

Grieving Black Girlhoods: Black Memory Work in Current and (Re)membered Geographies of Black Girls Who Have Experienced Loss

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Abstract

In the legacy of Black womanhood, surviving the loss of a loved one is etched into our blood memory. Amidst some of the most unfathomable grief, we, daughters of the dust, are often expected to move forward as quickly as possible (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Romero, 2000). Black women and girls have historically had to overcome—or mask—insurmountable losses at intersections of identity to ensure Black survival (Collins, 2000; Evans-Winters, 2019). I propose a strong Black girl schema (Brown, 2021) to trouble the erasure of lived experience evident in pervasive cultural discourses like the strong Black woman schema (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). Utilizing sista circle methodology (Johnson, 2015) and extending duoethnography (Sawyer & Norris, 2013) within embodied memory work (Dillard, 2000; Ohito, 2020) through storytelling (Evans-Winters, 2019), this paper extends the future possibilities of grief scholarship centering grieving Black girlhoods. Further, the paper acknowledges the enduring tensions in navigating grief and aspires to highlight the power of embodied memory work to illuminate the current and (re)membered geographies of grieving Black girlhoods.

Keywords: Black girlhood, Blackgirls, grief, embodied memory work

Introduction

Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength—in search of my mother’s garden, I found my own. (Walker, 1972, p. 409)

In the current pandemic era, Black women and girls continue to navigate the convergence of intersecting oppressions while also experiencing a disproportionate loss of life and livelihood (Jackson & Pederson, 2020). In modern studies of grief and loss (Department of Education, 2021; Wade, 2021), particularly amidst past and present traumas experienced disproportionately

within Black communities, there is an increasing need to attend to the implications of discourses that stifle healing for Black women and girls (Evans, 2020; Jackson & Pederson, 2020). These imagined possibilities of disruption acknowledge the long-standing experiences of Black women and girls shaped by pervasive discourses and cultural tropes, most notably jezebel, mammy, and sapphire discourses (Anderson, 1997; West, 1995), that are embedded, built, and maintained within physical and psychological institutions (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Brown, 2014; Butler, 2018; Collins, 2000; Evans-Winters, 2019; McKittrick, 2006).

Furthermore, grief and loss research continues to reflect dominant identities and narratives, with limited attention given to the experiences of those from minoritized backgrounds (Ohito, 2020; Wade, 2021). Thus, the grief literature and field of study largely exclude whole populations and histories of lived experience. Wade (2021) asserted the importance of centering grief and loss within complexities of lived experience. She posited this shift in perspective as central to the implications for understanding definitions and experiences of grief for Black communities. I contend that to grieve is to navigate the process of adapting to life after loss (Umberson, 2017); more specifically, I center how grief is complex and uniquely situated across spatial, physical, psychological, and emotional realms. These complexities necessitate exploring what it means to grieve and how grieving translates into our connections with self and others across different contexts. More directly, in the legacy of Black womanhood and Black girlhood, the survival of a loss—physical, spatial, ambiguous, or disenfranchised—remains in the blood memory of Black women’s and girls’ experiences. Experiences that are complex, apparent, and often muddled in stigmatizing cultural tropes that deem Black women and girls as all-enduring (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Brown, 2021; McKittrick, 2006).

Black women’s and girls’ experiences continue to be pathologized with scant acknowledgment that much of their stress and trauma is rooted in histories of loss and grief (e.g., transatlantic slave trade), forced productivity, and discouraged displays of emotion (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; McKittrick, 2006). Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2007) offered insight into these experiences through her contributions to the “strong Black womanhood” (SBW) schema. SBW perpetuates pressure for Black women and girls to enact superwoman/girl-like behavior, exhibited as self-sacrificing, free of emotion, and disconnected from the weight of navigating trials of daily life (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Romero, 2000). Building upon the research base on the impact of the SBW schema and the emerging interdisciplinary field of Black girlhood studies, I assert the importance of inquiry employing Black girl epistemologies to explore how conceptualizing within Black girlhood could lead to theories of Black girlhood that disrupt these cultural tropes and discourses. Through the conceptualization of a “strong Black girl” (SBG) schema (Brown, 2021), key stakeholders in the lives of Black girls can better understand the impact of space and locale in Black girl cartographies (Butler, 2018), and the power of knowing and reading the world in Black girl literacies (Brown, 2013; Butler, 2018; Muhammed & Haddix, 2016). This is also informed by the implications of what it means to be and exist as digitally native and communal Black girls (Muhammed & McArthur, 2015; Steele, 2021; Williams & Moody, 2019), and the associations across these aspects of Black girlhood to the

