Counter-Storytelling vs. Deficit Thinking around African American Children and Families, Digital Literacies, Race, and the Digital Divide

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This article examines the ways African American children and their parents “story” themselves in relation to digital literacies, race, and the digital divide. Drawing from two interconnected qualitative, ethnographic research case studies about African American children’s and parents’ digital literacy practices, and using counter-storytelling as a theoretical framework and methodological tool, the authors share narratives that resist common deficit perceptions about these populations. Exploring counter-storytelling as a method, the authors asked: In what ways did two African American children and one parent “story” themselves or use counter-stories to talk about digital literacies, race, and the digital divide? This article refutes claims that the digital divide is a normalcy for African American families, and delivers new insights relevant to the fields of English education and literacy research. It directs researchers’ and teacher educators’ attention to how participants and students from minoritized communities “story” their experiences, and is designed to spark courageous and rigorous conversations that support African American children’s and parents’ digital literacy narratives.

Introduction

Today’s digital technologies are changing the ways families communicate and learn, both within and outside academic sectors (Hawisher, Selfe, Moraski, & Pearson, 2004; Lewis, 2011, 2013). Such technologies have also been significant in the “formation of racial identity in America,” and yet, narratives about race and digital literacies among African American families have been overlooked, and deficit views about this group continue to dominate national perceptions (Sinclair, 2004, p. 3). Digital literacies, which are defined as multiple and interactive practices mediated by technological tools (e.g., computers, cell phones, and video games), and which include reading, writing, language, and exchanging information in online environments, are vital to African American children and their families (Lewis, 2013). These literacies help guide the ways families engage in these practices, and digital tools allow them to produce, interpret, and create meaning in their lives and relationships.
In this article, we argue that teachers and researchers must (re)consider the ways African American families’ lives and stories are perceived in the digital world, and must approach issues of race and digital literacies in ways that honor these narratives rather than marginalizing them. We begin with a discussion about how African American children’s and parents’ experiences with digital literacies are not readily understood in the literacy field, especially among those who know little about these individuals’ rich ethnocultural histories (Lewis, 2014; Lewis Ellison, 2017c; Milner, 2007; Tatum, 2001). However, African American children’s and parents’ counter-stories are significant to our understanding of the rise of digital literacies and tools, as well as the increase of racialized discourses currently represented on social and digital media. In this comparative case study, we share counter-stories of one African American mother and two African American children. We highlight the similarities, differences, and patterns of their counter-stories; how they spoke about their experiences with access to digital tools; and how they countered the common ideas of the digital divide. In addition, we address literature that has contributed to our understanding of this topic, and explore how the conceptualizations of the digital divide are represented in the digital era. Finally, we embrace counter-stories beyond the digital divide, arguing that teachers and researchers must consider the ways qualitative methods are used when studying populations of color. We bring awareness to teachers and researchers about counter-stories from African American populations that illustrate why equitable access to digital technologies within and outside schools is necessary to resist racial and technological oppression.

Counter-Storytelling

Counter-storytelling is defined by critical race theorists as a method of storytelling that “aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 144). It is also used to expose and critique normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). In essence, counter-stories (a) bring attention to the perspectives of marginalized and silenced voices; (b) stand in opposition to dominant stories of privilege; and (c) resist and challenge opposition, racism, and classism, thus working toward the goal of social justice (Lewis Ellison, 2017c; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

For African American children and parents, counter-stories mean that their stories are no longer silenced by the assumptions of others; rather, their stories are used to examine other ways of knowing and understanding (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Lewis Ellison, 2017c). In this article, we highlight how these stories serve as entry points to unlock the ways African American children and families attempt to move toward a post-digital-divide era and resist dominant narratives about their practices. It is important to note that storytelling in the African American community has been salient for centuries, during which many voices have been heard and celebrated (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Heath, 1983; Moss, 1990). Thus, we understand that counter-stories are a pivotal part of today’s research methods.
We use Solórzano and Yosso’s (2002) framework of *counter-storytelling* as a method of telling “the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” (p. 26). We chose counter-storytelling because, on numerous occasions, we have been asked about the specific ways in which we conduct research on digital literacies for and about African American children, adolescents, and families. We have found pertinent information on how they engage in practices that stimulate their learning and foster agency, but we also found that when we sat down with each participant, the narratives they told about themselves provided more insight about their cultural, digital, and racial selves than the digital practice itself.

