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There's Always a Way Out: Spatial Domination, Disappearance, and Free Movement in the Carceral-Education Landscape

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Abstract

This article aims to think beyond schooling as the terrain on which educational liberation might be achieved. Based on ethnographic research with students who have been pushed or pulled into alternative education, I explore how schooling operates through mundane forms of spatial domination that attempt to track, force, and contain the movement of Black and Brown young people within and between places, and across a carceral-education landscape more broadly. Through a Black feminist geographic lens, however, I read below patterns of forced disappearance to consider the ways students disappear themselves. Young people's persistence in moving freely within and away from sites of spatial domination charts the possibilities for educational liberation beyond formal schooling.

Keywords: critical geographies of education, school-prison nexus, abolition, Black feminist geographies

Story I: (Holo)Mapping the Carceral-Education Landscape

Principal Craig's[1] hairy white pointer finger met the holographic map with force, leaving a sticky imprint and the sound of peeling tape when he removed it. The cartographers—the deans, principals, and assistant principals of Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD)—were huddled around this map, which covered the entire length of the large conference table in their headquarters. This was a highly advanced interactive map that cost a considerable amount of school revenue, which should have been allocated elsewhere. The HoloMap was first adopted by the military, shortly followed by urban planners and others interested in the manipulation of space and the movement of people and places that comprise it. Through their brotherhood with the LAPD, Principal Craig and a couple other administrators in LAUSD had gotten their sticky fingers on the stereoscopic technology. As self-proclaimed cartographers of the carceral-education landscape, they too had stakes in spatial domination.

LAUSD was in fact only a portion of the holographic map, albeit a large one. (It was

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I thank the reviewers and editors for their thoughtful, critical, and generative feedback on numerous versions of this manuscript, through which it has been strengthened significantly.

[1] All names of schools and institutional agents (teachers, principals, deans, etc.) are pseudonyms, unless specified otherwise. All participating students chose the names by which they would like to be identified in this study, some of which are real names or nicknames, and others of which students made up on their own.

out of scale; the entire map was grotesque and disproportional). The rest of the map spanned LA County, with faint depictions of mountains, valleys, etc., to symbolize neighboring counties and bordering districts. These outlying regions, which came into play at times, allowed Principal Craig and his fellow cartographers a more expansive, and therefore more exploitative, use of space. Some sites on the map were outlined clearly, complete with labels, shading, the whole work of art. In addition to schools, these sites included juvenile halls, the Board of Supervisors, Child Protective Services (CPS), and other state institutions that played a central role in the movement of people and places and things across space. Other areas were shaded poorly or not at all, lumped into ambiguous zones that mulled over history, complexity, and heterogeneity: places like neighborhoods, which were color-coded according to myths that were shifting yet timeless. Each of the schools in LA County, including schools in juvenile hall, charter schools, private schools, alternative schools for the "good kids," alternative schools for the "bad kids," and everything else in between, were also labeled and color-coded according to categories that belied complexity and heterogeneity. Through this shading and labeling and lumping regime, the map and its cartographers inscribed narratives onto places and, as we will see, the people who inhabit those places.

With the help of university researchers, the map-makers developed a series of complex legends, brought to life through virtual 3-D game pieces that they could move around on the board. There were objects—furniture, electronics, office supplies—each one symbolizing a particular set of moves set into motion through a particular set of relationships. There were classroom chairs, which symbolized the physical and ideological ranking of kids from good to Black (and everywhere/everyone in between). There were phones, which symbolized complex networks and alliances conjoining the various state institutions (school, prison, CPS, etc.) that comprised the HoloMap. There were pieces of paper (referral slips, hall passes, diplomas, records) which symbolized the data points, descriptors, and "official" documentation of who belongs where and why. And then there were the bodies, only some of whom constituted people, which moved and were moved around the board. Multiple bodies were involved, each labeled and shaded, like the places, with varying complexity. There were teachers and counselors, police and security guards, social workers and POs, parents, and, of course, the students. Students' pieces were color-coded according to narratives, made and remade at the cartographer's whim, based on the same algorithms that color-coded the places from which (it was presumed) they came. All of it was both haphazard and highly organized, overly simplistic and complex. From this holographic gaze from above, bodies and objects and people and places could be labeled and lumped, tracked and charted, and most importantly controlled and contained. Or, so the legend has it.

A Roadmap: Listening to Stories

Spoiler alert: the HoloMap isn't real. Though, I hesitate to say it is simply a myth.

Let me backtrack.

I grew up listening to stories, and doing my best to retell them. My grandmother is a Holocaust survivor, and from a very young age I was the recipient of weighty words. She taught me about war and liberation, about losing faith and refusing to let faith die. Most

of all she taught me that stories are how we get at the shape of truth, against myth, against history books and mandated curriculum, and against narratives inscribed onto people and places. I learned, in some of my earliest attempts to listen and retell, that to scratch at the shape of truth you have to imagine against the weight of fact. You have to tell new stories, or tell old stories in new ways.

The HoloMap is one such story. It is a story that emerged from listening to a different set of stories: of students at FREE LA High School, an abolitionist alternative school created for and by young people of color who were removed, or removed themselves, from traditional schooling. I listened to these stories, and these students, as an educator and ethnographer at FREE LA, over the course of a two-and-a-half-year study (which developed into a longer relationship with the space and the people in it). Building from these stories, this essay makes two interconnected arguments: that schooling[2] operates intrinsically through mundane forms of spatial domination that are counterinsurgent in nature; and that (Black) students' persistence in moving freely charts epistemological ruptures in and from a carceral-education landscape that is neither fixed nor inevitable. Together, these arguments craft a metanarrative, one which reveals the ways spatial domination is always entangled with radical possibilities for living otherwise (McKittrick, 2006, 2011). My interest is in listening to these possibilities, thinking beyond the continuous recapitulation of schooling as a potential site of liberation, and considering more life-affirming forms of social organization and (educational) liberation.

To do so, I tell stories. Informed by the methodological-epistemological interventions of Black feminist geographic knowledges, I tell two stories that imagine, in different ways, beyond current fact and "what we already know" (McKittrick, 2014, 2017; Purifoy, 2023), in order to scratch at the shape of truth. Continuing with the HoloMap, I first tell a story of the carceral-education landscape from above. I then tell a story of a different set of legends, life, and livingness (McKittrick, 2016) that are threaded through that landscape from below. I tell these stories, and then I tug at their threads to expand on the core claims stated above, and to weave together a metanarrative of spatial domination and its refusal, of a holographic gaze and the things it cannot see, of schooling and a different set of possibilities.

Let us track back, then, to the sticky finger...

(Holo)mapping the Carceral-Education Landscape

When Principal Craig removed his hairy white pointer, leaving in its place an imprint and the sound of peeling tape, the HoloMap zoomed into his site, Watts Central High School. This was, as mentioned, a highly advanced interactive map that cost a considerable amount of revenue which really should have gone to other things. When you clicked on a site, like a school, the HoloMap zoomed in to reveal incredible detail, including hallways, classrooms and little images of things, objects, bodies inside the classrooms. This zooming

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[2] In this paper, while I use *schools* to refer to the physical site(s) of individual schools, or groups of individual schools, I use *schooling* to refer to the dynamic set of ideas and ideologies, practices and policies, state and extra-state actors, and institutional and ideological relationships that together make (and remake) the system of U.S. schooling. Of course, schools as sites are inseparably enmeshed with schooling as a system; as this essay argues, however, schools are just one of the institutions that make and remake the broader landscape of schooling.

in and out between the specific and the vague, between particular places and the broader landscape they comprised, was an anxious form of statecraft, integral to making and shaping the landscape itself.

Principal Craig's mitt came down again with similar force and stickiness, but this time to move a tiny 3-D piece which symbolized a student, Beautiful. "There," he said, "She was right there. Hiding from me. Sneaky girl always changes her hiding spot. Bathroom on the first floor, hallway on the second, bathroom on the first, hallway on the third. We got cameras in the hallways, but it takes my every nerve not to install cameras in the bathrooms." He made a disgusting winking gesture.