present-day rhetoric in navigating the aesthetic terrain of the Black girl's body politic (Collins, 2000; Halliday, 2019; Muhammed & McArthur, 2015). An understanding of the SBW schema (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007) and SBG schema (Brown, 2021) are central to illuminating the intersectional experiences of Black women and girls charting their own grieving Black girlhoods.

In contributing to grief scholarship and extending *embodied memory work*, spaces for embodied reflexivity for Black women and girls (Dillard, 2022; Ohito, 2020), within grieving Black girlhoods, the purpose of this work is to uplift the narratives of Black girls and Blackgirls (one word; Boylorn, 2016) in grief journeying. Central to the theoretical and methodological framings of this work, I center Boylorn's (2016) concept of *Blackgirl*, which is the decompartmentalization of Black women's and girls' intersectional identities. In extending this concept, storytelling is used to posit the decompartmentalization of identity towards a continuum of lived experience that negotiates space, time, and geography in grieving. A *remembered geography* of grieving Black girlhood is the continuum of Black girlhood and womanhood that emerges uniquely in negotiation with grief and loss for Black women and girls. This work thus conceptualizes *grieving Black girlhoods* to further theorize Black memory work in contemporary conversations of grief expression in Black girlhood and for Blackgirls. To begin this journey, I describe the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this work, followed by re-storied memories of grief journeying across each coresearcher in this project. Creating new standpoints of experience that disrupt the taken-for-granted notion that everyone navigates grief without interruption positions these remembrances as intentional, authentic, and affirming spaces for dialogic exchange to look back, remain present, and move forward in *(re)remembered* geographies of grieving Black girlhoods.

Methods

Dillard's (2000) endarkened feminist epistemology and Ohito's (2020) Black feminist memory work offered perspectives in centering grief journeys. Dillard (2022) posited an alternative approach to inquiry and its emphasis on multiple ways of knowing for retrospective storytelling. Ohito (2020) posited Black feminist memory work to conceptualize the use of creation, improvisation, and memories to resist and create alternatives in sorrow and suffering. At the nexus of these scholarly contributions, this paper situates the spatial realities in grief, loss, voice, and lived experiences for Black women and girls.

Methodology: Power Through Black Girl Story-Telling

In this project, Black feminist/womanist storytelling (Evans-Winters, 2019) highlighted the cultural standpoint for Black women and girls as intersectional and constantly overlapping. Utilizing *sista circle* methodology (Johnson, 2015) and *tri-ethnography* (Breault, 2012), an extension of *duoethnography* that involves three researchers in dialogic storytelling, we centered dialogical and collaborative engagement across three Black girl stories of grieving Black girlhoods. Furthermore, we aimed to draw from the power Black feminist storytelling (Evans-Winters, 2019) and memory work (Dillard, 2022; Ohito, 2021), which foregrounded the funds of knowledge in our lived experiences of Blackgirls.

Like the reflective practices embedded in endarkened feminist epistemologies and Black feminist/womanist storytelling, tri-ethnography as a methodology situates knowledge in a personal perspective, and then fosters the development and transformation of that knowledge over time. In the case of this project, we each had experienced our own realities around grief and loss at different points in time, and then were united in the dialogic through the invitation for *extrospection*. This created the opportunity for examining ourselves through a negotiated consideration and thoughtful observation with each other (Sawyer & Norris, 2015). Parallel to tri-ethnography, the sista circle methodology also allowed multiple connection points during our sharing and inquiry to situate our engagement within a supportive—*sister to sister*—context (Johnson, 2015). The sista circle methodology has three primary tenets that can be applied at different parts of the research process: communication dynamics, centrality to empowerment, and researcher as participant. Using all three tenets throughout the research process offered language for our shared conversations across platforms that provided comfort, trust, and vulnerability in the intimate conversations of grief and loss.