Based on past research that was detrimental, deceptive, and oftentimes deadly (e.g., the Tuskegee syphilis study and Henrietta Lacks’s cell harvesting), some populations may be skeptical of researchers who do not look like them. Since we are both African Americans, we gained privileged information that might not have been divulged to researchers from different ethnicities (Agyeman, 2008; Bell, 1996; Rosenthal, 1966; Russell, 1996). In addition, we were “woke” (Patel, 2018): we were well aware of the stereotypes, racial biases, and labeling that other researchers might have missed or ignored. Some have debated whether researchers should share the races and cultures of their participants in order to eliminate “unseen dangers” like these, which can remain hidden in the research process (Milner, 2007). Others have argued that researchers need to garner as much cultural knowledge about their subjects as possible in order to eliminate deficit and single-storied perceptions about participants’ racialized and cultural consciousness (Tatum, 2001). As cultural insiders, we considered ourselves more suitable gatherers of this information than researchers who did not share our subjectivities or personal investments in understanding our subjects (Lewis Ellison, Nogueron-Liu, & Solomon, 2016; Milner, 2007; Villenas, 1996).

As a theoretical framework and methodology, counter-storytelling is also significant to consideration of the methods that are underutilized by researchers who have not yet explored narratives from marginalized groups. Historical accounts of privileged literacies are often received through majoritarian narratives of racism, ignorance, and resistance (Fine, 2016). Counter-storytelling, on the other hand, can be used as a methodological and pedagogical tool, allowing participants’ voices, experiences, and stories to be heard independently of the majoritarian voice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Researchers have the choice to approach everyone’s counter-stories as dominant narratives, thus challenging uncontested supremacies.

**Race, Digital Literacies, and Counter-Stories among Families: A Literature Review**

The ways in which African American children and their parents story themselves and make meaning in and around digital literacy practices remains underexplored in English education (Lewis Ellison, 2016; Lewis Ellison & Wang, 2018; Solomon, 2012). In fact, research has yet to discuss how the counter-stories of African American children and their parents speak to the richness of their digital lives and the intricacies of their identity formation (Lewis Ellison, 2014b, 2017a). However, some
research has raised awareness about how parents and children access digital tools in the home, develop literacy skills when online, and find new ways to interact in complex literacy practices through digital technologies (Ba, Tally, & Tsikalas, 2002; Lewis, 2013; Lewis Ellison & Toliver, 2018; Lewis Ellison & Wang, 2018). Research has also revealed how counter-stories shed light on matters of race and digital literacies among African American and Latinx parents, researchers, and students (Lewis Ellison et al., 2016). For instance, it has highlighted one African American mother’s account of her own traumatic narratives through her use of digital tools (Lewis Ellison, 2014a), and discussed African American women’s counter-stories about how digital tools embodied their identities as mothers and young female rappers or emcees (Lewis Ellison & Kirkland, 2014). These studies identified that: (a) some African American families do have access to and engage with digital technologies in their homes; (b) among African Americans and their families, the creation of digital tools and literacies is just as important as the consumption thereof; and (c) cultural assumptions and stereotypes about African American children and their families tend to dismiss such findings.

These studies also revealed substantial data about how parents provide access to digital tools to their children, and how they control children’s use of these tools in the home. Additional research has examined how non-White students’ counter-stories illustrate their use of digital tools as a way to grapple with race and identity structures both inside and beyond educational contexts (Rolon-Dow, 2011). For example, Vasudevan’s (2006) work focused on the ways an African American adolescent male’s multimodal practices of digital storytelling and counter-storytelling explored his engagement with digital technologies and visual texts.

Other literature acknowledges the emergence of counter-narratives around these populations in teacher education and settings in and across English education fields. Rogers and Brefeld (2015) identified the counter-narratives of 31 African American parents as they related to their children’s literacy development and involvement in schools. The authors sought to explore how the parents’ counter-narratives were instrumental in transforming their children’s educational practices. Other studies have described how African American parents’ counter-narratives illuminated their children’s “racialized nature of spaces” in schools (Greene, 2013, p. 35); how African American urban mothers’ counter-stories about Common Core State Standards and quality teaching created deeper dialogues about their children’s educational outcomes (Lewis Ellison, 2017c); how African American children’s counter-stories about children’s literature concerning race in the classroom challenged the “stock stories” (Bell, 2010; Delgado, 1989) from majoritarian narratives in school curricula (Kelly, 2017); and how Mexican American/Latinx bilingual teachers’ counter-stories about their own education, families, and communities helped them draw conclusions about their teaching experiences, language ideologies, and perceptions about Latinx communities (Caldas, 2017). Smith (2016) explored counter-stories about African American eighth graders’ issues with race, gender, and obesity. Kinloch, Burkhard, and Penn (2017) examined the ways high school Black males used counter-narratives and digital literacies to challenge racial
stereotypes and create digital businesses. These findings suggest a continued need to use counter-stories as a foundational tool to connect to parents, teachers, and students both within and outside school contexts, and for researchers to provide a critical mass to aggregate their work for greater impact.

