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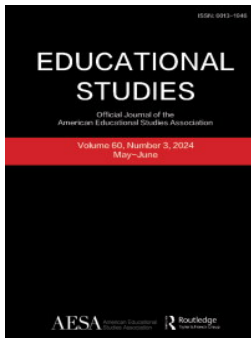
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Learning from Within: Life-Affirming Practices and Third Spaces Created by and for Incarcerated Youth

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ABSTRACT

Grounded in a Black feminist approach (Collins, 2022; Evans-Winters, 2019), in this article, I weave together the personal and professional to share what I have learned as a Black Latina educator, researcher, and abolitionist who for the past twelve years has worked in carceral spaces alongside numerous men, women, youth, and gender expansive people. I bridge what I have learned from theories of the flesh (Madison, 1993; Moraga & Anzaldúa 2021) to what I have learned as a researcher who works with incarcerated youth and use it as a lens to better understand and study youth confinement. Drawing on data from a three-year critical ethnographic study focused on teaching, learning, and identity development in a juvenile detention center, this article explores young people's experiences living and learning while confined. Using three distinct vignettes, this article touches on the lives of Black and Mexican heritage youth who at the time were detained in a juvenile detention center and the life-affirming practices and spaces they created in response to their dehumanization. Although youth were in a state of unfreedom (Gilmore, 2008), many refused their dehumanization and developed life-affirming strategies and third spaces for themselves and others.

I come to this work first and foremost as a sister, niece, cousin, and friend to people who have been and, in some cases, are still incarcerated. The first time I entered a correctional facility I was a child. My brother at the time was detained in county jail on nonviolent charges, yet had been brutally assaulted by two white men before they called the police. On another occasion, my mom and I visited my uncle who was detained in the same county jail for several days before he posted bail. Later in my childhood I felt the impact of family violence and incarceration as I accompanied a family member to visit the person who was responsible for the abuse. Even then I felt the tension of what it meant to visit the person who for years had inflicted harm onto my family. As a result of these experiences, I have always had an intimate and complex understanding of carcerality and its effects on families. Families, who like mine, were grappling with poverty, violence, and varied forms of marginalization. From those experiences, I have learned that we need systems of care and accountability that are not rooted in punishment logics because even as a kid I knew that caging someone was a temporary solution that did not address the underlying causes that led to family violence.

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Now as an adult, my relationship to carceral spaces and the people confined in them is one that I mostly experience as an educator, mentor, researcher, and advocate. Still, those early life experiences and positionality as a Black Latina (Lyiscott & Boyd, 2024) have profoundly shaped how I approach the work I do and my commitment to people's liberation. While in college, I volunteered with the grassroots organization, Legal Services for Prisoners with Children (LSPC), where I worked alongside incredible thought leaders and organizers, most of whom were formerly incarcerated themselves. It was them who introduced me to the power and promise of freedom dreaming toward *abolition* (Kelley, 2022; Love, 2019). Those early days of answering letters from people inside were the seeds of what is now my *heartwork*—a commitment to building just and humane futures for those living and learning in a state of unfreedom. Unfreedom is not just about physical confinement, it encapsulates the sociolegal afterlife of incarceration that continues to restrict and shape the lives of systems-impacted people (Gilmore, 2008).

Literature review

In the last two decades, there have been some concerted efforts within the field of education and psychology to attend to the lives and educational experiences of incarcerated students. Scholars like Michelle Fine and Torre (2006), Maisha Winn (2011), Sabina Vaught (2017), and Subini Annamma (2017), have paved the way for scholars, like me, who are committed to working with and learning from youth who have been systematically failed across multiple systems and institutions. From these scholars we have gained significant insights into what it means for Black girls (Winn, 2011), girls of color with dis/abilities (Annamma, 2017), and youth of color (Vaught, 2017) to navigate criminalization and juvenile court schooling. Further, these scholars, have taught us the importance of taking up critical and humanizing methodologies, such as participatory action research (Fine & Torre, 2006), participant observations (Winn, 2011), and ethnography (Annamma, 2017; Vaught, 2017; Winn, 2011). Building on their research, I too explore the identities and learning experiences of youth while they were incarcerated. In this article, I explore how youth created and sustained third spaces of learning and development, and leveraged life-affirming strategies to refute their dehumanization.