Procedures: Black girls’ (Re)membering

Over the course of a year of shared time in the Teen Parent Success Program and in the relationships that sustained in the subsequent years, our stories were gathered through different platforms and methods of communication, inclusive of Facebook Messenger, personal emails, and in-person discussions. I then organized and analyzed key elements (e.g., time, place, plot, and scene), and worked to re-story and center within a chronological sequence remembrances that highlighted explicitly what each of the coresearchers felt was the most salient from their own grief narratives. As all three stories were drafted, member-checking was initiated for each coresearcher for authenticity, accuracy, and resonance across experiences.

Reflexivity: The Outsider Within: A Shared Blackgirl’s Reflexivity

When our stories first converged, I was unaware I would find myself “in search of my mother’s garden” (Walker, 1972, p. 409) so soon. As the older daughter, and middle of three children, I moved through waves of emotional turbulence alongside family and friends all grieving the profound absence of the matriarch of our family and community. In the months following her death, memories of my Black girlhood were all-consuming as the loss felt like it had broken the tether of emotional well-being that connected my mother and me through birthright. This continued journey of grief is what catalyzes this work. In countering the invisibility of Black women and girls in grief and loss scholarship, this project made space for the power of story for all Blackgirls—*present* and *past*—as we honor, reflect, and *story* moments of our grieving Black girlhoods.

Coresearchers: When Our Paths Crossed and Stories Collided

Arianne, Kendra, & Taryrn

Storytelling has roots and wings. I have learned something happens when people sit down to tell stories from their lives authentically. Togetherness forges a rich space in which to learn, to

understand, to remember, and to cry. That space makes way for re-centering—for truth, authentic voice, and expression. As grief remains an often-uncharted site in the emotional experiences of Black women and girls (Evans, 2020; Jackson & Pederson, 2020), this storytelling space allows for a release of the often-unrealistic expectations of strength and emotional fortitude. The following section introduces each of the coresearchers and foregrounds our shared experiences as a catalyst in our memory work in grieving Black girlhoods. As each of our experiences of loss were at varied points in life's journey, the stories are ordered by the entry point that each coresearcher centered in their own negotiations with their grieving Black girlhoods. Following these introductions, the paper will then illustrate the power of dialogic through re-storied embodied memory work in grief journeying. The insights in these findings offer epistemological grounding for moments of remembrance in both the *then* and the *now* in grief journeys, and, in turn, what can then *become* in navigating grief and loss. These are our stories.

Modalities of Healing in Memory Work: Black Girl Story-Telling

Arianne's Story: "The Things That Matter ..." Coming into Oneself

Arianne (Pseudonym). A powerful force in a small frame, Arianne moves with confidence and drive. Her mother's only child, Arianne was a natural leader. She often assisted in the planning, organizing, and facilitating of events and meetings for the other teen mothers. Arianne joined the Teen Parent Success Program in her sophomore year at 16, which is also when we met each other. In our shared time, she often centered in memory her father as a driving force in her life as a mother. Her desire to help people came from watching her mom care for her dad, who passed away when she was 13. This is Arianne's story.

I've always been told I am a powerful force in a small frame, and I truly believe it is my confidence and drive that helps me. I'm my mother's only child, but I do have siblings on my dad's side. As a young girl it was just me and my mom; my dad died when I was 13. I had a close relationship with both my mom and my dad. Watching them is what I think gave me lessons for how I am as a mother. Both of them always helping, no matter what. When I think about my dad, I am consumed by memories. It was so hard losing him at 13 because I wanted him to see me get older, and I wish my son would have gotten to know his grandfather.

Since my dad was sick, my mom had to step up and not only take care of us, but also take care of him too. Day in and day out, I would remember her making sure he had everything he needed before she would go to work. Their relationship set the foundation for me and my son's father. Even now when I think about my memories of my dad, I always relate it back to how I see my son's father.

