small desks were lined neatly across the floor, each one occupied by a student. As the door opened, a room full of expectant faces turned toward us. Some of the children leaned forward in their seats, curious about the new girl standing in the doorway beside her Mama.

My new teacher stood near the front of the classroom.

She was a pretty lady with big brown eyes and a smile so warm and friendly that I couldn't help but smile back. There was something about the way she looked at me that made me feel seen, like she was happy I was there and not just another student filling a seat.

For that moment I thought everything would be OK.

I thought I would like this new school.

The room felt safe, the desks looked neat and orderly, and the voices of the other children sounded friendly as they whispered to one another, wondering who the new student was.

My Mama squeezed my shoulder gently before stepping back toward the door, giving me a look that said I would be just fine.

In that moment, standing there in that classroom with that teacher smiling at me, I believed her.

The feeling only lasted a moment.

When the school year came to an end, I would no longer be attending D.A. Holmes.

With the recent passing of Brown II, I would be attending Milton Moore in Kansas. All of my classmates had always been similar to me. They were all Black or of mixed race, children who came from families that looked like mine and neighborhoods that felt familiar.

Today, me, Inez, and my sister, the entirety of the Black student body at Milton Moore, were on our way to school.

I was lucky. Me and Inez were in the same class. My sister, who is three years younger than me, had a different classroom. Even though we all walked together, once we stepped inside those doors we went our separate ways.

It was a warm day for February. The kind of winter day that gives you just a little break before the cold settles back in again. We all wore our coats, but we didn't need our gloves and scarves. The air had that soft feeling that comes when the snow has melted and the ground is beginning to thaw.

The closest elementary school to our house, Greenwood, was about four blocks up the street from me. It would have been wonderful to only have had to walk those four blocks that day.

But that was not the school we attended.

Instead, we went to Milton Moore, which was eight blocks in the opposite direction because of the redistricting of the school zones. While other children from our neighborhood walked toward Greenwood, we walked the other way, past houses that were less familiar and streets that didn't quite feel like ours yet.

Our footsteps echoed softly along the sidewalk as we made our way down the street, the three of us together. The morning air carried the sounds of doors closing and children calling to one another as they hurried along their own paths to school.

There we were, me, Inez, and my sister, the three Black girls walking toward a school where we were the only ones who looked like each other.

Eight blocks felt like a very long walk.

I would classify myself as a confident child, however, looking at Margaret, I became slightly self-conscious, as I was more than aware that there were six people between me and her, and I had yet to find a successful exit from the tragedy waiting for me. I counted the paragraphs between me and her. I was hoping for a short one, maybe a one- or two-line paragraph, but no such luck.

I frantically rehearsed my paragraph in my head, line by line, word by word. I knew the words, every single one of them, if only the road from my brain to my mouth wasn't congested with constant traffic.

For me, I excelled in school. I was especially good at math. Numbers made sense to me; they stayed where you put them and followed rules. But what I did not like was reading, which was the precise subject we were working on. Reading out loud.

I watched as my teacher leaned against her desk, focused on Margaret, ready to interject a word or two if needed, but it was never needed. Margaret read with ease, the words rolling off her tongue like they had been waiting to be spoken. Slowly but surely, each student took their turn reading their paragraph. Each word sounded like a distorted echo through the blood pumping in my ears.

Sam was up next, then me.

I ran through the words several more times in my mind. Sam finished his last word and looked up with a proud smile spread wide across his freckled face. The teacher returned his smile, and maybe it was my imagination, but her smile seemed to widen as she turned to me, and her eyes softened when they met mine.

I quickly averted my eyes as my last hope of defiance.

The classroom felt still, almost too quiet, the kind of quiet where every shuffle of paper and every scrape of a chair leg echoed louder than it should. The afternoon light came through the tall windows, stretching across the wooden floors and the rows of desks. The smell of chalk dust and old books lingered in the air.

She called my name.

I looked up to meet her eyes one final time as I accepted my fate, gathered my pride, and found the paragraph I had almost committed to memory. I took a breath and started.

“T-t-t-the...”

The stutter came out immediately, catching on the first word like it always did. But I braced myself and kept going, slowly working my way through the rest of the paragraph, pushing each word forward one at a time.

When I was done, I looked up and met my teacher's eyes. She nodded once, smiled gently, and moved on to the next student.

I made it through the rest of the reading session with only having to read one more short paragraph.

August 1955- Guyetta Grade: 4th

Mama had four babies. I was the oldest. Then there was my younger brother, who's eighteen months younger than me, with his real deep, deep, deep dimple. Then when I was four my mother had the twin girls with big, beautiful eyes.

I was the one who didn't talk much. I was the quiet one. When we went places, there was often too much going on with the other kids. Their voices filled the room, their energy bouncing off the walls, and I found myself shrinking back from it all. I was always told to sit down and be quiet.

In my immediate household I felt like I was neglected, not because Mama didn't love me, but because there was just so much to do and so many little ones to care for. They were so busy taking care of all the other kids, and I was the oldest. A lot of times I was just left out. I had to rely on my grandma, my aunts, and my uncles who were close in age to me, some of them around five to nine years older than me. They filled in the quiet spaces.

My grandmother graduated valedictorian from Langston in 1922. That was a feat that Black women in that day did not do. She had worked hard, studied hard, and carried herself with the pride of a woman who knew education meant something. But when she came to Kansas City, they told her they had their quota of Negro women teaching at that time. She couldn't teach.

She had an education, but she couldn't use it.

She ended up cleaning houses because she couldn't get a job. An educated Black woman, scrubbing floors and dusting furniture in other people's homes.

Then that man she married, my grandfather, he barely had an eighth-grade education. But Grandma didn't see him that way. He was her first student.

She brought him all the way through college. He went through theology college because Grandma made him go. C.V. Bowie Reverend C.V. Bowie.

She told him he couldn't preach without it.

So, she taught him. She taught him how to write, how to read deeply, how to put sermons together. If he was going to preach about the prodigal son, she would make him write it all down on a piece of paper first and then bring it to her so she could see it before he ever stood up to preach about it.

She believed if you were going to stand before people and speak the Word, you needed to know what you were talking about.

This particular August day was a treat.

I was sitting on the front pew of the church next to Grandma as she beamed up at my grandfather with a mix of love and pride as he took the pulpit. Mama had fixed my hair real pretty, pressing it neat and tying it just right, and I had on a real pretty yellow dress with a white bow at the collar and my white sandals.

The church was full that morning.

The ladies in the congregation had their hand fans working steadily to combat the August heat. The soft flutter of those paper fans filled the room like wings beating the air. After a spirit-filled praise and worship, many of them had sweat lining their upper lip, but the hats were firmly in place, wide brims, bright flowers, lace, ribbons, and feathers sitting proudly on their heads.

The air was thick with warmth, perfume, and the lingering sound of voices that had just finished singing.

My grandfather stood tall behind the pulpit.

“Today we want to uplift Mamie Till Mobley in prayer,” he said, his voice steady but heavy, “as she has to endure the pain of doing what no mother should ever have to do, lay to rest a child well before their time.”

The room grew quiet.

“We all know what they did to that child. A horrific death and the pain rippling throughout the nation in the Black community.”

Some of the women lowered their heads.

“Let us name this for what it is,” he continued. “Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old Black boy, was murdered because of racial hate. Today we lift up not only his family, his soul, and his mother in prayer, but we pray for all the little Blackgirls and boys in our communities.”

His voice softened.

“Now I invite you to close your eyes and bow your heads with me.”

Reverend C.V. Bowie said it respectfully, the kind of respect that filled the room.

I closed my eyes and bowed my head.

But curiosity got the better of me.

I peeked through one eye as my grandfather led the congregation in prayer for the lady Mamie and her son Emmett. Some women pulled their children closer to their sides. Others had tears slowly falling down their brown cheeks.

I caught my grandma looking at me with a sad smile on her face.

And when I looked closer, it looked like there were tears in her eyes.

But why?

I didn't fully understand.

Did we know Mamie and Emmett?

Should I be sad too?

As he finished the prayer, a collective "Amen" ran across the church like a wave.

For the remainder of the service, I sat and observed. I had so many questions and thoughts occupying my mind that I didn't even know the service was over.

My grandma gently called my name.

When the pews began to empty and the congregation slowly made their way outside, Grandma took my hand and led me to a quiet spot near the steps of the church. The warm August air wrapped around us, and I could still hear the soft murmurs of the ladies talking as they gathered their purses and fans.

"Grandma," I asked softly, tugging at her hand, "who was Emmett?"

She looked down at me for a moment before answering. Her eyes were thoughtful, the way they always were when she was deciding how best to teach something important.

"Baby," she said gently, smoothing the front of my dress, "Emmett was a little boy not much older than some of the boys you play with."

"A little boy?" I asked.

"Yes," she said quietly. "A child. Just like all the children running around this church today."

"Then why are people crying?"

Grandma took a slow breath and looked out across the churchyard before answering.

“Because sometimes the world can be cruel to people who look like you and me,” she said. “And sometimes things happen that are not fair and not right.”

She knelt down so that her eyes were level with mine.

“That boy was hurt because he was Black,” she continued softly. “Some people in this world believe foolish things about who we are. They think because God made our skin brown that we are somehow less than them.”

I frowned, trying to understand.

“But that’s not true,” she said firmly, tapping my chest gently with her finger. “And the most powerful thing you can do in a world like this is know the truth and learn everything you can. Knowledge is one of the highest forms of intelligence.”

She stood up and took my hand again.

“That’s why you must pay attention to what is happening around you,” she said as we walked slowly down the steps. “And that’s why you must get your education. When you know better, you can stand taller in a world that sometimes tries to make you feel small.”

I looked up at her, still holding her hand tightly.

I didn’t understand everything she said that day.

I understood that it mattered.

September 1955- Marvinia Grade: 5th

My childhood felt secure until we were forced to move.

I went to Attucks Elementary on 19th and Woodland. It was the center of my world as a child. I walked those streets every day, passed the same houses, saw the same neighbors sitting out on their porches. Everything felt steady and familiar.

We had built our own institutions, our own culture.

Until fourth grade.

As a child, you don't always understand the reasons behind those kinds of decisions. You just know that suddenly your things are being packed up and the place you know is no longer where you are going to wake up in the morning.

When we moved to 20th and Wabash I was still able to attend Attucks Elementary.

We were what you would call poor.

I didn't know it at the time.

No one in my family ever presented life that way. Nobody said we had less than other people or that we were struggling. It was simply the life we lived. We had clothes, we had food, and we had parents who made sure we carried ourselves a certain way.

Everything we had was clean.

Taking care of what was yours was something my mother and father believed in strongly. Clothes were pressed, floors were swept, and the house stayed in order. My father used to say, "We take care of our own."

Living in a little apartment we had to share one bathroom and I had to share a bedroom.

But everything was clean.

Outside the apartment building was nothing but dirt. The manager never planted any grass. Instead of letting it sit there looking ragged, the mothers in the building would send us children outside with brooms.

And we would sweep the dirt.

No really, they made us sweep the dirt. We would sweep that ground until it looked smooth, almost like a carpet stretched across the yard. The mothers stood nearby making sure we did it right.

They always found something for us to do.

That was the kind of upbringing we had.

Things changed when we moved to 28th and Wabash.

This was the first time I had my own room. I remember standing there looking around that space, realizing it belonged just to me.

Here I realized the different social standings among our own people.

When I started attending D.A. Holmes, I saw that many of the students came from homes that felt different from mine. Their mothers were educators. Their fathers had professional jobs. They came from educated homes, so they were like “better” than us.

No one said those words out loud, but you could feel the difference in the way people carried themselves.

The neighborhood itself had its own quiet rules too.

Growing up, there were certain children we simply didn’t interact with. The children who went to Catholic schools were not allowed to play with the rest of us. Their parents kept them separate. Sometimes it also had to do with church. Families from certain denominations, like Church of God in Christ or Jehovah’s Witness, believed everyone outside their church was a heathen.

That was just part of the neighborhood.

We noticed it, but we didn’t let it bother us. We laughed about it and went on about our business.

School became a place where I simply did what came naturally to me. I had been placed in accelerated classes, though no one explained that to me. They didn’t use words like “advanced” or “gifted.”

They simply said, “She’s smart.”

I didn’t know I was smart.

I was just being myself.

March 1956- Brenda Grade: 5th

The air in the classroom felt thick. Was it me, or did the walls even look tired? The fluorescent lights buzzed just a little too loudly, and every scrape of a chair against the tile sounded like it was happening right next to my ear. Our teacher seemed to be having a bad day, or something was going on. Her heels clacked across the floor in an aggressive cadence, faster and sharper than usual, and she kept sighing before every word as though we were the reason she was breathing so hard.

None of her questions made sense. They were the kind no one really knew the answer to. The kind that felt like traps.

I sat hoping she didn’t call on me because I had no inkling of what was going on. I’d been trying to piece it together, watching other people’s mouths move, flipping pages when they flipped pages, but to no avail.

Of course, she called on me.

The room got really quiet, the kind of quiet that makes your ears ring. What did she ask me? I didn’t know. I didn’t even know what page we were on anymore. And I told her just that.

“I don’t know.”

The words came out small, but honest. Why was *I don’t know* not a suitable answer? I really just didn’t know.

My stomach was already in knots, but she continued.

“You don’t know because you’re not paying attention...”

Her voice got sharper, louder, stretching my name out like it was something sour in her mouth. She kept talking, but I don't remember much of what she said. The words just started floating over my head, blending into the hum of the lights and the heat creeping up my neck. I could feel all eyes on me. Some curious. Some thankful it wasn't them.

Until she finally stopped talking to me and moved on to her next victim.

The teacher stepped out of the room for a few minutes.

Finally, a moment to breathe.

The whole class exhaled at once like we'd all been underwater. A couple of kids started whispering. Someone laughed a little too loud. I just sat there staring at the pencil marks carved into my desk, tracing them with my finger.

Today had just been a day.

I was honestly ready to go home. I could already picture the screen door slamming behind me, the smell of something warm in the kitchen. I hoped my mama had a snack ready when I got home. Something sweet. Something that made everything feel normal again.

School usually wasn't like this for me.

At home, school mattered.

My family pushed us. Everyone in my family had a degree except for me, and they had all come through Black colleges. Education was something they took seriously. When I came home from school, they wanted to see the grades. They wanted to see the homework. When you finished with it, if it wasn't done properly, you did it again.

There wasn't any discussion about that.

It was demanding, but they were engaged. They were involved in what I was learning. There was an expectation that you were doing what you were supposed to do.

That was just the way things worked in our house.

Normally, I liked being in school, surrounded by my friends, the chatter before class, the notes we passed back and forth, the little inside jokes that made the day go faster.

Just today felt different.

It felt like the day had singled me out.

When the teacher came back into the room, I tried my best to avoid any type of confrontation and attempted to look like I was paying attention. I sat up straighter. I nodded at things I didn't understand. I copied notes even when they didn't make sense.

Then there was a knock on the classroom door.

The teacher told whoever it was to come in. The knock was firm. I looked up out of curiosity, and my stomach immediately dropped through the floor as my mama walked in.

The room didn't move, but it felt like it tilted.

She briefly scanned the room until her eyes landed on me. In that moment I wished with all my might I was invisible and she couldn't see me, because the look on her face was murderous and it was aimed right at me.

Her jaw was tight. Her lips pressed thin.

She didn't say a word.

She didn't need to.

It took my mama what appeared to be two steps, two superhuman steps, to cross that room. Her shoes hit the floor hard and purposeful. That was when I noticed the belt in her hand.

The leather hung loose at first, but I knew what it meant.

The class gasped before I did.

She snatched me up out of that seat so fast my chair fell backwards with a loud crash that echoed off the walls. She whooped me right there in front of the whole class.

I had no time to protest, but I had time to cry out, “No mama, please,” my voice cracking and desperate. My pleas fell on deaf ears as she continued with the whooping that felt like it lasted an entire lifetime.

Each lick stung hot and sharp, my legs jumping with every strike.

Through my tears everything blurred, but I could still see them, my classmates staring in astonishment, mouths slightly open in shock. Some looked down at their desks. Some covered their mouths.

Nobody said a word.

The teacher stood off to the side, stiff and quiet.

The belt snapped through the air again and again until it was finally over.

When she finished, she put me back in my seat like nothing had happened. Like this was just another lesson.

My legs were shaking. My face was wet. My pride was somewhere on the floor next to where my chair had fallen.

She leaned down close enough for me to smell her perfume and quietly told me,

“Let your teacher call me again and tell me you’re not participating in class, and me and my belt will be sitting next to you.”

I believed her.

April 1956- Jessie Grade: 5th

Being the only Black student in the class was something I learned to carry early.

When I went to school over there, everything on the surface looked right. The teachers, the classrooms, the routine of the day. The learning itself was really popular with them. The teachers were serious about teaching. And those teachers were committed in ways you don't see much anymore.

They all lived out off Main, around 51st and Main. It didn't matter how much snow was on the ground. It didn't matter how bad the weather was or what kind of storm had come through the night before.

Teachers didn't have cars back then. They rode the buses.

They would ride that country bus all the way down to 31st Street and get off and walk the rest of the way to the school.

They were always there.

Sometimes the teachers riding the bus down 31st would get there before us. Sometimes they would beat us to school. The teachers would still be there, stepping off those buses, walking up the block, ready to teach whoever walked through those doors.

They had that kind of commitment.

They were there to teach the kids, and it didn't matter who you were.

Me being the only Black student in the class, I was always aware of it.

In class, I always was a rebel.

I was still part of the Black side of the room. That's just how it was sometimes. You could hear things being said from the other side, little words floating across the classroom like they thought nobody would notice.

I always noticed.

Sometimes I would hear something said over there on the other side of the room and before I even thought about it, I would get up, walk across the room, and start beating up everybody sitting over there.

Not one person in particular either. Just whoever was sitting there.

Then I would leave.

I wouldn't wait for the teacher to say anything. I'd walk straight out of the classroom, go right down the hall to the principal's office, and sit there quietly because I already knew that's where I was going to end up anyway.

And that was alright with me.

Walking home was an in-between space. Not quite school, not quite home. A stretch of sidewalk where you could shake off the day or let it follow you all the way down the block. The air always felt different after that last bell rang. Lighter. Louder. Kids spilling out in every direction, voices layered on top of each other, shoes scuffing against concrete, somebody always running when they didn't need to.

This particular day wasn't much different. It was a Thursday, nothing special. The kind of day that doesn't announce itself as important, forgettable. The sky was clear, not too hot, not too cold. I was walking home with Sally, she usually walked with us after school for about two or three blocks, and I had to walk further down 31st street. We already passed the house with the barking dog that threw itself against the fence every afternoon like clockwork. Our bookbags bounced against our backs in rhythm with our steps.