The boys club erupted into gargling spouts of laughter, spit flying onto the map next to the sticky fingerprints. Principal Jabari, the one who got into this for "the right reasons," looked uneasy, his face contorted into a mixture of disgust and disappointment at his own lack of astonishment, as he often did in these meetings.

Zooming back out to the broader landscape, they tried to chart Beautiful's path: where she had already been and where she ought to go. Principal Craig moved her piece (not a personal piece, just a random piece with the appropriate color), gliding it across the map from school to school, including multiple middle and elementary schools. Of course, much of her path remained illegible to them, but myopia is the sort of powerfully destructive weakness that cannot see itself for what it is.

"Well, boys. What should I do?"

A chorus of slightly differing opinions blended together into a narrative that stayed the same, even as it changed. Only Principal Jabari's voice could be heard slightly out of tune, as he suggested shifting her over to another school within LAUSD. Somehow, he had convinced the boys to allow this for the last student they tried to throw away, but that was a rarity. The other principals made up the game as they went. The rules were a changing same, which made them both powerful and porous.

"Eh," Craig said, with smug nonchalance. He moved Beautiful's piece over to a random alternative school and the piece disappeared, making the *swipe-crunch* sound that a computer makes when you move a file to the trash bin.

Jabari sighed. He was reaching the end of his patience, his conscience constantly fighting him. Many well-meaning administrators (mostly women and people of color) stay, convinced they can fight the system, and, on occasion, make changes that have meaningful impacts on the lives of young people and their families. For Jabari, the contradictions were too great, and a few months later he was pushed-out to a trash bin school, too. Principal Craig, on the other hand, was ultimately removed for "touching a student inappropriately." But he maintained contact with the boys, and legend has it he became a social worker…or a cop.

Story II: The Legend Underneath the Landscape

The four boys and I wove through the narrow streets of South Central LA. Three recently enrolled students, Bandit, Kodak and Jayden, sat in the back, while Jimmy, one of the students I've known the longest, sat in the front. Cars, trucks, and tossed out furniture hugged both sides of what was supposedly a two-way road, so that each time a car came from the other direction I pulled into any oasis of space I could find, usually in

front of someone's driveway, to let the car get past. I kept checking the speedometer. I usually drive alone, not with students, and LA streets are no joke. Every so often, the large van that takes students home from FREE LA High School would fill up, and I would use the extra staff vehicle to drop off whoever didn't fit. On most of these days, the students I brought home would immediately connect to Bluetooth, eager to showcase the music they recorded that week in the school studio. Apparently, I passed the music test today, because no one seized the aux. Maybe they were just tired.

On every corner, sometimes more frequently than that, we passed a cop car. As one cut me off right before a light, I rolled my eyes in a dramatic exaggerated circle, landing them ultimately in Jimmy's direction.

His face didn't change. "Light's green," he said.

I looked forward and kept going. As we made our way out of the maze of stop lights, my eyes bounced back and forth between the road ahead of me, and the breaths of life that poked holes in the dense pollution of car exhaust and state surveillance: Rich, fragrant smoke billowed from street vendors' grills. A young woman waiting for the walk sign was having an animated conversation on her phone, the sun hitching a ride on her diamond-studded acrylics each time she threw her free hand in the air. A family of four Angelinos, two of them young teenagers, were setting up a stand of Easter baskets and pastel colored balloons for sale. The same group of faces I always saw in front of my favorite (i.e., cheapest) gas station bumped music from a tiny speaker, passing between fingers some things that might help pass the time.

Jayden, Kodak, and Bandit, two brothers and their good friend, were being dropped off in the same place, while Jimmy was going a bit further. When I made drop offs, the students rarely gave me an address; I just needed to trust their directions. Against the drive for full disclosure and the certainty of a knowable destination—and over years of conversations, in cars, in interviews, in classrooms and text threads—I had learned that I needed to listen to a different set of truths.

They used landmarks as often as they used street names, drawing from an internalized map of histories, memories, and informal legends in ways that continuously fascinated and impressed me. As we approached their part of South Central, the comfortable silence in the backseat broke into an enthusiastic impromptu tour guide. The three boys pointed out buildings haunted by forgotten histories, shops that stored erased genealogies, corners that marked belonging etched in code, and the names of schools they used to go to, their friends went to, they would have gone to if they weren't pushed or pulled into FREE LA. This compass, this legend underneath the landscape, is something all of the students at FREE LA possessed.

As we drove past the last high school the three boys attended before coming to FREE LA, I peered down narrow streets, wondering if we were passing their "hangout" spot. Autopilot kicking in, my mind drifted back a few days to my interview with Bandit and Kodak, in which they shared their shared histories being "sent out" of South Central High School. We were sitting in my classroom at FREE LA, where I had taught English for the past year. While I fidgeted, characteristically, on one side of the long student desk, the two of them leaned back comfortably in their chairs on the other side. As they narrated the experiences that converged in their simultaneous arrival at FREE LA, the base in each of their voices, like the clarity of their insight, belied their young age.

"So, yeah, we would go to school like when it was already lunch time. And they would get up on us over that. They knew where we…they knew our *hangout* spot." Bandit pushed the word hangout into the air.

"Outside of school?" My eyes were glued to a fraying thread on my staff sweatshirt. As the boys answered a concerted "yeah" in unison, I gave in to my temptations and began pulling at the thread, trying to break it off from the broader fabric.

Bandit continued. "And then the counselors and staff, they'll all go where we'll be at and they'll just tell us, 'Oh, go to class, go to class!'" As the students often did when sharing their education histories, Bandit swiftly changed his tone to play the role of staff, mimicking a frantic search party.

"Or they'll send school police to the alley just [to] tell us like, 'Oh, y'all gotta go to class. You gotta go to class.'"

"They'll find you off campus?" I looked up from my fraying thread in naive surprise.

Again, a chorus. Yeah.

"That's too much." In these interviews, oftentimes the only thing to say was something they already knew, something that didn't need to be said.

Despite my stating the obvious, Bandit confirmed, "Yeah, that's just doing too much. That's when—We really got up on them cause of that. And they just, they knew we was gon'…tore [the school] up, you feel me? That's why we just all got sent out." He paused, took his phone out of his pocket to check the time, and shifted his position. "Hey Miss, you keep pulling that thread 'n you might just unravel the whole thing."

As my mind wandered between images of fraying threads, hangout spots, and frantic search parties, Bandit's actual voice from the backseat entered my daydream like a spirit, startling me out of autopilot.

"This corner is good, Miss."

I pressed the brake and stopped abruptly at the corner, breathing sharp relief that no car was behind me. Knowing by now that they'd refuse, but feeling I needed to ask anyway, I offered to drive them all the way to their destination.

"Naw," the three boys said, almost in unison. "We got it from here."

I checked my rearview mirror quickly to make sure no cars were coming, and by the time I looked back up to say something they already knew—"be safe" or "see you tomorrow"— the boys had all but disappeared behind the corner of a building. All I caught was a glimpse of Jayden pulling an oversized hood over his head, revealing words penned in red font that had previously been hidden:

"There's always a way out."

Background: Spatial Domination and Free Movement in the Carceral-Education Landscape

The remainder of this paper pulls at the threads of these two stories to advance what I have mentioned are my two core claims. I argue, first, that formal schooling operates through various forms of spatial domination that attempt to track, force, or contain the movement of Black and Brown young people within and between spaces (i.e., which spaces they are allowed to inhabit or escape, when, and in what ways), and within and across a carceral-education landscape more broadly. Secondly, these incessant efforts to

track and control are not simply responses to (mis)behavior, methods of sorting, or draconic modes of maintaining safety and order, but rather anxious attempts to predict and contain free (Black) movement. These claims, in turn, suggest two others: first, that spatial domination is fundamentally counterinsurgent in nature; and second, that 'school' is not a fixed institution, or static and self-evident thing, but rather a set of "tenuous and unstable practices and relations [that are] subject to intervention and revision" (King, 2019, p. 78). Free (Black) movement in the context of schooling, in other words, signifies more than just a regulatory issue, a management risk, or even a disruption to the status quo; rather, it symbolizes an epistemological rupture that, when forced open, charts alternative ways of living, learning, and moving through the world.