Even with us both in school, we're still together as a family. And when I think about the parts of him that I love the most, it seems like the same thing I think about when I remember my mom and dad. He's loving, he's caring, and he's always there. Just like what I remember from my mom taking care of my dad. It's those memories that help me when I'm going through a hard time or trying to figure out things. Those memories give me strength too, 'cause sometimes I have my good days and my bad days.

Like when I had to go back to school after I had found out I was pregnant, and I was like, "How am I going to go back to school?" I remembered how it was tough too for my dad who was so used to being the one that took care of us and now having to be taken care of by my mom. He had to deal with people having something to say. In those moments he would just stay focused on the things that mattered. Even as hard as it was, I like to think that is one of the most important things I remember and learned from my dad. Focusing on the things that matter. My family.

Kendra's Story: "A little while longer ..." Shifting Roles & Responsibilities

Kendra (Pseudonym). When we first met, Kendra was an easy-going and generous 11th grader, always dreaming about who she desired to be and where she desired to go. Our paths crossed during an afterschool meeting with the Teen Parent Success Program at the local high school. Sitting directly across from me, during my first visit to the Teen Parent Success Program, Kendra smiled and offered a confident greeting to me as a visitor in the space that had been and continued to be a support in her emerging motherhood journey. Kendra lost her grandmother during our time together in this program when she was 17, a year after we met. This is Kendra's story.

Family has always been a foundation for me. I look at it as one of my most important values in life and I feel like that comes from *my strong lady*, my grandma. I mean, ever since I can remember, I've always been really close to her. My relationship with my grandmother got even more close after I found out I was going to have my first son, especially since my mom and I were kind of working through our own thing. I remember how she supported me after I had my son. It was like the way she took care of me when I was a little girl, she was going to do for my son. Especially since I was still trying to figure out how I was going to balance my schoolwork and being a new mom.

It may sound crazy, but I don't remember my mom; like, I remember growing up with my mom, but I just would always be with my grandmother. So, that's why I feel like she's my number one ... I don't want to say my grandma comes before my mom, but it was like, when it comes down to my grandma, it's, like, I

get kind of emotional because I know now everything she did for me and my family.

My memories of my grandma are the highlight from when I was a little girl. She helped me when I felt no one else was around. Even with my mama, she would tell me to work through those problems too. And it's, like, I find her as the most supportive person. She watched my son the whole school year after I had him, and then she had a stroke, and everything changed. She needed somebody to look after her. It had to be me ...

The roles changed. She had medical challenges after her stroke that she needed help with. It was hard finishing school and knowing she needed so much help. She couldn't walk anymore and had to have someone check on her all the time. It was different for me, because she was the one who I had the most when I got pregnant and when I had my son. She was always there. Doing whatever she could, someone I could count on even when I couldn't see how I was going to make it.

Finishing school and being a new mom, she helped me do that. She made it possible for me to try to handle everything.

It was so hard for me to see her hurting. I had to take care of her, I was now her number one like she had always been for me. And even still she was trying to be there for me, from her hospital bed. I remember back when she got out of the hospital, she kept asking to watch my child, like she still wanted to do it, and she couldn't see that she really couldn't.

I did what I had to, to keep us both as close to her as I could. It was a sacrifice because I still in high school. But I did what I had to do. I always wanted to start my day by checking on her. That was hard.

I would have to get my son ready super early and then I would run and make sure my grandma was okay, and then try to manage to catch the bus. Most of the time I would miss the bus and be late getting to school.

I remember this one time when she was in the hospital, and I had bad service and she was trying to get in touch with me. Everybody would be calling me to tell me, "Grandma's trying to get in touch with you." So, I would call her back thinking that it's an emergency, but she would just want to talk to me. My strong lady really was my everything.

She is the reason I keep going for my babies; she's the reason I stayed in school and kept going. Losing her has been so hard and sometimes I just miss those calls and messages of her asking for me. I always remember how she made me feel, "If you do not take care of yourself and you start getting yourself run-down, it's going to not only impact your ability to help your loved ones but also your ability to help yourself." I keep that in my mind when I feel like I am struggling or having a hard time trying to manage everything for my kids.

That's what she would want me to do, take care of myself and keep going. Just keep going. I just wish I could only have had her for just a little longer ...

