

Black Girls and Critical Media Literacy for Social Activism

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Despite the largely degrading media representations of Blackness, historically, Black girls and women have been strong activists, disrupting narratives the media conveys about Black girl- and womanhood. Centering Black girls' lived experience through critical media literacy can give them the opportunity to develop the language to identify, deconstruct, and problematize the complexity of power operating in media and negotiate visibility by counternarrating racist, sexist, and classist media narratives with authentic stories of Black girlhood. This article centralizes Black girls in media literacy by articulating the aims of the individual and collective endeavors of the Black Girls' Literacies Collective (BGLC). The author unpacks critical media literacy for classroom teachers and shares practical ways to employ media literacy for youth social activism to alter the educational landscape to effect change.

Centering Black girls' lived experience through critical media literacy can teach critical thinking and interrogation and enables Black girls to negotiate visibility by counternarrating racist, sexist, and classist media narratives with authentic stories of Black girlhood. As Kellner and Share (2005) emphasize, "Coming to voice is important for people who have seldom been allowed to speak for themselves, but without critical analysis it is not enough" (p. 371). Students—particularly Black girls—are often disconnected from the curriculum (Evans-Winters, 2005). As educators it is our responsibility to connect students' histories, stories, and lived experiences in classroom settings so they can identify, deconstruct, and problematize the complexity of power relations operating in society, specifically through media.

The goals of critical media literacy practices are to upset the dominant discourse about individuals and groups of people who contribute to oppressive relationships (Kellner & Share, 2007; Luke, 2000), emphasizing the questioning of social norms. When engaged in critical media literacy,

students are taught to interrogate texts, question myriad oppressive social structures, and unpack and analyze how stereotypes and prejudices are communicated through media (Scharer, 2015; Yosso, 2002). In this article, I draw on my own experiences as an African American woman who is a former elementary classroom teacher and co-creator and co-facilitator of a critical media literacy collective for Black girls in advocating for critical media literacy in English education classrooms to empower youth toward social activism. I unpack critical media literacy and how it can be espoused to encourage activism, show examples of programs that center Black girls in media literacy for social activism, and provide English educators practical examples of how to employ critical media literacy in their classrooms. I begin with a historical context of Black women's activism as a tradition that Black girls can continue today.

Historical Context: Black Women's Activism

Men of eminence have mostly risen from obscurity; nor will I, although a female of a darker hue, and far more obscure than they, bend my head or hand my harp upon willows; for though poor, I will virtuous prove.

—Maria W. Stewart, *What If I Am a Woman?*

Historically, Black women have spoken truth to power in various forms of media. Known as the first Black woman political writer (Richardson, 1987), Maria W. Stewart was a social activist and lecturer who spent her life advocating for the more complete representation, education, and civil rights of Black people, particularly of African American women. She advocated for Black women to know themselves and engage with politics and social activism. Black women's active resistance to racism and sexism was central to her platform, and these ideas rang through the public address, *What If I Am a Woman?* In this address, delivered in 1833 to the free Black community in Boston, she spoke to the struggles she carried as a Black American woman as well as to her inner strength, which was the basis of her hope as an activist. She spoke vehemently about the rights of women and of her refusal to give up or “bend her head” in the movement toward justice and righteousness. Instead, she proclaimed that she would virtuously demonstrate her stance. During this time and throughout her political writings, she boldly encouraged other Black women to do the same by cultivating their minds through developing their highest intellectual capabilities to be sociopolitical participants in society. This, she felt, would give them the tools to resist oppressions and the typecast image of the subservient woman (Richardson, 1987).