As we were walking, Sally stopped and looked at me. She didn't just glance. She stopped. Turned her whole body toward me like she was about to say something serious. She said, "Jessie, can I ask you a question?" She didn't wait for an answer; she never did, she just went on to ask, "How do you all know when you are clean?"

The question hung in the air between us. It didn't land soft. It didn't land playfully. It landed strange.

Was she asking because I was Black, how did I know when I was dirty opposed to when I was clean? No, no, that couldn't have been the question. My mind tried to rearrange her words into something that made more sense. Maybe she meant something else. Maybe I misheard. Maybe she was asking about laundry. Maybe she was asking about baths. Maybe I was thinking too much.

While my mind was processing, my body was reacting and I felt myself go from 0 to 100. It wasn't gradual. It wasn't thoughtful. It was instant. Like something lit a match inside my chest. My ears got hot. My hands clenched without me telling them to. I didn't even remember deciding to move. I just did. I beat her up. Simply fist to flesh a couple times and pushed her to the ground and continued walking home.

Her body hit the pavement with a dull thud. Her blonde hair splayed out across the concrete. She started crying right away, loud and shocked, more than hurt. I left her lying on 31st and Kensington and continued my walk home. I didn't look back. My heart was pounding so hard I could feel it in my throat. My hands were shaking, but my feet kept moving steady. Each step felt heavy and light at the same time.

When I got home my grandmother, my mother's mother, was in the kitchen. As I sat my bag down on the kitchen floor she looked over and asked me how my day was. She must have seen something on my face because she didn't ask with a smile on her face, her face showed hints of concern. Her eyes narrowed just slightly. She wiped her hands on a dish towel and leaned her hip against the counter, waiting for my answer.

I told her, “Sally asked me how do Black people know when they are clean,” those may not have been her exact words, but that’s what she meant, “so I beat her up. I don’t know what’s gone happen cuz she was still on the ground when I left.”

The words came out plain. No drama. No tears. Just fact.

My grandmother looked at me for a moment and I couldn’t really tell what she was thinking. Her face didn’t move much. She just studied me. Then she simply says, “and you ain’t still beating her ass?”

I go, “well no, I left her there.”

She nodded slow. Not approving. Not condemning. Just taking it in. Then she turned back to the stove like the conversation had settled itself. Like she had measured the situation and found no emergency in it.

The next day on my walk to school I didn’t see Sally. I was prepared to defend my stance. I had my explanation ready in my head. If a teacher had anything to say I would tell them what really happened and why Sally deserved to be left there lying on the ground.

Nobody said anything. I didn’t get a call to the principal’s office about how poor little Sally’s mother was outright distraught this happened to her daughter. My teacher didn’t mention it and Sally didn’t say a word. She came back eventually, quiet, eyes forward.

Nobody said or did anything like that again.

June 1957- Guyetta Grade: 6th

Uncle Chester did not stop by often, so when he did it was a treat. He was the kind of man who didn’t rush into rooms; he observed first what others overlooked and was constantly seeking new ways to understand the world around him. That was his way. Uncle Chester was not loud and demanding like other men I knew; he was thoughtful. Calculating. He was a man who carried books under his arm the way other men carried tools. He was a librarian and a history

teacher, the kind of man who believed the world could be understood through the understanding of history and through the world of literature.

On this particular summer day, I was curled up in a chair near the window, knees tucked under me, chin resting on the armrest. My siblings were running around the house, and I was just still blending into the surroundings. The kind of stillness adults sometimes mistake for boredom. The summer air was thick outside, cicadas humming, children somewhere down the block playing and yelling. I found more intrigue at this moment, being indoors in the cool air.

Uncle Chester stood in the doorway for a moment before speaking. He had that way about him, studying people the way he studied a text. He noticed something in me. I don't know if it was the quiet. The restlessness. Or the way my eyes seemed to be searching for something even when my body wasn't moving.

He walked over and sat down across from me. "You look like you need something to do," he said, half smiling.

I shrugged.

He reached into the worn leather bag he carried and pulled out a book. It was thick and heavy. The kind of book that made your wrist bend slightly when you held it. *Jane Eyre*. Nine hundred and eighty-seven pages. It might have been the largest book I had seen in my short ten years. He simply said, "if you need to, you can escape the world by reading books."

He handed me that book: *Jane Eyre*. He didn't explain the plot. Didn't summarize it. He simply said, "Put yourself in this book. We'll discuss it when you're done."

Put yourself in this book.

Not read it.

Not finish it.

Put yourself in it.

How was I going to put myself into the nine hundred and eighty-seven pages? Was I deep enough to encompass the width of the challenge?

At first, I read slowly. Trying to understand every word, then something shifted. The house would go quiet at night, and I would slip into that world. The cold halls of Lowood. The ache of loneliness. The hunger for independence. I found myself in Jane's stubbornness. In her refusal to shrink. In her longing for something more than what was handed to her.

As promised, I began to disappear into the pages. The escape into a world so unfamiliar, yet oddly symbolic of my own life.

Days went by. Then weeks. The summer sun would rise and fall, and I was somewhere else entirely. I wasn't just reading a story. I was living inside it. I would sit in that same chair by the window, in the same stillness, on another lane created by Brontë. I was elsewhere. In England. In drawing rooms. In quiet rebellions.

When I finally finished it, I went looking for Uncle Chester like I had accomplished something sacred.

He didn't ask me if I liked it. He asked me what I saw.

And we talked.

He didn't talk to me like I was a child unable to comprehend. He talked to me about characters, what surprised me, and what I noticed. We talked about power, morality, and how women survive. He listened to me like my thoughts mattered. Like, my interpretations were worthy of examination. Like he could see me. That book changed everything.

Reading became my escape, my outlet my mirror, and my weapon. I was armed with the knowledge to explore, to fantasize, to dream, and to imagine.

From that point on, Uncle Chester guided me through books, novels, and historical accounts by Black authors. He curated my education in a way that made me hungry to learn. He

didn't just hand me stories. He handed me perspective. Frederick Douglass. W.E.B. Du Bois. Zora Neale Hurston. Narratives of resistance. Accounts of wars. Stories of migrations. He would say, "History is not dates. It's decisions."

That's why I love history, it's storytelling.

What Uncle Chester provided me was a portal to entire worlds. He showed me that a girl curled up in a chair in the middle of summer wasn't idle. She was waiting for a door. And he handed me the key.

July 1957- Jessie Grade: 6th

I'd been sitting around waiting for Monday. Oh, but not just any Monday, it was the first Monday of April. The kind of Monday that felt like a holiday in our house. The bite of the winter cold has receded, and the smell of spring filled my room from the window left slightly ajar. It carried that fresh, damp-earth scent, mixed with something sweet blooming somewhere nearby. I watched the morning breeze dance through my curtains as I snuggled deeper into the covers of my bed, eagerly waiting for my mother to pop her head into the room to tell me to get ready for the day. The light outside illuminated the room soft and golden, stretching across my floor and catching the edge of my dresser.

My outfit lay neatly on top of my dresser with my shoes resting on the floor, awaiting the day's adventure. The dress had been pressed the night before, every crease sharp, every seam straight. I had run my fingers over it more than once before going to sleep. The first Mondays of the month were special in our home; my mother always went downtown to pay the bills on that first Monday of the month, and she would bring my little sister, little brother, and I along with her. It wasn't just errands. It was an outing.

Finally, she pops her head in my room, "Jessie, I know you're up. Come on and get dressed so we can eat breakfast before we leave," she said with a smile on her face as she went to

make sure my brother and sister were awake. She always knew I was up. I quickly washed my face and brushed my teeth. The water was cool on my skin, waking me up fully. I took extra care getting dressed. I didn't want to wrinkle the dress that my mother took so much pride and care in pressing the night before. I slipped it over my head gently, smoothing it down with both hands. We always wanted to look our best when we went downtown.

When I finally made it to the kitchen table for breakfast, my mother was fussing with my baby brother, and my sister and father were seated at the table eating their cream of wheat with a little dollop of butter and a sprinkle of brown sugar. The steam rose from their bowls in thin wisps. My father read the morning paper between bites, his glasses low on his nose. I sat down and ate as fast as I could while being careful not to spill. I didn't want a single speck of cream of wheat on my dress.

Once we were all fed and my mother made her final inspections of us, making sure we were well oiled and properly put together, faces clean and clothes tidy. She straightened collars. Wiped the corners of mouths. Smoothed hair. We said our goodbyes to my dad, and we were headed to the bus stop. On the first Monday's, we were able to ride the bus downtown, pay your fare, and get a transfer to get us home. That transfer felt important, like a small ticket to the world beyond our block.

We boarded the bus, paid our fare, and found seats. The bus was crowded, so my siblings and I sat while my mother stood. She held onto the metal pole steady as the bus lurched forward. I could see her reflection faintly in the window above us, always watching, always aware.

I sat with my face pressed to the window, watching the neighborhood, houses, and people change the further we got from home. The small houses gave way to taller buildings. The sidewalks got busier. Storefront windows grew larger and shinier. We took the bus from 31st Street all the way to 12th Street. The ride felt long and exciting at the same time.

When we got off the bus, I noticed Christie's on the corner of 12th and Main Street. The sign stood tall and bold, announcing itself like it belonged there more than anything else. If you walked into the front door of Christie's there was a counter, a huge eating area that was right there. You could sit down in chairs or up at the counter. No Blacks could sit there or eat there. Blacks would have to go down the steps on the side of 12th Street to get their food. Down the side. Not through the front.

We walked past Christys and my siblings, and I were on our best behavior as my mother paid the bills. She moved from office to office, envelope in hand, calm and composed. Downtown was really segregated, so I was aware of the different looks from white passersby. Some looked through us. Some looked at us too long. I felt it, even if I couldn't always name it.

A couple of blocks away from Christies was Woolworths, they were a diner that would let Blacks sit at their booth at a counter. The windows were wide and bright. You could see people sitting inside from the street. When my mother finished paying the bills, we would head to Woolworths and get a booth. Sliding into the seat at the counter felt like a small victory. Like we had earned it.

We each were allowed to order a chili dog and root beer. The chili dog came wrapped in paper, warm and messy, the chili spilling over the sides just enough to make you careful. The root beer came cold and sweet, bubbles rising up to the top. Oh, we thought we was something sitting at the counter getting to eat a chili dog and root beer. We would sip slow at first, trying to make it last. We would glance around like we belonged there, because in that moment, we did.

My mother didn't get anything for herself; she never did. She just made sure we had something to eat. She would sit across from us, hands folded on the table or resting in her lap, watching us with quiet satisfaction.

November 1957 - Mayola Grade: 6th

There were parts of the city we simply did not go.

Nobody had to write it down or put up signs for us to understand it. Everybody just knew where the lines were. Where we were welcomed and where we were not.

Where I grew up, our world stayed mostly between 9th Street and up to about 27th Street. That was our boundary. We didn't cross 27th. There was no reason to. Our families were there, our churches were there, our friends were there between these boundaries. Everything we knew existed inside that stretch of streets.

Truth be told, we didn't spend time worrying about white folks the way people might think. We weren't even thinking about them like that, because we weren't going into their areas anyway. Our lives were happening right there in our own community.

The first time I remember going beyond those streets in a real way was during a parade.

I wasn't just watching it. I was in it.

All of us had lined up early that morning, dressed and ready, waiting for the parade to begin. The band was playing, people were laughing and talking, and the excitement moved through the group like electricity. When it was time for us to start moving, we stepped off together, walking the route while people stood along the sidewalks watching.

I remember feeling proud being there in the parade, moving down the streets with everyone looking on.

What stayed with me the most was how far we went.

The parade kept moving farther and farther south, past the places I normally walked, past the streets that were familiar to me. Before I even realized it, we were down near 31st Street.

I had never been that far out before.

When the parade ended, people began breaking off in different directions, heading home with their families or friends. But I lingered a little while, just looking around.

It felt like I had stepped into another part of the city entirely.

The houses looked different. The streets felt wider. Everything seemed bigger somehow. I remember standing there just taking it all in, turning my head slowly like I didn't want to miss anything.

Then I saw it.

Central High School.

I stopped right there in the street and stared.

"Look at that school," I remember saying to myself.

The building seemed enormous to me. Bigger than any school I had ever seen. It stood there solid and wide, almost like a landmark in a place I had never known existed. I just stood there looking at it in awe.

Up until that moment, I had never even been out that far in the city.

Eventually I turned and started the long walk back home to 14th and Lydia, but my mind stayed on that school the whole way.

Not long after that, I would be going there.

When it came time for me to start junior high, I knew things were changing. The world I had grown up in between 9th Street and 27th was no longer going to be the only world I moved through. School was about to take me beyond those familiar streets.

My mind flashed back to the news sweeping the nation earlier this year. Going back to Central High School in Little Rock Arkansas and the Little Rock Nine. They were trying to attend Central High School there, and the whole country was watching. Crowds had gathered

outside the school, soldiers were called in, and those students had to walk through angry people just to get into the building.

People were still talking about them.

They were just students trying to go to school, students like me. The way people reacted made it seem like they were doing something dangerous. For the first time, I began to understand that crossing into certain school spaces meant more than simply going to class.

Next year, I would be my turn to cross that boundary at Central Jr. High, here in Kansas City. I carried a little nervousness with me. I had once stood on 31st Street staring at that big school in amazement.

I've always been excited about school. For the first time my nerves outweighed my excitement. I was more nervous.

Now I was about to walk into a school world that was changing across the entire country.

May 1958- Jessie Grade: 6th

Growing up in the 1950s, racism is not something I sit around analyzing every day. It is simply part of the air around us. You grow up with it the way you grow up with certain streets you know not to cross or certain doors you know you cannot walk through. It is real, but at the same time it becomes something you learn how to move around.

One place where that reality shows itself clearly is Fairyland Park, the amusement park out at 75th and Prospect.

All the children know about Fairyland. You hear about the rides, the lights, the sounds, the music playing through the park. It is the kind of place a kid imagines visiting all the time. For us, the colored folk, there is only one day we are allowed to go.

Just one.

The day the Kansas City, Missouri School District is allowed to go.

All year long you hear about the park. You hear other kids talk about it, but you know you cannot just go whenever you want. There is a single day marked out for us, and that is the only time the gates open.

Even that day comes with mixed feelings.

Some Black parents don't even allow their children to go. They say if you can't go any other day, then maybe you shouldn't go at all. They don't want their children walking into a place that makes it clear you are only welcome on special terms.

My parents let me go.

I remember the excitement building as that day approaches. All of us talking about it at school, imagining what the rides will be like, what we will see when we get there. When the buses finally pull up and we climb aboard, it feels like an adventure.

The park is just as big and bright as everyone said.

I can hear the rides moving before we even get through the gates. Music playing, people laughing, the smell of popcorn and cotton candy floating through the air. For a moment, it almost feels like we are just like any other children visiting an amusement park.

Then I notice the things that *are* different.

The swimming pool is closed.

They shut it down before we arrive.

We all know why.

They say it quietly, but everybody understands it. They don't want Black children in that water, because when the park opens again, white children will be swimming there too.

The rides are open, the games are open, the music is playing, but that water sits there untouched.

Closed.

Even as a child, you notice.

Yet, I am still a kid. I run from ride to ride with my friends whose parents also let them come. Laughing in between rides and the uncontrollable scream that wrestles the air from my lungs when the rides drop. I spend the little bit of money I have on games and candy, no reason to save it.

For that one day, I exalt in what is offered.

It is the only day I am allowed to be there.

Growing up during that time, you learn how to live inside those contradictions. How to feel the excitement of being somewhere special while also understanding the limits placed around you.

It is simply part of the world we are living in.

September 1958- Donna Grade: 7th

I never found out there was a problem with racism until I got back to Kansas City. Before that, my life had moved across several places. I had lived with my aunt and uncle, moving from California to El Paso, Texas, and finally, in the seventh grade, it was decided that I would go back to live with my father.

Walking into the first day of school was still disorienting for me.

Kansas City felt different. The air felt different. The streets looked familiar in a way that still made me feel like an outsider. Everything about returning felt like stepping into a place I was supposed to belong to but had not quite grown into yet.

My father had remarried, and my stepmother walked through the front doors of the school with me that morning. She just happened to be the counselor at my new school, Lincoln Junior High, a predominantly Black junior high school. She walked beside me calmly, like this was just another ordinary morning, but I was taking in everything around me, the voices in the hallway, the clanging of lockers, the sounds of running feet as students hurried to make it to their first hour.

Her role that day was to help make sure I got to the right classes and acclimated seamlessly. She walked me down the halls, pointing out classrooms and teachers' doors as we passed them. At the same time, I knew something else very clearly.

She would be the first person to know if I stepped out of line.

My routine at home was centered around excellence. There was no such thing as just getting by. I was constantly pushed toward high achievement. My father was the first motorcycle cop in Kansas City, Kansas, and he was also a very famous teacher for musicians. He was kind of a big deal in that world. It seemed like all the famous musicians out of Kansas City were his students, Charles Barker, Max Roach, Ella Fitzgerald, Bobby Baker, to name a few.

Music lived in our house the same way air did. It moved through the rooms, through conversations, through the rhythm of our daily routine.

My father was also a psychologist. When you coupled that with the fact that my stepmother was the school counselor, my household became a very educational environment. There was structure. There were expectations. There was discipline.

I was pushed to study six hours a day and practice the piano for three hours. That meant one and a half hours in the morning before school and another one and a half hours in the evening. There was no negotiating that schedule. The expectation was that I would maintain straight A's at all times.

Failure simply was not part of the vocabulary in our house.

I would like to classify myself as a high performer, but the truth is that nothing less was expected of me. Excellence was not celebrated as something special—it was simply the baseline.

Outside of my parents' expectations, when I moved back to Kansas City the environment changed. The people around me were hostile. They were unfriendly. The white people, that is.

They would knock you down if they could. Sometimes literally, sometimes in ways that were quieter but just as clear. You had to learn how to move, how to step aside, how to avoid confrontation before it started.

You just had to get out of the way.

Because of this, my parents would not allow me to go certain places. There were parts of town that were simply off limits. There were situations they would not allow me to enter.

At the time, I was performing at the University of Missouri Conservatory of Music. My world became centered around the professionals who were training me. Those were the people my parents trusted. Those were the spaces I was allowed to occupy.

They protected me carefully. Anyone who was not supposed to be around me was not allowed to get next to me. I moved in very controlled circles, school, home, the conservatory, rehearsal rooms filled with instruments and sheet music.

And I knew I was being protected from these mean people.

What I did not understand at the time was why.

I did not understand what their problem was. I did not yet understand the deeper workings of racism the way adults did. To me, it felt personal.

I just thought there was something wrong with me.

Why couldn't I be treated nicely?

Why did they look at me the way they did?

Those questions settled somewhere deep inside me, and the only answer I could come up with was that I had to work harder. If these people did not like me, there had to be something wrong with me. I must not have been acceptable. I must have been lacking something.