My Story: (Re)membered and Reminiscent Black girlhood

Taryn. When I met Arianne and Kendra, I was in the third year of my graduate program. The older of two daughters, and middle of three children, I have always been known as the person who could bring people together. Recognizing now that I mirror many of the same qualities as my mother, I've always embodied strength in connecting family, friends, and loved ones. This is the same embodied strength that connected us as coresearchers. A shared journeying that led us to these moments of grief processing following the loss of my mother unexpectedly in December of 2019, a few years after we coresearchers first met one another. This journeying also continues to be embedded in the iterative exchange of our Black girlhoods and Black womanhood. This is my story.

For me, it's like, I always wonder at what point do we not see ourselves as Black girls. Like when are you not connected to your girlhood, as surely age doesn't disconnect you from the tether your (spirit) woman has to the memories of the past. I feel dependent on where I am and who I'm with, and I feel I move in and throughout my existence of Black girlhood and womanhood simultaneously.

Because what I know and what will forever and always be is that I am Georgia's middle baby girl. Her thick haired, tender-headed, stubborn child that was going to live out the meaning of her name, "anything you can do, I can do better." I can remember her saying, "my little girl, with the big Zimbabwean name ... That's my Baby right there! Beauty and Brains! She gets it from her MOMMA! Yeah, I said it!"

If only I could go back and relive that last day. It was an impromptu movie screening of the 1975 historical drama, *Mandingo*, starring Ken Norton. You couldn't tell me why exactly this was the movie selection of choice on an early Saturday morning following my mother's hospital release from surgery, but it was so *her* as my remembrances of a plethora of Black historical dramas and

documentaries came at the helm of my mother's prompting that we need be "well read" and knowledgeable of the histories of "our people."

Momma was a storyteller. She came from a whole line of storytellers, with a rocking laugh that was out of this world. I grew up listening to stories of when she was a little girl, as she took care of her brothers and sister. A place where everybody knew everybody and families took care of families. She would take me "back home" and name every family that lived in each house as we drove up her old childhood street, smiling from ear to ear from the memories that clearly were filling her heart as she would share. History was her thing, and legacy too. And although our family stories and her shared memories of her Black girlhood were filled with pains, joys, and hardships, it was still her legacy, and *our* story.

Momma wanted to make sure we knew our legacy and our story. She was always about making sure we understood the truth and history of who and where we came from, and found books, movies, and storytelling as the opportunity to link our knowledge of past histories to contemporary understandings of self within the larger viewpoint of public life.

Little did I know that our early Saturday morning view of *Mandingo*—that 2 hours and 7 minutes of run time—would be my last opportunity to sit with Momma. Momma would be rushed to the hospital that afternoon and pass the following morning. My story was forever changed.

I was flooded with emotion and my physical, mental, and emotional state was inundated with the desire to just have Momma back. I was her "baby girl with the big name" who longed to hear her voice, be it even just one more time. I wondered ... what story she would tell if she had known that our last moment was our last. Would it have been a retelling from her own Black girlhood or would it have been something altogether new—a special story for her little girl. ... Her "little girl with the big Zimbabwean name."

What I do know, and even feel sometimes in my connection to her in the present, is that as I *reminisce* and *remember*, she shaped my story, our story, a story that guides me in grieving Black girlhood, in praxis, as educator, and as Blackgirl.

The Catalyst of Well-being in Centering Grieving Black Girlhoods

While the fact of grief is universal, the way people experience it is not. The experiences of Black women and girls are underreported, and even more so often masked in either an SBW schema or an SBG schema. As suggested in the previous literature, Black women and girls are often told that our very livelihoods are contingent upon how much pain we can withstand, and

how masterfully we can navigate and mask our grief. In this paper, however, our shared space of memory work troubled this notion of *performative okayness*, the act of performing the state or condition of being okay, that comes from operationalized cultural tropes navigated by Black women and girls. Our stories contextualized a *pause* in mind and body, as an act of authentic embodiment in the grief process. Our shared moments of reflection also reaffirmed how we could “be still” through the waves of emotion in the grieving process. The space and time theorized by Dillard (2022) and Ohito (2020) are actualized in the unique expressions of Black women’s and girls’ experiences. Kendra and I shared points of connections on the strength of family:

