

Blooming In the Shafts: A Black Mother Scholar's Tale of Flipping Pandemic Precarity to Educational Possibility

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The closure of schools across the country as COVID reached pandemic status, laid bare the long existing inequities experienced by Black children in the K–12 system. Ironically, the chaos in educational spaces at the advent of the pandemic, offered a reprieve from physical school attendance and provided a natural experiment in educational possibilities beyond the classroom. This autoethnographic narrative utilizes the frameworks of BlackCrit and Motherwork in concert with the concept of marronage to interrogate the opportunities and limitations of one such possibility—educational evacuation as marronage through homeschooling.

Keywords: *Motherwork, Black Mothers, educational marronage, homeschooling, COVID-19*

The following treatise is a culmination of journal entries I kept while working on an ethnographic study of a grassroots organization called the Aurora Coalition of Black Mothers (ACBM) comprised of natural and othermothers (James, 1993) with the explicit charge of interrupting the policies, procedures and practices that contribute to the exclusion of Black children from educational spaces. I did not anticipate the ways my personal experiences as a Black mother dealing with my son in the educational system would align with the work of these mothers and the themes of my research. The theoretical lenses which guide my unpacking of the events therein are motherwork (Collins, 1992) and BlackCrit (Dumas & Ross, 2016). I situate these theories in tandem as BlackCrit's incorporation of anti-Blackness "offers a lens to explain the positioning and treatment of Black people in society and schools" while, "Motherwork highlights the tools and tactics Black women utilize for resistance and survival within this anti-Black world (Watson & Baxley, 2021, p. 144). I then borrow from the concept of marronage (Roberts, 2015) to further contemplate how flight from harmful spaces fosters or impedes the larger aim of freedom for the collective.

FROM KID TO CRIMINAL JUST LIKE THAT

As I read over the police report, I noticed the officer had put Jay down as 210 lbs. 210 lbs.? He was barely 160 soaking wet. How could folks trained to eye and describe individuals while under duress, be so wrong about someone by 50 lbs.? The other thing that I noted was that my 15yr. old son was being charged with two felonies! How did we get here?

At the end of December, before winter break, the principal from Jay's high school called to tell me Jay was being suspended for smoking a vape pen in the boy's bathroom. So many things were flying in my head. "How did he get a vape pen? How long would he be suspended? What is the appropriate response to my son?" When I arrived to the principal's office, Jay was already seated. The principal began, "You, know, Jay has never been a problem. This is unfortunately his first time ever being in my office." The principal went on to tell me how the school security officer had gone into the boy's restroom to do his morning sweep before the bell rang and found a group of about 10 boys in the restroom. Apparently, the boys quickly left the premises, except Jay, who was in the stall. The security officer saw Jay receive "an unknown object" from underneath the stall from a boy in the stall next to him. They found the pen "on his person" and

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Offenders											
Seq. #	Type	Injuries	Residency Status			Ethnicity					
1	INDIVIDUAL	None	Resident			Non-Hispanic					
Name (Last, First, MI)											
[REDACTED] JAY [REDACTED], (JUVENILE)											
AKA											
	Race	Sex	DOB	Age	Height	Weight	Hair	Eyes			
	B	M	[REDACTED]	15	5'11"	210 lbs	BRO	BRO			
Address						Secondary Phone			Primary Phone		
[REDACTED]											
Employer Name/Address									Business Phone		
/											
Scars, Marks, Tattoos or other distinguishing features											
Physical Characteristics											
Suspect Details											