So therefore, I had to prove to them that I was qualified and acceptable.

I had to show them that I deserved to be there.

That meant I had to work the way my daddy used to tell me.

Three times as hard.

I had to be three times smarter and work three times as hard in order to be accepted.

And that became the rhythm of my life.

April 1959- Joyce Grade: 7th

My first experience with an integrated school came during the semester I spent at Central Junior, which eventually carried over into Central High School. Until that point, I had never attended school with white students. Every classroom I had known before then had been part of a segregated system. That was simply how school had always been organized in my life.

My school years had begun in Oklahoma, in segregated classrooms where everyone around me looked like me and where the teachers were Black. From there I moved to Kansas City, Kansas, where the pattern remained much the same. Those early years shaped how I understood school, how I moved through hallways, and how I expected to be treated in a classroom.

Everything I knew about education had been built inside those spaces.

Things shifted after my mother passed away.

When I entered Central Junior, it was the first time I found myself in an integrated environment. The hallways looked the same as any other school, lockers lining the walls, students moving in clusters between classes, but the experience was different in ways that were

impossible to ignore. New faces, new dynamics, new tensions that I had never had to navigate before.

It was in that environment that some of my earliest lessons about integration really began to unfold.

One particular morning made sure I would never forget it.

I had finally had enough.

I made the mistake of reaching down to pick up the books Tanya had just knocked out of my arms when she kicked them further down the hallway. I lost my balance and tumbled to meet the floor. This is not how I planned to start my morning, I thought, as I made sure to keep my skirt down as my bare legs kissed the cold floor.

The hallway was already buzzing with the noise of students making their way to class, lockers slamming shut, voices echoing against the tiled walls. No teachers in sight. I watched as Tanya and her friends laughed and pointed. Their laughter bounced down the hallway like it was the funniest thing they had ever seen.

I quickly got my books together as Tanya shooed me with her hand, waving me off. “Be a good little girl now and run along.”

Something snapped within me.

I had enough. I was tired of them bullying me day in and day out. I never did nothing to nobody, let alone Tanya and her friends. People always think it’s the white kids that bother you, but it was the Black kids that was bullying me.

I whirled around to face her, looking into her round brown face with dark brown beady eyes too close together, her stout nose and wide mouth stretched across a large smile showing slightly yellowing teeth. She wasn’t what you would call a pretty girl.

“I’m done with you thinking that you can treat me any kind of way,” I snapped.

They laughed.

“Ohh yeah?” she said. “What are you going to do about it?”

I gripped my books tighter to my chest.

“I’m gonna tell the principal.”

I had never told anybody before today. Never even tried it. It was something I could endure, until today. I typically tried to focus on my schoolwork and keep to myself, but Tanya just wouldn’t let me be, and I was tired of her treating me this way.

I saw anger flash across her face as she pushed me. I fell again, my backpack cushioning my fall as I reacquainted myself with the floor for the second time this morning. My books fell out of my arms as I tried to brace my landing. I laid there for a moment, partially stunned.

Tanya leaned down close enough that I could feel her breath against my ear.

“You better not tell anyone,” She whispered, “or I’ll make sure you regret it.”

She kicked my books for good measure and walked off with her friends trailing behind her.

I steeled myself, picked up my books, and ran straight to the principal’s office.

I didn’t hear from Tanya or her crew for the rest of the morning. I walked the halls between classes with my head held slightly higher. At lunch I sat in my usual spot in the cafeteria, absentmindedly munching a carrot and looking around.

Still no Tanya.

Wonderful.

After lunch, on my way to art, my favorite class this semester, I turned the corner and came face to face with Tanya and her folks. She smiled and balled up her fist, hitting it against her palm. The smile wasn't a happy smile. It was a menacing smile.

"Guess you didn't believe me when I said don't tell nobody," she said. "But here I am, and here you are."

Her eyes darted to the left, looking over my shoulder.

"I'll see you after school. Just wait."

She said nothing else, just turned and made an abrupt exit as though she had seen something or someone she was eager to avoid. She simply turned around and started walking down the hall.

"Just wait," she called behind her.

I turned and saw Principal T walking down the hallway, my temporary salvation. He nodded in my direction. I nodded back, but my mind was replaying Tanya's words over and over again. *Just wait.*

The rest of the day went by in a blur as I sat with my eyes trained on the clock. Typically, the second hand takes its time, slowly ticking down the minutes until we are free to go home. Today it was mocking me with its speed.

I watched intently as it made its final journey around.

I sat in my chair as the final bell rang, signaling the day had come to an end, along with my protection.

My teacher walked over to my desk as I sat there several minutes after the bell had rung. She asked if I was okay. With a weary smile on my face, I nodded my head.

"Everything is fine," I said.

I stood up and grabbed my backpack off the back of my chair. I slid one arm into one strap, followed by the other. I held my head high and walked out the classroom door, telling my teacher bye on my way out.

Making my way down the hallway toward the main exit, I had made up my mind. I would face whatever Tanya and her crew had waiting for me. I was determined not to let her get the best of me this time.

I walked out the door, greeted by the scent of spring and a soft breeze crossing my face. I surveyed the area, noting that most everyone had already started their journey home, with only a few stragglers left on the front lawn.

There was no sign of Tanya.

Not wanting to test my luck, I began my walk home.

“Hey.”

I heard someone call from behind me. I didn’t turn around. My pace may have quickened slightly.

“Hey.”

I heard it again, closer this time.

I stopped, planting my feet and preparing for the worst.

When I turned, it wasn’t Tanya and her group standing in front of me.

Instead, it was a different group of girls.

My lungs released the breath I hadn’t realized I had been holding.

Kansas City had different groups of gangs around the city, and standing before me were a few of the girls from the 31st St. gang, a group of hard-looking girls slightly older than me.

All I could do was stand there and wait. For what, I wasn’t sure.

“Your name Joyce?” the girl I instinctively knew was the leader asked.

I stood there for a minute before nodding my head.

“We heard,” she said, gesturing to the group behind her, “someone was going to get jumped today. Was that you?”

With my worries said aloud, I could only think back to Tanya’s threat. *Just wait.*

Not knowing what else to do, I nodded again.

“Don’t worry bout her. She won’t be doing nothing to you. We made sure of that.” She informed me.

I stood there in slight disbelief. Why, they didn’t know me from Adam. They just heard someone was getting jumped that day.

That was a start to a lifelong friendship.

July 1959-Marvina Grade: 8th

Sunday afternoons had a rhythm to them.

Church would end, people would stand outside talking a little while longer than they planned to, and eventually everyone would begin making their way home. For me, though, the day was not quite finished.

Almost every Sunday, my best friend Mary and I would stop by to see my grandmother.

By that time my grandmother was already 81 years old. To us, she seemed like she had lived through everything there was to live through. Her house carried the quiet comfort of someone who had settled into the later years of life. She kept the kinds of stories that only came with age.

Mary and I would walk in still dressed from church, sometimes holding our shoes in our hands if our feet were tired from the walk. My grandmother would be sitting there, already expecting us, like she knew we would show up.

We would sit and talk with her for a while.

Sometimes the conversation was serious, but most of the time it wasn't. My grandmother had a way of saying things that made us laugh. She would say something plain and matter-of-fact, the kind of comment only an older person could make, and Mary and I would look at each other trying not to burst out laughing.

Eventually we would leave the house walking back down the street, laughing about something Grandma had said.

At the time, it just seemed funny to us.

We were young girls, still trying to understand the world, and some of the things she said sounded old-fashioned or strange to our teenage ears.

Grandma wasn't just talking.

She was passing down little pieces of wisdom, the kind that only makes sense after you've lived a little longer yourself.

I cherished those Sundays spent with my Grandma.

She was passing down not only stories, but she was sharing with us our legacy!

February 1960- Mayola Grade: 8th

Winter at 13th and Wabash had its own rhythm.

The cold would settle in heavy, and the mornings often began with snow packed along the sidewalks and piled up against the curbs. Even in the middle of winter, the neighborhood moved with a sense of purpose. School was important.

There was a lady in the neighborhood, her daughter used to say she was everybody's shoe cleaner. On snowy mornings she would be out there early, making sure the snow was cleared so the children could get through without slipping. People looked out for one another like that.

Families, especially the mothers, stayed involved with the school in ways that felt constant. Some of them would be there from the morning bell all the way until the end of the school day. They helped watch over the children, helped in the classrooms, and stayed after school while parents came to pick their kids up. School wasn't just a building where lessons happened. It was part of the community.

I loved going.

I had nice teachers. I enjoyed my teachers. They were the kind who paid attention to their students. They noticed when you were doing well and made sure you knew they were proud of you.

One winter everything seemed to pause within the unknown.

I came down with pneumonia.

At first it just felt like a cold that wouldn't go away. Then the coughing got worse, the fever came, and before long I was stuck in bed while the rest of the world kept moving without me. Days stretched into weeks. I ended up being out of school for nearly a month, maybe even two.

For a child who loved school the way I did, that was hard.

Every morning, I would think about the classroom I wasn't sitting in. I wondered what lesson they were learning that day. What assignments I was missing. What the other children were doing while I was lying there trying to get well.

I kept worrying I was going to miss something important.

Something would happen that day and I wouldn't be there to see it.

My teachers did not forget about me.

They made sure I stayed connected to what was happening in class. Work would be sent home so I could keep up. Messages would come back telling me what the class was learning and reminding me that they expected to see me back when I was well.

That meant something to me!

It told me I still belonged there, even when I couldn't sit in my seat.

When I finally got strong enough to go back, I remember how happy I was walking through those school doors again. Seeing my teachers, seeing my classmates, hearing the familiar sounds of the classroom, it felt like coming home.

I had learned a lot in grade school. Thanks to my teachers who had a way of encouraging me that felt like I could achieve anything.

One teacher in particular loved my handwriting. I had very nice handwriting, and I took pride in it. I would take my time forming each letter, making sure it looked just right across the page. When she looked at my work she would tell me how beautiful it was.

Her words, the attention, made me feel so good.

In sewing class, some students thought the teacher was mean, but she really wasn't. She just knew what she wanted from us. She wanted us to learn, to do the work correctly, and to take pride in what we were making.

I liked that class.

I learned how to work all the machines in there, and before long I was ahead of most of the class. I would finish my work and be ready to move on to the next step while everyone else was still catching up.

One day I was ready to sew my piece together with the base stitch, and the teacher stopped me.

“Now you have to wait,” she said. “You’re ahead of the class.”

I remember thinking, *Oh my God*.

She was one of the best sewing teachers we had. She knew exactly how to teach us and how to keep the class moving together.

I enjoyed going to school.

I never wanted to miss school. I just knew something would happen.

Being present was a right. It was the way we stayed connected.

May 1960 - Joyce Grade: 8th

Before we moved over to Central Senior for ninth grade, they gave all of us an assessment test. It was supposed to help determine where we would be placed once we got to the high school, what classes we would take and what level we would be in.

At the time, I didn’t think much about it.

I was young and still a little naïve about those kinds of things. To me it was just another test they had us sit down and take, like any other day at school. I answered the questions the best I could and went on about my day without thinking twice about it.

What I didn’t know was that I had placed number one on the English portion of that assessment.

Few people were aware.

One day they called me to the office. In those days, being called to the office usually meant you had done something wrong. Nobody ever called you down there for anything good.

When they sent for me, I immediately felt my stomach tighten.

By the time I made my way down the hallway toward the office, I was already crying.

I was a sensitive girl back then, and my mind was racing trying to figure out what I could have possibly done. I kept thinking, *What did I do? What did I do wrong?*

When I walked into the office, I saw that they had also called my father.

That only made me cry harder.

I just knew I was in trouble.

Not knowing that was the furthest thing from reality.

They had called us in to talk about my placement. They explained that I had scored the highest on the English assessment and that they wanted to place me into a special set of classes once we moved over to Central Senior.

Those classes were what they called “A classes.”

When we transitioned over to Central Senior High School, they had created a group of honors classes specifically for students who had tested into them. Instead of moving through the school individually like everyone else, those of us in the A classes moved together as a block.

We took most of our classes together throughout the year.

Every now and then the schedule would shift a little if someone took a different elective, but for the most part we stayed together, one class after another, moving through the halls as the honors group.

We were the A class.

We stayed together like that all the way through our senior year.

September 1960 - Guyetta: 9th

Walking up those 21 steps into this huge building, I quickly realized I was in a different world. The steps themselves felt ceremonial, long and steep, forcing you to lift your knees just a

little higher with each stride. Central High School was not like anything I had imagined, and it had also been recently redistricted. You could feel it. The shift. The tension. The unspoken recalibration of who now belonged where.

The excitement and nerves of the first day of school hung in the air as freshmen made their way through foreign halls smelling of freshly waxed floors and polished wood. Shoes squeaked against the shine of the tile. Lockers slammed open and shut. Voices echoed, too loud in places and hushed in others. Everything felt oversized, the ceilings high, the hallways long, the expectations even higher.

The door to my first class opened to a new world. My teacher had a pleasant smile on her face that did not seem to make it fully to her eyes. It was the kind of smile meant to reassure but not quite reaching warmth. Looking around, I noticed abruptly, mine was the only brown face in the sea of white faces. The realization didn't arrive gently. It landed hard.

I walked in head held high and took a seat next to the window, the view of the green grass lining the sidewalks and the flow of traffic a quick escape from the growing feeling of unease. The window gave me something steady to look at. Something neutral. Cars passed. Leaves shifted in the breeze. Outside kept moving, even when the room felt still.

Here classes were ranked from A through C. A would be high-achieving Honors. B, Stiving, could swing between A and C. C, intermediate. Several of my friends were on the A-Level sprinkled throughout the hours of the school day. Having A-Level classes meant I was in different classes than most of the Black students, my friends. That separation was subtle but real. Constantly I found myself having to prove myself. Not loudly. Not dramatically. But in small ways. Every test. Every raised hand. Every grade.

Sitting by the window, I would often gaze out the window, listening while watching the world pass by outside of the classroom. I was listening. Always listening. The teacher often

found this time to try to call on me. They thought I was lacking. Thought my stillness meant absence. But as a freshman, the kid was on her job! I knew the material. I had done the reading. I could answer the question before they finished asking it.

Lunch was one of the favorite parts of my day. It was the time I got to hang out with my friends, the Black students. The cafeteria felt like a return. Laughter louder. Voices familiar. Shoulders relaxed. As I was walking out of English, I heard my name being called from down the hall.

“Guyetta!”

I turned and saw Dr. Hayes coming my way.

One thing about the teachers here at Central was the fact they had the letters D.R. in front of their names. This made them stand apart from other teachers in our district. It carried weight. Prestige. Authority. And Dr. Hayes wore it well.

Watching Dr. Hayes walking toward me, my hopes of hanging out with my friends for lunch were fading with each step closer. His stride was steady. Intentional. As he got closer, he said, “You haven’t done your unknowns. Did something happen?”

I refused to meet his eyes. No, nothing had happened. I simply forgot to turn in the assignment and hoped he didn’t notice. Of course he noticed. Usually, my assignments were on time and received full marks. I just got so caught up in the book I was currently reading. I simply forgot.

“No, Dr. Hayes, nothing happened.”

“Wonderful,” he replied calmly. “Go grab your lunch tray and meet me back in my classroom. You can write it during your lunch hour.”

“Yes, sir,” was all I could respond.

At least he didn’t call my mama first.

Those were the last thoughts I had before I made a beeline for the cafeteria, underwhelmed by the prospect of spending lunch with Dr. Hayes. My friends waved me over, unaware that my freedom had just been negotiated away for an essay.

He was a special breed of teacher. To see this white man take an interest in me reaffirmed he cared about my success. He believed in me. He expected more from me because he knew I was capable of it.

So, I guess I can give up a lunch hour.

If I'm quick about it, I can be done with time to spare.

February 1961 - Donna Grade: 9th

We were treated as though we were little subjects.

I remember very clearly. As a school we were a part of a study. I can't exactly remember what the study was called now, but I do remember it was done by a husband-and-wife team. They came into our school with clipboards and quiet conversations among themselves, observing, watching, judging.

They wanted to prove that we couldn't learn.

That was the whole purpose of the study. They wanted to prove that Black children could not learn. That was the assumption they walked in with, they wanted to show how white students were superior.

The study was written to prove that we couldn't learn mathematics. That was one of the things they were focused on.

Long behold.

Instead of proving that we couldn't learn mathematics, it proved that we were outstanding at mathematics.

Mathematics was one of my best subjects. Besides mathematics, I was also very good at Latin. I loved the structure of it, the precision of the language, the way words connected to one another and made sense if you paid close attention.

I was very good with mathematics and Latin.

Of course, I was outstanding in all my subjects.

Education was something that had been poured into me from the time I was very young. My father made sure of that. He taught me about his relationship to Africa, and he never stopped pouring that into me as part of my heritage. He wanted me to know where I came from and what that meant.

He also taught me about his background on the other side. His mother was German. A Black woman being German was something that fascinated me when I was young. It wasn't something you heard about often, but it was a part of who we were.

That heritage was constantly poured into me.

Whenever I ran into somebody who was German and they were indifferent to me, it struck a nerve. It bothered me deeply. Because in my mind I knew there was more to the story of who I was than what they saw when they looked at me.

The way that study worked, though, we were treated more like little subjects than students, indifference. The people conducting it were distant toward us. They watched. They wrote things down. They studied our answers and our behavior like they were collecting evidence.

We were lucky.

We had some very powerful, good teachers.

That's what saved us.

We had the best teachers in the world.

There was Jeremiah Cameron, oh my God, Dr. Jeremiah Cameron. He was our English teacher. Now people would whisper about him sometimes because he was gay, but to us he was just Dr. Cameron, and he was wonderful. He cared about us in a way that you could feel the moment you walked into his classroom. He pushed us to think, to read, to write, to see ourselves as capable of doing great things.

Then there was Ms. McLaughlin, my Latin teacher. She had a way of making a language that was centuries old feel alive right there in the classroom. She believed in us. She expected us to succeed, and because she expected it, we delivered.

Our mathematics teachers, they were a husband-and-wife team whose names I cannot recall. They were amazing.

Our teachers treated us like human beings.

But the rest of the people? That was different.

You knew that Kansas City Central carried a reputation. It was like a representation of “Black, stay out.” If you were Black, people expected less of you. They assumed you were less capable.

We were the best.

We proved that we were the best.

We were the best at everything.

I think that’s what they could not understand.

Everything they tried to say we couldn’t do, we excelled.

I was part of a singing group that would travel for concerts. We went away to perform in other cities and compete with other schools and other states. We would stand on stage, dressed in our concert attire, voices filling the room with music.

Every time we competed, we won.

We won again and again.

They couldn't understand that either.

They came expecting to prove something about us. To label us as incapable. Limited. Stunted.

Every time they tested us, every time they watched us, every time we stepped onto a stage or sat down at a desk to solve a problem, every time they doubted us.