Although Stewart was one of the first pioneers of social activism, she was not alone in her quest for a better society. She was a part of a rich lineage of Black women activists who used their voices and literacy practices for social change. Black women have been active participants in the path of social change and, as literate beings, they have been reading the politicized context of their worlds from the early nineteenth century onward (Yee, 1992). This reading of their worlds gave them the perspectives and standpoints to build their social agendas to ameliorate the conditions of African American people. Their sociopolitical participation was also tied to their multiple and complex identities, namely the intersection of race, class, and gender. Yee (1992) notes that their “economic circumstances, kinship and friendship ties, marriage, and education led women toward personal definition of their goals as activists” (p. 3). This, she posits, reflected and influenced their abolitionist activities and choices related to societal change. Moreover, traditions of activism and social change were grounded in critical literacy practices (Muhammad, 2015; Royster, 2000). As they read, wrote, and spoke about the contexts of their lives, they were making sense of power and the marginalized perspectives of others who had to fight to have a voice at the table. Black women’s language practices became the vehicles for action as they fought oppression, misrepresentations, and dominant ideologies with their pens and voices. They also used the media (mostly newspapers and later radio and television) to inform their arguments and speak their truths. These media were read and critiqued and used as the conduits for their resistance and protest writings (Newman, Rael, & Lapsansky, 2001; Reid, 2001).

From early activists such as Harriet Tubman, Anna Murray Douglass, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Maria Stewart, and Sojourner Truth to their successors such as Angela Davis, Kathleen Cleaver, Clara Muhammad, Coretta Scott King, to today through Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, Bree Newsome, and Johnetta Elzie, these women’s lives are evidence that traditions of striving for social change are continuing and still necessary. Black girls and women are a part of an ongoing movement that calls for radical change. As testament to this history, the Black Lives Matter movement was an ideological intervention spearheaded by three women—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—after the not-guilty verdict for George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin. Their efforts helped to propel the movement forward.

There are other recent examples of this activist lineage. “The Millions March,” which began in New York City (NYC) after the November 24, 2014, decision not to indict officer Darren Wilson in the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, was organized by Synead Nichols and Umaara Elliot through

Facebook; and Carmen Perez, co-founder of Justice League NYC, initiated the “die in” movement. The Millennial Activist United organization was started by three queer Black women—Ashley Yates, Alexis Templeton, and Brittney Ferrell—in Ferguson, Missouri. However, when people mention the Black Lives Matter movement, the way that the media have characterized the “radical” nature of the movement has led many to believe that the protests in Ferguson to the “Millions March” across the country are in fact “leaderless.” To the contrary: These movements have deep and sustained leadership. Often women’s contributions and leadership, however, are left invisible and minimized in the broader conversations and historical records. Throughout history, Black girls and women have been strong activists, disrupting narratives the media (once newspapers and now through television and social media platforms) convey about Black girlhood and womanhood. Therefore, centering Black girls’ lived experiences through critical media literacy enables Black girls to counter the stereotypes that haunt society’s collective consciousness about Black women and girls with genuine stories of Black girlhood.

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Critical Media Literacy as a Pedagogical Approach

Media includes such mediums as radio, television, magazines, newspapers, print ads, popular culture, and new technologies, to name a few, and represents a site of education situated outside of the traditional context of formal educational institutions. Kellner and Share (2007) assert that it is irresponsible for educators to ignore the educative nature of the media, especially in the media-saturated environment of the twenty-first century. Educators concerned with bringing media into the classroom space should recognize that their students are already bringing media into schools with them. They come in listening to media and watching media on their phones. They are reading comics and novels and discussing video games. What teachers do with media in classrooms is more important than how they are brought in, though. Because youth are being socialized and conditioned through their engagement with media, what teachers choose to do with media pedagogically becomes significant.

There is a strong need to define critical media literacy in a pedagogical context for practice in English classrooms (Alvermann, 2006; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Morrell, 2014). I emphasize the use of critical media literacy

for youth social activism as a way to alter the educational landscape in a movement toward social change. In essence, this movement incites what Giroux (2013) calls a “radical democracy,” which he defines as a “political, social, and ethical referent for rethinking how citizens can be educated to deal with a world made up of different, multiple, and fractured public cultures” (p. 53). A radical democracy requires a commitment to social justice and equity in education (Alsup & Miller, 2014). Schools can serve as a site to cultivate an understanding of the world—how to read it and navigate it to “help students develop the language to counter the sophisticated politics of public portrayal that target them every day” (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2006, p. 279). Undergirded by critical pedagogy and critical literacy, students

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can be taught to use media to create new and innovative ways to engage in social justice as twenty-first-century citizens (Haddix & Sealey-Ruiz, 2012).