Charges											
1	Charge Type	Description				Statute	UCR	Alt			
	State	NARCOTIC DRUG-POSSESS-USE				13-3408A1	35A	<input type="checkbox"/> Alt <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Com			
Alcohol, Drugs or Compens Used		Location Type		Premises Entered	Forced Entry		Weapons				
<input type="checkbox"/> Alcohol <input type="checkbox"/> Drugs <input type="checkbox"/> Compens		SCHOOL-ELEMENTARY/SE		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		1.				
Entry		Exit		Criminal Activity		2.					
				PROCESSING/ CONCEALING		3.					
Bias Motivation			Bias Target		Bias Circumstances		Hate Group				
2	Charge Type	Description				Statute	UCR	Alt			
	State	DRUG PARAPHERNALIA-POSSESS-USE				13-3415A	35B	<input type="checkbox"/> Alt <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Com			
Alcohol, Drugs or Compens Used		Location Type		Premises Entered	Forced Entry		Weapons				
<input type="checkbox"/> Alcohol <input type="checkbox"/> Drugs <input type="checkbox"/> Compens		SCHOOL-ELEMENTARY/SE		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		1.				
Entry		Exit		Criminal Activity		2.					
				PROCESSING/ CONCEALING		3.					
Bias Motivation			Bias Target		Bias Circumstances		Hate Group				

Figure 1. Jay's police report.

sent him to the office where Jay was told to “write a statement” detailing that he was caught with the vape pen. I turn to Jay, who is sitting next to me silently,

“Did you have the vape pen?”

“Yes ma’am.”

There is silence for a moment as I turn back to the principal with a tight smile. He continues, “This is a mandatory 10 day out of school suspension. We can count today as . . .”

I interrupt him, “Actually, it is really funny. But you know what I am going to school for?”

The principal shakes his head, “Well, no.”

“It just so happens I am working on my PhD in education studying this exact phenomenon. The pushout of students from schools. Of all the people in your office, right?”

He laughs, uncomfortably, “Yeah, that is something.”

I take out my cell phone to pull up the school’s student handbook that I had hurriedly scanned through when I was on my way to the school. I had this little trick drilled into my head through the Aurora Coalition of Black Mothers (ACBM) Know Your Rights trainings I had participated in and observed. “Go through that student handbook and know it. It is boring, but you need to know it and use it in your favor,” Ms. Thames would say.

“Your handbook actually says that it is to your discretion and in consideration of other factors, like students being a danger to the campus, how long they should be suspended. Now I will not argue that he should not have consequences for what he has admittedly done. But you said yourself that he has never been an issue. All his teachers like him and think well of him. I am going to have to push back on that ten-day out of school thing.”

The principal looks down at the incident papers and back at me.

“Okay, well we can do 5 days out of school and 5 days in-school counting today.”

I quickly consider and answer, “Okay, that is somewhat better. I want to be sure he is not missing any work as it is the end of the semester.”

"I will make sure his teachers get him a packet together. But he will have to take part in our drug diversion program." The principal motions for someone to come into the office. A police officer walks in and stands next to the principal's desk.

"This is Officer Hernandez. He is our SRO. He runs our drug diversion program."

The officer shakes my hand and explains, "It is a series of classes he will take. When he is done, we will not pursue prosecuting him."

"What do you mean prosecuting him?"

"Well, for illegal drug use in school. But if he completes the diversion program, there will be no further action on the part of the school."

I respond, "Well do we actually know what was in the pen?"

"We will get it tested to find out exactly what was in the pen and cartridge." Officer Hernandez states.

This all sounded like a lot of judicial talk for a "first time ever being in my office" student caught smoking in the bathroom! Was it possible they would really press charges against him? I quickly imagine the diversion program like the sort of classes we used to take as part of the failed "Just Say No" campaigns of my childhood. My head was spinning. How bad could a class be? I agree that Jay will take part in the school's drug diversion program.

"We will send you paperwork to let you know when they will begin." the principal says. I hardly hear him. I walk out with Jay fuming to my car. Once we get in the car, I tell Jay,

"Don't you ever in your life write down any statement or sign anything without me present. Do you understand?"

"Yes ma'am."

We head home in silence.