Nevertheless, it is important to note the shortage of literature related to issues concerning the counter-stories of diverse parents and their children about digital literacies, race, and the digital divide. While scholars such as Mills and Godley (2018) have studied contributions of counter-narratives that examined challenges to racism in multimodal and digital literacy research and practice, their findings have not focused specifically on African American children and families. Other research has emerged to identify the ways children and families experience technologies together (Chaudron, 2015; McPake, Plowman, & Stephen, 2013; O’Hara, 2011), as well as these parents’ perceptions of their children’s engagement with digital media in the home (Kucirkova, Littleton, & Kyparissiadis, 2018), but this work has focused on populations outside the United States. Livingstone and Helsper (2007) addressed the digital divide among children and adolescents, analyzing differences in digital technology use between socioeconomic populations, ages, and genders. Research has also investigated the ways teachers from the United States and other countries have negotiated issues of digital access, resources, and connectivity (Stornaiuolo & LeBlanc, 2016).

Drawing on Black feminist thought as a framework to self-actualize, affirm, and value African American women, mothers, and adolescent girls, Lewis Ellison (2018) has argued against the marginalization of African American populations, instead positioning them as “knowledgeable agents of the digital” (p. 88), whose experiences empowered them within digital and nondigital contexts. While these studies point to a few scholars of color who highlight the perspectives of African American families, adults, and children concerning race, digital literacies, and counter-stories, they demonstrate not only the lack of literature around this topic, but also the significance of sharing the exploration of these counter-stories.

What Is the Digital Divide and Why Is It Always Associated with Children/Families of Color?

In the late 1990s, a debate emerged about the technological “haves” and “have nots” of Internet access (US Department of Commerce, National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1995). The term digital divide implies strict binaries between those who are educated and uneducated, rich and poor—particularly for unrepresented diverse populations, geographies, and languages. Norris (2001) describes the digital divide as “shorthand for any and every disparity within the online community” (p. 4), and it is a disparity marked by three components: the global divide, the social divide, and the democratic divide. The global divide exists due to the uneven economic development of Internet access among various countries, which causes some to fall behind in education, tourism, labor, and democracy. It perpetuates the “Matthew effect” (Stanovich, 1986) of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, a principle of economic inequality based on Karl Marx’s
Law of Increasing Poverty (Marx, 1995) and New Testament scripture (Matthew 25:29). For example, in 2014, 19% of Africa’s population were Internet users, compared with 75% of Europeans (International Telecommunication Union, 2014).

The social divide refers to differences between the information the rich and poor receive within various nations or social groups. The democratic divide separates those who do and do not use Internet resources to engage in political processes. For instance, in countries with a higher distribution of power and influence in political systems, individuals use Internet access to participate in direct democracy and civic engagement (e.g., political chat rooms, online voter registration). These notions of the digital divide reveal the consequences of a digitally inequitable world and how access plays a major role in an individual’s agency and power.

When we think about access we are challenged by an ongoing historical debate concerning race and technology (Banks, 2006; Selfe, 1999). Even Google searches can represent perceived difference in access. For instance, when we entered “digital divide and boys and girls” into the Google search engine, we discovered multiple images of what the digital divide was “supposed” to look like. A majority of photos displayed individuals who appeared to be African American, Latinx, and/or international students, mostly young girls. This “data discrimination” or selective filtering of data from the Internet by service providers is a widespread, but underanalyzed, concern. These biases, based on search algorithms on digital platforms, tend to privilege Whiteness and marginalize and oppress people of color, in particular women of color (Noble, 2018). Noble argues that some digital platforms choose to “amplify certain voices and silence other voices” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRVZozEEWIE), thus reinforcing deficiency framing of African American children and technology in Google searches.

Additionally, those who are writing Internet-based news stories and reports also reveal a continuation of deficit thinking. When we googled “digital access,” we saw a range of Internet-based articles or news stories that displayed images of White kids having access to the Internet. We even saw terms such as a digital world and digital citizenship (a way of being online in responsible and appropriate ways). These platforms are consciously and unconsciously creating different narratives, showing billions of individuals what Internet access looks like, who has it, who does not, and how companies and organizations should market their information.

While some have said the digital divide is not about race but economics, they still perceive Whites as generally rich, and African Americans and other populations of color as poor. However, in its first demographic portrait of “African Americans and Technology Use” in the United States, the Pew Research Center’s Internet Project (Smith, 2014) reported that African Americans (including men and women, the young and old, parents and nonparents, and low- and middle-income families) showed significant strides in their use of digital tools compared with their White counterparts (with 87% of Whites and 80% of African Americans as Internet users). These findings indicate that African Americans and their families have histories of technology use and relevant digital literacy practices, and are slowly moving beyond a digital-divide era. In short, African Americans are indeed gaining access to and engaging with digital tools and related practices.
Methods

The data in this article represent a culmination of years of research and publications across various studies of the digital literacy practices of African American children and their parents. Here we share portions of two separate studies that identified participants’ access to and engagement with digital tools in low- and middle-income households. The participant families we studied were sometimes financially challenged, but still cognizant of the need for the Internet and other digital tools in the home for educational, occupational, and leisure use (Lewis, 2013, 2014; Lewis Ellison, 2016; Lewis Ellison et al., 2016; Lewis Ellison & Solomon, 2018; Lewis Ellison & Wang, 2018; Solomon, 2012). To understand how two African American children and one parent discussed digital literacies, race, and the digital divide, we used counter-stories as methodological and pedagogical tools to share their digital literacy experiences, which resisted majoritarian narratives about the digital divide. In this comparative case study (Yin, 1989), we carefully selected participants who exemplified common problems and concerns about traditional definitions of the digital divide and access. For instance, the counter-stories below speak against traditional definitions that have perpetuated incorrect, discriminatory, and deficit-view perspectives of what African Americans are capable of digitally producing.