In our market-driven information society of the twenty-first century, media promote various political and cultural values (Horn, 2003) and this promotion is possible because entire industries are under control of a few corporate conglomerates (Compaine & Gomery, 2000). The chair of the Federal Communications Commission, appointed by the president of the United States, is responsible for regulating the myriad communications of media, and while the commission should have balanced political viewpoints, the political party of the chair can influence decision-making about communications. Because 90 percent of American media are operated by six companies, the values, perspectives, and viewpoints of the controllers of those six companies permeate mass media, and thus have authority over what knowledge is disseminated. Educators must constantly engage in critique of media representations for the purpose of disrupting the stereotypical way that Black girls and other marginalized populations are represented in the media. For example, teachers could ask: *Why is sex used to sell everything from hamburgers to cars? What type of women are chosen to represent those images? What body sizes are represented in commercial and print ads? What skin tones? What hair textures?* Media penetrate every area of our everyday life; our immersion in media eliminates our ability to be unaffected (Hinchey, 2003). Youth are constantly bombarded with varying perspectives about their lives during an already complicated developmental time—adolescence. We do not have a choice about whether our students will be engaged in media consumption, so our choice about teaching students to be media literate should be an obvious one.

The ability to comprehend and stave off the barrage of information is as important as the ability to read; McBrien (1999) asserts reading is only one part of traditional literacy while comprehension is the other. If our students can read but cannot understand the print they read, we are failing them within instructional practices. Similarly, if our students can read media through their engagement with them, but do not know how to interpret and understand the messages they are receiving, we are once again failing them. Educators have the opportunity to develop pedagogies that employ the advances in technology and to understand the saturation of media around us to reconceptualize how literacy is understood and taught (Luke, 2000).

Educators who employ critical media literacy offer students the opportunity to practice becoming critical readers of the world around them by generating dialogue about the impact of media in shaping the way people think and view themselves and others (Morrell, 2014). Critical media literacy instruction helps students research, analyze, and critique social conditions of their everyday lives and encourages critical thinking and production of multimodal literacies (Hobbs, 1997) by promoting reflexivity in media consumption habits. Hobbs listed the key components of media literacy as understanding the following:

1. All messages are constructions.
2. Messages are representations of social reality.
3. Individuals negotiate meaning by interacting with messages.
4. Messages have economic, political, social and aesthetic purposes.
5. Each form of communication has unique characteristics. (p. 9)

Taken together, these components of media literacy suggest that all messages in the media are the conscious or unconscious decisions of what and who to represent and how it is represented. While the images, and inherent messages, are consciously and unconsciously constructed by the creator of the image shown in the media, as consumers of the media we negotiate their meanings based on our own experiences and social and political positions in society. Further, the key components of media literacy proffer that all messages have social, political, and commercial implications, that is, media are usually endeavoring to make a profit or a point. Because of how media are used as indoctrination, teachers can utilize critical media literacy for civic engagement, democratic practice, and social activism.

In our current sociopolitical climate, where many youth are joining the Black Lives Matter movement, protesting until university presidents

resign,¹ and holding rallies, boycotts, die-ins, and read-ins across the country, fostering youths' media literacy is more vital than ever. Education needs to heighten students' critical consciousness, challenging racism disguised as entertainment (Yosso, 2002); understanding that messages in the media have historical, social, political, and economic contexts (Kellner & Share, 2007); and recognizing that only part of the story is provided by the media (Horn, 2003).