Motherwork and Deservedness

My ontological homeplace is mother. Long before I became a biological mother, I engaged in the motherwork of my community as described by Collins (1994) centering my mental, spiritual and physical efforts toward the work of uplifting and empowering children and the members of my communal village. Motherwork entails "working for the physical survival of children and community" (p. 375), while battling, "the dialectical nature of power and powerlessness in structuring mothering patterns, and the significance of self-definition in constructing individual and collective racial identity" (p. 375). The antithetical construction of Black mothers' lives and actions is framed upon the usefulness of our labor to white supremacist and patriarchal ends and the necessity of our cooperation through familial maintenance to continue oppressive projects (Collins, 2000; James, 2016). The work that Black mothers engage in to tear down these structures of despotism for the benefit of their communal children is exemplary of ancestral luminaries such as Ida B. Wells and Anna Julia Cooper (Cooper, 2017). Yet, it is also witnessed in the everyday actions of "aunties," othermothers (James, 1993) and natural mothers using their voices and resources for the survival, power and identity of the children in their charge and the group (Collins, 1994).

One of the most consistent sites of struggle over the power, identity and survival of Black children occurs in school spaces (Bailey-Fakhoury & Frierson, 2014; Watson, 2020; Watson & Baxley, 2021). While rhetoricized as a place where all children should be loved and cared for while being bestowed with skills and knowledge, classrooms are often the scene of trauma, degradation, and exclusion for Black children (Coles & Powell, 2020; Dumas, 2014; Love, 2016; Shange, 2019). One iteration of school site trauma is realized through the disproportionate rates of school pushout and exclusion most readily recognized in the literature as the school to prison pipeline (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2019; Muñiz, 2021; Skiba et al., 2014). Black boys are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their White male counterparts and Black girls are six times more likely to be suspended than their White female peers (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Morris, 2016). Furthermore, Black children are more likely to face criminal sanctions for school misbehaviors than their White peers even though the violations are often similar (Abrams et al., 2021; Holloway, 2021). Given the rise of the use of police officers in schools (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010; Musa-Gillette et al., 2018) also known as school resource officers (SROs), schools have become the facilitator of

increased police contact in early youth (McGlynn-Wright et al., 2022). Research has found that for Black children, this early contact with law enforcement increases the likelihood of arrest in adulthood eleven-fold compared to their White adult peers (McGlynn-Wright et al., 2022).

When I received the call that my son was to be suspended, these are the contextual facts that raced through my mind as I made my way to his school. The ACBM focused their community workshops on preparing parents to protect and defend their child's right to make developmentally appropriate mistakes without the inordinate burden of life altering consequences. Although I could be assumed more equipped for such struggles given my educational and community training, I was caught on the defensive, nonetheless and grasped for responses to 'save my son.' By pointing out that Jay had never been in trouble before, I was elucidating the ridiculousness of such extreme punitive response while also hoping to highlight that my son was not "like those other kids" who may in fact have been in the principal's office countless times. Additionally, by bringing up my level of education, I sought to make the principal aware that I was not going to be bulldozed by talk of the requirements and immovability of policy while also engaging in a type of value signaling that as an educated Black woman, I was not like 'those other mamas.' The anti-Black narrative I had been fed of being essentially less-than as a Black single mother (Allen & White-Smith, 2018; Cammett, 2016; Harris, 2021), were unconsciously embedded in my psyche, making it necessary for me to defend the deservedness of my son while proving my own righteousness to the representatives of an oppressive system with the power to determine our fate.