Context of the Studies and Participant Selection

Study I

Lewis Ellison’s data represent counter-stories taken from a qualitative case study conducted with one African American mother and son from 2014 to 2015. Lewis Ellison met 36-year-old Chant in 2010 at an urban university in the southern United States, where Chant was a professor. Chant spent over five hours daily on some form of digital tool (i.e., cell phone, iPad, video games), and often used them during her instruction of undergraduate and graduate students. Chant and her 9-year-old son, Rem, participated in Lewis Ellison’s Dig-A-Fam: Families’ Digital Storytelling Project, in which Lewis Ellison created three 90-minute digital storytelling workshops that allowed five African American mothers and their children to create digital stories at a computer lab, church, and home.

Lewis Ellison recruited potential families from her former university and from churches in her community in Spring 2014. Participants were asked to complete a 14-item, open-ended questionnaire, which asked questions related to the family’s access to the Internet and digital tools, their engagement with their children’s (non) digital practices in the home, and their interest in creating a digital story with their children. Lewis Ellison chose Chant’s counter-stories based on her pre- and post-interview responses, which detailed her access to digital technologies in and out of school settings, and the effect such access had on: (a) the communities in which African American parents and their children lived; (b) the children’s interactions with their peers; and (c) personal stories about themselves and their cultures that were either portrayed or silenced in research and beyond.
Study II
Solomon’s case study is pulled from data collected over five months with a group of African American first graders during “center time” at an elementary school in a large, urban district in the southwestern United States. The children were drawn from five first-grade classrooms as part of a research project on African American children and digital storytelling practices. Solomon was a teacher at the school for 14 years, and chose to conduct research at a school with which she was familiar, and one where she knew the available technology resources, the teachers’ and parents’ willingness to participate, and the student population’s amount of exposure to digital tools during the school day. At that time, approximately 6% of the school’s population was African American. Therefore, the participant selection process was a matter of who among the small pool of African American children would be interested. The call for participation was distributed to eight first graders, and all eight children returned the parental permission slip indicating that they and their parents were willing to participate in the study.

The research setting was the school’s computer lab, down the hall from the first-grade wing. The research group met twice weekly for 30 minutes each session for four months, with more frequent meetings toward the end of the study, which allowed students to finish their final projects. The children’s tasks included writing time at the computer and a computer author’s chair time, modeled after a structure suggested by Labbo (2004). While the methodological focus of the original study was not specifically counter-stories, Solomon combed the collected data and identified places where the 6-year-olds asserted their digital identities as separate from common tropes. The students’ counter-stories are taken from their pre- and post-study interviews, as well as from the transcribed digital stories.

Data Collection and Analysis
Study I
During 2014 and 2015, Lewis Ellison and her graduate research assistant worked together on portions of the data. They engaged in two audiotaped participant pre- and post-interviews about participants’ digital and nondigital lives, based on three 90-minute workshops, video-taped observations of the digital workshops, and a video of participants’ creations of digital stories at home. Interviews were conducted either at a university office or at the participants’ home, and lasted 30 minutes with Rem and over 120 minutes with Chant. During the digital storytelling workshops, Lewis Ellison observed the participants’ engagement with their children and acted as both a researcher-participant and an observer-participant. She gathered rich data from her interactions with Chant and Rem (e.g., explaining the components of creating a digital story; showing examples of a digital story; and inviting participation in family and group conversation circles, in which the mothers and their children worked together and then in a group session with everyone) (Lewis Ellison, 2017b; Lewis Ellison & Wang, 2018). While Chant did not use the phrase digital divide, her interviews did suggest that components of her access to digital tools within and outside her home countered extant research about African American families.
Audio-recorded interviews were analyzed using thematic coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to capture how Chant storied herself concerning digital literacies, race, and evidence of the digital divide. Lewis Ellison and her GRA also applied code names to segments of text within the pre- and post-interview transcriptions. Created codes concerning resistance included affective roles, attempting agency, voice, and restricted.