These claims build on critical geographies of education (CGE), in order to contribute to broader cross-disciplinary dialogues around schooling, abolition, and educational liberation. CGE analyze schools as key sites of social reproduction, exploring how educational projects, policies, opportunities, and their spatial distributions shape and are shaped by local-global geographies of racial, gender, and class-based oppression (Holloway & Kirby, 2019; Kromidas, 2022; Pini et al., 2017; Serrano, 2022). The emerging subfield also explores how community members, organizers, and activists "*contest* unjust geographies of education" (Nguyen et al., 2017, p. 22, emphasis in original), resist racialized (educational) abandonment, and advance larger struggles for social and spatial justice, through the site of the school (Buras, 2013; Cahill et al., 2016; Cheng, 2016; Good, 2017; Lipman, 2018). Rather than focusing only on domination, the recent focus in CGE is to "engage schools as sites where multiple co-constitutive projects come together and can be resisted" (Nguyen et al., 2017, p. 9). What this subfield adds to education studies is an analysis of schooling that situates it as a dynamic and relational terrain of struggle, shaped constitutively by broader spatial configurations of power and resistance.

Despite these insights, CGE has struggled against the weight of one of U.S. empire's most timeless and seductive myths: the "deep down" benevolence, and thus salvageability, of American education. Hardly limited to CGE, this nimble and persistent myth weasels its way incessantly into otherwise radical demands for educational transformation made by scholars and activists alike.[3] Seeking a different set of truths, this paper takes as a point of departure a conclusion drawn by Henry (2020) in his recent review of CGE that, "while critical of some particularly egregious policies," the emerging subfield has yet "to openly problematize its subject: the whole notion of compulsory, mass institutionalized schooling" (p. 183).

By focusing on the foundational-symbiotic connections between schooling and carceral regimes (Meiners, 2007; Rodríguez, 2010; Sojoyner, 2016; Vaught, 2017; Vaught et al., 2022), I raise questions about the consistency with which schools are taken for granted and recapitulated as the primary sites, or necessary portals, of transformation in

[3] There are important interdisciplinary conversations around "abolitionist education," particularly in the context of the school-prison nexus. While relevant, the visions for educational transformation made in this body of work differ in key ways from the visions I discuss here. Demands for radical curricular, epistemic, ideological, and interpersonal transformations through "abolitionist education," while crucial and sorely needed, do not necessarily think beyond the site of the school. For a notable discussion of "school abolition," however, see Stovall (2018).

the movement for educational justice. Rather than focus strictly on harsh punishment, however, or "particularly egregious" disciplinary policies (Henry, 2020), I focus on the ways schooling extends the reach, materially and ideologically, of carceral regimes through its mundane and fundamental terms and conditions. I do so by listening to the insurgent forms of movement and place-making strategies embodied by young people within and outside of schools, which operate beyond the sorts of organized struggle typically characterized (and studied) as activism or collective resistance. These movements and the ruptures they force open are rendered illegible and unimaginable within frameworks of criminalization, as well as within frameworks of educational equality and access. Overall, I aim to think beyond schooling as the terrain on which (educational) liberation might be achieved.

Ethnographic, Epistemological, and Methodological Context

Ethnographic Context and Data

Research Site

This study draws from a two-and-a-half-year ethnography at Fighting for the Revolution that will Educate and Empower Los Angeles (FREE LA) High School, where I have also taught, tutored, and/or substituted for the past four years. FREE LA is an abolitionist alternative school in South Central LA, created by the Youth Justice Coalition (YJC), an organization of system-impacted young people building a broader social movement to abolish all forms of youth confinement and criminalization in LA County. As part of this movement, YJC created FREE LA in 2007 to serve the Black, Brown, and Indigenous youth being systematically pushed out of LA schools (E. Lacques-Zapién, personal communication, June 22, 2022; YJC, n.d.; see also Muñoz, 2021; Sardo, 2014), resulting in what YJC organizers recognized (and experienced) as a seeming diaspora of young people across the landscape. As YJC organizer Emilio explained, "Young people had nowhere to go." Indeed, of the approximately 30[4] students who regularly attend FREE LA in-person per semester, all are students of color between ages 15 and 22. Although the HoloMap focused on LAUSD, students at FREE LA came, were moved, and moved themselves from and to multiple places within and beyond Southern California. In addition to sharing an experience with school push-out, nearly all of the students have been impacted, directly or through loved ones, by overlapping systems of incarceration, probation, foster care, and/or immigration enforcement; and all of the students navigate the landscapes of organized abandonment that are endemic to racial capitalist carceral regimes (Gilmore, 2007). Beyond frameworks of vulnerability and disadvantage, however, and as I argue throughout this essay, what FREE LA students share is an insistence on moving through the world at their own pace.

Although alternative schools often exist in scholarly and public imaginaries as sites of abandonment, YJC created FREE LA as a space with "open doors" (E. Lacques-Zapién,

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[4] Approximately 60 students were officially enrolled each semester during my time at FREE LA, about half of whom attended regularly in person. Of these 30, some attended more regularly than others.

personal communication, June 22, 2022), and as a police-free, punishment-free alternative to both traditional schooling and other institutions that confine and displace racialized youth (YJC, n.d.). FREE LA runs on a credit system (similar to a community college) and has typical core classes. What makes their curriculum unique, however, is that FREE LA is technically a trade school, and their trade is social justice movement building. Thus, their curriculum is rooted in political education, and as a graduation requirement students participate in actions and protests organized by YJC. Instead of exams, students complete project-based assessments, many of which are community-oriented. For example, students recently prepared presentations for the local South Central community about how to respond to a fentanyl overdose (see Patino, 2023). Another unique and pivotal dimension of FREE LA is its connection with YJC's abolitionist legal clinic, which provides free legal service to students (and other South Central community members) who come into contact with the criminal punishment system. For example, folks in the clinic will help students build their cases, accompany students at court hearings (what we call "court support"), and assist students in complying with probation requirements, such as by developing opportunities for them to complete community service hours in the FREE LA/YJC space. Quite importantly, teachers, including myself, write court support letters for students (letters of recommendation submitted to the judge). In my experience, teachers write these letters unconditionally, regardless of the facts of the case.

These dimensions of the program, and FREE LA's broader refusal to criminalize, suspend, or otherwise exile young people, are rooted in its foundations in abolition and transformative justice (TJ). Whereas restorative justice is increasingly implemented as an alternative to punishment in schools and other state institutions (e.g., Agudelo et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2020), TJ seeks to transform the nexus of institutions, structural conditions, ideologies, and power relationships that make both systemic and interpersonal harm inevitable. Including but vastly exceeding an alternative method of conflict resolution, TJ encompasses a broad framework and set of everyday praxes for addressing the multi-scalar roots of harm, and building community safety and accountability, in ways that do not partition people into binary categories of humanness (like victim/offender and violent/non-violent) (see, for example, Kaba, 2017; Kaba et al., 2021; Ortiz, 2019). Before elaborating on this study's data and my methodological approach, a brief discussion of my positionality and relationships within the FREE LA space provides important context.

Relational Context

The broader study from which this paper pulls, like the relationships which made the study possible, grew and unfolded in unexpected ways. It is through pre-existing relationships with YJC that I first learned about FREE LA, became (more) invested in abolitionist education, and became interested in studying the two together. For the first year of my field work, I assisted the Humanities teacher at the time, Sir Bailey, as a teaching assistant, and served as a support person for FREE LA students more broadly. As that year ended and the next began, right around the time many schools were shifting from (COVID-19) distance learning to in-person learning, the FREE LA staff asked me to teach English. For the remainder of my study, I inhabited the dual role of educator/ethnographer.