Critical Media Literacy for Black Girls

Media representations of Black girlhood, both as entertainment and in the news, are largely subtractive and dehumanizing. For example, in October 2015, at Spring Valley High School in South Carolina a cell-phone camera

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video showing a school resource officer dragging a Black girl out of her seat in a classroom went viral on social media sites. Various news outlets reported this assault with commentary such as “we don't know what occurred before the video” to insinuate that there would be sufficient reason for an adult male to manhandle a female student. Black girls' lives matter. However, the way their lives are represented through the media, whether

on television, in music, in print, or on the news, sends the message to Black girls and others that they, in fact, do not matter—that their lives are not valuable. *That no one cares about them. That they should accept the way they are treated.* In a media-saturated environment, undeniably, Black girls' media consumption influences the way they see themselves and others.

Critical media literacy is transformative for Black girls because it is not simply an exercise in reading and writing; it is a mode through which Black girls learn how to push back and (re)write who they are. “The revolution will not be televised, it will be on social media,” was a sentence I recently read on Twitter, posted by an adolescent. The sentence was making reference to the ways people are using social media to inform others and to push back against the ways news reports share partial stories, or misrepresent stories altogether when Black and Brown bodies are assaulted. Haddix, Everson, and Hodge (2015) echoed these same sentiments, asking if *the youth will lead the revolution. And if the revolution is to be televised and tweeted, what tools will they use?* Sharing their experiences from their involvement in a youth writing project, the authors weave together their three perspectives—that of a youth writer, a workshop facilitator, and the program director—to demonstrate the importance of (1) holding time and space—whether in classrooms,

community centers, or online—to support youth literacies and (2) listening to and valuing the perspectives of youth writers. They share an example of how Josanique, a young Black woman writer, called for social action and change, how her call was heard by supportive adults in her community, and how her writing contributed to moving forward a school reform agenda in response to youth violence, school discipline, and increased police brutality. Through the use of social media and digital tools, Josanique organized a community rally and a hashtag campaign to call attention to social injustices in her school community.

Critical media literacy education should not be viewed as an ancillary add-on to curriculum but as the basis of civic education in the twenty-first century. Educators not employing critical media literacy are missing real opportunities for addressing key aspects of our social, political, and economic landscape. Critical media literacy provides a framework to advocate for social justice; however, social justice and activism are not explicit aims. Therefore, I am arguing for the use of critical media literacy not only as a means to educate, empower, and encourage Black girls to deconstruct media but also to use their voices, pens, and digital platforms to advocate for social change.

Centering Black Girls: The Black Girls' Literacies Collective

The Black Girls' Literacies Collective (BGLC) uses critical media literacy to engage Black girls in social activism. The BGLC is comprised of five Black women scholars at four different universities. Our work centralizes and honors the multiple identities and literacies of Black adolescent females. The outreach that we engage in collectively and individually is solution-oriented scholarship that resists and works against the attacks on Black girlhood, namely that impact their self-esteem and construction of positive identity.

The work of Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, member of BGLC and author of this themed issue's editorial, created and facilitates the Racial Literacy Roundtables Series at Teachers College, Columbia University. For the past three years, the series has focused on the well-being of youth. The most recent roundtable facilitated by four Black female high school students is described in the editorial. Based on their facilitation, the four girls and their assistant principal were invited to write an article for a scholarly journal's special issue on youth experiences in neo-liberal educational contexts. Additionally, the girls will be featured presenters at a high-profile conference on Black girls in New York City. Their work, starting with the Racial Literacy Roundtable, continues to evolve into a program focused on Black girls' literacies. These roundtable series and the girls' writings are campaigning to bring about social change by tapping into their investment with media culture.

Marcelle Haddix, co-author of the literature review of this themed issue, facilitates Dark Girls, a program geared toward supporting the creative literacies of Black adolescent girls in middle and high schools. Dark Girls is an after-school program in the northeast United States that supports literacy, identity, self-esteem, and social development. The workshop leaders of Dark Girls are women faculty, staff, and doctoral students of color who facilitate the promotion of positive representations of Black women and girls through writing, arts, performance, and dance. Gholnecsar Muhammad, also co-author of the literature review in this issue, facilitates a summer literacy institute, Black Girls Writing to Represent our Identities, Times, and Excellence!, or Black Girls W.R.I.T.E!, for Black girls that has operated out of the Midwest and the Southeast. This program provides space and physical place for Black girls to use their pens as a form of resistance, and explores how Black adolescent girls represent themselves in their writings. The program works with middle school and high school Black girls to teach literacy skills, intellectual knowledge, identity development, and criticality (Muhammad, 2015).