We proved we belonged.

We were not inferior.

March 1961 - Marvina Grade: 10th

My sixteenth birthday was supposed to be a big moment.

Sixteen felt like one of those ages where you thought you were just a little more grown than you had been the day before. In my father's house, turning sixteen didn't change the rules.

That evening I had plans to go out to Bush Rock for a birthday party. Before I left, I did what every child in that house had to do, I asked permission.

"Daddy," I said, "can I go?"

He looked at me and answered the way he always did, plain and direct.

"You better have your *** in here by midnight."

Midnight already felt early, but that was the rule. I said yes sir and left the house thinking the night would go just like any other night out with friends.

Billy Johnson was driving, and we were riding around laughing and talking feeling like the night belonged to us. Somewhere along the way I got tired and fell asleep in the car. I had long hair then, and I remember pulling my coat around me and tucking my hair up while I slept.

When I woke up, I realized we were out at the drag strip.

I blinked, trying to figure out where I was. Somebody else was sitting in the front seat talking quietly. Then I checked the time.

It was two o'clock in the morning.

My stomach dropped.

Midnight had come and gone.

When we finally drove back to my house, the whole ride felt quiet to me even though the car was still full of people. All I could think about was my father waiting at home. We lived on the second floor at 2843, and when the car stopped outside my legs felt weak stepping out.

Sam was with me.

"I'm not scared," he said.

I was. I knew better!

I climbed those steps slowly, my heart pounding the closer I got to the door. My hands were shaking so badly that when I tried to slide the key into the lock, I couldn't get it in right.

The metal scraped against the plate while I stood there trembling.

Inside, my father was sitting there chewing Red Man.

He heard the noise and opened the door.

Sam tried to speak.

"Mr. Branson—"

My father cut him off before he could finish.

“You get your little *** away from my door.”

Then he shut the door.

When I finally stepped inside, my mother was sitting there crocheting.

And crying.

I will never forget that moment.

The next day was Sunday, and there had been a surprise birthday gathering planned for me at Rita’s house. Sam had called my father and begged him to let me come. Rita had even cooked dinner for him first.

The house was supposed to be full, friends, the football team, everybody.

My father hadn’t forgotten the night before.

Before I left that evening, he looked straight at me and said,

“You better have your *** in here by seven.”

Seven.

Not midnight this time.

Seven.

“I don’t give a damn about your birthday,” he said. “Nick kept you out after two o’clock. That was your birthday then.”

I went to the party knowing exactly what time I had to be home.

When I got to Rita’s house the place was already alive with people. Music playing, food everywhere, voices filling every room. The football team was there and just about everybody we knew. For a little while it felt like the birthday everyone had planned for me.

In the back of my mind I was watching the clock.

In my father’s house the time you were given was the time you kept.

As it got closer to seven, Lawrence Brooks drove me back toward home. We were coming down 28th and Bell and the minutes were disappearing fast.

“Lawrence,” I said, “you better hurry.”

He must have been flying down Seventh Street because when the car stopped I jumped out and ran up those steps as fast as I could.

It was 6:59.

I hit the step, slid my key into the door, and stepped inside just before the clock turned.

Just in time.

No matter how big the birthday was, no matter how full the party had been, the rules in my father’s house still stood.

The next morning, just like always, I still had to get up and go to church.

April 1961 - Mayola Grade: 9th

There were little things about yourself you became aware of in school, sometimes because somebody else decided to point them out.

It was my lips, for me.

I have large lips. Always have. This wasn’t something people admired or a trait desired at the time. It was something other children noticed and talked about.

Some of them started calling me “big lips.”

I remember how much that hurt my feelings. It made me cry more than once. After hearing it enough times, I started to believe that maybe my lips really did stand out too much. I became very self-conscious about them.

I refused to wear lipstick.

Girls around me were beginning to wear it. They would pull out their little tubes and put it on between classes or before they went somewhere after school. Sometimes my friends would look at me and ask, “Why don’t you wear lipstick?”

I would tell them exactly why.

“Everybody says I’ve got big lips,” I would say. “I don’t want to put anything on them and make them stick out even more so people can talk about me.”

I didn’t wear it.

Not once through those years.

Still, school, was a place I enjoyed. I liked being there, liked the rhythm of the day moving from one class to the next. I didn’t want to miss anything. If I stayed home for some reason, I always felt like something interesting might happen that day and I wouldn’t be there to see it.

I didn’t want to hear about it later.

I wanted to be there when it happened.

The teachers at Central were good teachers. Many of them were white, and they treated us well. They came there to teach, and they took their work seriously. We had quite a few of them, and they were just wonderful.

We didn’t spend our time fighting with white students or having problems like people might assume. We went to school, did our work, and enjoyed being there.

There was one thing during those years that always gave me a slight pause.

The vice principal.

Every now and then he would call me out of gym class.

At first, I thought maybe there was some kind of problem or that I had done something wrong. When I would get down to the office, that wasn't the case at all. He would just have me sit there while he talked to me.

Just talking. About nothing in particular.

I remember sitting there wondering why I had been pulled out of class in the first place. The rest of the girls were still in the gym, and I was down in the office listening to him talk.

I always had a fleeting thought he might have been trying to flirt with me in some way.

I couldn't say why he would.

I wouldn't say I thought I was pretty, but I knew I looked decent. I had pretty hair and nice legs, and maybe he noticed those things.

I didn't really understand what it meant.

I can't even remember his name now.

He couldn't make me not like school though. Those moments were brief and were outweighed by the many positive experiences I had.

What I remember most about those years is how much I enjoyed school. I liked my teachers, I liked learning, and I liked being part of everything that was happening there.

Missing a day felt like missing something important.

I never wanted anybody else telling me what happened that day.

I wanted to see it for myself.

February 1962 – Marvin Grade: 10th

I was sitting in class, looking at the clock, wondering what the cafeteria was serving for lunch. The second hand seemed to drag, ticking louder than usual, mocking my impatience. I was hungry and could feel the slow aches of hunger beginning to eat away at my ability to focus.

It wasn't a sharp pain, just that steady gnawing in the pit of your stomach that makes every other thought blurry. The teacher's voice floated somewhere in front of me, but it sounded far away. All I could think about was whether it was chili day or those dry hamburgers they sometimes served.

There was a soft knock at the door, and the office aide walked in with an office slip. The room shifted slightly. A few heads lifted. My teacher nods at the office aid, and her gaze glides over the classroom when it finally settles on me with a soft smile. Why she looking at me?

"Marvina, it appears Ms. Carmichael would like to have a word with you."

Of all the people, why Ms. Carmichael.

I gathered my bookbag off the back of my chair as I collected my books and headed out the room. The chair legs scraped lightly against the floor as I stood. I could feel eyes on my back as I walked toward the door. Nobody said anything, but silence in a classroom can be loud.

There was always something a little soothing about the halls when all the students were in class. The noise disappears. The lockers stand still. The air feels cooler somehow. I took my time walking to the office, a hand lay softly over my stomach, food is a necessity at this point. Each step felt heavier than the last, not because of distance, but because of what I suspected this visit might be about.

I walk into the office, present the note, and take a right as I head to the end of the office where Ms. Carmichael's office is located. The hallway there felt narrower. Quieter. I knock, then open the door.

When she notices me, she folds her hands under her breasts, leans back in her chair, and looks at me over her glasses. She motions for me to sit. I sit in the chair closest to the door, in case a quick exit is necessary. You never know.

She just sat there for a minute, looking at me. The silence stretched. She was silently trying to bully me. I made it my mission not to squirm in my chair, even though under my exterior I was really scared. My palms were damp, but my back stayed straight. I took her in, she looked like a big man, square shoulders, wide in the waist and her hips occupied the entire width of the chair. Her presence filled the room.

“Marvina?” she finally says after an eternity of silence.

“Yes, ma’am,” I reply.

“I heard you’re pregnant.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said.

“That true?” she questions as though she didn’t hear my confirmation.

“Yes, ma’am,” I reply for the third time.

“Why did you say that? If you had just said no.”

I was slightly confused at this point. The question hung between us, strange and almost foolish. “Because it’s true. Why should I lie? You called me down here. I’m no bigger than a pencil. You see this baby bump? What do you think it is?”

The room felt smaller after that. I could feel my heart beating in my throat, but my voice stayed steady. I had already made peace with what was happening in my body.

She sighed, and for a moment, I could see something shift in her face. It wasn’t just authority. It was disappointment.

If I had just said no, she could have pretended she didn’t know. She could have delayed the inevitable. In her mind, a pregnancy could be a sentence. A sentence to limited choices. A sentence to hardship. A sentence to becoming another statistic whispered about in hallways. During that time, being pregnant in school was a damnable offense. It marked you. It followed you. It could close doors before you even knew they were there.

“Well, what are you going to do?” she inquired like there were options available for situations like this.

I simply replied, “I’m going to have my baby.”

There was no tremble in my voice. No apology.

“Do you know who the father is?” Now that question was rather insulting. Of course, I knew who the father of my child was. Samuel Bowers, or Sam as we called him. There was nothing vague about it. Nothing careless. Nothing accidental in the way she implied.

They tried to keep Sam out of school and off the team when they found out I was pregnant. But his mother was having none of that. She went downtown and they let Sonny stay because he was an athlete. His talent made room for him. His jersey protected him. But more than that, our families stepped in. This wasn’t a secret. It wasn’t something we were hiding from. It was something we were stepping into.

During this time, you could not be pregnant and go to school. Those were the rules. I was 16 almost 17 and I was supposed to graduate in 1963. I had my baby and took that year off.

But that wasn’t the end of my story.

That year was not a collapse. It was a pivot.

Sam and I married as teenagers. We made a decision. Not because someone forced us. Not because we were ashamed. But because we believed in what we were building. We were young, yes. But we were not reckless. There is a difference.

I stepped out of school for a season, but I did not step out of my future. I had my baby. I became a wife. And I became something else too. Stronger. Clearer. More certain about who I was.

What they saw as scandal, I saw as responsibility.

What they saw as a mistake, I saw as a commitment.

I did not disappear.

I adjusted.

I decided to return to graduate with the class of 64, I returned with more than textbooks in my hands. I returned with a family. With purpose. With a deeper understanding of what it means to choose your life and stand in it fully.

May 1962 - Donna Grade: 10th

The end is near. Summer is on the horizon, and I'm staring at the bold writing of the "I" representing my success, or shall I say lack of success, in world history for that semester. The paper felt heavier than it should have. The ink darker than the rest of the letters on the page. I verified the name on the top; there was no denying it, but how? There has to be a mistake, surely there is a mistake, an "I". My eyes scanned the line again and again as if it might shift if I stared hard enough.

The grading scale denotes "E" for Excellent, "S" for Superior, "M" for Medium, "I" for Inferior, and "F" for Failure. "I" for Inferior. The word itself felt insulting. Inferior. It didn't just describe a grade, it felt like it described a person. The only thing I could think about was my daddy, Dr. Eugene R. Williams. He is a very hard man, of course, he is also a police officer, and no nonsense.

The expectation was for me to maintain straight "E"s at all times. Not sometimes. Not most of the time. Always. There was no world I could bring home an "I" and survive, with the summer close enough to taste the freedom. I could already feel it, the long days, no alarm clocks, the ease of waking up without a textbook waiting for me. It was right there. Within reach.

My choices in the matter seemed minimal, and as the time between when I was to leave school and make it home dwindled, a solution presented itself. What if he never knew? The thought came quietly at first, then louder. It was an "I" one straight line with enough space to

transform from an “I” to an “E” with three simple strokes of the pen! I traced it lightly with my finger. Just three horizontal lines. Clean. Precise. Yes, I can do this. Everything would be okay!

When I walked in the house, I made it to my room, but it was not long before my daddy called me into the living room. His voice carried through the house with authority, steady and direct. He was in search of my report card, knowing they were to be sent home today. Of course, he knew. Of course, he remembered.

I casually informed him it was in my bag in my room. As I went to retrieve the altered document, I steeled myself in my decision and put on my best air of confidence. My heart was beating loud enough to hear, but my face stayed calm. As I handed over the evidence, I made sure my hand did not shake and kept my composure. He looked it over, nodded his head, “Well done.”

Those two words washed over me like a blessing. Well done. I could barely contain my excitement as I took in his pride and knew I’d live to see another day. My shoulders relaxed. My lungs filled fully for the first time since I saw that grade. I had done it. I had outsmarted the system. Summer was saved.

My victory was short-lived.

I neglected to account for the community.

As we sat around the kitchen table to enjoy a meal as a family, my stepmother was the undoing of my freedom. The kitchen light hung low over the table, casting soft shadows across our plates. The clinking of silverware was the only sound for a moment. Then one sentence, “I heard you got an ‘I’ in world history this semester.”

I sat there frozen with my fork full of food halfway to my lips, I could not believe what I just heard, so I pretended not to hear anything. Maybe if I kept chewing. Maybe if I swallowed.

Maybe if I didn't react. My fork completed its journey as I felt my father's eyes instantly shoot to me. The air thickened.

"No, I saw her report card, there were all 'E's," he so kindly informed her. His tone was calm, confident.

"That must have been some sort of mistake, because I know I heard Ms. Franklin very clearly when she called me earlier today to inform me of your progress in her class, she was curious why she had not heard from us. I was very shocked to hear the news, to say the least."

The room went still.

It wasn't just that she called. It was why she called.

Ms. Franklin could not understand why my parents had not come to see about me. I was a very high achiever. That is what she knew of me. That is what the community knew of me. And in our community, when a child underperformed, it was not shrugged off. It was not ignored. It was not accepted as "well, maybe that's just where she is."

No.

They extended themselves.

They called parents.

They showed up.

They asked questions.

They refused to let you slip quietly.

That's what Black teachers did for us. And the white teachers that were essential, the ones who believed in us, they did it too. They did not allow mediocrity to define us. They did not allow a bad grade to become an identity.

I looked slowly between the two. I could see the anger forming on my father's brown face. His jaw tightened. His nostrils flared just slightly. It was not the anger that worried me; it

was the undertones of disappointment I could see in his eyes. That hurt more than any punishment I could imagine. I knew, without a doubt, how important education was in this household. And in our wider community.

In that moment, I saw my appetite fly right out the window, along with my summer.

As a result, I was put on punishment for ten months.

TEN MONTHS!

For ten very long months, my life was a shadow of the comforts I was used to. My stepmother and I have a very unique relationship. When my mother left, she was the one who raised me. She was structured. Refined. Strategic. In our house, my responsibilities were to practice the piano and to maintain my grades.

I was to uphold a level of excellence.

I did not have to cook, wash dishes, or clean the house, but there was a strong level of accountability in our household. Expectations were clear and consequences even clearer. In return for managing expectations and completing my studies and lessons, we went shopping every weekend. My solace.

I acquired at least three outfits complete with shoes, gloves, and a hat to match every week. The saleswomen knew us. They would greet us by name, already pulling pieces they thought would suit me. I would stand in front of the mirror, turning side to side, admiring the way the fabric fell. The click of heels against polished floors felt like music.

All of a sudden, I was not going to go to my normal shopping sessions where they knew I was coming to be dressed for our weekly sessions.

This was tragic for me. Tragic.

The silence of Saturdays felt loud. The absence of tissue paper crinkling and boxes stacking up felt like punishment in itself. The only store I could go to with my stepmother was

the grocery store. For ten months! Aisle after aisle of canned goods and produce instead of dresses and hats. No mirrors. No admiration. Just lists and budgets.

During this time the expectation was to get that “I” up to an “E”.

And that is what I mean when I say our community did not allow us to fail quietly. They did not let us become our lowest performance. They held us accountable because they believed we were capable of more.

That summer school class taught me more than just world history. I got a very hard lesson about discipline. Integrity. And I never forgot.

September 1963 - Mayola Grade: 11th

My mother made sure we were taken care of. We were always dressed well. Our clothes were clean, our hair was done, and we didn’t go without the things we needed. Looking at us, nobody would say we lacked anything.

The one thing I wanted, she would not give me.

I wanted to go with my friends. She wanted me home!

My mother believed a girl belonged at home, and she did her best to keep me there. If I wasn’t at school, she expected me to be in the house. That was just the way she believed things ought to be.

I would watch my friends outside laughing together, walking up the street, heading toward somebody’s house or the corner store, and I wanted to go with them so badly. But my mother would shake her head.

“No,” she would say. “You stay here.”

What made it even harder was watching my sisters once they got older.

When they reached the age, I had been, suddenly my mother seemed to loosen her grip. They could go places. They could be out with their friends. They had the freedom I had begged for.

I remember telling her one day, “You didn’t let me go nowhere.”

She looked at me and said, “Well, you know, I’m tired now. I just don’t feel like worrying about all that.”

I couldn’t help but think to myself, *You didn’t get tired when I was growing up.* When it came to me, she kept me corralled up in that house.

A girl finds her ways.

Sometimes my mother would send me to the store for a loaf of bread. I would leave the house just like she asked, but that quick trip to the store didn’t always turn out so quick. I might not make it back until ten o’clock that night.

When I came through the door, I always had the bread.

Most of the time I would be over on 35th and Bales. That’s where my cousin lived, right by my mother’s sister. That whole little area was where my people were.

My aunt lived there. My cousins lived there. Most of my friends were in that neighborhood too.

They ran track together, hung around together, moved through those streets like it was their own little world. And whenever I could get away from the house, that’s exactly where I would go.

Something about that neighborhood pulled me there.

That’s where my crowd was.

That’s where everybody gathered.

May 1963 - Joyce Grade: 11th

When I'm at Central, things don't feel the way people on the outside might expect them to feel. People talk about race like it is the first thing everyone notices, but walking through those halls every day, that isn't really how it feels to me.

We really don't sit around thinking about race like that.

There are white students and there are Black students, of course. Everybody can see that. We are mostly just students trying to get through our classes, trying to figure out friendships and what the next step in life is going to be.

White students tend to move in their groups and we move in ours, but there are plenty of places where those worlds meet without anybody making a big deal about it.

Homecoming is one of those moments.

When the court is announced, there are Black queens and white queens. Black princesses and white princesses. The same with the boys, Black kings and white kings. The school votes on them together. When those names are called, it isn't separated by race.

It's just who the students choose.

Walking around Central, it feels like something different is happening. It feels like maybe some of the things people worry about on the outside don't quite work the same way here inside the school.

Most of the time we go to class, do our work, laugh in the hallways, and move from one period to the next just like any other group of students.

There is one class where something feels different.

Geometry.

Our teacher stands at the front of the room, wearing one of the same two dresses she always wears. It's hard not to notice, she doesn't seem to care much about how she presents herself. Everyone in the room notices it, even if nobody says anything out loud.

Our class is made up of honors students, the students the school considers the *crème de la crème*. We are used to doing well in our classes. In this room something isn't right.