Conceptual framework

Grounded in a Black feminist approach (Collins, 2022; Evans-Winters, 2019), I weave the personal and professional together to share what I have learned as a Black Latina educator, researcher, and abolitionist about how youth resist their dehumanization while incarcerated. I merge what I have learned from theories of the flesh (Madison, 1993; Moraga & Anzaldúa 2021) to what I have learned from youth to shed light on the lives of young people living, learning, and creating life-affirming pathways while incarcerated. Theories of the flesh refers to the knowledge that we, as women of color whether Black, Indigenous, Chicanx, or Latinx, possess as a result of our experiences and the communities we come from. It is a purposeful (re)centering of those experiences, teachings, and lenses that we carry into the relationships we forge and the

research we conduct (Moraga & Anzaldúa 2021). Similarly, Black feminist thought encourages us to use our marginal identities and knowledge, what Collins (2022) also describes as the outsider-within framework, to study issues of oppression from new, or more expansive, angles. I use a Black feminist approach and theories of the flesh to analyze data collected in a residential juvenile detention center in the Midwest. In doing so, I explore two key research questions:

1. How do Black and Mexican heritage youth describe what it means to live and learn in juvenile detention?
2. In what ways are Black and Mexican heritage youth proactively creating and sustaining life-affirming practices and spaces while incarcerated?

The findings are organized into three vignettes each of which explores Black and Mexican heritage youths' experiences in Locke County Juvenile Detention Center (LCJDC), a pseudonym, as well as some of the life-affirming practices and third spaces created by youth in response to their dehumanization.

Methods

Research site

Locke County Juvenile Detention Center is a midsize secure residential juvenile detention center located in a suburban county in the Midwest. At the time of the study, LCJDC incarcerated nearly a thousand youths between the ages of ten to nineteen years old per year. In 2019, Black youth were more than 40% of the population whereas Latinx and white youth were each about a third of the population. These percentages mirror national trends in which Black youth are typically overrepresented in residential placement compared to white and Latinx youth (Abrams et al., 2021; Rodriguez, 2013). Male-identified youth were nearly 80% of all residential admissions. In most cases, youth were in custody pending further court proceedings while some had already been adjudicated and remanded to LCJDC.

Data collection

The data discussed in this article is part of a critical ethnographic dataset gathered from 2018 to 2021 in LCJDC. Conventional ethnography is the study of 'what is' whereas critical ethnography attends to both 'what is' and 'what could be,' an important extension rooted in justice, human freedom, and equity (Madison, 2005; Thomas, 1993). Critical ethnography requires careful analytic attention to the social processes that reproduce "control, taming, power imbalance, and the symbolic mechanisms that impose one set of preferred meanings or behaviors over others" (Thomas, 1993, p. 9). For this article, I draw on 24 youth interviews with Black (n=14) and Mexican heritage (n=10) youth, focus group transcripts (n=3), and field notes. In an effort to honor how young people self-identified, I specifically use the term 'Mexican American' or 'Mexican heritage' instead of Brown, Hispanic, or Latine/x. In instances where we can be specific, I find that it is important that

we attend to the specificity of experiences across ethnic groups. Throughout the article, I also weave in my own reflections of what it meant for me, as a Black Latina researcher of Mexican heritage to witness and learn with youth while they were in a state of unfreedom. These reflections are drawn from audio recordings, journal entries, and analytic memos I wrote and recorded throughout the study. This study was approved by Northwestern University's Institutional Review Board (STU00206638).

Data analysis

All focus group and interview data were professionally transcribed using Rev.com. The transcripts were then prepped for further analysis. The first round of coding consisted of open and descriptive coding (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018; Miles et al., 2019) with attention to how young people described what it meant to live and learn in confinement. The data was coded for both explicit and implicit forms of what I came to understand as processes of rehumanization that young people enacted while detained. I noted how young people contested their dehumanization and instead found ways to affirm their humanity via processes of rehumanization. This process rendered an initial set of patterns and codes that I then refined into thematic codes (Miles et al., 2019). I then revisited the data and recoded it using the updated thematic codes. I also wrote analytic memos that captured my decision-making, developing ideas, and salient themes across the various data sources. It was through this iterative process that I identified the three vignettes discussed in the findings section (Dillard, 2016).