Detra Price-Dennis, who contributes a piece on digital literacy to this issue, has worked with fifth-grade Black girls as they use tablets to create multimodal projects through the Digital Literacies Collaborative. This collaborative is a mobile program that has operated in the northeast United States and provides literacy instruction to educate and understand the digital literacy practices of Black girls in elementary schools. Over the course of the program, the Black girls create responses to racism, sexism, religion, and power by creating and performing spoken word, creating podcasts from those compositions, analyzing music videos, and discussing hegemony in magazine advertisements. Lastly, I co-created and co-facilitated the critical media literacy collective Beyond Your Perception (BYP) in the southeast United States. This collective worked with high school Black girls to critique and analyze the media they engage and to empower them to disrupt the dominant narrative presented by the media with their own voices.

I emphasize the work of the BGLC because we center Black girls in an intentional and deliberate act. We take on an activist stance as Black women scholars, purposefully working to bring about social change through our work with Black girls. We strive to develop civically and socially engaged youth, building their critical capacity and encouraging them to tap into their agency. We have constructed programs out of the need for their existence: Black girls remain invisible and overlooked in the conversations on race and gender (Crenshaw, 2015). Research and programs that focus on Black education are purposeful in addressing the needs of Black boys; however,

gender studies tend not to focus on the unique racialized-gender position of Black girls (Evans-Winters, 2005). Individually, the members of the BGLC created and facilitate our programs where we espouse activist epistemology and pedagogy. We are actively working to disrupt the dominant narrative by working with Black girls to discover and uncover myths in media messages about who we are as Black women, and as literacy educators we encourage them to use their voices through speech, writings, or digital spaces to advocate for themselves.

These Black girls recognize that acts of resistance nationally, and globally, can be found in informative and inciting ways on various media platforms. Youth may be turning to social media because, as Johnson, Bass, and Hicks (2014) note, “Facebook’s non-hierarchical and interactive platform seemed to serve as a scaffold for students’ development from passive consumers to producers” (p. 45). They may also recognize the global reach using social media provides. A tweet, Facebook post, YouTube video, or Snapchat clip, for example, has the ability to be read or viewed millions of times. Educators and youth workers around the world, including the members of BGLC, are using social media to produce alternative representations of Black girlhood than the largely negative representations currently present in the media. The members of BGLC are making connections among identity, literacy, and media in both in-school and out-of-school contexts. The work that we do has great implications on what English educators can do in their classrooms. Much of this work is inspired by the efforts and actions we employed while serving as classroom teachers. The following section provides practical examples from the individual programs of the BGLC to highlight how critical media literacy can be used in English education classrooms for social activism.

The Practicality of Critical Media Literacy for Activism in English Classrooms

The #SayHerName hashtag was developed to draw attention to the violence against unarmed Black women and girls by the hands of police. Many other hashtag campaigns assert empowerment to the celebration of Black woman- and girlhood, like #BlackGirlMajic and #BlackGirlGenius. Dark Girls has implemented the creation of hashtag campaigns for self-definition and reclamation. During a session of Dark Girls, the facilitators showed the participants visual images online that represented Black girls and women in demeaning and deficit ways. The participants were aware of many of the visual images used and were able to direct the facilitators to more images that depicted Black women and girls in degrading ways. Dark Girls mentors asked