This positionality radically shaped the study's unfolding. A full discussion of how and to what effect this was the case is beyond the scope of this paper, but I'll focus here briefly

on my approach to this dual positionality and how it shaped my praxis as a researcher. Broadly, I was guided in this study by João Costa Vargas' (2008) conceptualization of observant participation, which he develops as part of a praxis and "blueprint for ethnography that does not shy away from projecting explicit political involvement" (p. 164). Observant participation, in this context, refers to "active participation in [an] organized group, such that observation becomes an appendage of the main activity" (p. 175). This means that, as a FREE LA English teacher (and later as a tutor and substitute), my field work was structured by my participation in non-research activities, with the latter prioritized if/when the two conflicted. This also means that, in line with various scholarships and knowledge traditions[5] that have critiqued the notion and possibility of "scientific objectivity" (e.g., Collins, 1989; Grosfoguel, 2007; Mignolo, 2000; Prescod-Weinstein, 2020; Wynter, 2003), I made no attempt in my study, theoretically or epistemologically, to separate my two roles, nor did I attempt to separate the ethnographic from the political.

This broad approach informed my praxis (in each role) in important ways. Rather than teaching with my teaching hat on, and then observing with my ethnographer hat on, I wore the two proverbial hats together, and this relationship itself became reciprocal. The nature of the questions I asked in my research, the knowledge traditions with which my study engages (described below), and the praxis of listening deeply to students' stories in and beyond interviews, along with numerous other dimensions of the ethnographic process, radically shaped my understanding, approach, and pedagogy in the classroom. My research, then, shaped and deepened the relationships I was able to form with FREE LA students as an educator. At the same time, the trust I was able to build and insights I was able to gain as an educator radically shaped and deepened how the study unfolded, and in what directions. In sum, rather than a barrier to an "objective" scientific process, becoming such an intimate part of the FREE LA space and community afforded me a perspective, and a depth of relationality, that was and is invaluable—and not just empirically.

Data

Bolstered by ethnographic observant participation, including informal conversations with all FREE LA students, education histories with 13 students are the present study's primary source of data. I conducted education histories like oral histories, which gather "personal recollections of events, their causes, and their effects" from the perspective of the individuals experiencing them (Creswell, 1998, p. 49). Thus, education histories captured students' in-depth narratives of, and personal reflections on, their experiences in traditional schooling from elementary to high school, their experiences being pushed out of (or choosing to leave) traditional schooling, and their experiences at FREE LA, including how those experiences compare to their experiences in prior schools. I began each interview asking broadly about students' experiences with education and school push-out. Free to let their narratives guide the interviews, students frequently discussed

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[5] To be clear, this paper does not aim or claim to be in deep conversation with each of these scholarships and knowledge traditions; I reference them here to acknowledge the diverse dialogues surrounding questions of objectivity, methodology, positionality, and power.

how their experiences in schools overlapped with other state institutions (e.g., foster care, immigration enforcement, policing), broader structures and configurations of dispossession (e.g., poverty, housing insecurity), and aspects of their lives irreducible to schooling, state systems, or geographies of domination.

Throughout interviews, I asked students how their experiences in, and being removed from, their prior schools compared to their experiences at FREE LA. Students' repeated juxtapositions, in conversations and interviews, between FREE LA and the "regular schools" (including other alternative schools) they had attended emerged as a compass to analyze the myriad entanglements between schooling, displacement, and confinement for young people of color, and thus the numerous scopes and scales of transformation necessary to unravel, or abolish, those entanglements. Following this compass, my broader ethnographic project has explored the ways FREE LA departs interpersonally, ideologically, epistemologically, and spatially from—even as it is absorbed into (Gilmore, 2008)—the carceral-education landscape.

Epistemological and Methodological Context: Black Feminist Geographies

This paper draws its epistemological and methodological praxis from Black feminist geographic knowledge traditions. Black feminist geographies have detailed the centrality of map-making/cartography to colonial conquest and the violent (re)iterative processes of constructing modernity's "human"—Man (Wynter, 2003), the white European-self (King, 2019)—through Black and Indigenous death and dispossession (King, 2019; Madera, 2023; Wynter, 2003; Wynter & McKittrick, 2015). However, in departure from both dominant and critical geographic analyses—which reinscribe, whether by valorizing or critiquing, the condemned status of Black space—Black feminist geographies refuse the dialectic that renders Black life either unintelligible, or knowable only in relation to (its inclusion within, exclusion from, or resistance to) systems of domination. In the specific ways they uncover the inextricability of "race, place and violence" (McKittrick, 2011), Black feminist geographies disrupt two core epistemic technologies of cartographic domination. The first of these technologies is to story space, both body and place, as fixed and "transparent" (McKittrick, 2006; Hawthorne, 2019; Hawthorne & Lewis, 2023, p. 10). The notion "that space 'just is'" (McKittrick, 2006, p. xi)—that there just are, for example, white suburbs and Black neighborhoods and those places you wouldn't want to raise your kids—is inextricably entwined with the spatialization of difference, and with gendered-racialized narratives inscribed onto people and the places from which (it is presumed) they come. The second epistemic technology is to begin a priori with, and therefore remain unable to imagine beyond, the "algorithmic fact" of Black abjection and placelessness (McKittrick, 2014, 2017). As McKittrick (2011) explains, this violent epistemic practice pervades the analytical and so-called commonsense frameworks through which researchers (and others) understand the world. Specifically, the analytic frameworks that exist within our present Eurocentric systems of knowledge and knowing become enclosed in a circuitous logic wherein the Black/non-white person, or body, can only ever be seen and rendered legible as violent or violated. This is the case, McKittrick (2011, 2014) argues, even and especially in analytical critiques of that violence.

Radically disrupting these technologies of cartographic domination, Black feminist geographies begin instead from "a Black sense of place": a place of Black life and

livingness (McKittrick, 2014, 2021), which "brings into focus the ways in which racial violences (concrete and epistemic actions and structural patterns intended to harm, kill, or coerce a particular grouping of people) *shape, but do not wholly define*, black worlds" (McKittrick, 2011, p. 947, emphasis added). This place of Black life and livingness, and the liberatory epistemological praxis of beginning from it, foregrounds how Black stories, knowledges, ecologies, imaginaries, and everyday spatial practices are inseparably enmeshed with modernity's racial-colonial geographic arrangements, and therefore as well with the present-future and real-imagined possibilities that (might) exist beyond it (Brand, 2023; Madera, 2023; McKittrick, 2006, 2014; McKittrick & Woods, 2007; Reese, 2019; Winston, 2021).

This enmeshment is the metanarrative. It is the legends, the alternative sense of place, those errant paths, hideouts and hangouts, (un)forgotten histories, belonging etched in code, threaded through the carceral-education landscape from below. This enmeshment is a portal and point of departure to understand "what else happens" (King, 2019) beyond and beneath the white holographic/cartographic gaze (Hawthorne & Lewis, 2023). The epistemological interventions of Black feminist geographic knowledge are therefore also methodological. King (2019), for example, argues that through Black geographical reading practices, Black uncontainability surfaces as always already unsettling dominant cartographic configurations. Such reading practices, and related analytical orientations, begin with and are therefore able to unearth Black visions of liberation, forms of social organization, and ways of knowing, being and making space, that move outside Eurocentric epistemic regimes and white temporal-spatial logics (Brand, 2023; McKittrick, 2020).

These methodological-epistemological interventions have informed, in iterative conjunction with FREE LA students' own repeated claims to space, the way I listen(ed) to students' stories—not only in interviews, but over time, in conversations, in cars and classrooms, in text threads and impromptu tour guides that rupture comfortable backseat silences, and as both an ethnographer and educator. Likewise, these iterative interventions methodologically, analytically, and theoretically inform how I reread, interpret, make sense of, and retell students' stories in the sections that follow. In other words, Black feminist geographic praxis frames both what I say and, constitutively, how I listen(ed) to what students say, how students move, and what students say about movement—their own and others'.

Black feminist geographic praxis also informs the way the present study opened. Given how over-determined our current systems of knowledge/production are by Man's cartographic sensibilities (Wynter, 2003), it is the combination of real-imagined geographies (McKittrick, 2006) that allows us to stitch together a different set of truths and possibilities. Like those who have grappled with the violence of the archives (Haley, 2016; Hartman, 2008), Black feminist geographic knowledge production has turned insurgently to the "speculative—an integration of 'what is' and 'what could be' despite it" (Purifoy, 2023, p. 31; McKittrick, 2014) in order to tell new stories, or old stories in new ways that refuse to begin with and therefore arrive at a place of Black placelessness. The

stories with which I began, which toyed in various ways with fact, detail, and chronology,[6] should thus be understood as analysis (Hartman, 2021), and as the study's core metanarrative structure—its bones and background—while the following sections pull at the threads and fibers of those stories in order to stretch the analytical precision and clarity of the metanarrative they tell.