Our final grades are being delivered and they don't make sense.

Students who normally perform well are suddenly failing. One paper after another comes back with marks that make everyone look at each other in confusion. Only a small handful of students seem to be passing.

It begins to feel like she is trying to fail most of us.

Eventually the situation reaches the counselor and the school administration. Our counselor has always been someone we trust, someone who believes in us and pushes for us to succeed. When they look into what is happening in that classroom, they don't ignore it.

They take measures.

Before long, it becomes clear that the administration has decided it is time for that teacher to retire.

The moment that stays with me happens inside the classroom itself.

She looks out at us one day and says something that freezes the room.

"I'm not used to teaching Negras," she says.

She goes on, "You Negras are different from the students I'm used to teaching."

The words hang there in the air.

Now we understand what we have been feeling in that room all along.

That statement is the overt part, the part she says out loud.

The way she favors only a few students while trying to fail the rest of us, that is the quieter part of it. That is the covert side of the same attitude.

Still, something else becomes clear at the same time.

The school does not let it stand.

The counselor, the administration, the people who have been watching our progress, they step in. In that moment it becomes clear that while the world outside the school might be struggling with integration, inside these halls there are people who expect us to succeed and who are willing to protect that possibility.

October 1963 - Donna Grade: 12th

Order.

That is the word that best describes the life I was living at that time.

Everything around me had order. Everything had expectation. In my household there were rules about how you spoke, how you dressed, where you went, and who you were around. Discipline and education were the center of everything. My family believed that structure protected you and prepared you for the world.

I was not allowed out unless it was spaces deemed appropriate.

Not the way other young people were. I could not simply walk out the door and meet friends somewhere. I was not allowed to bring friends into the house either. My parents believed that the environment inside our home should remain exactly the way they built it.

The gatherings our family hosted were not the kind of parties young people talked about.

They were backyard gatherings.

Very proper.

There would be tables set neatly across the yard with little umbrellas shading the drinks. The women would come dressed in beautiful dresses, hats tilted carefully, gloves folded neatly in their hands. The men would stand in small circles speaking in calm voices, laughing in that quiet way adults laugh when they are trying to remain dignified.

Trays of little cheese sandwiches would be placed carefully across the tables. Small tea cookies arranged neatly beside them. Glass pitchers of lemonade or iced tea catching the afternoon light as people helped themselves.

Everything had order.

Everything had control.

When I found myself outside of that world, it felt unfamiliar in ways I could not quite explain.

There was a boy I knew from school who introduced me to one of his college friends. It did not seem unusual at the time. I had never been around situations like that before, but nothing about it felt dangerous. I was simply standing there, talking, holding a cup of Kool-Aid the way anyone might on a warm afternoon.

I took a sip.

It tasted sweet like Kool-Aid always does, but there was something else in it. Something sharp I could not quite place. I didn't think much of it at first because I had never tasted alcohol before.

I didn't drink.

I had never been around people who drank.

I took another sip anyway, trying to decide what was different about it.

The boy watched me in a way that made me uneasy, though I did not yet understand why. The world around me felt just slightly off balance, like the ground beneath my feet had shifted but I could not see how.

That is when I realized something had been done to the drink.

This asinine individual had spiked my Kool-Aid with 150-proof alcohol.

The realization came slowly, more through the feeling in my body than through understanding. My head felt light. My thoughts were moving slower than they should. I remember looking around, trying to steady myself, trying to understand what was happening.

Nothing in my life had prepared me for that moment.

My world had always been structured, supervised, protected. Now I was standing there in a situation where someone had taken advantage of the very thing I had never been exposed to.

The sweetness of the Kool-Aid still sat on my tongue, mixed with something burning and unfamiliar.

I stood there trying to collect myself, trying not to show confusion on my face. My mind was racing, but my body felt slow.

All I could think was that something was not right.

Something had been done.

In that moment I understood that I had stepped outside the carefully ordered world my family had built around me.

January 1964 - Joyce Grade: 12th

Today was a lazy kind of day, the kind of Saturday where everybody is in their own space doing their own thing. The house had that quiet weekend feeling, where time moves a little slower and nobody is in a hurry to be anywhere. I was sitting on the couch with my drawing pad,

working through a painting that had been sitting in my mind for a while. I just needed to get it out on paper.

I sat there intently focused on my work, the pencil moving across the page while the rest of the house hummed softly around me. Then there was a knock at the door.

I looked up for a moment and glanced around. I wasn't expecting anybody, so I went right back to my drawing. My father answered the door, and from where I sat I could hear voices coming through the hallway.

Then I heard a familiar one.

"Hello," Mr. Stevens said.

Mr. Stevens... the Latin teacher.

That couldn't be right. Why was Mr. Stevens at my door?

Then I heard another voice, Mr. Lawrence. Now him being there wasn't too out of the ordinary, because he also happened to be my cousin. But still, I wondered why both of them were standing at our door together.

My daddy invited them in, and they walked into the living room and took a seat on the couch next to me while I was still sitting there with my drawing pad in my lap.

My daddy looked over at me.

"Go get a cup of water for Mr. Stevens and Mr. Lawrence," he said.

I obediently obliged. In our house that was just what you did when guests came over. So I went into the kitchen, pulled out two glasses, filled them with water, and carried them carefully back into the living room.

When I returned and handed them their glasses, I could hear them already beginning to talk to my daddy.

They were talking about me.

They were talking about scholarships.

I was slightly taken aback, because my daddy had been resistant to the idea of sending me to college. His concern had always been the money and how much it was going to cost him. We had already talked about it before, thought about it, and discussed it, and the conversation had pretty much closed itself. It wasn't something we had brought up again.

It just so happened this year was my senior year and I had been offered three scholarships.

The reason Mr. Stevens and Mr. Lawrence were now sitting on my couch, drinking the water I had just poured for them, was because they wanted my daddy to understand what those scholarships actually meant.

For me.

They wanted him to understand how important it was for me to continue my higher education. They wanted him to understand how much they believed in me.

So, they explained everything to him.

They explained what it would look like for me to accept the scholarships. They explained what life on campus might look like. They told him that while I was there, I could even get a part-time job, working in the cafeteria or someplace else on campus, to help support myself.

They spoke patiently and respectfully, making sure my daddy understood that this opportunity did not have to become a burden on him.

They did this for me because they believed in my potential.

They knew my goals, and they knew that my daddy knew my goals too. If there was a way for me to get there, they believed he would make a way.

If he needed help seeing that path, they were willing to sit in our living room on a quiet Saturday afternoon and help him see it.

Sometimes belief in a young person doesn't stay inside the classroom.

Sometimes it shows up knocking on your front door.

February 1964 - Brenda Grade: 12th

The closer graduation gets, the more my mind starts to wander beyond it.

Kansas City has been my whole world for as long as I can remember. I know the streets, the neighborhoods, the way people move and talk. There is a comfort in that kind of familiarity, in knowing where you belong and how everything fits together. Still, lately I find myself thinking about what exists outside of all of it, what it might feel like to step beyond those boundaries and see something different.

I have never seen the ocean, but I think about it often.

I try to imagine standing there, looking out at water that stretches farther than your eyes can follow, moving in a rhythm that does not stop. I imagine the sound of it, the air, the feeling of being somewhere completely unfamiliar. California feels like something distant, almost unreal, but also possible in a way I cannot quite explain.

Graduation feels like a doorway into that possibility. I do not have everything figured out, and I am not walking toward a clearly defined plan the way some people are. What I do have is a sense that I want more than what I have already seen. I want to experience something beyond the life I have known here, even if I do not yet know exactly what that will look like.

The respect we have molded for ourselves, I carry with me. There is a quiet understanding, I am supposed to move forward, not remain in the same place. The people around

me did not settle. They wanted more for themselves, and they were willing to work for it, to strive, to sacrifice if necessary. Their mindset shaped the way I see my own future.

For me, education has always meant more than just being in school. It meant learning how to think, how to move, how to take care of myself in the world. I have always wanted to be on my own, to stand in a place where I can depend on myself. I understand independence does not come without effort. You have to learn how to read, how to write, how to do something with your hands and your mind. That kind of learning stays with you no matter where you go.

Even without a clear path, I do not feel uncertain in a way that holds me back. I feel ready to step forward, ready to leave what is familiar and discover what else is out there. The impending graduation does not feel like an ending to me. It feels like the beginning of something I have been moving toward all along, even before I could name it.

I may not know exactly where I am going yet, but I know I am not meant to stay where I started.

March 1964- Mayola Grade: 12th

The days leading up to graduation have a way of pulling your thoughts backward, even as everything in front of you is moving ahead.

I find myself thinking about school in a fuller way now, not just moments here and there, but the whole of it. The classrooms, the lessons, the parts that came easy and the parts that did not. I did well in school, not perfectly, but in a way that showed effort and consistency.

Math was my hardest subject. It never settled easily in my mind the way other subjects did. I had to spend more time with it, go over it again and again until it made enough sense to move forward. Even then, I made sure I passed. I can add, subtract, divide, count my money, and for me, that held real value beyond any classroom.

Most of my other classes came more naturally. I understood what was being asked of me, and I stayed engaged. In English, there were moments where I would mix things up or lose my place in what I was trying to express, but I worked through it. I listened, I corrected myself, and I kept going until it came together.

Looking back, I can see a pattern in how I moved through school. I did not walk away from what challenged me. I stayed with it long enough to get through it. That mattered more than anything else.

Now, with graduation close, my thoughts are not only on finishing, but on what comes next. High school feels like something I am closing with intention, not something slipping away. I know what I enjoy. I know what feels natural in my hands.

I like doing hair. I like cooking. I like sewing. There is something meaningful in creating, in taking care with how something looks and feels when it is finished. Those are not just small interests to me, they are direction. Cosmetology is something I am looking toward, something I can step into with confidence.

When I think about where I came from, I think about how I learned to stay steady. I learned how to work through confusion without giving up. I learned how to keep moving even when something did not come easily at first.

All of those lessons sit with me now as I prepare to walk across that stage. I am not focused on what felt difficult along the way. I am focused on what I gained from staying with it.

April 1964 - Donna Grade: 12th

The air is warmer now, softer, carrying that feeling that something is about to change whether you are ready or not. The days move a little faster, or maybe it just feels that way because May is so close I can almost touch it.

Graduation is no longer something distant.

I can see it clearly now. I can see myself in that blue cap and gown, walking across that stage, hearing my name called, feeling my daddy's eyes on me from wherever he is sitting in that auditorium. I can already hear his voice in my head, steady and firm, the way it has always been, reminding me of what has always been expected of me.

Excellence was never optional in our house.

My daddy, the police officer, a no-nonsense man, did not raise me to fall short. My stepmother, sitting in that school every day as a counselor, knew before I ever made it home what was happening in those classrooms. There was no space to hide, no way to slip through unnoticed. What was expected of me followed me from school to home, and I was expected to meet it every time.

Even when I stumbled.

Even when I made decisions I had to answer for.

I always returned to the same expectation, and over time that return became part of how I moved. I sat in those classrooms and paid attention. I did the work. I stayed ahead of what was being asked of me. I did not allow anything, nothing, to take me off track for long, not even the things I did not fully understand yet.

Life had already begun to show me pieces of the world outside of what my parents built for me. Pieces that did not fit neatly into the order I had been raised in. Moments that felt unfamiliar, unstructured, and at times uncertain. Still, I did not lose myself in any of it, because something in me had already been shaped long before I encountered those moments.

Discipline.

Expectation.

Structure.

Those things held.

They held me.

Now I sit in class not just as a student finishing out the year, but as someone standing at the edge of what comes next. College is no longer something people speak about like it is far away. It feels immediate, present in the way teachers speak to us, in the way people ask what we plan to do next as if they already expect an answer.

I have one.

I am going.

This was never really in question, even when life tried to shift my focus elsewhere. Over time I have come to understand how much education shapes the way a person is able to move through the world. I have seen who holds power and how often education sits at the center of it. I am not unaware of the reality surrounding me. Nothing about this world is equal, not in the way people like to say it is, and certainly not for someone like me.

Understanding does not stop me.

It prepares me.

It sharpens the way I move, the way I think, the way I approach what is in front of me. I know I will have to work harder. I know I will have to prove myself in ways others may not. I know I will have to stand firm in who I am regardless of what is placed in front of me.

As April moves toward May, I am not sitting here wondering if I will make it.

I am looking at everything that has already brought me to this point. Every moment I had to correct myself, every adjustment I made, every time I chose to keep moving forward instead of stepping away.

All of it leads here.

When I walk across that stage, it will not simply mark the end of something I have completed. It will mark the beginning of what I have been preparing for all along.

College is no longer just a goal.

It is the next step.

May 1964 - Marvinina Grade: 12th

I find myself thinking about it more now, everything that led me here, not in weighted in heaviness, clarity.

There was a time I could see my path laid out so plainly. I was supposed to graduate with the class I started with, the class of 1963. Walk across that stage with them. Move forward together the way we had always imagined. That picture stayed with me for a long time, even after life began to move in a different direction.

Becoming a mother at seventeen changed everything, not in a deficit, I acquired a new understanding of myself as my responsibilities shifted. I didn't suddenly feel less capable. I didn't question my intelligence or my ability. Those things were always there. What changed was how I understood my role. I began to believe that my responsibilities lived somewhere else, with my family, the one we created.

I came from a place where responsibility was not something you negotiated. You handled what was in front of you. You showed up. You took care of your family. I leaned into that, even when it meant stepping away from something I had been working toward for so long.

Still, something in me did not settle with leaving it unfinished.

It stayed with me quietly, the sense I was not done, I had not reached the end of what I was meant to do. The same upbringing taught me to take care of my responsibilities also taught

me discipline and perseverance. Those things do not allow you to simply walk away. They stay with you. They call you back.

I returned.

Not in the same way, and not for the same reasons. I came back with a different kind of focus, one shaped by everything I had experienced. School was no longer something I was moving through because it was expected of me. It became something I chose to complete. The choice changed everything about how I showed up.

I paid attention differently. I approached my work differently. I understood the value of finishing something I had started, even if the path had shifted along the way. There was no space for distraction in the same way there had been before. I moved with intention because I understood what it meant to step away and what it required to come back.

As I prepare for graduation now, I realize that the path I thought I lost was never really gone. It simply changed shape. I did not graduate when I expected to, and for a time I held this as something I had missed. Standing here now, I can see that what I gained in that shift is something I would not trade.

If I had graduated when I first planned to, I would have walked away with that moment, but I would have missed the people I stand beside now. The Class of '64 has become part of my story in a way I did not anticipate. There is a shared understanding here, a quiet recognition of what it takes to arrive at this point when the journey has not been simple.

It allows me to see this moment not as something delayed, but as something earned in a different way. I am not standing here thinking about what did not happen. I am standing here fully aware of what it took to get here.

Becoming a mother did not close a door for me. It made me more aware of what I was working toward and why. It gave me a reason to move with more intention, to be more disciplined, to carry myself in a way that reflected not only who I was, but who I was responsible for.

When I walk across that stage, I will not be thinking about how long it took me to get there.

I will be thinking about the fact that I did.

May 1964 - Jessie Grade: 12th

The blue cap and gown hang over the back of the chair, pressed and ready for tomorrow. I sit at the edge of the bed for a moment, looking at it, thinking about how quickly these years at Central have passed. Four years ago, I walked into that building not knowing exactly what to expect. Now I'm standing at the edge of graduation, about to step into whatever comes next.

High school has been full of more than just books and tests.

When I think about the classes we've taken, I realize how many different things the school has tried to teach us. It hasn't just been sitting in a desk all day listening to someone talk.

We've worked with our hands too.

In woodwork class we built things, real things out of wood. I remember the smell of sawdust in the room and the sound of the tools against the worktables. We measured, cut, sanded, and shaped pieces until they turned into something useful. When you finished a project and held it in your hands, you knew you had actually made something.

Then there was homemaking.

Boys and girls signed up for those classes. We learned how to sew, how to make clothes, how to cook a proper meal. The sewing machines lined up across the classroom hummed while

we worked fabric under the needle, learning how to turn a flat piece of cloth into something someone could wear.

Looking back on it now, those classes did something important. When we graduate, we won't just leave with a diploma. We are leaving knowing how to do things.

You could build something.

You could cook something.

You could fix something.

School was about becoming a person who knew how to live in the world.

Now, when it came to learning, I realized something about myself along the way. I could sit and listen to a teacher lecture all day long. I liked that part. I liked hearing someone explain things, breaking ideas down piece by piece.

I was good at taking notes.

Give me a lecture and I could outline it, pick out the important points, organize it in a way that made sense. But sit me down with a long book and tell me to read it cover to cover?

I hated that.

Still do.

Listening, organizing information, writing things out, that was the way I learned best.

Somewhere along the way I started noticing that other students were paying attention to that. They would come up to me after class asking if they could see my notes. They knew I had written everything down in a way that made it easier to understand.

I would sometimes laugh and tell them, "You all had the same opportunity I did. You heard the same lecture. Why don't you have your own notes?"

Most of the time I helped them anyway.

It seemed to become part of my role without me even trying. People began looking to me for help or direction in small ways. They trusted the way I organized things, the way I thought through problems.

When I look back at it now, I can see that it says something about who I am.

Yes, I consider myself competitive.

Yes, I consider myself strong.

And yes, in some ways I've become a leader among my peers.

Tomorrow when we walk across that stage and receive our diplomas, the path begins to split for all of us. Some will go straight to work. Some will leave for other cities. Some will find themselves heading into the military.

As for me, I already know where I'm going next.

After graduation I'll be heading into nursing school.

The thought of it excites me. It feels like the natural next step, taking everything I've learned about discipline, responsibility, and paying attention to detail and applying it in a place where it can truly help people.

Tonight I sit here looking at that blue cap and gown, realizing that high school has done exactly what it was supposed to do.

It has prepared me.

Tomorrow, we walk across that stage as graduates.

After that, the real work begins.

May 1964 - Guyetta Grade: 12th

Centralites,

“Great talent is yours to use great need for this talent is here what use you make of the talent you have has been our concern all year Great wisdom is yours to use great need for wisdom is here what uses you make of wisdom you have has been our concern all year great meaning and life is ours great need for meaning is here what uses you make of the two nobody above give meaning to our careers great success in life to you great need for success is here what uses you make of success you have will be our concern and cheer” Principal James F. Boyd.

The day had finally come. As I stand here in my Central blue cap and gown, I can feel the energy filling the auditorium as friends, family, and the Class of '64 settle in, waiting for the procession to start. The room hums with quiet excitement, programs rustling, whispers moving through the rows, cameras being adjusted as mothers and fathers try to find the best view.

We take our positions just as we practiced the day before. We line up in two lines, shoulder to shoulder, ready to walk out together for the last time. Some of us glance at each other, smiling nervously. Others stand still, holding their caps in place, trying to steady their breathing.