the girls to create their own hashtags to rewrite and reclaim their narratives. The girls created hashtags collaboratively to inform the world about what they wanted them to know about Black girls that included #BlackGirlFearless, #TalentedBlackGirl, #TeamDarkGirls, #AllBlackGirlsMatter, #IAmMe, #StopBlackDiscrimination, #BeNatural, and #BlackGirlStyle. While they did not use the hashtags outside of Dark Girls, this activity can be used in school contexts for students to inform others about the issues that they find important. Especially in the context of national and global issues, a classroom teacher can create a hashtag with the class that they can all follow regarding classroom conversations. Similarly, teachers can create hashtags that relate to a particular text students are reading and as they engage with that text, either during the school day or at home, hashtag their questions, comments, reflections, or connections between that text and what they may be viewing in their lived experience. For example, while watching the presidential debates, students could post their comments through social media using the class hashtag. They can later use their tweets or posts to compose editorials, essays, protest poetry, or public addresses. This may prove to be a more inviting way for students to discuss the text and would enable the teacher to better understand students' thoughts about the text they are reading and the ways they are making sense of it.

One example from Black Girls W.R.I.T.E.! that teachers can employ is the girls' production of public service announcements. Behrman (2006) identified six categories for critical literacy classroom practices while exploring how the same reader might read a text from a different viewpoint based on identity. For example, the students might read one text and attempt to read said text through the eyes of a different race, gender, ethnicity, or religion. To do this work, Behrman (2006) names the following categories: (1) reading supplementary texts, (2) reading multiple texts, (3) reading from a resistant perspective, (4) producing counter-texts, (5) conducting student-choice research projects, and (6) taking social action.

Black Girls W.R.I.T.E! employed all six of these categories within the summer program. The facilitator provided a mentor text as an exemplar of the writing task they would participate in that day, and would introduce a "sister spark²" highlighting the biography, picture, quote, or video clip of a Black woman writer. As mentor texts, the facilitator introduced Anna Julia Cooper's "The Higher Education of Women," Maria Stewart's "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build," and Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?" After discussing their initial thoughts on each piece, she asked the participants to think of a critical topic about the current state of Black girls, asking them why the

topics they chose were urgent. She went on to ask: “What do you want to say about this topic? Who is your audience? What will you need to know to make your points eloquently? What research do you need?” With this weeklong project, the girls brainstormed ideas, researched their final topics, composed a public service announcement (PSA), shared with the group for feedback, edited and revised, and recorded their PSAs. Their PSAs were later extended into speeches that they delivered publically to the local community. She also asked them to consider the topic they chose through the eyes of other marginalized populations, questioning if their PSA could speak for the experiences of others. This activity can be used in school contexts in similar ways to explore issues happening in the worlds around them and create public service announcements for the community—whether the school, local, national, or global communities—to reshape the narrative on myriad issues. Johnston-Goodstar, Richards-Schuster, and Sethi (2014) note that “youth media reflects the range of opportunities and possibilities through which young people use and create media—traditional media” (p. 339), like creating written or filmed public service announcements for school or local newspapers, social media, or blogging and podcasts as “a vehicle for youth development, youth leadership, and increasingly organizational and community change” (p. 339). Building upon the various social media platforms used by students will enable them to become activists and advocates for issues that they find pertinent to their own existence and/or the existence of marginalized and oppressed people.

Being thoughtful about the visual image of a magazine cover, or the advertisements within magazines, takes methodical thinking and questioning to ensure that the way that people are represented visually is not reductive or subtractive. Popular media such as magazines are sites of cultural reproduction and thus are ripe for interrogation and critique. Therefore, the process of creating magazine covers, advertisements, and editorials can enable students to better understand the role of stereotypes in media that they might not have otherwise understood or been aware of, thus connecting student experiences with other groups of people. Based on these findings, girls in the Digital Literacies Collaborative created magazines using free platforms available online.