Findings

Each vignette illustrates what it meant for Black and Mexican American youth to live and learn while incarcerated. Using varied data sources, I demonstrate how youth passed on life-affirming survival strategies (Thompson, 1998) and created third spaces of learning and development within the carceral context (Gutiérrez, 2008; Gutiérrez et al., 1999). Third spaces refer to hybrid sites of learning and development— both formal and informal— that intersect “creating the potential for authentic interaction and a shift in the social organization of learning and what counts as knowledge” (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 151). Third spaces created by youth within the carceral context exist in spite of and in direct opposition to the totalizing effects of carceral institutions (Goffman, 1961). Vignette one details a social interaction I saw unfold between two generations of Black males in LCJDC in which youth— in solidarity with two Black male staff members— passed on teachings about how to care for their hair given the absence of the appropriate hair care products. The second vignette explores a focus group interaction between four friends enrolled in a college program in LCJDC. The vignette highlights the affordances of formalized third spaces and the life-affirming systems of support that youth create for themselves and others. The last vignette delves into interviews as pedagogical encounters (Vossoughi & Zavala, 2020) that can be leveraged toward young people's rehumanization. I do so by examining two excerpts from two distinct interviews that capture how Black and

Mexican American youth were proactively refusing their dehumanization and affirming their humanity.

Vignette 1: Black youth, hair care, and life-affirming survival strategies

During data collection, I would often focus my field observations around the school day to better understand how youth experienced schooling while incarcerated. At times I focused on specific youth or teachers, other days on specific groups of youth organized by units (e.g., the female unit, older male unit, younger male unit), other days I hopped around to different classes (e.g., Math, Biology, English) with different youth, and still other days I allowed the commotion of the day to guide me to different classes, units, and people. I would also eat lunch with youth in the cafeteria and spend time with them in the living units. I would often sit with a young person or group of youth, but only if invited to do so. While we ate and talked, I purposely would set my notebook and pen aside either on my lap or on the seat next to me to let youth know that I was not actively taking notes and recording our interaction. Instead, I used that time to get to know them beyond the classroom. I found the practice of breaking bread with young people to be one of the most organic ways to build with them. Youth would often laugh and joke about me eating “prison food.” Others found it amusing and would use it as an opportunity to show me how to make the meal “better.” Still, others would ask why I chose to eat with them when I could eat food on “the outs.” For me, breaking bread, was participating in an age-old practice, particularly within communities of color, to signal a mutual trust and investment in the relationship.

In the spring of 2019, I was observing an all-male unit most of whom were Black and Latinx between the ages of 16 to 17 years old. Among the group were three Black boys, one of whom was new to LCJDC. Donnie, who had short dreadlocks or “locs,” was standing near the two other Black boys waiting to be escorted back to their unit. As Donnie played with one of his locs, he remarked, “I’m gonna have to cut these off being in here.” One of the boys standing next to him responded, “Why bro?” Donnie turned with the loc still in his hand and simply responded, “It’s dry.” The other boy he was standing with turned to face him and said, “Nah bro, you gotta find the right things to use.” The two boys who had been in custody longer, went on to explain how instead of cutting his locs off, Donnie needed to use his coupons to buy the right commissary items. LCJDC operated on a positive behavioral incentive system (PBIS) that rewarded positive behavior (Lopez et al., 2015) with coupons that served like money that they could use to purchase commissary items including personal hygiene items, hair products, and snacks. I stood and listened as the two boys brilliantly described how to make a hair moisturizer using lotion, conditioner, and gel. As Donnie and the two boys were having this conversation, two Black male security staff members walked over and joined the conversation. One of the men, Morales, who had worked at LCJDC for over ten years and identified as a Black Latino, joined the conversation and added that while the products for “Black hair weren’t great,” over the years youth had learned how to make a thick moisturizer suitable for their hair care needs. Morales used the word “resourceful” to describe Black youths’ ingenuity and creativity when their basic needs were not met. Although Black youth continue

to be overrepresented in residential placement (Abrams et al., 2021; Rodriguez, 2013), most juvenile detention centers, including LCJDC, do not provide hair products conducive to Black youths' hair care needs. Still, in that moment, the two boys with the support of the two staff members challenged what Donnie might have perceived as his only option—cutting his locs. Instead, they were passing on “strategies for survival” (Thompson, 1998) that they had presumably learned from other Black youth and staff.