The music starts to play.

That's our signal.

It's our time to shine.

There were 680 of us who started here at Central High our freshman year. Today there will be 435 of us graduating. Along the way many fell off the path, some caught up in gangs, some girls who had babies, others pulled away by life and the responsibilities waiting outside these school doors.

Today, 435 of us are still here.

As freshmen, sophomores, and juniors, Central remained predominantly white. The halls, the classrooms, the bleachers at games, most of the faces around us were white. Today, as we take our seats in the auditorium, there are only two white students represented here.

You could see the shift happening in the neighborhood long before today.

One day you had a white neighbor, and before long they were gone. In their place a Black family moved in. Then another. Then another. Street by street the city was changing right before our eyes.

The times were changing.

In many ways, that change was starting with us.

One by one they begin calling our names. Each of us stands when our name is spoken, walking across the stage under the bright lights. When it is my turn, I rise and make my way forward. I shake Principal Boyd's hand and smile toward the crowd where my family sits.

In that moment, it isn't just about me.

Their hopes are standing there with me. Their dreams. Their struggles. All of it is present in that one brief moment as I hold that diploma.

We were the future they strived for.

We were the future they hoped for.

We were the future they prayed for.

We were the future they worked for.

We were the future some of them died for.

As we take our diplomas, we represent change. Something that once seemed impossible now sits in our hands.

The time has come.

The glass ceiling has shattered.

It is our time to step into the world.

Many of us will head off to college, becoming the first in our families to sit in those classrooms. Some of us will soon find ourselves in uniform, heading off to war. Others will travel across the country chasing opportunities our parents could only imagine.

But in this moment, we are still here together.

Our teachers stand on that stage with us, their smiles revealing just how proud they are of what we have accomplished. They have watched us grow from uncertain freshmen into young men and women ready to face the world.

How far we have all come.

This moment is not just for us.

It belongs to our families.

Our grandparents.

Our neighbors.

Our churches.

Our communities.

Every sacrifice, every prayer, every late night and early morning that carried us here is present in this room.

Sitting here in our blue caps and gowns, diplomas in hand, we understand something quietly but clearly.

This moment is not only about what we have done.

It is about the futures that will come after us, futures still waiting to be written.

March 21, 2024 - Me, Jasmine

I couldn't get enough of their history, specifically Central High School Class of 1964's history. My Grandmommie's history. 3221 Indiana Avenue. I walked through the doors of Central High School feeling as though I had navigated these halls across time. Central High School. I place my car keys and phone in the bowl as I walk through the metal detectors greeted by the school resource office with a smile. I hand him my ID, and in exchange, he hands me a name tag, dated 3/21/2024 9:24 am with my name boldly in the middle, HALL PASS, School Visitor Management. Today, the class of 1964 is meeting with the graduating class of 2024 as mentors to share lived experiences, an opportunity to connect generations through time. I am greeted by a graduate of '64. She lets me know she has heard about me and my interest in Centrals class of 64' and that I had a project with some of their graduates. She asked for a copy when I was finished. Humbled. I eagerly agreed, and she informed me the library was across the common space as I walked in the direction the librarian greeted me at the door, and as we were talking, she informed me the library just reopened this year after being closed for the previous three years. It was previously used as a storage space. Now it was a space to host intergenerational histories.

The room was decorated in royal blue decorations with the Blue and white spirit on display. In the front of the library were several wooden square tables enclosed by shelves of books arranged in rows leading to the back of the room. Between the rows of books off to the left of the library a large monitor was set up for Zoom participants. Caterers were setting up food along a side wall, and the 64' graduates were gathered around several tables pushed together to form a long-connected table to the front of the library. I was greeted warmly as though many had been introduced to me prior to meeting me for the first time. They all asked about my project and the history of Blackgirls at Central High class of '64; they all had stories to share, laughs to give.

They met to prepare for what to expect when the seniors arrived in a few short minutes. The plan was simple: fifteen questions prepared by the seniors, small-group dialogue, and space for follow-up conversation. On an average day, about forty-five students attended. If they all showed up, each mentor would sit with five students.

The bell rang, and the moment we all had been waiting for was among us. Students started pouring in and sitting at tables; the back tables filled up fast. The principal welcomed the alumni as living treasures of Central's history. Graduates who had experienced integration firsthand and whose courage made today's opportunities possible. With that, he turned the program over to the class of 64'. My Grandmommie got up and stood in front of the class of 2024 and said, "We usually start the day off with Central's school song. Does everyone know the song." There were several murmurs among the crowd, shakes of the head. It was clear the class of 2024 was not aware; the rupture was undeniable. What had once been daily ritual had become unknown standards. "That's okay, we are going to fix that today. We are passing out the lyrics to the song. If there are not enough, please share with your neighbor." The moment was breathtaking as the voices of 64 led the voices of 2024 through the song honoring their school's legacy and promise. A beautiful way to start off. After everyone sectioned off mentors to their tables and students slowly made their way to their tables. Boys gravitated to the men while the girls gravitated to the women. The movement was instinctive. As I moved from table to table, listening to the girls' questions, I realized this was no longer about memory alone. It was about what survives, what must be restored. Protected.

Before moving I sat and observed everyone. They released each table to get food at the start of the session and as one table of girls and mentor settled in, I walked over and pulled up a chair. "Do you think school was easier for 'y'all back then?" One girl asked. The mentor thought for a minute and answered, "It was different, we had fewer options, but the expectations or our

parents even our teachers were high. Our teachers lived in our communities so they knew our parents, we couldn't get away with a lot of the things you all get away with now. If your work wasn't done you got in trouble at school and at home. Education for us was not optional, at least it didn't feel like we had much of a choice." What she neglected to say, but what I had heard listening to her former classmates was they believed education is no longer valued as it once was and it does not appear the Black child is valued. Respect, honor, and accountability were non negotiables for them it was demanded and did not need to be earned. The students respected their teachers and the school because their parents respected the school. Today it seems the parents are less involved and many only interact with teachers when students are in trouble. The conversation continued around what school was like back in 64. I adjusted my chair to join the table behind me as they were discussing the value of education.

"Why was education such a big deal to you?" a girl asked as I rearranged my chair and smiled at the girls around the table as their eyes briefly slid to me. The mentor took no time before answering, "We knew what our parents knew, what our grandparents fought for, education was the one thing no one could ever take from us. Money, time, jobs, those are things that can be taken for granted even lost. What you know, how you carry yourself, that will become what defines you, what the next generation remembers about you and the impact you have on your family and community. Without education we really have nothing. You have to have something to stand on, something to look back on. Without education can you really understand where you came from? You will have no idea where you are going." I found myself silently nodding along with what she said, but never offering my opinion. In this space my opinion was not important I was here to witness history. I was making my way to another table when I heard a girl simply say, "I don't want to go to college, I think it's pointless." The mentors eyes shifted to me briefly an unspoken understanding.

The next table I chose was towards the back of the library. A mentor was in the middle of a thought, "... teachers knew when we were not giving it our best, they knew when we were trying to blend into the background. They took the time to assess what we were capable of and would not let us hide in the back of the classroom. Our teachers called on us intentionally not trying to catch us not paying attention, but because we had been too quiet. They corrected us, pushed us, and most importantly celebrated us. Being seen wasn't always comfortable, it meant there was a standard you were expected to live up to. They asked of us what we in turned to ask of ourselves, to endure and persevere learn and give it our all." One girl was listening with intent and when the mentor finished talking she quietly added, "Teachers don't tell us as much they think we can do anything. It makes me want to do more." I sat for a moment taking her words in when another girl chimed in, "I don't really speak much in classes, I motivate myself to be stronger and take risks..." these girls were showing their strength, but also showing how they have been overlooked and the ownness seems to weigh heavy on them even though they are motivated to move forward.

"No disrespect, but why does it always seem like we have to justify being ourselves, the clothes we wear, the music we listen to, even how we wear our hair." This was another table a young lady with a side cut and long blue hair framing her face asked. "That's a fair question," the mentor started, "you deserve to be yourself, but you also deserve to fully understand the world you are walking into. The goal is never to diminish your shine, don't let anybody make you believe you are less than. The goal is to put your best foot forward, and sometimes we just wish that foot had a little more clothing on it," some of the girls around the table chuckled at that. She continued, how you hold yourself is the world's first impression of how you respect yourself. Learn the game. Learn the rules, play to win, but that doesn't mean you're being less than, you are not." I smiled at her as our eyes met, I knew what she was thinking, what she

wouldn't say to them, what she couldn't say to them. Nobody really gives a damn if you're Black, she said, because they can see you Black. But you still have to be smarter than the average white girl. You still have to present yourself in a way that you wouldn't be an embarrassment.

When I approached the net table I knew I'd want to sit and stay awhile, "I keep hearing people telling us to learn the history of your ancestors, but if we don't learn it in school, where do we learn it?" A beautiful question, I didn't know this young woman, but I was proud of her for asking this question. There was a slow smile that spread across this table's mentors face before she nodded her head and answered, "When we say learn your history we want you to learn the history outside of the classroom, outside of the generic education that is provided in the U.S Education. Education was once the center of the Black community; you should find out why and help bring it back. Find out your history, where did you come from? Who do you belong to? Where did your mother come from? How did generations before make it through? What did your elders sacrifice to get you where you are today? Black people didn't always have the right to vote. They couldn't always ridge in the front of the bus, couldn't go to any grocery or department store. Why? Find those answers, but don't go to the history books, go to the people. Your grandparents and great grandparents. They hold your history in their stories. That's your culture. That's your lineage. That's the legacy you are to hold on to." I was so expired by her response all I could do was smile and find another table, if i was lucky I could make it to the last table before the bell rang.

Sitting down in an empty chair the mentor was asking her group if they had any closing questions. One girl spoke up, what's something nobody told you that you think we need to know?" Great question! The mentor took her time before she responded, "Understand the beauty in your eyes, your smile, and your curves. You aren't meant to fit in you are meant to break

molds. You are beautiful in every shape and size with good minds and strong spirits capable of anything. Focus. Meditate. Learn all you can. Don't hang around people who aren't doing what you want to do. Choose your friends carefully. Make sure they are headed in the same direction as you." With that the session was over. The 2024 class resident, a Blackgirl, stood up and thanked the class of 1964 for coming back to share their knowledge with them. The bell rang and the seniors of class of 2024 quickly dispersed ready to get to the hall for the brief social period before the start of the next class.

Watching the students merge into the flow of students in the hallway I made my way back to the central table and took a seat at the end. Around me I saw the impact this experience had on the Class of 64' by the gleam in their eyes, the smiles on their faces. A call was made for everyone to sit and debrief at the table. One lady, I believe her name was Joyce, stood and shared, "Thank you for showing up, from the conversations I heard it was great. Many asked different questions. It was a good group of kids." Heads nodded and smiles remained. One individual spoke up and shared, "These kids believe school back in our day was easier than what they endure today. School wasn't easier, it was structured. There were rhythms formed by explicit expectations. When that bell rang, your behind had better be in that seat with your homework ready to be presented. Our papers were handwritten, no matter if it were four pages, five or six. They were also graded by hand. If you took Latin, you took Latin seriously. If it was English, you memorized Dr. Cameron's Dos and Don'ts of English! They, our parents AND our teachers, expected college level effort because college was the goal. We outperformed the other schools because we were poured into! Our teachers saw excellence in us, so they made sure they brought excellence out of us. When we didn't perform, we were held accountable, they corrected us, and made sure we stood tall. We walked across that stage not wondering if we would make it to the next level, we believed in ourselves because our community believed in us!" The passion

coming from this individual was palpable. You could feel the determination she had 60 years ago.

Another leaned back in his chair folded his hands across his chest, pursed his lips nodded twice and shared, “They did believe in us. So, education wasn’t optional. Our parents and grandparents always believed education was the pathway to true freedom, it was the one thing that once you possessed it no one could take it from you. The doors to true freedom were closed to generations before us because of race, our grandparents labored for the right to vote, for the right to make changes, to open the doors for us. We carried that history with us daily as we walked these halls. That’s why we studied, that’s why we rose to excel beyond the standards set before us.”

“You right,” another a woman at the end of the table chimed in, “They wouldn’t even let us slouch. If your skirt was too short, they made you fix it, they didn’t call your mama, they didn’t have it was about respect...”

They went on for a moment before a woman sitting next to me said, “But what are the schools doing for these babies? There seemed to be a theme of lowered academic urgency. No one wants to go to college, and we know college isn’t the only path to success, but they don’t want to do anything. Teachers are overwhelmed students are allowed to disengage silently. The girls at my table some of them talked about how they just blended into the background, where they need to find the motivation within them because their teachers aren’t motivating them. Or they don’t feel their teachers believe in them.” I sat there quietly taking in her statements, wondering how do we fix it. How do we bring back the rigor of writing standards, intentional feedback, accountability, and cultural competency. Is there a way to bring the pride in excellence to the classroom?

Reading my thoughts a man wearing a veteran's cap added, "The culture is missing. They need to integrate Black scholars, they need diversity, these kids need to see Black folks who were inventors, economists, educators and community leaders across subject and time. Not just in February, Black history should be celebrated and integrated they should have pride."

"How can we do that when teachers aren't even teachers anymore?" was the question presented. Several people started to talk at the same time, the loudest most persistent voice stated, "Right, they teachers struggle to *earn* the respect of their students, education is presented through electronic devices and discipline is intermittent. These new age teachers are young without mentors and lack understanding of how to talk to these students of color. And that's the ones who actually have degrees not to mention those who are "emergency certified". The students they feel it, they smell the weakness and they play on that. What we need is mentorship for our teachers investing in teachers. Let the OGs show the newer teachers how to conduct classroom management, demand respect while maintaining relationship, and understand the varying cultures in their classrooms."

A woman leaned forward crossed her arms on the table before she said, "It's not just the teachers or the schools who need to fix things. What about the community? What's our role in this? Back in the day teachers were a part of the community, they lived in our neighborhoods, parents and teachers knew each other outside of the classroom walls. Now, schools are isolated, parents come to parent teacher conferences trying to assign fault to the teachers for their child's bad behavior or failing grades. We need to rebuild the partnerships between not only schools and parents, but the churches and even mentor groups. Normalize the presence of elders in educational spaces." They were on the path to what I could call enlightenment or maybe revolution

What would that look like, I pondered silently, leaning in to make sure I missed nothing. What would wrapping our students, our Black children in community look like for their future development? “Maybe if they saw more community more people together maybe it would be easy to respect their community, their elders.” One voice spoke up and another answered, “I hate to say it but I don’t talk to them anymore. They don’t want to hear what we have to say. They think us Baby Boomers talk too much. They want us to be quiet and die off. So, I just keep to myself now.” It was said with so much defeat I couldn’t help but divert my eyes. The quiet in her voice, the sadness there. I imagine an ache that comes from watching history repeat itself and feeling powerless to intervene. She continued “You know, sometimes I sit and think about how far things have come, and how far they haven’t. When I look at the younger generation, especially these girls out here now, I feel like there’s a huge disconnect. They don’t respect anything, not themselves, not each other, not their elders. Everything is about them. It’s like they believe the world started with them, and it’s supposed to revolve around them, too.” I saw how this landed around the room. The nods of agreement the stoic faces, the hurt, the regret, maybe even guilt. It was silent for a second.

“We can’t just give up,” a voice broke the silence, “they are too precious for us to just give up. These kids may have some entitlement and may be a bit self-centered, but who wasn’t at their age. We just turned into the old biddies we use to complain about back in the day. I can only imagine what it is like out here fighting for their worth, especially our Blackgirls and Boys. I know what it feels like when I look at the television, across all of these Facebooks and Twitters, the standard of beauty they are judged by the way they have become sexualized, the way they are always performing. This social media has really made the main character syndrome more prominent. But we can’t give up on them, not yet not ever. They are still worth it. I think today was a good day! It showed us what we did all of it for, why we walked the halls of Central, why

we went to college, why we continue to speak up, and not silence ourselves. Once we start silencing ourselves, we continue to silence our histories. They have been silenced too long.” The sadness and defeat that momentarily overtook the room was replaced with hope, the smiles returned to their faces.

They wrapped up shortly after with hugs and well wishes. I took my grandmommies bags and boxes as I reflected on the experience along my short walk back to the car.

October 04, 2024 - Me, Jasmine

The GPS directed me to 1722 E. 17th Terrace, Kansas City, Missouri. I arrived late, as usual, circling the block before finding a narrow spot that could be considered a parking spot. I checked the mirror one last time, making sure my blue and white Central Football shirt was intact. Making my way to the front of the Black Archives of Mid-America, I paused ever so briefly. I was standing in front of a collection of Black history, the history of Kansas City. After reading and re-reading, crying, and laughing from the stories shared by the women in my grandmommie's book of knowledge, I found myself in awe of the realization of what was happening in front of me. Walking in and making my way to the second floor, I couldn't believe how nervous I was as I walked into the room. My grandmommie was just in front of me, arriving shortly before I did with my auntie, her sister. When I walked in the room, there was a slight shift in the atmosphere when it appeared all eyes turned to me, the outsider. Curiosity palpable in the room. I wasn't just an outsider. I was legacy. This night signified the opening event for Central High Class of 1964's 60th class reunion. A meet and greet.

When you walked into the room, food tables were lined along the wall to my right with sandwiches, salad, hot dogs, hamburgers, chips, cookies, cake, and drinks. The room was taken over by round tables and chairs with Central's colors decorating the space. Everyone had on the

Central attire as was the requirement. A band played near the center of the room, the saxophone carrying across conversations. The atmosphere in the room was a moment worth reflecting on.

When I saw Ms. Betty, one of my Grandmommie's oldest friends, whose granddaughters I used to play with as a child. She came over and wrapped me up in her smile and a hug, helping ease my feelings of being an imposter. I looked around found there were faces I knew, face I had seen in the book of knowledge, women who's stories I now carried as a part of my own. Since the time of reading their stories and this meet and greet, I had the opportunity to sit down with each of them to hear a little more of their stories to understand who they were.

My auntie made her way to help Grandmommie find a seat. I became a fly on the wall, observing, taking in the scene, remembering every now and then not to stare too long and to keep my mouth closed as I marveled at the ease the class of 1964 fell into step with each other. My Grandmommie brought out several photo albums from her bag, and I watched the album pass from table to table as each person found themselves in the sea of still memories. Then phones began circulating as people searched for each other on Facebook, and people made their rounds from table to table.