Another Roadmap

In the first section, I tug at the strands of the HoloMap by returning to the carceral-education landscape, to tell a story of schooling and/as spatial domination. Analytically, I pay attention to the ways students story the landscape from a (Black) sense of place, an internal compass, that both unveils and refuses the validity and naturalness of spatial domination. In the second section, as in the drive through LA, I (re)turn to what is always already threaded through that landscape. I turn to those apparently illegible paths, that movement from below, to (re)read the carceral-education landscape for "momentary ruptures" (King, 2019) that, if followed, might just unravel the whole thing. Jettisoning both the object and its critique*,* I turn to these movements as an alternative legend that invites us to ask: Beyond frameworks of "equal access" or "better schools," what would a broader vision of educational liberation look like? I conclude by looking to FREE LA as a model of how collective action might honor these forms of movement.

Story I: Returning to the Carceral-Education Landscape

> Zahra: I used to talk. That's why I got kicked out…of the whole LAUSD system. I got in one fight on campus, and I was not even responsible for that fight. The others were off campus. But I was still kicked out and it was counted for as on campus. So, after ninth grade, I was not allowed to go—I was kicked out of the whole LAUSD system, out of the whole platform in general. So, I did not attend public school.
> Margaret: Do you feel like, at your other schools, it was discrimination?
> Zahra: Well, [that] was a primarily Black school. Soo*,* I would say no, not there. Officer Li, he was a little racist though. Like that [man] told me if I step on *they* side of the sidewalk, he was gonna arrest me!

[6] The HoloMap visualizes core themes that emerged across FREE LA students' stories. However, I wove in some specificities of Beautiful's story, such as bathroom tracking and principals who were removed for "touching students inappropriately," which I revisit and discuss in the forthcoming sections. Additionally, the specific moves symbolized by the objects on the HoloMap (see p. 33) reflect actual events described by students in their education histories. One student, Kimora, described a teacher who "sat all…her 'ideal smart kids' in the front, and all the 'whatever' in the middle, and had the Black kids in the back." Another student, Jimmy, described how his preschool "just called CPS every time I got in trouble," with some of these calls resulting in CPS showing up to his home and "searching the house." In addition to the broad patterns of forced or contained movement symbolized by "pieces of paper"—patterns which impacted all of the students—Jimmy also described how his teachers would prepare referral slips for him in advance: "On Monday, they had a referral already signed, and the only thing they gotta put is what I did to get sent out [of class]. Because they knew I was gonna get sent out eventually." In the second story, the drive through LA, all of the events described are things that happened and all of the things that are said were actually said, though not always in the precise order, or under the specific contexts, in which I (re)tell them. All interview transcripts specifically pertaining to students' educational experiences were quoted verbatim.

> Margaret: Who's they?
> Zahra: Mind you, I lived down the street from the school. So, like, that's my neighborhood, that's my area. So, you're telling me if I step on the school grounds, you're going to arrest me.

Like Zahra and Beautiful, many FREE LA students were shifted between multiple elementary, middle, and high schools, and/or banned from entire districts, before coming to FREE LA. Focusing on this pattern of young people first being moved between places, and then being "removed from the whole platform in general," in this section I advance the claim that spatial domination is endemic to schooling. I argue that through various forms and scales of spatial domination, schools are made and remade by claiming ownership over and inscribing difference into a broader landscape that includes multiple other state, public, and private institutions (including informal and alternative schools), as well as ideology and common-sense. In contributing to CGE, and broader cross-disciplinary dialogues around abolition and education, my goal is not to paint the landscape as an impenetrable thing, nor simply a site of resistance, but rather to expose it as a set of relations and an always "unresolved and incomplete project" (King, 2019) of stifling free (Black) movement. My purpose, as well, is to consider how these processes and relations operate and are concealed through relatively mundane rules, terms, and stipulations of schooling.

Zahra's anecdote captures how schooling functions as part of a broader carceral apparatus that displaces and disappears people, by determining and naturalizing who has a right to be in and of (a) place, and therefore, who has the right to be. As the HoloMap visualizes, through relationships with other institutions, ideologies and agents, schooling, as a fractured and heterogenous but interconnected landscape, dictates—beyond, but through, individual school sites—which spaces and forms of movement Black and Brown young people have access to. As Zahra asserts, that was her neighborhood. Yet, conjuring specters of Jim Crow-era 'their side and ours' (and thus the plantation geographies that preceded them [McKittrick, 2011]), Officer Li fortifies "school grounds" as both an exceptional space of racialized state power (and therefore whiteness, even in the absence of white people), and as the basis of her mattering. In this landscape, Zahra's student status is her token to inhabit ("their") space, even in a place where she lives.

Students' education histories revealed how this territorialization of space (both body and place) through the site of the school cuts in multiple directions, whereby movement that occurs off campus—in homes, in hoods, in hangout spots—is leveraged by school and confederate agents to dictate where and how movement and belonging ought to occur in the future. Students mentioned attending their previous schools to avoid being arrested for truancy, while others recalled times that CPS workers or school superintendents had shown up at their homes and threatened to arrest their parents, many of them Black mothers, if they did not attend. While Zahra, too, was threatened with arrest, other students were arrested for trespassing at the schools they used to attend, and at schools they were currently attending, exposing schools as sites of conditional belonging shaped as much by who is there as who is

not. Rather than exceptional, this policing of who gets to be where and when is an uninterrupted throughline connecting seemingly disparate coordinates across a continuously restructured carceral-education landscape.

Indeed, beyond arresting, suspending or physically displacing students, the means through which schooling claims ownership over movement and space are much more mundane. In particular, schools reflect and regenerate the locomotion of prisons by institutionally marking students with records (disciplinary records, attendance records, report cards), pieces of paper that work like locks and keys to determine, both within and far beyond the site of the school, which spaces they are allowed to inhabit, and to what quality of life they are entitled. Through an embodied knowing that stretches back centuries (Purifoy, 2023), numerous FREE LA students conceptualized formal schooling and college as a scam—even as they valued myriad forms of learning—while at the same time being keenly aware that graduating is important because, in student Jayla's words, "to the white people it's important." Within a carceral-education landscape, moreover, simply being marked as truant or unenrolled in school makes young people more likely to be detained (Goldman & Rodriguez, 2022).

Given the centrality of schooling to capitalist mobility and relative "freedom" in carceral regimes, this marking, charting, and record-keeping—banal dimensions of schooling—functions as part of a broader operation of unevenly distributing life chances across the landscape and, valorized by myths of meritocracy (Vaught, 2017), obscuring them as the result of individual choices. Alongside and as part of activist/scholarly efforts to equalize educational access and opportunity across space (or, maybe, to repurpose those efforts towards other ends), we might also interrogate how such intrinsic features and relations of schooling, beyond "particularly egregious policies" (Henry, 2020, p. 183), will always already differentiate in ways that reinforce and reproduce racial capitalist exploitation. Diplomas, for example, like keys to cages, advance a skewed definition of freedom contingent on unfreedom, normalizing particular markers of educational success as proxies for who counts as human. Likewise, elemental ingredients of schooling such as compulsory attendance and student status are fundamentally exclusionary markers of who deserves access to education, and the myriad doors it opens, because they imply, necessarily, that some people do not deserve access. This hierarchical partitioning of resources, access, and life chances across space serves not only a material, but also a social and cultural function.