As I reflect on the intergenerational exchange between the boys and men, I recognize a life-affirming interplay between teaching and learning in an everyday social interaction. Learning in that moment moved across time, space, and people; learning was not bound by time but rather passed across young people and adults who had developed survival strategies to counter the dehumanization integral to the carceral condition. The two boys were passing on teachings they had likely learned from other now formerly incarcerated Black youth. As a result, Donnie regained some agency and choice in the matter. Although a key function of carcerality is to try to “erase away every part of human individuality” (Kohn et al., 2022, p. 217) through social control and conformity, in that moment, Donnie's peers in solidarity with the two staff members, defied the conditions created by the carceral state.

As a Black Latina scholar, I also cannot help but notice the role of race and color-evasiveness in this interaction (Annamma et al., 2017; Thompson, 1998). Even though Black youth are the disparate majority, standard hygiene items do not include hair products (e.g., shampoo, condition, moisturizers) conducive to their hair care needs. From a colorblind, or color evasive, standpoint some may not see anything wrong with giving all youth the same hair products, yet doing so overlooks the need to attend to differences that impact the daily life of young people inside. Those in charge of ordering supplies are presumably purchasing items based on cost with very little consideration for what youth might need. Still this blanket approach to purchasing hair care products ignores difference and the hair care needs of youth like Donnie. Instead, Black youth must create their own products and pass on life-affirming survival strategies to other Black youth who will similarly have to navigate the limitations and the effects of color-evasive practices. The carework and kinship that goes into hair care within the Black community does not disappear when a person is incarcerated, in fact, it becomes more sacred, albeit more difficult to attend to. This exchange is an example of Black youth creating life-affirming survival strategies and third spaces of learning by which they can resist and practice some agency while in a state of unfreedom.

Vignette 2: Black boy joy and third spaces of learning

Every year LCJDC hosts a series of community college courses focused on college and career readiness in which youth who successfully complete the program receive both high school and college credits. In order to participate in the dual-credit program, youth must be at least 17 years old, in custody for the duration of the program, and in good academic and behavioral standing. Youth who met the requirements were invited to participate in the program free of charge to them and their families. Youth were often excited and eager to participate in the program. For many, participating in the program was an opportunity to challenge themselves academically, to receive both high school and college credits, disrupt the monotony of confinement, and to

make themselves and their families proud. In 2019, I observed one of the courses and its respective students– Ricky, Rashaad, Thomas, and Dante. As the course was nearing the end, I invited the boys to participate in a focus group to learn more about their experiences in the program. All four boys enthusiastically agreed and upon getting their guardians approval we scheduled the focus group.

Although they were incarcerated, Ricky, Rashaad, Thomas, and Dante had found a space within the juvenile detention center where they were not reduced to the worst thing they had ever done (Stevenson, 2019). When class was in session, they were college students enrolled in a credit-bearing college course which they fully owned as part of their developing identity. In many ways, it was a third space (Gutiérrez et al., 1999) of development within the carceral context where youth could explore and “try on” college going identities (Urrieta et al., 2011). The college program offered a space, albeit temporary, for youth that was neither fully a college classroom nor a carceral classroom, and created a “radical space of possibilities” (Urrieta et al, 2011, p. 504). For most youth, participating in the college program was also about restoring hope both for themselves and their families. As Thomas explained,

Man, my momma was happy, man. She ain't know what to say to me, you know what I'm saying? She like, 'All you gotta do now is get up outta there.' She like, 'The next step to doing that is getting outta there. After you get outta there, then you can do whatever you want.'

Similarly, Ricky shared how he initially did not tell his mother but instead mailed her his GED certificate so she could see it with her own eyes. Ricky shared the following about the experience,

My mom was ecstatic. She- I even, I think it was like two or three weeks ago, I mailed her my certificate. And I just mailed it to her. And I didn't tell her, I waited 'til she got it. She was like “Boy why didn't you tell me you taking these classes.” She was like, “That's good, keep going.”

For Thomas, Ricky, and the other boys, sharing the accomplishment with their families was a source of pride and helped foster a sense of hope for the future. Although their incarceration had brought their family pain and shame, having access to another identity and space within the carceral context helped them visualize a path forward where they could be a fuller version of themselves.