Similar to *Dark Girls*, where the participants were charged with creating hashtags that reflected their lived experiences as Black girls, in the Digital Literacies Collaborative, fifth-grade Black girls were asked to consider images and descriptions that aligned with how the girls saw themselves in the world. The elementary school that the program operated from received a grant that afforded the fifth-grade classroom a set of tablets that the girls

used for the following project. The dialogue in the Digital Literacies Collaborative around Black girlhood led to discussions on gender, race, religion, and the role of power among those social identities. The facilitator and classroom teacher asked the girls to curate magazine covers to reflect who they were and how they wanted to be perceived. After researching pictures and information and creating magazine covers through Flipboard, the girls then used their tablets to compose editorials for the magazine reflective of the deeper discussions they were involved in through the collaborative. This process aided them in countering negative images of Black girlhood in the media and then reframing any dominant narratives. During these activities, teachers can ask students to consider people they would choose for the cover, reflecting on gender composition and race(s), why that particular gender and race were chosen, and what the long-term consequences of choosing certain races, gender, or sexual identities over others might be. This process encourages students to be mindful of gender roles and to consider what messages are sent about what families can look like, for example. It also encourages students to consider if their cover is socially responsible or if it counters or undermines social change. Teachers might also create lessons where students analyze depictions of Native Americans, African Americans, and other marginalized peoples in outdated textbooks, works of literature, billboards, or magazine advertisements. They might ask students to then create magazine covers that reflect a counternarrative to how those cultures have otherwise been represented. As with the Digital Literacies Collaborative, after creating covers, students can compose editorials for the classroom magazine that delve into sociopolitical issues.

Before beginning instruction in *Beyond Your Perception* (BYP), the co-facilitator and I worked to get to know the girls. BYP contextualized, listened to, and learned from their experiences as Black girls. Based on the experiences they shared, when we moved into our lessons our goal was to deconstruct the media they engaged with and to provide them space to create counternarratives and push back against the hegemonic discourse around Black woman- and girlhood. Our first unit of study was to provide historical understandings of the stereotypes for Black women—Jezebel, Mammy, Matriarch, Welfare Mother, and Sapphire (Harris-Perry, 2011; Stephens & Few, 2007; Stephens & Phillips, 2005). For contemporary young Black women the imagery presented of who they are or can become—their “media role models”—resemble the stereotypes of old. The program provided a space for Black girls to use counterstorytelling to speak back to hegemonic narratives.

I discussed the cruel and inhumane roots and justifications of these restrictive tropes for Black women. One activity that stemmed from this

unit was a chalk-walk and writing activity to provide depth and character to these women. After posting a piece of chart paper for each label, I asked the participants to walk around and begin to write on the chart paper a backstory for each woman. The questions they answered were: Why might the Welfare Mother need governmental assistance? And, why might Sapphire be angry? After each participant was satisfied in her contribution, we discussed the reasons they provided. In a follow-up activity, I asked the girls to write counterstories to provide a reimagined representation of Jezebel, Mammy, Matriarch, Welfare Mother, and Sapphire. Each participant chose who she wanted to write about, named her, and composed a narrative that was counterhegemonic. The excerpt below written by Dakota (pseudonym) was composed for Sapphire, who is the foundational stereotype of the “Angry Black Woman” trope.

If the color of my skin is just too much for you, then I’m sorry. If the way I am is just too pushy for you, then I’m sorry. If the way I stand with this deep arch in my back, this head held high, this smile painted on my face, this strut I take with each step . . . I mean if that’s too much for you, then I’m sorry. . . . Because of the color of my skin, I won’t be burdened with the stress of life. Just because of the way I push, I know I won’t fail in life. . . . The days get longer and the nights get shorter, but I’m done fighting by myself.

The excerpt above from Dakota’s counterstory, articulating why she might be perceived as angry “because of the color of my skin” and “because of the way I push,” is just one example that demonstrates the girls’ ability to understand and uncover the stories of marginalized peoples and speak against the hegemony within the metanarrative. Classroom teachers could use this activity, asking their students to rewrite characters as different identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, class, gender, language, sexuality, gender identity, and/or religion) and discuss how the change in identity shifts the story and changes the reader’s perception of their character’s position in the text. Grouping students together based on the character they chose would also provide rich discussion as students may have chosen to rewrite the same character as various identities. Chapters of texts, or whole texts, could be rewritten with characters taking on new identities and as a class discussing the way the changes in identity transforms the storyline. Engaging students in the practice of considering how a story, fictional or nonfictional, changes based on the identities of the characters fosters critical autonomy so that students will want to critically question media when they are not with their teacher (Masterman, 1990).