During Lewis Ellison's first interview with Chant, Chant shared concerns about technology access in an urban Black community, or, as they both coined it: “being digital while Black” (a variation of a highly popularized phrase, “Driving while Black” and most recently “Living while Black”). Their conversations turned into in-depth discussions about race, digital literacies, and the digital divide. Chant also related her own experiences with critical race theory, which allowed for further discussion about counter-storytelling and the above topics. The data yielded codes that formed themes and patterns that aligned with the research question, In what ways did the digital literacy and story-making practices of an African American family dyad (mother/son) display evidence of agency in the context of a family-focused digital storytelling activity? and ultimately resulted in three sets of codes: technological access, race, and narratives. Certain themes attracted Lewis Ellison's attention regarding technological access (e.g., equal access, community, and digital inequality in your community). Themes that emerged from the data around race included ethnic/racial dynamics, racism, and institutional racism. Lastly, themes that illustrated characteristics of Chant’s narratives included phrases such as we are silenced because our voices don’t count, silent voices in dialogues, and giving voice. Lewis Ellison member checked with Chant for accuracy, and confirmed the credibility of the reported information (Guba & Lincoln, 2001; Lewis Ellison & Wang, 2018).

Study II
Solomon chose to engage in a naturalistic inquiry (Patton, 1990), where real-world situations were observed as they naturally unfolded. The main research question was focused on discovering what would happen if first graders had the opportunity to use digital tools in their own storytelling. This work was inspired by Dyson’s (2003) work with first-grade writers. Data sources included field notes taken during the sessions with the students; parent and teacher surveys; participant interviews; participant member checks; video and audio recordings; collection and transcription of artifacts; and the digital stories created during the project.

Solomon's data were analyzed using the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which involves the process of analyzing relationships within the data and drawing conclusions. It is a method of analysis often used to gain grounded theory, or theory derived inductively from research data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Solomon analyzed her participants’ stories both in their digital form and in transcribed text. Solomon first employed a within-case analysis by creating summaries of each participant that brought together data from myriad sources collected throughout the study. She then employed cross-case analysis (Merriam, 1998) to identify larger themes and patterns across participants. She replayed the
digital stories several times and reread the transcriptions, adding notes in the margins. Solomon also created a private blog as a space to record thoughts and connections as they occurred to her. Eventually, patterns emerged that could be organized into themes, such as the first graders’ attention to audience (Solomon, 2012), their use of African American Language patterns to add entertainment value to their recorded stories (Ball, 1999), and the categories of digital texts they created. These data, including digital story texts, interviews, and member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), were reexamined with a counter-storytelling lens. In their own way, these African American first graders countered common stereotypes about the digital divide and asserted their own identities during purposeful digital play (Lewis Ellison & Solomon, 2018).

Eight African American first-grade boys and girls participated in Solomon’s digital storytelling research project. Seven of the eight families reported on parent surveys that there was an available computer in the home for the children. Interestingly, the differences between the participants in terms of their interest and ability on the computer did not track along SES lines, but instead along gender lines—a different manifestation of the digital divide. For instance, the boys, most of whom frequently played computer games at home, easily transferred their familiarity to using digital tools to create stories. However, the girls’ parents reported that the girls were less enthusiastic about using the home computer. Instead, they occasionally played on free learning websites like Starfall (www.starfall.com) or chose not to use the computer at all.

Since most of the boys had more experience playing on the computer, they were more likely to play and experiment with digital creation software. They would test out each menu item: stamps, paint cans, spray cans, mirroring, and gradient tools. They also constructed elaborate backgrounds made from their experimentation, then superimposed their stories on top of their creations.

The girls were more likely to use the mouse as an awkward crayon and draw, taking a screen as canvas stance (Labbo, 1996). The girls created clouds, suns, flowers, and people to populate the stories. Interestingly, however, in one session, the girls were as experimental with the digital tools as the boys were. Three of the girls sat in a row and worked together, shouting across to each other to try different tools, and exclaiming about the different effects. The children you will read about in this article, Penny and Jordan, are two of the four girls who participated in this study.

Findings: Counter-Stories among an African American Parent and Two Children

Our data, which include interviews and digital story transcripts from two separate case studies of an African American parent and children, provide insight into their counter-stories that challenges perceptions of the digital divide and access. As we draw on counter-storytelling as a framework for these studies, we also acknowledge Banks’s (2006) notion of access (e.g., material access, functional access, experiential access, critical access, and transformative access—see Figure 1). He acknowledges how race and racism are factors in understanding what technology access among African Americans and the American society can and should mean.
In this section, we introduce a parent (Chant) and first graders (Penny and Jordan) who existed on the “other side” of the digital divide. Chant was concerned about the silencing of the African American voice, and how inequities across communities limit people in her demographic. Penny and Jordan, on the other hand, were young children who did not pontificate about race, the digital divide, or the vital importance of being able to tell their own stories. Instead, they illustrated counter-stories within discussions about sharing their stories with their families, and within the texts of those stories themselves. As young children, their attempts to counter cultural stories about themselves were more subtle than adult conversation, yet are vital to this discussion.