Still, the college program offered more than just credits and academic opportunities, it also created a third space (Gutiérrez et al., 1999; Urrieta et al., 2011) of learning and development in which youth could learn and support one another. The day of the focus group, I brought snacks and we sat in a semi-circle eating, laughing, and talking. The energy in the room was light and joyful, they smiled as they opened up and shared parts of themselves with me and each other. I asked a few guiding questions, but we also allowed the conversation to flow, and they too asked questions of each other and me. At one point, the youth had the following exchange about learning to “work together” and what it meant for them to have one another during that time of unfreedom.

Rashaad: Hey, this killed me though. This killed me though. You wanna know something I really noticed about being up in here though? Man, though- 'cause when I'm on the outside a lot of people don't work together. And you wanna know why, though? It's 'cause you can do whatever you want when you on the outside, and you got anything you want on the outside.

- Thomas: You got all the resources.
- Rashaad: When you come in here, you be hungry. You be mad. You be depressed.
- Thomas: Away from your family.
- Rashaad: You away from your family, so you have to grasp on to certain people.
- Ricky: Yeah.
- Rashaad: And then it be like, “Oh, this my dawg now.”
- Ricky: This my team.
- Rashaad: You know what I’m saying? This my dude, you know what I’m saying? This my dude. If I wanna laugh, he gonna make me laugh, you feel me? You know what I’m saying? If I wanna talk about him ‘cause I feel bad, he- he ain’t gonna say nothing, you know what I’m saying? You know what I mean? But he talk about me, I ain’t gonna say nothing either, because he feel- he feel like that’s what he need to do, he gotta get stuff off his chest.

This exchange between four friends, three Black boys and an Albanian American boy, was unprompted and one that came from their own want and desire to talk about their “team” and what it meant to have each other’s support at a time when they were away from their family. Rarely in the literature, with few notable exceptions (Annamma, 2017; Vaught, 2017; Winn, 2011), do we get a window into understanding the lives of young people who are incarcerated, much less of them openly talking about the challenges of being confined, hungry, mad, depressed, and separated from those they love. Still, in this rare glimpse into their lives, we see how young people were not only surviving but creating third spaces that challenged their dehumanization. Rashaad named that in order to make it in LCJDC “you have to grasp on to certain people,” and as a true team, the three boys agreed. He then goes on to explain that if he needed to laugh or talk, or get something “off his chest,” his friends would be there to support him and vice versa. As friends, they allowed each other to be full human beings with a range of emotions and feelings. This moment highlights how even though they were incarcerated, youth found ways to create life-affirming third spaces and pathways for themselves where they could be what they needed for themselves and others.

Vignette 3: Interviews as spaces of rehumanization

For the third and final vignette, I highlight how interviews were transformed into pedagogical encounters co-constructed between myself and the youth (Vossoughi & Zavala, 2020). Drawing on the work of Vossoughi and Zavala (2020), in which interviews are understood as a “potentially meaningful learning experience for those who are having the conversation” (p.138), I highlight two moments from two distinct interviews in which the youth and I co-constructed a mutual space of learning and development. Given the context of the juvenile detention center, youth seldomly had the opportunity to talk privately about their experiences inside. However, as part of the agreement between the juvenile detention center and myself, I interviewed youth without a staff person present in one of the “privileged” visiting rooms, often reserved for attorneys, probation officers, and caregivers. Security staff would escort

youth to the visitation room but once in the room staff members would return to their assigned posts. Youth were often surprised and relieved to learn that a staff member would not be present for the interview. Still, there were other forms of surveillance that while less visible were still felt including multiple cameras in the visitation area. I did however notice that youth were more willing to speak openly and critically about the various challenges they faced while detained in LCJDC. It also allowed conversations to flow more freely and for youth to share how they were feeling in a private space away from their peers and staff. It also meant that at times, we only got through a handful of questions and had to schedule a subsequent time to meet because they had so much to say. Early on I learned that to do human-centered research in a carceral environment means putting young people's lives and needs first, even if at times it "interfered" with the proposed research timeline. For those of us who simultaneously identify as researchers and abolitionists the reality is that conducting research in carceral spaces requires that we attend to the material lives of those inside because there is no such thing as business as usual when people's well-being and freedom are at stake. As a result, I approached the interview process with a great deal of care and intention informed by the teachings of other scholars engaged in humanizing research (Paris & Winn, 2013; Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014).