I joined my auntie at the food line as someone asked who I belonged to, the question catching me off guard. I simply informed them my Grandmommie's name, that was enough. They already knew who I was and why I was present. They went as far as to thank me for showing up. As I sat there basking in this moment of history, one of the men from the class of 64 took a seat and shared that he had heard I was interested in hearing about the history of the women from his class. He shared the history of the men is just as important, and if I would like, I should find some time to talk to them about it. Honored and in slight shock, I affirmed him and eagerly agreed. I listened as people introduced their new wives, shared stories about their children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren. They reminisced over the days of roaming

the halls of Central High. Until it came time for the group photo. This was my time to engage. I was young and able-bodied; I could move chairs and push tables into the corner and help them set a stage for the group Photo. I even got a quick lesson on how to hold the angle and aim the camera so the cameraman could be a part of his class's history. The night ended as the first fading rays of sunset, and many concerned with their ability to drive in the dark. With the conclusion to the meet and greet, they left before dark, and the memories of the stories, the laughter, lingered. Now a part of the archives.

Part Three: For Blackgirls like Me!

Chapter 5: What Does it all Mean?

The journey through this work has moved across history, story, and shared space, beginning with foundational understandings of Black education, moving through the lived narratives of the Storygivers, and extending into a collective gathering across generations. What began as individual stories unfolded into something larger, where patterns surfaced, connections deepened, and meaning formed across voices, across time, and across experience. This chapter brings those layers together, not as separate accounts, but as a connected understanding shaped through relationship and continuity.

The stories offered throughout this work were never meant to stand alone. Each narrative carries its own weight, yet when placed alongside one another, a broader picture comes into view. What emerges is not a singular account of Black girlhood, but a layered and living representation shaped through community, expectation, care, and cultural grounding. This is where interpretation takes hold, moving beyond description to consider what these stories reveal about how Blackgirls experienced education within spaces built by and sustained through their communities.

This chapter examines how family, school, and community functioned together, holding shared responsibility for learning and development. It reflects on how these experiences speak to, expand, and at times disrupt dominant narratives surrounding segregation, desegregation, and educational progress. The Storygivers do more than recall what happened. They demonstrate ways of being, ways of knowing, and ways of moving through educational spaces with confidence, accountability, and a clear sense of belonging. Their experiences remain active, offering insight into ongoing conversations surrounding Black girlhood and education.

Reading these stories together brings forward new clarity. It allows space to consider what becomes visible when voices are held in relation to one another, what these experiences reveal about education when grounded in care and expectation, and what has been sustained across time. It also creates room to sit with what remains possible.

This is where sense-making settles, not as a final answer, but as a moment of reflection grounded in what has been lived and what continues to carry forward.

Reclaiming Black Girlhood Across Time

When I first reached out, I was unsure what I would find. I expected stories shaped by open hostility, walking through school halls under threat, being called names, navigating spaces where racism was constant and visible. What I received held counter narratives to what I had been taught. The lives of the Storygivers reflected childhoods grounded in direction, in knowing what mattered, and in moving toward something with intention. Segregation and desegregation were present, yet they did not define how these Blackgirls understood their lives. They held goals, they held dreams, and even in moments of uncertainty, they moved with stability and determination.

Their lives were sustained through relationships. Family remained central. Teachers carried influence beyond instruction. Friends were present in ways that moved them through everyday moments. What they described reflects forms of community-centered support long documented within Black educational spaces, where learning extended beyond the classroom and was reinforced through shared responsibility (Walker, 1996; Anderson, 1988). They moved through school not only as students, but as young people connected to something larger than themselves.

Joy appeared throughout their stories. It lived in relationships, in discovering a love of reading, in stepping into leadership, and in choosing kindness even in spaces where it was not always returned. These moments reflect what Black_girlhood Studies has named as spaces of expression, creativity, and presence within everyday life (Brown, 2009). Joy did not sit outside of their experiences. It moved within them.

Each day carried a sense of purpose shaped through what had been given to them and what they were expected to carry forward. Their lives reflect connection to history, to family, and to community. Education was not experienced as obligation alone. It held meaning. It offered connection, growth, and movement into what came next.

What becomes clear through these stories is Black_girlhood has always held more than what is often named. The voices of Blackgirls from the past remain less present in current conversations. Much of what is known has been filtered through interpretation or limited to written record. Bringing these voices forward creates space to understand who they were, what they imagined, and how they moved through their lives in ways not always captured on the page. Oral history reinforces the concept of memory holding meaning beyond documented fact and carries insight through lived experience (Portelli, 1991; Thompson, 1988).

Time shifts what is accessible. Stories held within these women will not always be available in the same way. Without space for them to be spoken, shared, and carried forward, pieces of personal and collective history begin to fade. What is lost is not only memory, but ways of understanding how Black girlhood has been lived.

Black girlhood has been described as fluid across the lifespan (Brown, 2009). What emerges here extends beyond individual life stages and moves across generations. The lives of these women reflect continuity shaped through what has been carried forward. When those

connections are not held, distance forms. Distance creates gaps in understanding, in communication, and in how cultural knowledge is sustained.

This work brings those voices into the present as part of an ongoing conversation shaping how Black_girlhood is understood moving forward.

The method follows what the stories required. Storytelling, narrative analysis, endarkened storywork, and dreaming shaped how these experiences were held and carried. Intergenerational connection and legacy remained central, allowing these stories to exist within a larger continuum. This work was not conducted at a distance. It was personal, situated, and socially meaningful, shaped through lived experience and connection to the community.

Accounts of Black_girlhood often live within archives and written records shaped by others. Those records hold value, yet they do not hold everything. History is shaped by what is recorded and what is left out (Trouillot, 1995). This work returns to those who lived these experiences and invites them into shaping how their histories are understood. Oral history affirms memory as a site of meaning (Portelli, 1991; Thompson, 1988), while narrative inquiry holds experience as storied and situated (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Their stories were offered as foundation. What I carried forward was the responsibility of shaping those experiences into narrative form, drawing from lived understanding while remaining grounded in what was shared. This created a co-constructed space where memory and interpretation exist together.

Ethnohistoric storywork creates space to co-construct the past in ways that allow Blackgirls to understand themselves across time. It holds memory, lived experience, and narrative in relationship, allowing what has been lived to remain present while opening space for

what comes next. Black girlhood moves through these stories as something carried, remembered, and continued, existing across generations rather than within a single moment.

The Black Educational Ecosystem

Education was never intended to function as a simple transactional exchange between teacher and student (Freire & Ramos, 2023). Instead, it operated as part of a larger ecosystem, a system that existed in relationship with other systems within the community. For the Storygivers in this study, their experiences reveal what can be understood as a Black educational ecosystem. Within this ecosystem, education was not the responsibility of a single institution or individual. It was a collective responsibility held by families, teachers, churches, and the broader community.

Scholars such as Walker (1996) and Anderson (1988) have documented the central role education held within Black communities, particularly during the era of segregation. Education was not viewed as an optional luxury but as a necessary pathway toward freedom and possibility. For many families, ensuring that the next generation received an education represented both survival and hope for a future that extended beyond the limitations imposed by racial segregation.

The stories shared by the Storygivers reflect this communal commitment. Across their narratives, education appears as something the community actively wrapped around its children. The responsibility did not fall solely on parents or teachers. Instead, the entire community participated in sustaining educational expectations. Some Storygivers described family members who were highly educated, while others came from households where adults had only completed elementary school. Yet regardless of formal education levels, what remained consistent across these families was a deep commitment to discipline, dedication, and the expectation that children would pursue an education.

Although moments of rebellion or resistance occasionally surfaced, the standard remained clear: obtaining an education was not optional. It was expected. This expectation was reinforced through multiple layers of community support. Churches affirmed the importance of schooling. Families reinforced educational discipline within the home. Peers shared in the rhythms of academic life, moving together through school as part of a collective experience.

Teachers played a particularly important role within this ecosystem. The Storygivers repeatedly described teachers who held students accountable for their academic performance. Missed assignments or failing grades were not ignored; they were addressed directly. In some cases, teachers were willing to visit students' homes to ensure that families were aware of academic concerns or to advocate for students continued educational opportunities. Counselors also emerged as advocates, standing alongside students when they encountered discrimination or barriers within educational systems.

These actions reflect a form of care and accountability extending beyond the classroom walls. Teachers were not simply instructors delivering academic content; they were active participants in the educational development of their students. Their involvement reinforced the broader community belief that education was a shared responsibility.

The Storygivers were fully aware of the historical era in which they were growing up. They understood the presence of racism and the structural limitations shaping the educational landscape around them. Yet their experiences complicate simplified historical narratives portraying Black students during this period only through the lens of oppression. While racism and discrimination were real and present, these women's stories also reveal spaces where Black students thrived, supported by communities that believed deeply in their intellectual potential.

Within the walls of segregated schools and within communities committed to their success, these Blackgirls were able to build confidence, pursue opportunity, and imagine futures that extended beyond the circumstances surrounding them. Their stories reveal that even within systems shaped by racial inequality, community structures worked intentionally to sustain educational growth and possibility.

Complicating the Desegregation Narrative

My understanding of the 1950s and 1960s was shaped, like many others, through the lens of major Civil Rights milestones. *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Little Rock Nine, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Greensboro sit-ins, and the brutal murder of Emmett Till are often presented as defining markers of the era. These moments are frequently framed through narratives of hate, division, and the long struggle toward integration. While these events remain critically important, the historical narratives surrounding them often leave out a deeper conversation about what Black communities were actually seeking during this period.

What many Black communities wanted was equality. They wanted equitable resources. They wanted access to quality facilities and opportunities for their children. At the same time, communities also wanted the ability to educate their children within spaces that honored Black history, Black culture, and the values held within their communities. For many families, education represented both freedom and responsibility. Schools were not simply places where children received academic instruction; they were spaces where cultural identity, discipline, and community pride were reinforced.

Scholars such as W. E. B. Du Bois raised early concerns about what might occur if the responsibility for educating Black children shifted away from Black educators and communities. Du Bois (1935) argued that if Black students were primarily educated by individuals who did not understand their communities, histories, or lived experiences, something essential could be lost.

His warning speaks directly to what many communities would later experience during the process of desegregation.

Before integration, many Black schools functioned as cultural and educational centers within their communities. Black educators were deeply committed to upholding expectations of integrity, respect, and academic discipline within their classrooms. Cultural traditions were woven into daily educational life. For example, some schools began the day by singing the Negro National Anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” Prior to this research, I did not know this tradition existed in many Black schools. Yet for the Storygivers, these practices were part of the everyday rhythms of their educational experiences.

As desegregation unfolded, many Black students gained access to improved facilities, expanded resources, and new academic opportunities. These changes represented meaningful progress in the long struggle for educational equity. However, desegregation also resulted in significant losses. Across the nation, many Black educators lost their positions as schools were integrated. The presence of Black teachers, administrators, and community advocates within schools declined dramatically.

Today, the face of education across much of the United States is often represented by the middle-class white woman, reflecting a teaching workforce shaped by broader historical shifts in educational systems. As this transition occurred, the cultural grounding once existing within many Black educational spaces was gradually diminished. The stories shared by the Storygivers suggest while integration brought certain gains, it also altered the cultural environment previously affirming their identities as Black students.

Their experiences complicate simplified historical narratives presenting desegregation as a straightforward improvement in educational opportunity. The Storygivers’ reflections reveal a more complex reality. While resources expanded, the cultural richness and communal

accountability once shaping Black educational spaces were often weakened. What was gained in access was sometimes accompanied by the loss of spaces where Black students' cultural identities were deeply understood and affirmed.

Through the voices of the Storygivers, a more layered understanding of this historical moment emerges. Their stories remind us; educational progress cannot be measured by resources alone. It must also consider the presence of community, cultural affirmation, and the relationships that make educational spaces places of belonging.

Reframing Black Girlhood in Educational History

What the Storygivers made clear is what we are still trying to figure out for Blackgirls today is not new. These were not experimental ideas or theoretical possibilities. These were lived realities. Blackgirls have always known how to thrive inside educational spaces when those spaces are rooted in community, care, and expectation. What we are naming now, what we are trying to build now, already existed.

The difference is, we are often trying to recreate what has been forgotten.

When I think about the work of Ruth Nicole Brown (2008) and the creation of spaces where Blackgirls can be fully seen, heard, and held in their truth, I cannot help but see reflection in the lives of these women. The Storygivers were not waiting for spaces to be created. They were already in them. Their schools, their homes, their communities functioned in ways allowing them to exist fully as themselves. What we now describe as intentional, they experienced as normal.

The same is true when we consider what Bettina Love (2018) calls for in her push toward freedom dreaming and moving beyond survival. These women were not rooted in survival as the center of childhood. They were rooted in living. They had room to imagine, to connect, to grow,

and to be. Racism existed. It did, it does. They knew it. It was not the main force shaping how they experienced themselves or their education. Freedom dreaming acknowledges the past, where we have been, and brings it forward, shaping how we understand history, how we understand education, and how we come to know purpose and possibility. It calls for an uncovering of truth, not so we stay there, but so we can move forward with clarity and intention. In this work, it becomes the ability to name our own histories and our own journeys, creating space to begin healing through the bridging of intergenerational gaps.

This is where the work begins to shift what we have been taught to see. In educational history, it pushes beyond stories that center only struggle, making room for lives holding space for joy, expectation, and the everyday. In secondary education, it calls for a different way of seeing Blackgirls, where how they move, how they know, and how they imagine are understood as part of learning, not something to be corrected or contained. It also affirms what has always been true within Black culture and language, meaning lives in how we speak, how we connect, and how we make sense of the world together. In Black youth studies, it asks us to look again, to center how Blackgirls are living, imagining, and becoming, not just what they have had to endure.

We continue to see Blackgirls through frameworks positioning them as problems to be fixed or behaviors to be corrected. Morris (2015) challenges this thinking, calling for spaces where Blackgirls are treated as children deserving of care, protection, and understanding. What the Storygivers show us is this is not a new demand. They had teachers, families, and communities who inherently operated from this place. They were held accountable, but they were also held in care. There was balance. There was relationship.

Resilience and survival have long been attached to Blackgirls and Blackwomen across time. Leaning into Dillard's (2000) endarkened epistemologies, what emerges here moves beyond survival into endarkened flourishing. These stories remind us knowledge has always existed within our communities. The ways these women describe childhood, schooling, and relationships carry insight into what it looks like to educate Blackgirls in ways holding them whole, grounded, and sustained.

What stands out most is how ordinary their experiences felt to them. Not extraordinary. Not exceptional. Just life. Here is where history has gotten it wrong, for this group of women. We have built an understanding of Black girlhood so centered on struggle we have lost sight of what it looks like when Blackgirls are simply allowed to be children. To be supported. To be corrected. To be loved. To be expected to do well and given tools to do so.

These girls were not trying to find belonging.

They were already inside of it.

They knew who they were. They knew who they belonged to. They were surrounded by people reinforcing this daily. They saw themselves reflected in the people teaching them, guiding them, and raising them. They understood education not just as something they did, but as something woven into who they were becoming. Education was not a chore. It was a gift carried forward from those who came before them.

So, when we ask what Blackgirls need today, the answer is not distant or abstract. The Storygivers have lived it. Their communities laid the foundation for what it looks like when community is involved, when teachers are accountable, when expectations are clear, and when care is present. They show us what becomes possible when Blackgirls are not reduced to struggle but are allowed to live fully within childhood.

This study does not introduce something new.

It calls us back to something we allowed ourselves to forget.

Ways of Navigating School (Driven, Watchful, Steady, Relational)

Listening to the Storygivers speak about their educational experiences revealed Black girlhood within these schooling environments was not singular. Their stories did not unfold in identical ways, nor were their personalities or approaches to school uniform. Each Storygivers story reflected a distinct way of moving through school, shaped by relationships, expectations, and an evolving sense of self.

As I began the work of reconstructing their narratives, my initial instinct was to organize these experiences into what I conceptualized as *Ways* of navigating education, Driven, Watchful, Steady, and Relational, and to group each Storygiver into the category best representing their experience. The Driven Way center's purpose and forward movement, where education is approached with direction and intention. The Watchful Way reflects observation and discernment, where listening, timing, and selective engagement carry meaning. The Steady Way reflects consistency and adaptability, where persistence and self-trust guide movement across changing circumstances. The Relational Way centers connection, where learning is shaped through community, shared expectations, and belonging. This approach offered structure and clarity, allowing patterns to emerge across their accounts.

However, as I the stories began to take root colliding with my preconceived notions about how to write about these Storygivers, it became evident this framework risked flattening the complexity of their experiences. Assigning each woman to a single Way imposed boundaries which did not reflect the fluidity present in how they moved through educational spaces. Their

lives were not contained within categories; rather, they reflected overlapping, shifting ways of being which could not be neatly separated.

In response, I shifted my approach. Instead of positioning *Ways* as fixed categories, I began to understand them as patterns moving across the narratives. This shift allowed me to maintain the integrity of each Storygiver's narrative as whole and distinct, while still recognizing shared threads connecting their experiences. *Ways* became not a tool for classification, but a lens for understanding how Blackgirls navigated education in dynamic and interconnected ways.

Naming these *Ways* makes it possible to see Black girlhood as patterned in consistent ways of interpreting and responding to educational life. These orientations bring forward how Blackgirls were already making decisions, reading their environments, and developing ways of being shaped through family, community, and self-understanding. Lived experience here functions as knowledge, aligning with work grounding theory in everyday life (Collins, 2000) and extending understandings of intellectual work beyond formal spaces (Dent, 1995).

Ways also deepen how existing scholarship can be read. Language, identity, and self-perception shape how Blackgirls come to understand themselves within school (Hopson, 2009), while Blackgirls actively construct meaning and community through everyday practices within those spaces (Kelly, 2020). At the same time, racialized and gendered expectations shape how their presence is interpreted and regulated (Morris, 2016; Epstein, Blake, & González, 2017). Within this, observation, silence, and discernment reflect awareness rather than disengagement (Cox, 2015), while refusal and opacity allow Blackgirls to maintain control over how they are seen (Thompson-Jones, 2019; Franklin, 2023). These orientations do not sit outside this scholarship; they make visible how these dynamics are lived together across time.

Across these *Ways*, joy, imagination, and relational life remain central to how Blackgirls experienced schooling. Connection, play, and shared routines shaped how learning was lived, reflecting long-standing understandings of care and community as foundational (hooks, 1997). Blackgirls' creativity, imagination, and full humanity were not separate from their education, but part of it (Brown, 2024). Purpose, consistency, and expectation were also shaped through cultural grounding, aligning with approaches that sustain identity rather than separate it from learning (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Ways offer more than description. They provide a way to understand Black girlhood as intentional, relational, and continuously unfolding. They also open new directions for research and practice. If these orientations make visible how Blackgirls moved through schooling in one historical moment, then future work must attend to how similar patterns emerge across contexts and generations. This requires asking how Blackgirls demonstrate knowledge through movement, relationship, and imagination, and how educational spaces might recognize and support these ways of being rather than misread or overlook them.

Implications for Education Today

The foundation of education has always been to teach, guide, enlighten them, and prepare children to move through life in ways allowing them to contribute to their communities. Education was never meant to exist as a silo separate from family or community. It was meant to function within community. A space where students are supported, where families are involved, where learning extends beyond the classroom.

