

Why Black Girls' Literacies Matter: New Literacies for a New Era

On December 9, 2015, Lanasia M., Janell J., Aichatou N., and Fatou S., four Black female high school students from the Urban Assembly School for Applied Math and Science in the Bronx, New York, facilitated a Racial Literacy Roundtable (RLR) at Teachers College, Columbia University on the topic of racism against Black girls in schools and society. With more than 80 attendees present—teachers, academics, social workers, graduate students, and fellow high school students—these young women posed the question, “What does it mean to be young, Black, and female in America?” as their topic for discussion. Customary to the facilitation of an RLR, the presenters read aloud a letter specifically prepared for the event. The letter offered commentary on their experiences with the topic presented for discussion and was in keeping with a historical literary tradition of Black women writers (Sterling, 1984). The following is an excerpt from the girls’ December 9 letter, which poignantly underscores the need for this special issue on Black girls’ literacies and informs English educators on who they are, how they perceive themselves to be, and the importance of considering the texts we ask Black girls to read and write about in classrooms:

Welcome Friends, Family, Peers and Mentors,

We gather you here today to discuss something that holds much relevance to our lives in a multiracial society. Even though some of us [in the audience] are not actually women of color, it is imperative to notice and address our struggles in order to create a more equitable world. The four of us ask you today, *what does it mean to be young, Black and female in America?* The intersection of these three identities is unique. In some of our classes at the Urban Assembly School for Applied Math and Science, the books that we have read are largely focused around the themes of race and gender.

This has had a huge influence on our personal values and has added to our passion about the topic. Analyzing these texts and these people's stories have made us re-evaluate every aspect of our lives as women of color and taught us to be more concerned with our own issues. It helped us recognize our own responsibility to others to share our life experiences so that young Black women can be seen as powerful figures of change rather than victims of the oppressor.

A general search of the term "Black girls" on the Internet yields a variety of results that show both positive and negative depictions of this group. There are some empowering sites such as blackgirlsrock.com, that show the more recent efforts of activists such as ourselves to uplift the image of young Black women. And yet, it's not enough. Even these efforts are often shut down by the "angry Black woman" myth. Other websites, such as YouTube respond to this Google search with offensive videos. Our major news trends also subscribe to such prejudicial views of young Black women. In fact, the first five sites that we come up with either objectify or generalize Black girls, and diminish them to their mere parts. This is both shameful and sad.

In their letter and subsequently in their presentation, the facilitators shared trends and statistics about the challenges to an equitable education for Black girls. The RLR discussion included the topics of negative media portrayal of Black girls as well as the belief that Black girls are loud, unmanageable, exotic, uneducated, anti-intellectual, "ghetto," and, eventually, headed for prison (Morris, 2007). If English educators are to teach Black girls in the most excellent of ways, they must understand the liminal space in which society positions Black girls. The attention to their humanity is vital and illustrates the ways they engage in literacy practices; thus, the English classroom becomes a critical site for a (re)humanizing pedagogy.

A New Era of Violence: Current Contexts for Black Girls

The brutality against Black girls has a long and deep history in the United States. Dating back centuries to the sanctioned system of slavery that began in 1619, acts of violence against Black female bodies, including death at the hands of slave traders, were a common occurrence. The historical research of Berry (2010), Gray White (1999), and Hartman (1997), among others, details the brutality Black girls and women experienced under the system of chattel slavery. Varying degrees of inhumane treatment experienced by Black girls have continued throughout history; however, in recent times, there has been a heightened attack on them, particularly in schools. For example, in 2014, a 12-year-old girl faced expulsion and criminal charges after writing "hi" on a locker-room wall of her Georgia middle school. In the same year in Detroit,

an honors student was suspended for her entire senior year for accidentally bringing a pocketknife to a football game. One year before, an 8-year-old girl in Illinois was arrested for acting out, and in Alabama, a 16-year-old girl who suffers from diabetes, asthma, and sleep apnea was hit with a book by her teacher after she fell asleep in class. The student was later arrested and hospitalized because of injuries she sustained in her interaction with the police. Also in 2013, a 12-year-old girl was threatened with expulsion from an Orlando private school unless she changed the look of her natural hair. These are a few of the numerous examples mentioned in *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected* (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015), a report based on interviews with young women and girls in New York and Boston.