Telling the Tale Through Autoethnography

The realization of the layered nuances of my response was brought to the fore through the process of autoethnographic journaling I begun utilizing during my research collection. Living beyond the canonical boundaries of what is considered legitimate data (Dumitrica, 2010) autoethnography allows me to move from being a research voyeur to join my participants as a source of knowledge and observation. Analytically, this method served a range of purposes that I did not clearly foresee at its' initiation. Viewing this style of documenting as a form of storytelling and "embodied narrative" (Boehner, 2012) this approach proved to be additionally therapeutic (Kiesinger, 2002), disruptive resistance (Delgado, 1989) and revelatory in nature. As a qualitative researcher Wolcott (1994) suggested, "there must be something of the storyteller in each of us" (p. 17). Delgado (1989) expounded on this idea of researcher as storyteller, by asserting that storytelling is a way of revealing the hand that is being dealt to "show us the way out of the trap of unjustified exclusion" (p. 2415). Thus, autoethnography has the ability to "confront dominant forms of representation and power in an attempt to reclaim, through self-reflective response, representational spaces that have marginalized those of us at the borders" (Tierney, 1998, p. 66). Specific to my lived experiences as a Black woman engaged in the labor of motherwork, Black feminist autoethnography (BFA) renders me the ability to acquire visibility for myself, and my community "in the hopes that my voice will echo and affirm the experiences of women who look like me" (Griffin, 2012, p. 145). Griffin suggests that Black academic women use BFA to "highlight and challenge the U.S. American society's failure to fully reckon with racism and sexism" (p. 139). Through the act of writing my life as valid, I reclaim humanity and intellectual legitimacy (Boylorn, 2016; Brown-Vincent, 2019; Collins, 2022; Osei, 2019).

OF FEAR AND PROTECTION

I give Jay every form of punishment I can think of. He has dishes for 3 months. I take away his phone "until I feel like you ready to have it back." I take away his laptop. He is banished to his room for a month. I make him start running 2 miles every morning before school. I preach to him 13 different versions of the same talk. "You should not have done what you did. Peep how all your little White friends who were in the bathroom with you all got out. What about the boy who gave you this mess? Only you stuck holding the bag Jay! That is the society we live in. You can't make those type of mistakes because they waiting to gobble you up whole. Waiting for you to get out the stall! Watching to put you out the school! You can't afford bad decisions!

They can cost you everything!” I am sure I sounded like a mad woman to him. I just desperately needed him to understand that he can’t be a kid anymore. It felt like a psychologically abusive, developmentally inappropriate, but sadistically necessary conversation.

On February 23rd, Ahmaud Arbury was murdered while taking a jog. On February 24th, I start getting up in the morning and following Jay in my car as he did his punishment jog. Jay later told me that he believed I was following him in my car to make sure he ran the assigned distance. I wish it were so light.

February 28th, I receive a “notice to appear” in the mail from the city police department detailing that Jay was to meet with a probation officer at the Superior Court’s Juvenile Division where he must “admit responsibility for the offense in order to participate in the diversion program.” This whole situation occurred before Christmas, but I am just receiving this follow-up about the diversion program? Additionally, this is no classroom diversion program as I had believed it would be. He has to report to a probation officer! I realize this is a whole different ballgame. I call Mrs. Dotson to ask her if I can meet with her after the next ACBM meeting.

I take Jay with me to the next ACBM meeting and bring the letter I had received from the Superior Court and the paperwork detailing Jay’s suspension back in December. After the meeting once all the members leave, Mrs. Dotson asks me and Jay to sit down at a table where Mrs. Thames joins us. I give them all the paperwork, outlining the incident, Jay’s suspension and the letter informing me of his meeting with the probation officer. They write down some notes as they are reading through everything. Mrs. Dotson starts,

“Why didn’t you tell us about this whole situation earlier?”

“I thought I could handle it.” In my head I added, “And I was ashamed...embarrassed.”

Even with these mothers whom I knew would not judge me and had seen it all before. But fear superseded all pride when I recognized these folks were really trying to catch my son up in the judicial system.

“Don’t ever do that again. You should have told us about all this in December. Don’t think you have to do this alone. I think Simone may be able to go with you to this meeting with the probation officer. But just in case, we are going to go over some things you need to do before the meeting.” They instruct me to write down questions for the officer in advance regarding the program. They also direct me to pick up the police report. I didn’t even think about there being a police report. Mrs. Thames lets me know, “If they have the charges listed on this paper and have assigned him a probation officer, there is a police report.” They also offer to pay the \$50 fee that I am being charged to put Jay in the diversion program. They give Jay a good talking to—a gentler variation of the same talk I had given him multiple times in the last three months. They hug us both and we leave. When we get home, I go to my bedroom, lock the door and cry.