Spatializing Difference in the Carceral-Education Landscape

Indeed, the means through which schools of multiple types filter and normalize conditional forms of mattering and access, through the territorialization of body and place, are also ideological in form and consequence. Zooming back into Beautiful's story:

> Beautiful: I wouldn't even stay the whole day at school, because I just had enough. So, I would go home—and they still had a problem with that. I'm just like, how do you have a problem with *this?*
> Margaret: Right. Like, you have a problem when I'm here and then—
> Beautiful: Yeah. Y'all say it's a problem when I don't go to class. And when I do go to class, it's still the same outcome. So…what's really the difference if I'm

> here or if I go home?

Beautiful explains how she was labeled and lumped wrong or non-compliant when she went to class, and wrong or non-compliant when she left, conveying the message that she belongs nowhere. Uprooting and exposing that message (Hawthorne, 2019), Beautiful insightfully relates these everyday forms of spatial domination to her broader history of ultimately being banned from LAUSD and to broader racialized narratives of belonging, place, and placelessness:

> I honestly feel like [schools] need to care more. Because when you just take a student like, 'Okay, well, you can't go here no more. So, I don't know what to tell you'—I feel like when they do that, you tellin' me like, 'Well, shit, you not going nowhere in life, so…Might as well just fuck up and go do some dumb shit, and just go… *sit in a jail cell.*'

Black feminist geographies unsettle by unearthing the ways geo-racial configurations of humanness are mapped out through cartographic violence (Wynter, 2003). McKittrick (2006) argues how racial, sexual, and economic "hierarchies are naturalized by repetitively spatializing 'difference,'" and that "practices of domination, sustained by a unitary vantage point, naturalize both identity and place, repetitively spatializing where nondominant groups 'naturally' belong" (p. xv). As both Zahra and Beautiful's stories exemplify, through various scales and modes of spatial domination, schools reinforce ideological vantage points, which structure global world orders, by establishing "that some bodies belong, some bodies do not belong, and some bodies are out of place" (McKittrick, 2006, p. xv). In particular, Black girls are teleologically, algorithmically narrated as perpetually out of place and belonging nowhere (McKittrick, 2014, 2017; Morris, 2016; Shange, 2019; Wun, 2016).

At the level of ideology and common sense, through the interplay of material and discursive violence (Madera, 2023), the spatialization of difference also attempts to make real "the idea that space 'just is,' and the illusion that the external world is readily knowable" (McKittrick, 2006, p. xv). There just are, so the story goes, urban schools and Black neighborhoods and bad kids who "not going nowhere in life." There just are, so the dominant cartographic legend has it, kids who go to college, and kids who never graduate, and kids who go to jail. Like prisons, schools occupy the public imaginary—in their ostensibly democratic function (Vaught, 2017) and seemingly natural if uneven spatial distribution—in ways that normalize the carceral ideology that some people will live and move and be free while others, simply, will not.

But understanding how power moves, and how space is made and remade, resists the tendency to begin with Black placelessness as pre-determined, algorithmic fact (McKittrick, 2014, 2016). Both Beautiful and Zahra's stories unveil how individual agents leverage the material and ideological power of carceral institutions, property law, and broader so-called commonsense constructions of place, race, and belonging. Through, and as, a set of ideas and contestations, actors and absences, shifting policies and unchanging practices, school is made and remade as an ostensibly public good, in ways that reconfigure and obscure racial hierarchies of humanness and taken-for-granted notions of

access (Kromidas, 2022). Yet, neither brute force nor coerced consent are able to fully erase the histories that exist before and beyond—the informal landmarks, the deep spatial awareness of what is real, of whose neighborhood this is, of who lives here. In storying this landscape as irrational, and in dislodging by disclosing from below, the "supposedly stable spatial referents" (Hawthorne & Lewis, 2023, p.13) that sustain a cartographic gaze from above, Beautiful and Zahra send surface fractures across a landscape that is much less fixed, inevitable, and knowable than its cartographers map it out to be.

Threaded through and troubling the carceral-education landscape is an inability to understand the ways young people disappear themselves, and the possibilities they unearth in the process. Directly below the surface, complex systems of spatial domination reveal themselves, like holograms, as beams of light filtered through a series of mirrors and gadgets: as a "tenuous and unstable" landscape shaped and reshaped as much by errant movement from below as by the counterinsurgent attempts to comprehend and contain that movement from above (King, 2019, p. 78). Geographies of education, in developing top-down accounts and critiques of socio-spatial difference, can in fact naturalize this difference, in that "to describe is also to produce" (Gilmore, 2022, p. 109).

However, reading the carceral-education landscape for this movement from below—from and through a compass that centers Black life, legends, and livingness—a different (meta)narrative emerges. This enmeshed metanarrative denaturalizes the seemingly inherent, inevitable, natural orderings of bodies, place, race, opportunities and taken-for-granted solutions such as expanding inclusion into inherently exclusionary structures. Moving outside frameworks of vulnerability, outside frameworks of push-out, upward mobility, and other one-way streets, we might scratch at the shape of a different type of blueprint.

Story II: The Legend Underneath the Landscape

Two days after the interview with Bandit and Kodak, Nova and I sat in the same place. Thick short dreads, dyed blonde at the ends, framed his face, hovering right above his eyebrows.

> Nova: The biggest difference in FREE LA is they give you freedom.
> Margaret: Mhm.
> Nova: All the other schools, they don't give you freedom to be who you want. Cause FREE LA, they say, 'if you not gonna do work, you can go home.'
> Margaret: Right.
> Nova: Other schools, [if] you're not gonna do the work, you're goin' to detention. You either, they either gone suspend you—or you just not gonna get no credit. They not giving you no other option. Other than *failure*. You get what I'm saying? The difference is: if you not gone do work at FREE LA, you can go home. Do it on the computer anytime you want to. You got a choice at FREE LA, you got freedom. I can't walk out of class at a normal school, and be gone a whole entire class period, and be like, 'yeah, I'm just not feelin it right now.' Cause then they gonna think, 'Oh, you just tryin to skip class. You not tryna be in class. You not tryna do this 'n that. You not tryna be around everybody.' But then, what are the circumstances in my life?

Nova paused here, and the brief silence that followed created a powerful space of clarity around his words. Moving from this space, he continued:

> They always want to say, 'Oh, I *been* through that.' The teachers always tell you, 'I *been* through that. I understand you.' Well, I never hear one person say, 'Oh, I—I never really gone through that. Tell me more.'

Nova's reflections offer a moving point of departure to consider how the territorialization of space, in schools and through schooling, extends to both body and place. In Nova's experience relinquishing the right to free movement was a stipulation of "normal" schooling, where "doing the work" and "failure" form a narrow dichotomy that eclipses the possibilities for more liberatory forms of and relationships with education. This section argues that spatial domination, as an intrinsic feature of schooling, operates specifically in order to suppress and preclude the sorts of free movement, or ability to come and go, that might shape spaces of liberated and unconditional education. Through their shared essential problems of perception, both spatial domination and its commonsense solutions—greater access to or less exclusion from so-called good schools—foreclose the possibilities, embodied in young people's movements, for something else entirely. I began with Nova's thoughts on FREE LA as a point of departure to then revisit students' experiences in "other schools." Nova's juxtapositions between the two offers an alternative legend to reread the carceral-education landscape not only for students' movements but for the possibilities of honoring those movements through collective action.

Pulling at the Thread

Reading below the landscape for "what else happened" (King, 2019; McKittrick, 2014), I found that Black and Brown students' persistence in moving freely—and the expansive visions of educational freedom they signify—is the primary (elusive) target of spatial domination. These forms of movement demonstrate young people's insistence on honoring their bodies and boundaries that—while rendered irrational and unimaginable through narratives of criminality, classificatory systems of risk and vulnerability, and demands for schools as sites of liberation—chart the blueprints for an alternative epistemological order where (Black) life is cared for unconditionally. Woven throughout students' education histories are forms of refusal and escape, within and beyond the site of school, preceded by a keen spatial awareness of their bodies being used as sites of territorialization, and thus an insurgent drive to disappear themselves.

Returning to the movements that foreshadowed Bandit and Kodak's departures to their hangout spot, Bandit explained:

> Bandit: [School] was boring. And it was long periods, too. And the teachers, they just— they just get you mad, and you just walk out.
> Margaret: Right.
> Bandit: Yeah, that's what I would do. You feel me, if I get into it with a teacher, I just—bro, I'd just rather walk out.
> Margaret: You just wanna leave instead?