Education should bring people together. Not just as individuals, but as cultures. It should be a place where growth, maturity, and understanding are developed through connection.

For Black students, and specifically Blackgirls, this means education must be rooted in community, pride, and confidence. Blackgirls need to know when they walk into a classroom they are valued. They need to know they will be protected. They need to know they are worthy of care, support, and investment from teachers and school systems.

Care cannot be optional.

Connection cannot be accidental.

Community cannot be an afterthought.

Right now, many Blackgirls are navigating spaces where these things are missing. Teachers often lack cultural understanding of the students in front of them. Curriculum continues to center middle-class white experiences as the standard, leaving others measured against expectations never created with them in mind. The standard itself needs to shift. It should reflect the collective student body, not a single cultural norm.

Blackgirls have been denied full access to girlhood. They are often expected to be more mature, seen as older than they are, and mischaracterized as aggressive or loud. These perceptions are not rooted in who they are, but in how they have been historically framed. Blackgirls have been positioned as capable of enduring more, In turn they are expected to be more. Being more requires something being poured into them.

They cannot be more than what they have been given space to become.

Blackgirls today are still girls. Even as they enter more spaces, representation has not always translated into understanding. Many are misunderstood, not because of who they are, but because of expectations placed on them they never agreed to carry.

This means teachers must be prepared differently. Cultural understanding cannot be surface-level or optional. It must be ongoing, intentional, and grounded in real engagement with

students' lives, families, and communities. What Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) names as culturally relevant pedagogy centers academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness, but what becomes clear here is these are not abstract ideas. They are necessary practices. Teachers need to know who they are teaching, not just what they are teaching.

This looks like a classroom where a teacher knows more than a student's name and test score. A teacher who understands where her students come from, who their people are, and what matters to them. When a Blackgirl speaks, she is not immediately corrected for tone, listened to for meaning. When she struggles, the response is not punishment, but support. Expectations remain high, but they are paired with guidance, patience, and belief. The classroom becomes a place where she does not have to shrink herself to succeed, but where she is allowed to show up fully and still be pushed to grow.

Education cannot rest solely within schools. There has been a shift in how families and communities engage with education. Learning does not stop when students leave the classroom. Families play a critical role in reinforcing values, expectations, and belief in what education can provide. Communities must be present within educational spaces, not separate from them. This looks like schools opening themselves to community, not just inviting it in occasionally, but building with it consistently. Families are not only contacted when something goes wrong, they are engaged as partners in a child's growth. Community members are present, visible, and involved in ways that reinforce shared responsibility. Students see adults who look like them, who know them, and who are invested in them across spaces. Education does not stop at the classroom door, and success is not carried by the child alone, but held by a network of people who are committed to their development.

This work requires collective investment.

Moving beyond survival for Blackgirls requires more than language. It requires action. It requires dismantling the stereotypes placed on them. It requires giving them grace, listening to them, creating spaces where they are allowed to ask questions, to grow, and to exist fully within their childhood.

Limitations

There are limitations within this study need to be acknowledged to be clear about what this study is and what it is not. First, this work is grounded in memory. The Storygivers are reflecting on experiences transpiring decades ago. Memory is not fixed. It shifts. It is shaped by time, by growth, by what has stayed with them and what has faded. Keeping this in mind what these Storygivers chose to share, what they emphasized, and what they did not return to all matter. Within this work, memory is not treated as something unreliable. It is treated as meaningful. What remains is just as important as what happened.

This study is also small and specific by design. Seven Storygivers. One school. One graduating class. One community. This is not meant to represent every Blackgirl, every region, or every experience. This work goes deep instead of wide. The goal was never generalization. The goal was understanding. Central was one school in Kansas City, the voices of the Blackgirls attending Lincoln High, the historically all black school in the area, are important to explore. Also, the year of Central High these Storygivers attending was important, because with their graduating class there was a shift in the culture at Central.

My role in this work also matters. I was not a distant researcher. I was in relationship with these women. I was listening, responding, connecting, and at times seeing parts of myself and my own family in what they shared. This closeness created space for honesty and depth, it also required me to stay aware of how I was interpreting what I heard. There were moments

where things felt familiar, where I had to slow down and make sure I was not filling in gaps with my own understanding. This work required constant reflection on my part.

Another limitation within this study is how the stories were constructed and presented. While each Storygivers narrative is grounded in her own words, I expanded moments, built out scenes, and at times developed fuller narratives from shorter responses or reflections. This allowed the stories to carry flow, setting, and depth in ways that honored how they were shared and how they lived in memory.

At the same time, this approach required interpretive decisions. I made choices about how to extend certain moments, how to structure the narratives, and how to hold the tone and direction of each story. I did not create outside of what was given, but I did shape how those experiences were presented. It means my voice is present alongside theirs in the construction of the narrative, even as I worked to keep their words, meanings, and intentions at the center.

This balance between honoring their voices and constructing narrative is important to name. The stories are not fictional, but they are also not untouched. They are co-constructed through what was shared and how I carried it forward.

This study is also rooted in a specific historical moment. The experiences shared are shaped by a time surrounding segregation and early desegregation. While there are clear connections to what Blackgirls experience today, those conditions are not the same. This work is not meant to say everything is identical. It is meant to show what existed, what was present, and what can still inform how we think about education now.

This study does not attempt to speak for all Blackgirls. It does not attempt to capture every experience. What it does is hold space for seven women to tell their stories in their own ways, and to take those stories seriously.

The limitations do not take away from the work. They define its boundaries. And within those boundaries, there is still depth, meaning, and truth.

Recommendations for Generational Relationships

This study opens up space for additional questions that were not fully explored here.

This work centers Blackwomen reflecting on their experiences as Blackgirls during a specific time and within a specific community. There is room to expand this work across different regions, different school systems, and different generations. Black girlhood is not singular, and there is more to understand about how it is experienced across space and time.

There is also opportunity to explore intergenerational connection more directly. This study highlights how much can be learned from looking back, but future work could intentionally bring younger Blackgirls and older Blackwomen into conversation with one another. There is knowledge being held across generations that has not been fully connected.

Additionally, this work focused on storytelling as a method of understanding educational experience. Future research could continue to explore narrative, memory, and oral history as legitimate and necessary forms of knowledge production, particularly within Black communities where lived experience has not always been documented in traditional ways.

There is also a need to further examine how educational spaces today can intentionally recreate the sense of community, expectation, and care described by the Storygivers. This includes looking at schools, families, and communities together rather than in isolation.

This study does not close the conversation. It opens it.

There is still more to learn, more to listen to, and more to understand.

Reflection

This work has never been just about research.

It has always been about people. About stories. About memory. About responsibility.

Sitting with the Storygivers, listening to them, laughing with them, reflecting with them, I realized early on this was not something I was simply conducting. This was something I was being trusted with. Each conversation carried weight. Not in a way that felt heavy, but in a way that felt sacred. These were not just stories being told. These were lives being shared.

There were moments where I found myself not thinking as a researcher, but as a granddaughter. Listening to the way they spoke about school, about family, about expectations, I could hear echoes of my own upbringing. I could see the ways their lives shaped the conditions that made mine possible. This work became a bridge. A connection between generations. A reminder that none of us arrive where we are on our own.

What stayed with me most was not just what they said, but how they said it. The ease in their voices when they spoke about community. The certainty when they spoke about expectations. The normalcy when they described what it meant to be a Blackgirl in their time. There was no performance in it. No need to explain or justify. It simply was.

I had to sit with a question.

What changed?

Not in a way that ignores progress, but in a way that asks what was lost along the way. How did we move from spaces where Blackgirls were held in community, expectation, and care, to spaces where many are now trying to find belonging?

This work did not leave me discouraged. It did the opposite.

It reminded me that what we are searching for is not unfamiliar. It reminded me that Black communities have always held the knowledge of how to raise, teach, and support their children. It reminded me that what we call innovation is often restoration.

As I think about my own life, my own child, and the spaces he will move through, this work shifts how I understand education. It moves beyond access and opportunity and settles into something deeper, shaped by environment, relationship, and the people who are present in the lives of children as they grow. What surrounds them, what is poured into them, and who chooses to stand with them all matter.

The Storygivers trusted me with their memories and with their words. They trusted me to carry their stories forward in ways that honored what they lived and what they shared. That responsibility does not sit lightly. This work stands as an acknowledgment of the value of their lives, of their experiences, and of their voices, not confined to the past, but continuing into the present.

Listening to them extends beyond remembering. It calls attention to what has always been possible, to what has already been done, and to what can still be created when community, care, and belief come together in meaningful ways. Their stories hold direction, offering insight into how spaces can be shaped and sustained with intention.

Their story does not end here. It continues through what is carried forward, through how it is held, and through what is built from it. What follows is offered as a continuation, bringing the past into the present through the gift of generations.

October 5, 2024

Sitting in the parking lot of the Bruce R. Watkins Cultural Center, I eagerly awaited the arrival of my grandmother. This time, I was early. As I sat in the car, I found myself replaying the events of the night before, silently second-guessing my choice of outfit. Central's school colors were royal blue and white. I donned a cream top with bright red slacks. Not exactly blending in. I was scrutinizing every decision I had made this morning. My auntie pulled into the

parking lot, and I watched my grandmommie step out of the car with her royal blue jumpsuit, her low heels, and her cane as she walked with quiet confidence towards the front entrance. It was showtime.

Yearbooks were spread across the entrance table. A large printout of the class photo greeted us. Each graduate wore a nametag printed with their senior portrait. Their motto, ‘We did more in ’64,’ framed by the blue eagle mascot, watched over the room.

There were about 50 graduates in attendance, and I witnessed the class interact, not as elders, but as the teenagers they once were, laughing, joking, once again reclaiming roles and dynamics they had long since formed and cultivated. The pride they had for Central High was palpable in this moment. I took up my role again as a fly on the wall, observing everything from the outskirts with my unique invitation to the proverbial table. They recalled the history of the school, “Kansas City runs deep when it comes to education, especially Central...the most historic school in Kansas City, in the state of Missouri.”

The current principal, Anthony Holland, was the speaker of the night, reminding the alumni when they left Central in 1964, many were the first in their families to attend college. Others were drafted into Vietnam. Holland spoke of ceilings broken, barriers crossed, and how the privileges students experience today rest on the risks their class once took. Central remains at 3221 Indiana, not in the same building, but with the same spirit, now in one of the nation’s most dangerous zip codes yet steadily increasing in graduation rates and test scores. Central continues.

From the first steps they took into Central to the last time they left, the Class Historian shared the “Gone but never forgotten” memorial. It was such a special, pure, and emotional moment. To watch these groups that naturally gravitated back to secure places in their own little groups. “You and me, girl, we go a long way back ...” the room started singing the lyrics by the

Bloodstones as the song played, as the memories captured in moments transitioned to the senior pictures of those who did not live to see their 64th class reunion.

The bonds formed showed that high school was just the beginning for this group. I sat there at one moment watching my grandmommie over the years; she never missed a reunion. As I sat and listened, the song transitions to another song by the Bloodstones as the pictures kept rolling, I understood this group came out of Central High; they were the Sinceres in high school, and the respect and pride their classmates showed was present in that moment. I had the privilege of sharing a table with a few ladies from the Book of Knowledge and my grandmother. There was so much pride in my heart at this moment that I can now label it living history. The slide show changed to the Fallen Eagles, and there was such a shift in the energy room as those who graduated with them, but were no longer with them, filled the screen. As Millie, my grandmother's best friend since second grade, the prom queen, my mother's Godmother, picture took the screen, something shifted in the room; it was a moment I had not fully prepared for. As the pictures continued to transition across time, I could not help but count the number of white students. There was one. Reflecting on how many people get the opportunity to experience these moments as bystanders or outsiders, I marveled at the privilege I was given.

One of their classmates was unable to attend and sent a handwritten letter to be read. Unfortunately, his handwriting was barely legible, so the sentiment was carried through the crowd. As the night wrapped up, I was honored to step back into the role of assistant camerawoman. The group made their way to the stage, some with canes, some with walkers, some in wheelchairs, but all present, even for those who were not. These individuals had spent sixty years together navigating life, overcoming barriers, breaking ceilings, as they stood there

with the brightest smiles on their faces, all I could think about was the honor I had to share this space with them. For sixty years, they carried each other.

Now, I carry them.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Script

My name is Jasmine Small, and I am a current Graduate student in the Educational Studies Doctoral program at OU. I am reaching out to you because your name and contact information was provided by Guyetta Mabin as a potential candidate for a research study.

The research study will be titled “Central Class of 1964: The Voices of our BLACK Grandmothers.” Would you be interested in hearing a bit more about the study?

Participant Response

My field of study is centered around Black girlhood studies in education and through my review of the research I have found a missing component to be the voices of Black woman in education. There are many notable studies and literature centering around teachers and the development of schools in the black community, but the re-telling of the experiences of the black female is something I would like to learn more about.

If you are interested in participating in this study, I would ask you to conduct an individual interview with me regarding your educational experience. After all interviews are complete, I would ask all participants to meet for a collective group discussion.

Would this be something you would be interested in participating in.

Participant response.

If Yes:

I am glad you are willing to be a part of this study. To properly prepare for our interview I would like to obtain some preliminary data in reference to your household make-up during this time including if your mom and dad were both present in the home and any siblings you had. I would also like to know the street you lived on and your attendance at Central High School.

After I gather this information, I will reach out to you and other participants to schedule

interviews.

Thank you for your time and I will speak to you soon.

If No:

Thank you for taking the time to talk to me this morning/afternoon/evening it was greatly appreciated.

Appendix B: Signed Consent to Participate in Research

University of Oklahoma

Would you like to be involved in research at the University of Oklahoma?

I am Jasmine Small from the Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education, and I invite you to participate in my research entitled Central Class of 1964: The Voices of our BLACK Grandmothers. This research is being conducted in Kansas City, MO Summer 2023. You were selected as a possible participant because You identify as an African American (Black) female who entered Central High School with the class classification of “Class of 1964.” You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this research.

Please read this document and contact me to ask any questions you may have BEFORE agreeing to participate in my research.

What is the purpose of this research?

This research aims to recreate and understand the historical culture of Central High's Class of 1964, specifically focusing on African American (Black) females who attended the school during that time. This research will focus on Blackgirls during the Civil Rights Era in 1964 to help navigate the conversations surrounding intersectionality and overcoming the erasure and silencing of the voices of Blackgirls in educational research.

How many participants will be in this research?

About six individuals will take part in this research.

What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to be in this research, you will take part in an individual audio-recorded interview at a place of your choosing and in two collective audio-recorded interviews (focus groups) with other participants to discuss commonalities and provide deeper insight.

How long will this take?

Your participation will take approximately 1-6 hour(s) for the individual interview and 2-4

hours for each collective interview.

What are the risks and benefits if I participate?

There are minimal risks in participating in this research study and limited benefits from being in this research.

Questions that could be emotionally distressing: We will ask you to answer questions that may make you distressed or trigger strong emotional reactions. If these questions make you feel uncomfortable, you do not have to provide an answer, or you can stop our discussion or discontinue participation in the research. If the researcher sees signs that you are distressed, they will pause the discussion and ask if you would like to continue.

Audio or video recorded data collection: There is a risk of accidental data release if we collect your data using audio and video recordings. If this occurred, your identity and statements you made would become known to people who are not on the research team. To minimize this risk,

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the researchers will transfer data to, and store your data on, a secure platform approved by the University's Information Technology Office.

Will I be compensated for participating?

You will not be reimbursed for your time and participation in this research.

Who will see my information?

There will be no information in research reports that will make it possible to identify you without your permission. Research records will be stored securely, and only approved researchers and the OU Institutional Review Board will have access to the records.

You have the right to access the research data that has been collected about you as a part of this research. However, you may not access this information until the entire research has finished and you consent to this temporary restriction.

Do I have to participate?

No. If you do not participate, you will not be penalized or lose benefits or services unrelated to the research. If you decide to participate, you don't have to answer any questions and can stop participating at any time.

Will my identity be anonymous or confidential?

Your name will not be retained or linked with your responses unless you agree to be identified.

Please check all of the options that you agree to:

I agree for data records to include my identifiable information. ☐ Yes ☐ No

I agree to be quoted directly, without the use of my name. ☐ Yes ☐ No

I agree to have my name reported with quoted material. ☐ Yes ☐ No

I agree for my research to be archived for scholarly and public access. ☐ Yes ☐ No

Audio Recording of Research Activities

To assist with accurate recording of your responses, interviews may be recorded on an audio recording device and retained indefinitely for future reference and documentation. You have the right to refuse to allow such recording without penalty.

I consent to audio recording. ☐ Yes ☐ No

Will I be contacted again?

The researcher might contact you to gather additional data or recruit you for new research.

I give my permission for the researcher to contact me in the future. ☐ Yes ☐ No

Who do I contact with questions, concerns, or complaints?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research or have experienced a research-related injury, contact me at 405-227-3400 or by email at jsmall@ou.edu. You may also contact my advisor Jenny Sperling at jenny.sperling@ou.edu.

You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board (OU-NC IRB) at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, concerns, or complaints about the research and wish to talk to someone

other than the researcher(s) or if you cannot reach the researcher(s).

You will be given a copy of this document for your records. By providing information to the researcher(s), I agree to participate in this research.

Participant Signature Print Name Date

Signature of Researcher Obtaining

Consent

Print Name Date

Appendix C: Central 1964 Story Session Questions

1. How would you describe yourself as a child? (personality, drive, self-esteem)
2. Growing up, how would you describe your outlook on education?
3. How would you describe your educational experience as a child and young adult?
4. Describe the support you had to help navigate your educational experience.
5. Can you describe your most memorable experience in education?
6. What were your thoughts as you entered Central High on your first day of High school?
7. Describe your relationship with the teacher or individual who had the greatest influence on your trajectory. - What impact did your family and community have on your education?
8. How did your friend group enhance your experience in education?
9. How was your educational experience similar or different than the Blackgirls attending school today?
10. If you could give one piece of advice to Blackgirls currently navigating the educational system, what would it be?

Appendix D: Communal Session #2 Questions 2024

1. How do we reclaim and preserve cultural memories that have been forgotten?
2. What everyday experiences do you believe Black girls share, regardless of when they attended school?
3. Why is it essential to view Black girlhood as dynamic and adaptable across generations?
4. What aspects are overlooked in understanding Black girls' educational experiences?
5. How can we reimagine and reconstruct the historical narrative surrounding Black girls and education?
6. If you could offer advice to your younger self about navigating education and life, what would it be?
7. Why do you think Black women must share their personal stories, particularly about their educational journeys?
8. How can we integrate the experiences of Black girls from different generations into our discussions about education?
9. What guiding principles or concepts shape your understanding of the history and experiences of Black girls in education?
10. How can we ensure that the voices and perspectives of Black girls are central in conversations about education?