The BGLC has created critical spaces to use literacy to transform social

inequalities and empower Black girls to become activists and advocates for their own lives. In all five programs, the Black girls were bearers of knowledge as well as the facilitators of knowledge. We each learned with and alongside the Black girls as much as they were learning from and alongside us as the teachers and facilitators. We created these spaces to be a powerful starting place for transformative education. All five programs support critical media literacy because they provide the skills not only needed to thrive academically but also to push back, advocate for social change, and become socially productive citizens. The girls were all actively involved in deconstructing inequalities and learning ways to reconstruct alternatives to create a better society. The examples shared in this section that center Black girls illustrate how we use our programs to transform the literacies, identities, and activism of Black adolescent girls using myriad critical media literacy practices within and beyond official school contexts. The literacy skills gained by centering Black girlhood have been longstanding and proved applicable to the varied experiences they find themselves in. Not doing this work—that is, using critical media literacy—may mean we, as Lewis and Fabos (2005) affirm, “find ourselves schooling young people in literacy practices that disregard the vitality of their literate lives and the needs they will have for their literate and social futures at home, at work, and in their communities” (p. 498). Youth need opportunities to decode the messages, representations, and content of the media in which they engage. Therefore, literacy instruction should reflect the social, cultural, and political landscapes and influences on the lived experiences of students. Critical media literacy is essential to advancing literacy instruction to navigate hegemonic discourses, construction of positive identities, and the transformation of social inequalities.

Doing the Work

I think the importance of doing activist work is precisely because it allows you to give back and to consider yourself not as a single individual who may have achieved whatever but to be a part of an ongoing historical movement.

—Angela Davis

In the 1800s, Maria Stewart advocated, among other things, for representation inclusive of Black people, specifically African American women. In the movements since Maria Stewart’s activism, Black girls and women are doing the work. They are the ones who instigate. Who push. Who resist. Who organize. Who stand up when others cannot or will not. Black women and girls today continue the activist practices by critiquing and repurposing media. In the current sociopolitical climate, I argue that in school contexts,

we should educate Black girls to be a part of the historical movement to keep social justice work moving through critical media literacy practices. Through their pens, minds, revolutionary pursuits, and activist spirits, Black women have always been a part of and have led movements in the United States to bring about justice for all. In this way, Black women's literary histories serve as a useful roadmap for understanding and applying critical media literacy practices for activism in English classrooms. Teaching can be an act of activism, and through our teaching we can encourage and empower our students to become youth activists, taking up issues that are important to them and that are in need of transformation. Critical media literacy is a transformative pedagogy that will enable us to produce critical thinkers who pursue individual and collective good. We know youth are learning from multiple media sources, so we have to be diligent in influencing what they learn from those media. Whether or not teachers introduce or acknowledge media in their classroom, it finds itself in classrooms and youth find themselves socialized through their engagement with it.

Educators can use education as a site of transformation by being deliberate and intentional in their instruction to empower students to be conduits of social change. We can do this by connecting youth to the rich cultural histories they are a part of. Black women's historical activism is an impetus for critical media literacy for social activism today. The roles of Black women throughout history have helped to make society better for all people, and through critical interrogation for deeper understanding of multiple oppressions and counternarrating racist, sexist, and classist media narratives with stories of multidimensionality of Black girlhood, Black girls can continue the fight.

Endnotes

1. In October 2015, a Black University of Missouri student went on a hunger strike calling for the university president to resign based on racial incidents and tensions on campus that the university administration was not taking action against. As tensions mounted, students began nonviolent protests and a #ConcernedStudent1950 hashtag campaign, using social media as a platform to inform others of the racial experiences students were encountering. Eventually, the Black University of Missouri football players decided to stand in solidarity and not play until the president resigned. On November 9, 2015, the university president resigned.

2. The weekly theme is illuminated through visual examples during "sister spark."

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