> Bandit: Yeah.
> Margaret: And so that's why they said you were ditching or whatever?
> Bandit: They would see me walking past [in] the hallways and stuff. But they don't know I would be ditching, though.

Despite "them" (teachers, staff, school police, cartographers) not always knowing, Bandit included "ditching," walking out, and coming late within the host of (potential) reasons he was pushed between numerous schools. In addition to escaping to hangout spots and hiding in plain sight in hallways, students protected their spiritual and emotional boundaries by not going to school in the first place. As Jimmy explained:

> People not in the mood for that every day. And, first of all, if I'm not in the mood when I wake up, and then I gotta go to school, that's gonna put me in a worse mood. So, now when I go to school, *something's* going to happen.

That is, rather than in response to a specific incident, students also moved in refusal of the terms and conditions of schooling, of the feeling of being contained, in general. As another student, Kimora, shared:

> I definitely had my own world, and I was going through a lot. If it took me ditching with my friends to be happy, I would go ditch with my friends to be happy.

This insurgent drive to come and go as they need creates what emerged in students' education histories, and in my time teaching at FREE LA, as a general ebb and flow: a dynamic diaspora shaped but not wholly determined by forces of domination and displacement (McKittrick, 2011). For example, in greeting a student at FREE LA who hadn't attended my class in a few weeks, I asked where she'd been and she replied, "I've been living my best life." As both educator and ethnographer, I learned over time (and always imperfectly) to heed to these movements, against the weight of terribly seductive myths (McKittrick, 2006) that to be in school is to have a more safe and certain destination. Reading below and beyond dominant cartographic legends, I found that students were routinely punished specifically for these forms of movement: for "walking out," hiding and wandering, and doing whatever it takes to be happy. Some students would return to school from their self-proclaimed wellness breaks and be told they cannot come back, either immediately, having lost their student status, or over time, having been labeled a "bad kid." Backtracking to the beginning of her journey, we see that Beautiful was rendered belonging nowhere, not only for going home when she "had enough," but distinctively for moving on her own terms:

> Beautiful: My story in terms of school, it would have been like, I would say every school that I went to probably either kicked me out or expelled, suspended [me]. And all for very dumb reasons, like not going to class, not compliant with staff members. Uh, doing things on my own time. But, as far as myself, I know what I do and what I don't do. And, as far as 'compliant with staff'—yeah, sometimes I don't comply. But yeah, I'ma still go to class. I might not move as fast as you

want me to—
Margaret: Mhm.
Beautiful: But I *will*.

As others have argued, Black students' withdrawals from public schooling can be read as liberatory and insurgent departures from state-sanctioned spaces of carceral anti-black enclosure (Sojoyner, 2016, 2017; Shange, 2019). Alongside an awareness, and political analysis, that Black girls and boys are not entitled to emotions like anger in spaces like schools, young people walking out, or not coming, or doing things on their own time, demonstrate an unwavering refusal to disavow their internal compass in order to meet the compulsory demands of schooling and its pre-scripted metrics of (conditional) belonging. Tethered to our current Eurocentric knowledge system, this internal compass can only ever be calculated as risk (McKittrick, 2014; 2016); squeezed into a narrow dichotomy of domination and resistance, or "death and survival" (Reese, 2019); or critiqued through closed analytic frameworks that begin and therefore end with Black placelessness. Wrenched from the white cartographic gaze, however, and beginning from a place that centers the entanglements between everyday (Black) spatial praxes and real-imagined geographies of liberation, another story unfolds. Rather than simply resisting or surviving, students' movements *poke holes* in the set of interlocking institutions and ideologies comprising neoliberal carceral regimes, which command the extraction of bodily autonomy through the policing of where bodies must be, for how long, and in what ways, as a commonsense stipulation of basic human rights: from education and housing to medical care and food (Gilmore, 2022).

That students were routinely displaced or told they cannot come back for moving on their own terms reveals how schools, beyond simply engines of stratification, are sites of inherently contingent access that demand young people relinquish their bodily sovereignty in exchange for an education. Constitutive features of formal schooling such as mandatory attendance, student status, minimum GPAs, schedules dictated by bells, and predetermined/permission-contingent bathroom breaks operate as quotidian forms of spatial domination that preclude the ability to come and go as one needs, and to move at a livable pace. Yet, students' insistence on doing so suggests the potential for more radical visions of learning beyond the site of the school—beyond both the object and its constant reformulation through critique.

Cartographies of Counter/Insurgency

It is these alternative worlds, these epistemological ruptures, I am arguing, that schooling as an ever-shifting institutional and ideological system works hard to extinguish through anxious forms of statecraft. In addition to frantic search parties, trespassing arrests, home invasions, and exile across the landscape, desperate attempts to chart youths' paths emerged as an incessant stalking, following, tracking within schools in order to contain their movement before it even occurred. Returning again to the hairy white pointer finger, Beautiful's story ties together these multiple scales of spatial domination:

> I had this one specific teacher. He was also a—I think he was the principal, or something. He was very so…hands on with everything…in *his* mind. I'm just like, damn, give me a break. Like, soon as I walk into school—'cause I used to walk to school every day, so it'll take me a minute to get there—he's, every day: 'You're late! You're this! You're that! Tardy! Detention! No lunch! And you're gonna sit in the class and…do this! And you're gonna clean up after lunch!' And I'm just like…Well, after lunch I'ma be sitting in the bathroom somewhere, because I'm not doing that! And they would literally come looking for me. When I say first floor to third floor, first building to the second building, they would literally come lookin' for me. 'Have you guys seen Beautiful? Have you guys seen her? Where's she at? And dah-dah-dah-dah.' And they would literally *watch* the cameras and track which bathroom I'm in.

Likewise, when I asked him to describe the series of events at his prior schools that led him to FREE LA, Jimmy explained:

> Jimmy: First of all, they used to stalk me, like around campus. Just follow me, every time.
> Margaret: Who?
> Jimmy: The staff. It was an assistant principal. My tenth grade year was his first year there. He used to follow me around every day. Every single day! Nutrition, lunch, passing period. He used to come to my classes. Like, I think he had a crush on me.
> Margaret: The assistant principal?
> Jimmy: Yeah, but it's like ten of them.
> Margaret: Just following you, for what? To see if you had something?

After dramatically listing a host of potential reasons, as equally ridiculous as they were probable, why he was "stalked" and "followed," Jimmy claimed what Zahra, Beautiful, and many other students had concluded: "They was looking for a reason to kick me out."

Having spun around in half-circles in my teacher's chair for the past five minutes, Jimmy abruptly stopped at the word reason.

"Okay," I said.

The spinning resumed. "Because, like I said, I knew the system, so I knew how to stay out of trouble, and I knew what stuff I could get in trouble for, and I knew how to talk. So, I used to get out of a lot of situations." He paused. "And it used to irritate them. So, they used to try to get me on anything. So that's pretty much—that's what I think that was."

I watched his face disappear and return, disappear and return as he spun, thinking about how Zahra was "banned from the entire platform" for talking.

"They was hating," Jimmy said as a matter of fact, placing his hand on the desk in front me and halting his movement for a moment. Maintaining eye contact, he pushed away from the desk again, letting his body spin as far is it would go before letting his head follow. "You know, because they can't catch me. *I'm too hot*."

"'Landmarks shift' and 'slip,'" King writes, "from the grip of those intending to fix and dominate people and the earth" (2019, p. 76). As Jimmy notes, the greatest threat to systems of schooling are young people who cannot be contained, not because they are a danger to themselves and others, as carceral cartographic legend teaches us, but rather because they breathe life into seemingly impenetrable, inevitable systems. Black and Brown students who "always find a way out," who can't be caught because they're *too hot*, unravel the very premise of formal schooling: education with stipulations. However, the insurgent nature of these actions is eclipsed by frameworks of non-compliance, and rendered "un-geographic" (McKittrick, 2006) by the recapitulation of schools as both the problem and its only possible solution. Even if not viewed as criminal, young people intent on "living their best lives" or moving on their own time are often viewed as immature or irresponsible. They are people to be fixed or saved. The empty desks they leave when they depart are viewed as spaces to be filled, schools as sites to be reclaimed. Yet, disentangled from teleological algorithms and seductive myths and top-down critiques that begin and end with the certainty of violence (McKittrick, 2011; 2014), these movements weave a different, more life-affirming web of possibilities.