I first met Maria, a 16-year-old Mexican American girl, in the fall of 2018 while observing what is colloquially known as the "Girl's Unit." Maria was slim with dark brown hair with a fading burgundy tint, her eyebrows sharp, and her voice loud and cheerful. I met Maria at a time in her life when she was bouncing between different relatives' homes, group homes, and LCJDC. From 2018 to 2019 Maria was detained in LCJDC three separate times, each stay longer than the previous one. Over the course of those months, I got to know Maria well through informal interactions, tutoring sessions, and classroom and unit observations. Three months into knowing Maria, I asked her to participate in the study to which she agreed. Although I had heard parts of Maria's story prior to the interviews, I gained a deeper understanding of Maria's experiences through the interviews. I interviewed Maria three separate times, each interview approximately an hour and half to two hours long.

During the first interview, Maria talked at length about some of the harmful social interactions she experienced in public schools with teachers, school leaders, and peers. Maria described schooling experiences riddled with instances of spirit murdering (Love, 2019) that she carried with her years after they occurred. In detailing some of the harm she experienced at the hands of one of her middle school teachers, Maria connected it to how she responds when she sees someone "talking shit about people who can't defend themselves." Maria explained that such behavior made her "mad" and triggered her because, "I never really had no one like to defend me so when I see someone getting bullied or something I want to help out. Because like I know all I got is myself at the end of the day." Maria's words highlight a deep seeded wound connected to her schooling and home life where she felt that no one had looked out for her. As a result, Maria would often step in and help others who she perceived as not being able to defend themselves, even if that meant putting herself at risk of harm. Almost ironically, Maria concluded by saying, "I know I don't have a big heart, but I

love to help people who are like in danger.” In that moment, I wanted to both understand and challenge Maria’s thinking.

Julissa: Why do you say you don’t have a big heart?

Maria: Like I don’t really care for people but at the same time I do.

Julissa: I don’t believe that.

Maria: (Laughs) I adore people that I don’t even know. Like I can walk into a room....

Julissa: So, why do you say that? Why do you say you don’t have a big heart?

Maria: Because I feel like I don’t.

Julissa: Do you feel like you have to say that because that’s what people have told you?

Maria: Everybody has told me that (Laughs).

Julissa: I don’t believe that. I mean I’m not going to say I know you all that well but that’s the last thing I would say about you. I would never say you don’t care.

Maria: I mean it’s just hard to show like I do care about people.

Julissa: You clearly care about people. I mean in our conversations that’s one thing I’ve always known, you care about your sisters, you care about your friends, you cared about your boyfriend who passed away.

Maria: I mean I do care then. I do. I mean it’s very kinda hard to hide it sometimes. Sometimes it will be like you know if there is a fight at Walmart and this person is getting jumped some people will watch and record. Me? I’m going to jumping in and I’m going to make it my business because what if that was me in that situation? Would I want people to help? Hell yeah, come help me dude I’m getting jumped for I don’t know what.

Some might read this excerpt and question my decision to challenge Maria’s comment about not having a big heart. In order to understand my questions and comments, the reader must know that Maria and I had a relationship prior to the interview. I could have simply listened and moved on to the next question, but Maria’s comment did not align with the person I had come to know. I knew Maria to be caring and attentive to others’ needs. On numerous occasions, I saw Maria help younger residents whether in the classroom or in the living unit, so I probed to better understand why she felt that she did not have a big heart. In doing so, it became clear that she was repeating what others had led her to believe about herself. Deep down, Maria revealed that she saw herself as a caring person even though others had told her otherwise. Thus, my probing in the interview, was a subtle move toward rehumanization that challenged her to not internalize what others had said about her. Maria in turn responded in the affirmative declaring, “I adore people that I don’t even know,” and “I mean I do care then. I do.” In doing so, Maria countered her initial declaration that she did not have a big heart. The decision to challenge her initial response was intentional and aimed at clarifying the narrative that was emerging. By probing, we learn that it was something she had heard other people say about her and was beginning to internalize and repeat. As someone who she trusted, it was important that in that discursive opening that her and I challenge what others had said and instead

recenter who she knew herself to be. Vossoughi and Zavala (2020) argue that interviews are pedagogical encounters that can create “discursive openings and ideational tools” (pg. 143) that participants can use to develop and express their own thinking. Discursive openings, in the moment, require active listening and careful attunement to what youth participants are sharing (p.149) but if done well can be a space of pedagogical mediation where young people like Maria get to develop their own meaning making. In this case, it also created an opening for Maria to reclaim her sense of self through a co-constructed process of rehumanization.