One of the most violent attacks on a Black female student by a school official caught on camera occurred on October 26, 2015. On the same day that the Obama administration and the Council of the Great City Schools announced that the decades-old emphasis of standardized testing in public schools had not been effective and was “potentially harmful,” the world witnessed a South Carolina police officer body slam a 16-year-old Black girl and fling her across a classroom at Spring Valley High School in Columbia, South Carolina. When the Spring Valley incident occurred, academics took to social media to express their shock, dismay, and disdain about the incident. A Facebook post by Monique Lane (2015), an educational researcher whose work centers on Black girls, called for her fellow academics and others to take a stand in interrupting the violence Black girls face in schools:

The #springvalleyhigh video reflects the continued efficacy of the political control over Black women’s bodies and gender expression. It reifies our fear. It encourages young Black girls to trust no one. It reminds us that we cannot count on other folks to have our backs. Not our peers. And sadly, not even our teachers. So, what now?! Thanks to social media, I’ve read my fair share of folks’ melancholy musings regarding the fate of our nation. How many videos will it take for us to center Black women and girls in our analyses and reform efforts against state-sanctioned violence and the school to prison pipeline? When will we engage an intersectional racial justice agenda that includes the dimensionality of the Black female experience?

I challenge you as I am challenging myself. It’s time to #riseup!

This recent increased violence against Black bodies, including Black girls, has led to the formation of two highly visible anti-brutality movements. #BlackLivesMatter, an international activist movement, was cofounded by three Black female community organizers, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors,

and Opal Tometi. The movement began in 2013 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin. Kimberlé Crenshaw's #SayHerName hashtag campaign, a racial justice movement started in 2014, specifically targets cases of police brutality and anti-Black violence against Black women in the United States. Given the current state of brutality against Black women and girls across the nation coupled with negative representations projected on their lives, the timeliness of this special issue is significant and of grave moral concern.

Today's Educational Climate for Black Girls

Reports by influential organizations such as the African American Policy Institute, Colorlines, the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, among many others, account for the "state of the union" for Black women and girls in our schools and society. The statistics in these reports are horrifying and should move fellow citizens of Black women and girls (especially educators) to take action against these harsh realities. For example, it should concern us all that 12 percent of Black girls in pre-kindergarten through 12th grade received an out-of-school suspension during the 2011–12 school year (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015). In that same year in New York City, for example, 90 percent of all the girls subjected to expulsion were Black. No White girls were expelled. When Black girls attend schools like Spring Valley where zero tolerance is the order of the day and discipline is prioritized over academic learning (Casella, 2005), suspension is normalized.

As fellow citizens of Black girls, and as educators in particular, we should be disturbed by the fact that Black girls' suspension rate is six times higher than their White female counterparts. Educators in all schools across the nation should be concerned that Black girls are *three times more likely* to attend schools that don't offer the full range of college preparatory courses, and where most teachers fail to meet all state requirements for certification or licensures (Campbell & DeWeever, 2014). Researchers, many of whom are mentioned in the literature review of this special issue, are clear that race is the primary reason for these disparities. As with Black boys, Black girls are being educated during an age of mass incarceration, zero-tolerance policies, and harsh treatment by security officers and other school personnel. All of these conditions directly affect their chances for academic and social success in school.

The academic and social success, and overall well-being, of Black girls in school contexts cannot be achieved without their teachers and those

researchers who produce data to help inform educators and policymakers. Black girls need and deserve an education that prepares them to be successful in life, and we know that college is a strong predictor for creating opportunities in life and for social advancement. Well-funded federal, state, and local initiatives that respond to the factors that create and contribute to the substandard education of Black girls are urgently needed. There must be a commitment to eliminating the barriers to Black girls' academic and social success by mandating that school districts create new opportunities and promote a college-going culture in their schools with state and local accountability measures in place. A commitment to restructuring the way we engage with Black girls in our classrooms, and maintaining accountability—as teachers and as members of school communities—is essential for their success.

This history and the current sociopolitical landscape calls for educators and researchers to ask, *What does it mean to be teachers and educators in the reawakening of racial violence against Black people, and in particular, Black women and girls?* With a continued proliferation of deficit-based research that continues to reveal a “separate and unequal” school system for Black girls and their induction into a national school-to-prison pipeline (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015; Losen, Martinez, & Gillespie, 2012; Morris, 2012; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008), it is critical for educators to lead the charge to both understand that these inequalities exist and to create strategies and actions to interrupt them. English and literacy educators are in a unique position to interrupt the violence, pedagogical injustices, and misrepresentations against Black girls in schools. The tools we have at our disposal (writing, visual arts, spoken word, and other modalities more readily accepted in English and literacy classrooms) provide an outlet to discuss, critique, and dismantle this violence. We hope that the readers of this special issue will gain a fuller vision of the role of English and literacy educators in the work to undo educational wrongs against Black girls and women, and to create inclusive spaces that acknowledge the legitimacy and value of a literacies framework that speaks to the experiences and current conditions of the Black girls we are charged to educate.