Rather than irresponsible, students' movements within and across the landscape chart blueprints for a more transformative and unconditional relationship young people might develop with education—one that occurs on their terms, one that happens when they are ready. One that they can walk away from when it/things/life become too much, or when they're "just not feelin' it" right now. As space-making practices, these movements scaffold blueprints for a broader vision of educational liberation beyond expanded access into fundamentally exclusionary institutions and, ideally, beyond greater integration into a broader (global) territory that is inherently uneven and unjust. Concluding briefly with some of the ways FREE LA departs from the spatial domination endemic to schooling suggests the possibilities for collective action to heed to the flow of these movements.

Conclusion

As noted, YJC created FREE LA in response to the seeming diaspora of young people of color across the carceral-education landscape. As Nova's reflections captured, the ability to come and go is a critical distinguishing dimension of FREE LA. The various scales—within, to, and from the space—of which FREE LA embraces free movement are shaped by their foundations in abolition and transformative justice (TJ): both of which, as also noted, offer a framework and set of everyday praxes for transforming the interpersonal, institutional, and ideological relationships and practices that sustain carceral regimes. I focus briefly on three examples here. I then close by discussing the possibilities these departures present for the formation of non-school spaces of educational liberation.

Departure I

Whereas students were ultimately exiled for "walking out" in other schools, young people at FREE LA are encouraged to leave (the classroom or the space) and come back when they are ready, in particular as it relates to honoring their emotions. As Ms. Tracey, FREE LA's main TJ facilitator, explained to the students during one orientation:

> If you need time to go get your mind right, if you're angry today and need to leave for the day, that's okay. We won't take it personal because you are human and allowed to have a bad day.

As opposed to refusing to understand or, as Nova mentioned, claiming to always already know young people and the reasons they move the ways they do, FREE LA creates space for youth to make themselves known at their own pace, through conversations. At FREE LA, conversation and communication—relatively mundane social processes, or human capacities used towards particular ends—serve as alternatives to punishment, exile, and "no option other than failure," and furthermore serve as critical methods (everyday practices) for transforming carceral relationships within and between individuals. Integral to this transformation, the ability to follow one's internal compass—to leave, come back, and communicate on one's own terms without fear of being disappeared in the process—is an essential way FREE LA affirms free movement. As Beautiful explained:

> It's not even just about conflict. Like, you can go, talk to them, have a conversation… Even if you having a bad day and don't want to talk about it right there in that moment, they're like, 'Okay, well we'll give you some time.' I hated it in the beginning because I didn't know how to talk at the time…Ms. Tracey doesn't make us stay, never holds us hostage. But eventually I came back and got comfortable. I opened up and started talking.

This example demonstrates a radical departure from the epistemological violence of spatial domination and its attendant Eurocentric/biocentric conceptions of humanness (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015; Wynter, 2003), which render Black space, both body and place, as blank space (Brand, 2023): as "knowable (or findable and searchable)" (McKittrick, 2014, p. 23). This departure signifies the possibilities for an insurgent relational praxis of how we, as educators, might listen to young people—and how we might understand that there are some things we cannot understand, against the (death-)drive for full disclosure and the certainty of a knowable destination.

Departure II

At FREE LA, students leaving and coming back when they are ready, as Ms. Tracey describes above, might be for the day, but it also might be for a semester or a year. Whereas, in Jimmy's words, "in regular schools you get kicked out for not coming," in my time at FREE LA I have been touched on numerous occasions when a face unfamiliar to me, someone I presumed to be a new student, entered the lobby to sign up for classes and was welcomed home by the staff, like a family member returning from vacation. I began to realize how many youth flow to and from FREE LA, people with memories and deep ties to the space (and to South Central more generally) that vastly exceed my time in it. Whether because life showed up or because they just weren't feeling it right now, this ebb and flow between FREE LA's open doors, influenced but not wholly determined by forces of domination, allows the space to be shaped as much by the people who are in it as those who are not—but in ways that disrupt patterns of spatial domination and conditional belonging.

Departure III

Finally, in addition to transforming interpersonal relationships within the space, at the spatial scale, FREE LA works to untether the institutional and ideological relationships through which schooling (or "school") is made and remade across the carceral-education landscape. FREE LA's abolitionist refusal to report to or allow police, probation officers, or other carceral agents into the building works to obstruct the state's territorialization of and unfettered access to body and place through the site of the school. As YJC organizer Gloria explained, "The beauty is that you can now walk out of this building without being watched and followed." More mundanely, FREE LA refuses to institutionally mark young people with suspension records, truancy citations, or failing grades: paper trails that also follow Black and Brown youth across the carceral landscape, dictating like locks and keys which sorts of movements and to which sorts of places they have access.

Threaded through each of these examples is a current of unconditional belonging—to one's own body and time, and to the FREE LA space as a whole. This unconditional belonging signifies the capacities of spaces created through collective action to be shaped, in small laps and sweeping waves, by young people's (free) movements—like the shoreline heeds to the ebb and flow of the tide. In Ms. Tracey's words: "Staying is a form of love. We are staying put."

Unraveling the Whole Thing

What does it mean for a space to "stay put" so that young people are free to move into and away from sites of learning on their own terms, so that young people can always be of a place, without being tethered to place? What are the unchanging features and through-lines of schooling that preclude this form of belonging? On one hand, exposing the fickle practices and relations through which schools perpetuate spatial domination also exposes "already-existing capacities" that educators and others might repurpose towards alternative means (Gilmore, 2022, p. 127). FREE LA shows how, through relatively simple interactions, seemingly inevitable stipulations of schooling can be refused, signifying the possibilities for new or transformed educational spaces of unconditional belonging. However, if schooling—as it is reconfigured through progressive and regressive movements alike (Shange, 2019)—ultimately becomes woven into a broader global territory of racialized exclusion (Henry, 2020), then strengthening our movements for educational liberation means also diligently asking what else we can create. As FREE LA student BabySD noted, "School is important because school is the only place for certain kids to go to." If schools are the only places young people can access education, and more generally the only places they can be, then there will always be groups of young people who must sacrifice free movement for the sake of belonging. And, there will always be those who refuse to do so.

Taking those refusals as a set of directions, places like FREE LA offer an abolitionist blueprint not only for educational spaces shaped by unconditional belonging (and therefore by free movement), but also for moving "in wrecking-ball fashion" through the physical and conceptual site of the school (Henry, 2020, p. 184). Uplifting YJC's demand for 50 new youth centers across LA, collective movements for educational liberation should also push for the creation of non-school spaces where young people can access various forms

of learning on their own terms, and more simply where they can just be. Recognizing that education is much broader than school and what is taught therein, tethering visions of educational transformation to various reiterations of schooling may eclipse more expansive horizons and stifle our ability to scratch at a different set of truths.

While everyone deserves access to a quality education, not being in school is only dangerous because we have made it that way. True educational liberation would mean that young people are not threatened with arrest, with the specter of incarceration, homelessness, or death, for leaving or not coming to school. Unconditional educational liberation locally and globally would mean that schooling, as it is rooted in Eurocentric epistemology, Western imperialism, and racial capitalist modernity, is not the metric of who deserves access to movement, to space, and to the things we all deserve simply because we are human (Watson, 2022). Certainly, community control over schools is a crucial anchor of collective movements against genocidal spatial arrangements. However, critical goals that address immediate needs, like increased matriculation or equitable access to a better-funded public education system, might be repurposed as means to a different end, which is also to say a new beginning. Rather than creating more keys, we must abolish the cages and borders they police, rooting ourselves in the ruptures they cannot seem to reach. To tell new stories and rewrite new legends, rather than reconfigure the old, we must turn inward and look outward and ask, over and over: What is the world we are building, and who are we building it for?

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