Interviews were also learning opportunities for me. Youth taught me a great deal about how they rehumanize *themselves* in an environment predicated on their organized abandonment (Gilmore, 2008). As an example, I drafted a question that asked, “What words or phrases have you heard people use to describe you?” I would typically ask this question near the end of the interview after we had discussed their upbringing and schooling experiences. The intention behind the question was to elicit answers that might speak to labeling theory and its effects. However, I quickly learned that for some youth that was not where their minds immediately went. In fact, many shared positive and uplifting words and phrases which stood in stark contrast to what I expected to hear. Take the following five excerpts as examples of how youth at times responded to the question;

Quest (Black transyouth, 16): Outgoing, funny, kind, smart, intelligent, caring, loving

Rashaad (Black boy, 17): Bright. I heard that a lot. And determined...It was something like, he [*referring to his attorney*] feel like I can actually do something with myself.

Desiree (Black and Mexican girl, 13): So good ones are people called me intelligent, smart, beautiful, bright. And I can be really happy and rowdy. And I genuinely care about people. And then the bad things are... people say that sometimes I can be too negative. Sometimes I want to be the center of attention. I fight too much. I'm too aggressive. One of the staff actually just told me that inside of here I made a reputation for myself as being bitchy.

Larry (Black boy, 17): Respectful, protective. I try to protect... take cover for people who can't take care of their self. Loving, compassionate.

Carl (Black boy, 16): Mmm, smart, open minded, thoughtful, powerful, warm-hearted, sweet, kind, um, energetic, and there's a lot of negative words unless you wanna hear those too.

For Quest, Rashaad, Desiree, Larry, and Carl, all of whom identified as Black, the words they shared did not reference their legal status nor did they start with the negative labels. Instead, they emphasized positive attributes like ‘smart,’ ‘bright,’ ‘caring,’ ‘loving,’ and ‘compassionate,’ that when spoken brought a fuller, richer picture of who they were as people to light. I mistakenly assumed that youth would start by naming negative labels such as ‘juvenile delinquent’ or ‘criminal’ and while some youth did, most did not. It is neither that youth were naïve or did not acknowledge that people had called them terrible thing, in some cases, it was part of a refusal to not internalize the negativity. Still, it is evident in Desiree and Carl’s responses that they were keenly aware of those words too. As misguided as my question was, their responses challenged my assumptions and in turn helped me become a better researcher. A key function of carcerality is to strip people of their many identities and to reduce them to the worst thing they have ever done (Stevenson, 2019). Yet, the excerpts highlight youths’ refusal and purposeful reclaiming of the best parts of themselves.

To further illustrate one Black youth's attempt at refusing the dehumanization he experienced while incarcerated I will focus on the rest of the exchange with Carl. Carl was charismatic, talkative, and a joy to be around. At the time of the interview, I was still trying to make sense of youths' responses to the previous question, so I asked Carl why he started by naming the more positive attributes. He explained, "I just don't like negative things. I hate having negative vibes. So that's why I always go to the positive." As a follow up I asked him whether there were stereotypes associated with some of the more negative attributes he shared, "dumb, worthless, criminal," Carl replied,

Carl: Hmmmmm...Black kids.

Julissa: Tell me more.

Carl: Black kids. (Pause). So like, Black kids are stereotyped as like dumb and uneducated. And I don't wanna be, I don't wanna be, you know, put in that group, like I'm uneducated or I know less, or I'm less of a person because I'm Black, you know. A lot of Black, not just Black, Hispanic, Mexican, non-white, if you not white then you get stereotyped as like uneducated or you don't know, you know less because we got the highest prison rate, or you know, a lot of us been, been, been, ummm...

Julissa: Been incarcerated?

Carl: Yeah, like been incarcerated. So, it's like, we get stereotyped as uneducated...