Like, my grandma could do everything, even when it seemed like she couldn’t at the end because she was in a wheelchair and need supports, she still managed to stand up strong for us ... I just call her a strong lady. (Kendra)

She was always about making sure we understood the truth and history of who and where we came from. (Taryrn)

Kendra’s spoke to memories of her grandmother that shaped so much of her upbringing that she had physically become the outward manifestation of strength in her own personal experience. An acknowledgment of intergenerational Black girlhoods was apparent across all three stories and across a continuum that placed grieving Black girlhoods in the context of generational capital present in spaces that were being navigated, and that each coresearcher sought to sustain for the generations to come. Specifically, as we learn from Arianne’s and my grief stories, there was an attention to our identity development that was even more realized in loss:

She was shaping my story, our story, a story that guides me in grieving Black girlhood in praxis, as educator, and as Black girl. (Taryrn)

I like to think that is one of the most important things I remember and learned from my dad. Focusing on the things that matter. My family. (Arianne)

In these moments, each of us acknowledged our mourning as uniquely transforming over time—a grieving process that was equal parts sadness, healing, joy, and a reconnection in the embraced moments of opportunity to honor those we had lost—and valued the feelings and process in the way that was right for each of us. Honoring our (re)membered Black girlhoods also highlighted how our grief and loss experiences emerged at different points in time and were experienced and situated in different ways. It highlighted how time, space, and complexity at the intersection of grief and Black girlhood was unique and sacred. This is further illustrated in Arianne’s and Kendra’s remembrances:

When I think about my dad, I have the same memories. It was hard losing him at 13 because you want them as a parent to be able to see you get older, and I think about how my son would have gotten to know his grandfather. (Arianne)

Losing her has been so hard and sometimes I just miss those calls and messages of her asking for me. I always remember how she made me feel. (Kendra)

Our shared Black feminist storytelling captured how we were each in separate individual spaces of the process within our grief journeys. These experiences also captured the way we were able to think more directly into the impacts of our memory work in connection to experiences of our Black girlhoods, *then* and *now*. Space in the conceptualization of grieving Black girlhoods offered and valued remembrances of lived experience across a continuum of Black girlhood that was constantly catalyzed throughout our memory work.

Implications for Research and Practice

As conversations in grief journeys of Black women and girls are limited, and the invisibility of Black women's and girls' experiences at the intersections of grief and loss are further bound through stigma and deficit discourses, this work aimed to highlight possibilities when we create space for the messy, complex, and unique realities of grieving Black girlhoods. In consideration of future research, policy, and inquiry for key stakeholders in community with Black women and girls, this project generated additional strands of inquiry that can further extend this work and practice in grieving Black girlhoods. These are strands of research that center (a) creating spaces for grieving Black girlhoods; (b) encouraging creative methods, strategies, and supports in educational and community contexts for grieving Black girlhoods; and (c) valuing grieving Black girlhoods as funds of knowledge.

The following questions accompany each of these strands: (a) Creating spaces for grieving: how key stakeholders of and in communities for Black women and girls can envision spaces for grieving Black girlhoods. (b) Supports in educational and community contexts and grieving Black girlhoods: how key stakeholders in communities with and for Black girls can think about these spaces in educational contexts that can support the growing number of Black girls in schools navigating grief amidst the disproportionate COVID-19 pandemic-related loss within the Black community. (c) Valuing grieving Black girlhoods as funds of knowledge: how key stakeholders in communities for and with Black girls can continue to expand our inquiry in theories and frameworks within Black girlhood that trouble dehumanizing constructs.

As the future directions posited by this work, grief journeys and expression are central to the mental health and wellness of Blackgirls and Black girls in and outside of education spaces. These brief glimpses into grieving Black girlhoods were demonstrative of how we might envision, build, cultivate, and sustain more opportunities for dialogue, feeling, becoming, processing, and healing in our grief journeys. Spaces of dialogic exchange and inquiry that help us sit in, walk alongside, and work through our memories in moments of grief and loss.

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