The Burden of Disregard

Black women’s motherwork occurs underneath a canopy of antiblackness that pervades all corners of Black life in the United States and the world (Jung & Vargas, 2021). Dumas identifies antiblackness as the core concept of BlackCrit in education (Dumas & Ross, 2016). He defines antiblackness as a “cultural disregard for and disgust with blackness” (Dumas, 2016, p.12). “. . . antiblackness marks an irreconcilability between the Black and any sense of social or cultural regard” (p. 13). The horrifying images and tales of Black disregard and violence as witnessed through the murders of Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Eric Garner, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd are not disconnected from what occurs in schools but are analogous. One could even say they are instructive (Foucault, 2012; Meiners, 2010; Shedd, 2015; Stovall, 2016).

In the field of education, we bear witness to the long legacy of federal, state, and district level policies and practices that have deprived Black communities and children of educational resources (Anderson, 1988; Anyon, 1997; Lipman & Haines, 2007; Rothstein, 2014; Shiller, 2018) to the absence of culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012), and the maladministration of school discipline policies (Ferguson, 2000; Noguera, 2003; Skiba et al., 2002). These indiscretions occur with searing dependability under the presupposition that Black

children are the other ; other than children, other than capable and other than innocent (Goff et al., 2014). The summations of these assumptions are fertilized with the ideology that Blackness is germane to incivility and that Black people are inherently beings without sentience (Weir, 2014; Wilderson, 2010).

Accumulatively, the weight of anti-Black attacks in neighborhoods, workplaces and schoolhouses impact the psyche and well-being of Black people (Carter, 2007; Carter et al., 2013; Comas-Diaz et al., 2019). These stressors create racialized trauma that is omnipresent and vicarious. A dominant feature of racialized pain is its ability to travel from a direct victim far beyond the material boundaries of the initial violation. Much like the historical terror of a lynching reverberated throughout Black communities (Ore, 2019; Ore & Houdek, 2020), today the repeated viewings on television and social media platforms of Black people murdered by the police and self-appointed neighborhood watchmen, spread the residual psychic and mental effects of the trauma throughout the community (Young, 2020). Exemplary of this secondary trauma, just hearing the news of Ahmaud Arbury, who was pursued and trapped by white supremacists as he was jogging through his neighborhood (Fausset, 2020) was enough to make me get up early in the morning and follow my son as he jogged in our neighborhood. This is the same energy that motivated my repeated admonitions to him regarding how he must move in the school and ultimately the world. I am sure he received it as anger. Even I believed my core emotion to be anger at his behavior. But what was truly driving my passionate reprimands was fear.

Consequently, Black mothers are laden with the vicarious pain of their entire brood. The attendant omnipresence of crisis exacts a psychic toll that is incalculable (Nash, 2021). The ubiquity of tragedy and impending doom animates every decision and consideration Black natural and othermothers are forced to make. It is a seemingly impenetrable wall of impossibility separating survival from freedom (Love, 2019). In the trifecta grounding the theorization of motherwork: power, identity and survival—the survival of our children is of premier concern. “Motherwork for physical survival encompasses Black women’s continuous fight for the longevity and holistic well-being of Black children” (Watson & Baxley, 2021, p. 146). Meanwhile, master systems ensure we stay busied with the precarity of our existence and train us in the understanding that the lives of our children are ever on the metaphorical auction block. In this way our mothering is inexorably captive to the terror that threatens our children’s existence (James, 2016).

THE EPIPHANY

The day of the meeting arrives, and we drive to the Juvenile Detention Center in silence. I remember I kept looking over at him while I was driving. He had on khaki shorts and a dark gray polo. His untamed hair was saying what he wasn’t. What he couldn’t. His knobby knees caught my attention and I decided to use that to make small talk.

“Did you put lotion on honey?”

“Yeah, Nana bought me some.”

Thinking of his sensitive eczema-prone skin that he has dealt with since he was a baby, “I need to get you some more Eucerin.” He nods in agreement.

Another long hallway of quiet.”

I tap his knee, my voice shaking, “Mama is just scared for you, okay?” My eyes welled up and Jay grabbed my hand. “I know mama.”

More silence.