Why Black Girls' Literacies Matter: Literacies for a New Era

Some readers may ask, Why a themed issue dedicated to the literacy education of Black girls? To that we answer, *Why not?* We now must be urgent in interrogating hegemonic systems, English education practices, and educational policy to ask how we can experience a shift in the way we teach, talk

about, and represent Black girls in school and society. In this way, English education becomes a site of possibility and disruption—a space to begin to ask these questions and respond. Instructional practice needs to become space for resistance and for the educational excellence of Black girls.

Instruction must be urgent and purposeful in responding to and anticipating the social context of our times. Applying a Black Girls' Literacies Framework (presented in the literature review by Muhammad and Haddix in this issue) to the multiple texts we invite into our classrooms and to the lens we bring to research that reports on Black girls can break the silence on the issues that work against Black girls' social and academic success. Through our curriculum choices, we have the power to change the way Black girls are talked about, by first investigating their reality. We first must see why what happens to Black girls outside of school relates to their in-school experiences, and why all of this matters to us in English education. Here are a few ways English and literacy educators can begin to think about our responsibility and potential action steps:

- 1.** Take stock of what we are doing for and with Black girls, and what still needs to be done in our school communities to support them socially and academically.
- 2.** Adopt a Black Girls' Literacies Framework approach in the classroom. This framework allows Black girls to draw on their critical literacies skills by reading and writing about their individual and collective experiences of being a Black girl in today's context.
- 3.** Realize the power of social media and their engagement with it. Black girls are taking to social media to self-define and reclaim their identities. We can envision the use of digital tools and literacies to support the intellectual activities of our Black female students.
- 4.** Connect our work to the movements for social change and transformation—it is our social responsibility to do so.

The authors of this themed issue are scholars of a newly formed group: Black Girls' Literacies Collective (BGLC). We are five scholars at four different universities in the United States who have been meeting at conferences for several years. Our work is centered on the educational experiences of Black children. We each bring wide and varied experiences in education as educators, disrupters, school administrators, school board members, and community-engaged scholars. In addition, we each facilitate ongoing literacy collectives to advance the literacy development of Black girls. As a

collective, we seek to sustain the conversation on Black girls in the scholarly literature, building on the work of other scholars who conduct research and write with and about Black girls.

This themed issue was written in the spirit of disrupting the stereotypical narratives that seek to define Black girls, and to break the silence on their mistreatment. In the first article, “Centering Black Girls’ Literacies: A Review of Literature on the Multiple Ways of Knowing of Black Girls,” **Muhammad and Haddix** provide a review of literature of Black girls’ literacies by examining historical, theoretical, and empirical scholarship conducted across the past several decades. The literature reviewed transgresses multiple literacies and includes a synthesis of research in the areas of reading, writing, language, and cultural studies. These literatures are organized into themes that help to illustrate the pedagogies for English and literacy educators of Black girls in and outside of classrooms. The authors provide implications for literacy practice, policy, and research that center Black girls’ ways of knowing and suggest a Black Girls’ Literacies Framework for teaching and teacher education.

In the next article, “Developing Curriculum to Support Black Girls’ Literacies in Digital Spaces,” **Price-Dennis** discusses the phenomenon of how teacher educators, literacy scholars, and classroom teachers are beginning to develop curricula that leverage digital literacy practices to help elementary students process content and demonstrate their knowledge construction across modalities. Given the significant participation and savvy digital literacy practices that Black girls and women take up across social media platforms to address issues of identity, achievement, safety, self-expression, and social justice (#SayHerName; #BlackGirlMagic; #BlackLivesMatter), Price-Dennis’s study seeks to better understand how elementary classroom teachers can support the development of Black girls’ literacies in digital spaces. Following, in her article “Black Girls and Critical Media Literacy for Social Activism,” **McArthur** encourages educators to utilize critical media literacy in their classrooms for social activism to teach youth, specifically Black girls, how to push back, speak out, and advocate for social change against the negative messages they receive about their lives.

In the final section of this issue, the authors present a Provocateur Piece that is inspired by their virtual “kitchen table talk,” their regular virtual hangouts and conference calls to discuss pertinent issues to their collective work on Black girls’ literacies. Each member of the collective is doing community-engaged and/or classroom-based work with Black girls, initiatives that are described with more detail in McArthur’s article. In our work, we draw on each other’s experiences to identify effective practices

and to assert knowledge claims about Black girls' ways of knowing and being. We present "an open letter to our young sistas" that offers a sisterly response to the young women who offered their letter to the RLR attendees on December 9, 2015. Our letter seeks to contribute to a fuller vision for the literacy education of Black girls. This creative contribution represents the collaborative and dialogic project from us as Black women English and literacy educators, all deeply committed to ensuring that the needs and interests of Black girls are central in the agenda to advance English education for them and for all students.

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