**Chant: A Counter-Story of Access and Marginalization**

During Lewis Ellison’s interview with Chant, Chant argued that, in order for African American families to have any kind of technological access, they must first be part of the conversation. During this interview, Lewis Ellison asked Chant why she chose to participate in this project. She explained:

I think it is paramount to be part of such a study, because, a lot of times, our stories are not part of the mainstream narratives, as if everybody else does these things [researches about African American families]. […] So this was an opportunity for me to add to
that research, add to that dialogue in particular what African American families are doing around digital literacies. [. . . ] I would [also] like to know things that are going on in my community and in other people's families as well. So I will learn from them.

In Chant's quote above, she argues that African American families are excluded from the dominant conversation, not only when it comes to digital literacy research, but also when it comes to adding voice to a major conversation about race, culture, and digital literacies in today's racial global climate. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) and Solórzano and Yosso (2002) remind us that certain stories and experiences that are not often told fall "on the margins of society" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32), while others remain a part of the majoritarian story.

Although Chant had digital and economic access, she chose to live in a pre-dominantly African American urban community; as Milner and Lomotey (2014) note, such communities are "geographical spaces that are not necessarily situated in large cities, but also exist in suburban areas" (p. 201). During pre- and post-interviews, Lewis Ellison noticed that Chant's narratives about her and her son Rem's access to, consumption of, and production of digital tools and practices on a daily basis (e.g., researching, writing, and creating digital stories) spoke against the rhetoric of the digital divide. Nevertheless, in Chant's neighborhood, she still "[did] not get equal access to certain resources like the Internet." In fact, she shared that when she attempted to change her Internet services (from Comcast) to ones more suitable for her and her son's needs (Direct TV), the customer service representative told her, "we don't do that in your community." To prove her suspicions about access, Chant provided two other zip codes in more affluent communities, and was told that the services were offered in those locations. As Chant explained, "That says that certain technologies are not available in my community because of my zip code, where it would be cheaper and much more beneficial if I were to have access to those [Internet] services." At the same time, however, she was "notic[ing] a shift in the ethnic/racial dynamics of [her] community." In fact, she believed that:

In another year or so, that service will be available as more people of the majority, White, move into my community and because they will scream and shout loud enough and their voices will be heard, although the people currently in the community scream and shout, [. . . but] we are silenced because our voices don't count as loudly as theirs. Now, we don't have access, so we have to pay the premium rates for Internet access which sometimes fails.

Chant's quote reveals that even a professional academic with an Internet-dependent career cannot obtain home service because of perceptions about need. While the digital divide tends to refer to people living at the poverty level, systemic discrimination makes even the reasonably affluent less likely to have access. Lipsitz (2006) describes a “‘possessive investment in Whiteness’ that is responsible for the racialized hierarchies of our society” (p. vii). In fact, he states that this system is formed to protect the privileges of Whites, even if it means “denying communities of color opportunities for asset accumulation and upward mobility” (Lipsitz, 2006, p. viii).
Chant provided narratives and reflections with a sophisticated understanding of how society thinks about communities of color. Her unique positioning, as both a professor and an urban community resident, allowed her to speak from both sides of the digital divide. Since her narrative came from an earned position of status and knowledge, she had far greater access than the average person to concepts like critical race theory, and a disposition to inquire and make sense of things in more sophisticated ways than the general population. Thus, stories like Chant’s need to be told to “shatter complacency [and] challenge the dominant discourse on race” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). We can do this by conducting research on individuals whose voices are rarely—if ever—heard.

Penny: A Counter-Story of Access and Context
To understand how access and counter-storytelling are embodied by young children, we introduce Penny, a first-grader who did not have technological access in her home, but was able to function in the digital age (Eisenberg, Lowe, & Spitzer 2004). Her counter-stories reveal that such children can still be producers of their digital literacies, which has the potential to shift the definitions of and conversations about access.

Penny was the only student in the group who did not have a computer at home; however, despite her lack of home computer access, she was an eager participant when the students met to create their stories. She impressed everyone with her digital storytelling skills. During the final interviews, the other children often stated that they liked her stories best. During the first author’s chair session, when the students’ digital stories were played on the lab’s main projector, Penny indicated that she was a bit perplexed at the power she had to create an enjoyable tale for her peers. “Well, all I did was draw stars,” she said. However, it was not long before she was a confident storyteller and appreciated her power to evoke a response from her audience. In her final interview, she declared that her favorite part of the project was not making the stories, but watching them with others.

Although Penny’s immediate family did not own a computer, she did have access to computers at her grandmother’s and aunt’s homes. This access was not apparent in the parent survey responses, but only came to light when, during her post-study interview, she revealed that the family had played her digital story several times. That, Penny claimed, was one of the best parts of digital storytelling. She enthusiastically described a “funny” part that made her mother laugh “every time” during Penny’s tale of an unfortunate duck who got run over while crossing the street to look for her babies: “Did you hear that part? I added an extra quack. And the duck is super smashed. […] It’s like this [she laughed and made a gesture with her palms]. And with ‘streeeeeet. ‘ My mom laughed on the quack, and she laughed when I said ‘streeeeeet!’”