After a couple minutes Jay notes as I wipe tears from my eyes, “But let’s keep your hands on the steering wheel, so we can be safe.”

We both bust out laughing. Jay had successfully broken the tension. Until we pulled up to the detention center parking lot and silently pull in. We head into the building where security takes my purse as we walk through metal detectors. We are directed upstairs to the office where our meeting will take place. The woman at the desk directs us to sit in a lobby area. While we are waiting, it seems like the heaviness of the situation drapes itself over Jay’s back. He set his head down on the table as we waited to be called in.

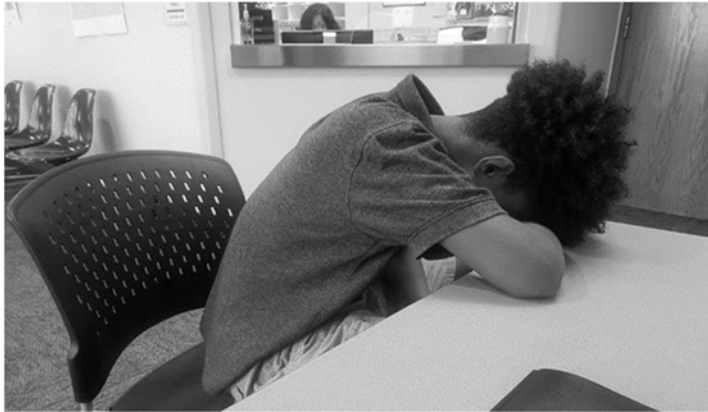


Figure 2. Jay seated in waiting area.

We are eventually called in to see Officer Jodi. She makes clear that Jay must complete all the steps in the diversion program to avoid being sent before a judge and a potential trial. The plan included the following steps: Weekly drug testing, complete an 8-hour drug education class at the detention center, write an essay on life goals, attend five adult 12 step meetings, and I have to complete a parenting class. Because . . . you know . . . I must need a parenting class. During this time, if he does anything wrong—all bets are off and he will be sent before a judge.

COVID and “vape gate” as I jokingly refer to it, has made me think more deeply about the role and function of my son’s schooling. Jay has not liked school since 4th grade when he was first suspended for drawing a comic strip, evaporating his teacher in protest of a bad grade he had received on a math test. Then in his 5th grade year, I had a teacher meet with me because she believed Jay was trying to “be smart(ass)” because he was using big words in class that “he knew the other students didn’t understand.”

Since Spring Break the kids have been in school online because of COVID and to my observation ‘they not learning nothing!’ The main upside of this whole pandemic is knowing my children are safe at home with me. Another plus is I get to see all the work they are supposed to be doing and see how the teachers interact—or don’t interact—with the kids. Also, I am finding more resources and Black parent groups creating online options for curriculum supplementation. I believe I can do this myself. I could ‘school’ Jay myself! I could get Jay a curriculum together that we both work on. I can make it more aligned with what he is interested in, what will be useful for him to be secure and knowledgeable in his Blackness, and what will be truly useful to him in adulthood.

So far, everyone I have told my idea to, thinks I am crazy. “Why are you adding that extra work to your plate while trying to finish a PhD program?” “You just need to whip his ass and set him straight to follow the rules of the school.” “He will have fewer opportunities available to him if you just school him yourself.” “I don’t think that is fair to him because he will miss out on the friendships and social aspects of school.” I have been given all of these reasons and more for why I should not take charge of my son’s education—literally. I honestly don’t care. That may be my stubbornness talking. Or it may be that my experience with the education system makes me wholly aware of how it is not all that we believe it to be in terms of deliverables for OUR kids. In the end, the privilege of my education is ill-used if I can’t use it for my own child. The selfish part of me (is it selfish?) comforts in knowing he will continue to be safe with me. I will not suspend him for drawing pictures, or being caught with a vape thing, or any other reason. I am just over it.