Carl is a Black boy who experienced the racial stereotypes, stigma, and antiblack racism associated (Edwards & Dancy, 2023) with being Black in America. At 16 years old, Carl demonstrates a complex understanding of race, racism, and how it translates into societal perceptions about Blacks, Mexicans, Latinxs, and other people of color. We also get a glimpse into what Du Bois (2008) so poignantly described as "double consciousness," which refers to a dual awareness of self and how others, particularly white America, perceives Black people. Importantly, Carl rejected the idea that he and other Black people were somehow dumb, uneducated, or "less of a person" because they were Black. Still, he recognizes that the stereotype is partially rooted in the overrepresentation of Black people in prisons and situates himself in that phenomenon. Even so, he refuses to see himself and other Black people as less than or "worthless." Carl's move toward positivity was not because he was unaware of his Black identity and legal disposition, on the contrary, Carl was hyperaware of being Black and incarcerated. Carl's articulated double consciousness informed his refusal and fueled his efforts to rehumanize himself despite the constant dehumanization.

Discussion

Within the abolitionist tradition (Cabral, 2023; Davis et al., 2022; Gilmore, 2008; Kaba, 2021) we are often tasked with thinking about the here and now of people's lives, particularly for those living in confinement. Yet what is often left out of the conversation are the ways that incarcerated communities are already creating life-affirming pathways forward. Incarcerated individuals and communities understand better than anyone else what it means to exist in a perpetual state of unfreedom. Thus, they are the ones who best understand the importance of creating third spaces and passing on survival strategies for themselves and others.

Using three carefully selected vignettes, this article explored how young people resisted practices and conditions that perpetuated their dehumanization while incarcerated. The first vignette, an exchange between two generations of Black boys and men, is an example of the everyday forms of learning that take place within the carceral context oftentimes beyond the purview of the carceral classroom. Importantly, the type of learning was rooted in what I argue are life-affirming “strategies for survival” (Thompson, 1998) and practices that young people passed on to one another. These strategies for survival were often about maintaining a sense of self and semblance of the life they lived before their incarceration. The intergenerational exchange also demonstrates how incarcerated youth create third spaces of learning and development that defy practices and conditions that attempt to strip youth of their sense of self.

The second vignette focused on four boys—Thomas, Ricky, Dante, and Rashaad—who participated in an on-site college program, builds on the concept of third spaces by highlighting both a formal and informal third space of learning and development created by the juvenile facility and youth. The college course created a third space within LCJDC where youth could try on other identities in an environment that was designed to foreclose such identities. Additionally, the friendship that the four-youth forged offered another informal third space where they created life-affirming spaces that gave them space to be fuller versions of themselves.

The final vignette concludes with an exploration of interviews as co-constructed pedagogical encounters that can be leveraged as third spaces of learning and development between researchers and youth (Vossoughi & Zavala, 2020). The first excerpt captures an exchange between Maria and I in which I challenged an emerging narrative that Maria was creating about herself. The interview created a space of pedagogical mediation where Maria in conversation with me could develop her own meaning-making that aligned with her sense of self. The second excerpt explores my learning and development as a researcher. Youth, like Carl, taught me to see the subtle and transformative ways that youth were actively resisting their dehumanization and reclaiming their humanity through everyday forms of resistance.

As I reflect on what I have learned and continue to learn from youth, I ask myself what it would mean to leverage what young people are already learning and creating with how we approach teaching, learning, and world building with systems impacted youth? As educators, how often do we pause to learn from young people about the learning environments and practices they are developing and sharing with one another? What might we learn from youth who have experienced incarceration firsthand about what it means to survive and not lose themselves in the depths of dehumanization? In each of these vignettes I have shown that youth are capable of creating and sustaining themselves via relationships, third spaces, and their ability to resist their dehumanization. To privilege and uplift their voice is not just about listening, it is about learning and applying what we learn from them to our research, pedagogy, practice, and praxis within the field of education.

As an abolitionist, I also wonder how can we support and build on the freedom dreaming and worldmaking that is already happening in carceral spaces? How can we bridge these life-affirming strategies and third spaces to the abolitionist movement in the free world? What other third spaces are possible and needed as we continue to visualize and plan for a world where correctional facilities are not the answer? Lastly,

how can we mimic the systems of support that youth create for themselves while incarcerated in our own reimagining of systems of care? (Kaba, 2021). In order to keep reimagining a world without carceral logics and correctional facilities, we must continue to center the voices, experiences, and knowledge of people inside including our youth.

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