The perception of a digital divide and its reality are often contradictory. Penny was a child who fit the typical profile: she did not have computer access at home. However, she had resources beyond her immediate family; thus, her perceived lack of access was inaccurate. Literature on African American families often credits extended family units as a source of strength (Martin & Martin, 1978; Roy &
Burton, 2007). Extended families often serve as an emotional and economic buffer; in this case, they provided digital resources for Penny. Considering these contexts, the very question, “Is there a computer in the home?” belies the realities of some African Americans’ lives. Penny’s counter-story is one of invisible access. In the cases of Chant and Penny, productive digital access was a part of their lives even though the contexts were different. Their counter-stories reveal the complexities of what it means to have digital access, defying simplistic ideas about the digital divide for African Americans. Thus, these counter-stories have the potential to open conversations about who determines how access should look.

**Jordan: A Counter-Story of Access and Stereotypes**

Penny’s and Chant’s counter-stories represent complex understandings of how access appears in African American families’ contexts. Our next participant, Jordan, illustrates how African Americans not only have access in unconventional ways, but can use access to counter-stories externally imposed on them. For instance, Chant discussed how society often places limits on communities of color. Jordan, Penny’s classmate, encountered similar marginalization and stereotyping by an otherwise well-meaning teacher.

According to Jordan’s teacher, she was a “bright” girl. Her teacher’s survey categorized Jordan as “very loud! She speaks articulately and intelligently and often doesn’t know when to stop!” Jordan’s teacher managed to invoke several stereotypes about African Americans in one simple sentence. Jordan’s teacher also stated that she was a “very creative” writer. However, when Jordan was asked during her interview whether she had written any stories in first grade, she could only recall one: “When we went to the zoo, we had to write about the zoo. I wrote about the giraffes.” It was obviously not Jordan’s perception that she had many opportunities to write “creatively,” despite what the teacher said.

A perusal of Jordan’s journal revealed the illustrated account of what she saw at the zoo. Additionally, during morning journaling (a time when the students were asked to write in journals while the teacher collected notes and lunch money), Jordan wrote a short essay about losing four baby teeth and having sixteen baby teeth left, as well as three permanent teeth. Finally, she responded to a prompt that required her to invent and describe her own dinosaur. Her teacher responded to each entry with a check mark, a smiley face, or a word like “Lovely!” Every journal entry was a response to a teacher prompt, and despite a lack of opportunities to compose her own stories, Jordan was a successful first grader. She exceeded her teacher’s expectations in assigned topics and prompts.

As part of the study, Jordan and the other children were asked to create digital stories. This was Jordan’s first opportunity to write for her own purposes in a school setting, and she chose to story herself. Her teacher’s description of her as a “bright” and “loud” little girl—a description that implied an air of frivolousness, not depth—was not indicative of the story she chose to tell. Jordan did have depth, and used her access to digital tools to communicate a more meaningful portrait of herself. In her first digital story, Jordan created multiple images. Each screen contained a picture that she said described her family and a close friend. She used
the computer’s tools as she would use crayons or markers to create a series of portraits. She also used the colors black and pink in distinct ways. She declared her identity as a biracial child in the images by deliberately scribbling in black faces for her grandmother and mother, but each time she drew her own face, she merely outlined a circle in black. She distinguished herself from her White friend, Cassidy, by using bright pink to scribble in her friend’s face. In this way, she chose to reveal her counter-story: beyond the “bright” but “loud” girl (Fordham, 1993; Morris, 2007), she was instead a little girl who, given the opportunity to tell any story she wanted, chose to announce her status as multiracial in a bivariate family and world.

Jordan’s counter-story was different from others because it was less about her verbal narratives; instead, she used digital images to make a clear statement that countered her teacher’s notions. Unlike Chant, Jordan was not aware of the stereotypes that were limiting her, but in her own powerful, first-grade way, she countered the opinions and perceptions of her teacher. Opportunities for African American students to create texts in their own voices and for their own purposes are often subordinate in schools, where skills-based instruction and standardized tests are emphasized. However, technology can be used to enrich and empower students with tools that reflect their cultural identities (Hall, 2011), tell their counter-stories, and provide transformative ways to narrate their lives.

(Re)Articulating Families’ Technology/Digital Access and Use

In the previous sections, we described how our research provides an understanding in how African American parent and children’s digital access and use are achieved in any community. As illustrated in this article, we do not subscribe to the traditional definition of the digital divide, but rather highlight intricate ways in which the participants take up and speak out about access and use in their lives as consumers and producers.