Running Toward Freedom

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic sent the education system into a tailspin. While confusion and institutional hysteria ran amuck (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Watson & Baxley, 2021) efforts were poured into returning as quickly as possible to the previously established status-quo. Yet, as Ladson

Billings (2021) stated “going back is the wrong thing for children and youth who were unsuccessful and oppressed in our schools before the pandemic” (p. 68). She goes on to reference Roy (2021) who further reiterates the mistake of romanticizing the preexisting realities of the marginalized and suggests instead launching from the debris to imagine systems anew. Thus, processing the calamity of the pandemic as “a portal, a gateway between one world and the next” (p.85). What shape can this portal take in educational spaces for the Black community?

Black mothers have long operated in the in-betweenness of their assigned designation as laborers for the goals of white supremacist ends (James, 2016) and their commitment to the survival of their communities (Collins, 1994, 2022; James, 2016). These crevices of possibility provide cover from the world as it is, while they engage in the motherwork necessary to create the world as it should be. Through motherwork Black women perform acts of refusal and create maroons for revival, safety, revelation, and reprieve from the normalcy of Black suffering (Dumas, 2014, 2018; Hartman, 1997). Like the eye of the storm of anti-black trauma, structural inequity, and human disregard, I consider homeschooling as one model of educational marronage that could serve as a portal to new educational possibilities.

Black women’s commitment to “make a way out of no way” and “steal away” education (Williams, 2005) whenever possible, follows Dill’s (2022) summation that marronage is a Black feminist praxis. Roberts (2015) described marronage as a multidimensional construct encapsulating the properties of flight through distance, movement, property and purpose. Roberts defined distance as a “spatial quality separating an individual or individuals in a current location or condition from a future location or condition” (p. 9). He noted that “movement refers to the ability of agents to have control over motion and the intended directions of their actions” (p. 9). When speaking of property, he is referencing the “physical, legal, and material object that is under the possession and ownership of an individual, institution, or state” (p. 9). Lastly, he spoke to purpose as “the rational and reason for a particular act” (p. 9). Ultimately, marronage is dynamic and always in flux; forever between slavery and freedom, bound and boundless. Therefore, when considering the associated components of flight in educational context, it must be understood that each prism may be held in higher or lower relief at various intervals yet, are always in a perpetual state of escape. As Roberts indicated, “Actuality is merely the manifestation of a heightened form of activity in the action of flight” (p. 10).

Marronage as a practice was taken up by our African ancestors (and other groups globally) to escape the restraints of enslavement. Shockley and LeNiles (2019) suggested that the “spirit of the maroons” is a concept which can “create liberated spaces for Black people” (p. 364). Maroons engaged in resistance by “[1] denying slaveholders the legal ownership of their bodies, [2] depriving them of the product of their labor, and [3] refusing them the authority to manage and control what they considered their personal sphere: their family” (Diouf, 2016, p. 84).

Referencing Roberts’ pillars (2015) as the frame for understanding the impacts of committing myself and my son the status of maroon in a quest toward educational self-determination and autonomy (Dill, 2022; Roberts, 2015) I sought to deny “the master” institution say over whether further “violations” by my son could place him at the mercy of the juvenile system. This movement deprived them the benefit of his presence from which they receive monetary compensation and further refused them authority over the contents of and methods for my son’s learning. By moving him outside of striking distance from the institution, I denied them “property-rights” and control over his fate. I additionally reclaimed his physical, intellectual and psychic well-being by reinscribing the purpose of his education to be in service to himself and his cultural community. Mazama and Lundy (2012) framed homeschooling as “an exercise in agency inspired by the desire to defeat racism through physical removal from one of its major spheres of operation, school (p. 730). Much of the literature that focuses on the motivations for Black homeschooling further reiterate it as a strategy of protection, resistance, survival, and freedom (Crowe, 2016; Fields-Smith, 2020; Llewellyn, 1996; Lundy & Mazama, 2014; Mazama, 2016; Mazama & Lundy, 2012) much in the model of the maroons of old. It is in shade of flight, unseen by their intended captors, that maroon communities bloomed and blossomed, dancing in their freedom dreams.

The Boundaries of Educational Marronage

As a communal mother concerned with the needs of children beyond my body, I must contend with the ways my act of petit marronage or “individual act of truancy” (Roberts, 2015) contributes to or impedes the larger freedom struggle. The tension between those with the ability to maroon and those left to fend on the plantation is unavoidable. The relationship between Black people and the educational system is often oversimplified and framed as matters of parental involvement or parental ignorance (Fields-Smith, 2020). Interest groups and competing educational factions (Pedroni, 2006, 2021; Scott, 2011) play on our vulnerabilities (Stovall, 2013) and contort to present themselves as most concerned with the needs of Black children. Meanwhile, little positive material benefit nor sustained change is evident from any camp (Almond, 2012; Boyce et al., 2020; Stovall, 2013). Black parents appear as pawns for those jockeying for power in a system never intended to center the concerns of Black children (Bartlett et al., 2002; Demps, 2021).

Yet, limits abound to how acts of educational evacuation as exercised through homeschooling as marronage, can progress whole group liberation (Fields-Smith, 2015). Peering through the prism of my social location as a Black, single, mother with a disability (Crenshaw, 2017) it must be recognized that my educational status and upwardly mobile class trajectory provided me the avenue to even consider homeschooling my son. Early on in the pandemic, the flexibility I had of writing a dissertation and later working from home where I could be with my children daily was a luxury not afforded to many Black women who are disproportionately considered essential workers (University of Illinois Chicago School of Public Health, 2021). Furthermore, the social networks and attendant resources afforded me by virtue of my educational status enabled me to bring my son to campus where he could access university resources as well. These are samples of the capital I could wield as vehicles of resistance unavailable to many Black mothers (Battle et al., 2005; Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009).

Ladson-Billings (2021) analogized an education system reset to the reset given to a smartphone. I expound on this image and offer that if the phone is defective from its draft to construction, then a reset for correction is futile. I echo the sentiments of Fields-Smith (2020) that “While many[Black] home educators love their communities and even hold public education in high regard, how long should they wait for the high-quality education they want for their children and that their children deserve?” Ultimately, there seems to be no singular approach to communal educational liberation as we battle to save our children from the insatiable gods of white supremacy. In concert with the “islands of hope” (Ladson-Billings, 2021) that have been revealed in this moment, we need the bravery and imagination to also create maroons of sovereignty that are accessible to the most fragile among us until our ultimate ambitions can be actualized for all of our children.

SEEING MONSTERS

I heard a BBC story some time ago discussing a trick of the eyes-or maybe the mind- that makes us see things out of what is not actually there. Like our ability to see castles in clouds or Jesus in a piece of toast. This tendency to incorrectly perceive of what is right before our eyes is known as pareidolia. It is normally a perfectly innocuous natural occurrence. But what if the reimaginings are always monsters? I think often of how my son is perceived by those around us. Do these optic manipulations bring some type of twisted comfort to the observer? Like how an officer can see a child 50 lbs larger than he actually is. The murderers of Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Eric Garner, Botham Jean, and George Floyd described their victims as scary, monstrous—even “demons” in some way. How society may perceive of my son brings me nightmares. A constant worry that today may be the day a misstep ends poorly for him. That instead of my dear, sweet boy who brings me breakfast in bed, and makes sure I take a break from working to eat a meal—they will see a tall, black abomination that must be locked away—or killed. I imagine these are normal thoughts for the mothers of Black children. But it should not be this way. We have grown accustomed to adapting to this suffering-living with this ominous fear. Like “the talk” we all have in some form or another with our babies, this persistent cloud of foreboding is psychotic trauma for survival on daily repeat. A 12-inch

over the same scratch in the song. Yet, we can't just put on a new album. We don't hold the records.

Black mothers must hold one image in each hand of their children. We must grasp how they are seen by the world in one while in the other, we hold tightly to who they actually are. We can never let loose of either hand, lest we are caught unprepared for what always comes. We must love them hard and prep them harder.

“We gotta arm warriors we pray only ever see peace.”
–MamaSol, 2011

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