Chant had access to a number of digital technologies in her home (material access). In addition, these technologies were part of the normalcy of her everyday life as the mother of a digitally competent 9-year-old whose class and homework assignments were completed with the use of a computer and/or the Internet (experiential access). Furthermore, she was a professor who taught online and face-to-face classes and used the Internet for leisure. Chant also understood the benefits and problems that are associated with these technologies. While she had the benefit of access to the technologies in her community, for geographic, economic, and social reasons, she was unable to manage those technologies for herself and her family. Chant was aware of her position in a marginalized space that limited her from gaining access to Internet services available to other neighborhoods, and she spoke critically about African Americans’ lack of participation in the larger digital narrative (critical access).

Penny, on the other hand, did not have digital technology in her home, but did have access to her grandmother and aunt, who provided her with the opportunity to extend her digital storytelling skills. These skills were so expressive that other students from her class praised her digital story as the most impressive due
to its creativity and content. Additionally, once she shared the story at home, it became a part of the family’s discursive landscape. Penny’s knowledge and skill (functional access) created a family digital heirloom. Jordan, on the other hand, used her transformative access to tell her own stories about how she wished to be perceived as a biracial first grader. She used technology to empower herself for cultural and social reasons, and to acknowledge her identity.

**Conclusion: Embracing African American Counter-Stories beyond the Digital Divide**

The narratives about African Americans and the digital divide have displayed evidence of racist and stereotypical stories over time by disproportionately focusing on the access—or lack thereof—of populations of color. These issues stem from deficit viewpoints about race, families, and economic inequities. In this article, we used the counter-stories of African American children and parents as a way to push back against deficit thinking concerning digital literacies, race, and access to digital technologies. Banks’s (2006) taxonomy of access provided us with a framework to consider how we need to go beyond notions of the digital divide and accept African Americans as “intelligent users, producers, and even transformers of technologies if access is to mean anything to our individual lives, the lives of our students, or those of the communities we live, work, and play in” (p. 138).

For instance, Chant’s lack of access to certain resources is an important issue because her community was perceived as one not in need of additional technological access. In Penny’s case, a simple question—“Does your family have a computer at home?”—might have limited teacher and researcher expectations of what she could accomplish in the digital space, since the question did not consider her extended family’s resources. With Jordan, limiting her to assigned prompts and consumption of digital media might have deprived her of the opportunity to use digital tools to tell her own story, thus asserting herself as more than the “loud” girl who wrote about giraffes. When researchers and teachers partner with African American families and children, African Americans’ experiences are made visible.

As illustrated in this article, these concerns travel beyond research projects to classrooms, where learning opportunities are affected. Making room for continual growth and learning for all children may not necessarily mean installing digital technologies in every classroom, but it might mean reconsidering the ways African American children are using technologies—not as passive content consumers, but as active and creative content producers whose activities support and transform their own learning (Lewis Ellison, 2014b, 2017a; Rowsell, Morrell, & Alvermann, 2017; US Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology, 2016). It is important that researchers consider not only barriers, but also opportunities among African American children and families. One pathway to discovering such opportunities is counter-stories.
Implications for Teaching and Future Research

There are many ways English education teachers and digital literacy researchers can engage in courageous and rigorous conversations with African American children and families concerning race and the digital divide. The following are a few takeaways for those who wish to delve into topics related to the digital literacies of African American children and parents. Building solid relationships with families helps teachers recognize the importance of families’ and students’ counter-stories. These relationships could help diminish deficit-view thinking about African American populations, especially concerning the digital divide and access. Reimagining what schooling practices should look like in today’s classrooms could include affirming and embracing students’ counter-stories, communities, and digital lives, and bringing those affirmations into the curriculum. Gathering this information from students is important, because student learning includes all of the issues and experiences they encounter on a daily basis, such as identity, access, and literacies across diverse platforms (Thomas, 2015).

While some studies employ discussions about race and language in professional development workshops and materials (Coles-Ritchie & Smith, 2017; Deshmukh-Towery, Oliveri, & Gidney, 2007; Lathan, 2014), to date, there are no known opportunities to cultivate discussions and strategies for learning between teachers and parents (and particularly parents of color) concerning digital and nondigital practices. One method could be requiring teachers to participate in book clubs, which could help increase awareness of current issues about culture, race, and literacies both within and outside the classroom. This method is similar to that of Florio-Ruane (2001), who, along with her pre- and inservice teachers, discussed topics to understand culture in teaching, and required teachers to read autobiographical literature by authors from diverse backgrounds. This approach could help teachers engage in courageous conversations about their own cultural experiences. Many White teachers quoted in Florio-Ruane’s book were unaware of their own cultural experiences, and only saw “culture” in terms of color, rather than behaviors, practices, and ideologies that span racial divides. English teachers should also be aware of their own assumptions about the digital divide and access, ones that may manifest as deficit thinking, thus skewing pedagogical decisions and outcomes.

NOTES

1. The terms African American and Black are used interchangeably here.
2. All names are pseudonyms.
3. The Dig-A-Fam: Families’ Digital Storytelling Project was funded by the National Council of Teachers of English Research Foundation.
4. “Driving while Black” is a phrase associated with African Americans and racial profiling.
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