JoLLE@UGA®
JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

The Multiple Identities and Literacies of Black Girlhood: A Conversation About Creating Spaces for Black Girl Voices

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Abstract: In light of the current assaults on Black girls in and out of schools across the nation, K-12 educators need to understand a more complete vision of the identities these girls create for themselves and the literacies and practices needed to best teach them. In this article a collective of Black female scholars addresses how gender construction and the literacy experiences of Black adolescent females are supported by their interactions with and engagements in community- and school-based programs that center on the literacy needs and interests of Black adolescent females. The authors draw on their collective yet individual experiences as Black women scholars and teachers to share ways to transform the identity development of Black adolescent females within and beyond official school contexts. Implications are provided for educators in creating legitimate spaces for Black girls to express their voices, perspectives and ways engage in multiple acts of literacies.

Keywords: Black girl literacies; pedagogy; identity development

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I t is with emotions of heart-felt pleasure that I now, while in the city of Boston, take the opportunity of making a few remarks respecting the female literary societies of color in the city of Philadelphia. They are two in number. About nine months, since the period of their commencement, they have increased both in numbers, popularity [sic]. What is far more preferable, they have wonderfully improved their mental faculties – which object should be eagerly sought after and obtained if possible by every female, though she have to encounter some difficulty to acquire it. **For a female soul, without education, is like a marble in a quarry previous to being polished by the hands of the artist.** Then, my female friends, it is my sincere desire that you arouse from your lethargy: be no longer dormant on the subject, but now follow in the footsteps of your sisters in the city of Philadelphia. Establish societies, give them strict attention, and I am confident that in a short period you will realize those blessings that are an ornament to the female character, which are calculated to adorn and enlighten the mind, and which should be acquired by every female of color in the universe. [The Liberator, August 30, 1834; emphasis added]

The selection above comes from a newspaper article published in *The Liberator* in 1834. The author, who signed as "J.C.B," informs readers about the benefits of the two Black female literary societies that were created in the urban northeast region of the United States. Literary societies were not just organized "book clubs," where members engaged in the study of literature. These groups also had greater goals of advancing the conditions of humankind and fighting oppression through their[1] collaborative literacies—of organizing to read, write, and think together toward

a better humanity for all (McHenry, 2000; Muhammad, 2012). The earliest of these societies were led by, and solely for, African American males in 1828. Three years later, young Black women created spaces of their own.

Within these literary societies, literacy was not only skill-driven, but also a tool used to define their identities, advocate for their rights to better themselves, and address issues of inequity for the wider society. Young Black women came together to make sense of their complex identities through a literary means. As they were reading text, they were not only discussing their collective identities as Black women, but also their individual and unique self-identities. Their engagements in reading, writing, speaking and thinking were intertwined with, and never isolated from, their pursuits to define their lives. As members in literary societies, they also read literature, debated ideas, and wrote across social issues to incite thought and action. The author of this article from *The Liberator* also asserts the intellectual benefits of literary societies and metaphorically compares educated women to polished marbles by the "hands of artists" or teachers. The writer then encourages other young women or "sisters" to establish literary societies in their own towns to "adorn and enlighten the mind," which "should be acquired by every female of color." McHenry (2002) describes literary societies as spaces created to develop such enlightenment. Adhering to the charge written in *The Liberator* in 1834, we (authors) sought to continue this rich legacy by establishing modern-day collaborative literacy groups to advance literacy development among young Black girls today.

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[1] We acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals in our writing. Throughout this article we will use "he" to refer to individuals who identify as male and "she" to refer to individuals who identify as female. We have selected these pronouns because we believe they are more familiar for a diverse audience of readers.

In this essay, we continue the historic literacy practices of Black women and examine our unique positionality as five Black women educators within the spaces we individually created for young Black girls, and share conversations from creating these spaces. We begin by defining the need for Black girl spaces and then share details of our programs, including strengths and challenges that we encountered when we developed Black girl spaces for literacy learning and identity meaning making. The rich histories of Black women's literary societies encouraged us to cultivate these literacy collaboratives. This history also serves as a reminder of why Black girls need these types of spaces created for them. We conclude the essay by synthesizing our programmatic affordances and challenges and by offering suggestions for practice, including a Black Girl Literacies Framework (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016) that is useful in advancing the literacy development for Black girls as well as other populations of youth.

Defining the Need for Creating Contemporary Spaces for Black Girls

To examine the need for creating literacy learning spaces for Black girls, one must begin with a critical discussion about representation. In a time of profound sociopolitical climate change, youth, specifically Black girls, are continually negotiating identity while navigating the (mis)representations of Black women and girlhood in the media. Further, Black girls circumnavigate the influence of those representations in and out of school spaces. We desire for Black girls to reclaim spaces for themselves in order to define their excellence.

School spaces should be transformative and educators must be intentional and deliberate in teaching practices that serve to embolden students to be agents of collective community change. Literacy learning requires a commitment to the whole child and the environments we create for them. In our society, Black girl spaces are not strongly advocated for by those who intentionally or unintentionally promote anti-Blackness, but Black girls themselves deeply desire such collectivism. We can look to the news media to see the ways Black girls have been asking and working toward reclaiming spaces. For example, eleven-year-old Marley Dias found that the main characters in the books she loved to read looked nothing like her. This realization prompted her to set a goal of collecting 1,000 books about Black girls. Not only did she meet her goal, she also used her voice to advocate for social justice and now has a book being published by Scholastic in 2018. In 2016, a Florida high school required that two Black girls remove their African head wraps. Believing that this request violated their cultural heritage, one of the girls, Liu Kwayera, organized a protest that inspired many of the schools' students to come dressed in African head wraps and dashikis. #BlackGirlsWrapWednesday is a weekly protest space that will continue until the school's dress code policies are changed.

Though these are just a few media examples, there is a need to define Black girl excellence for ourselves. As Marly and Liu, and countless other Black girls around this nation and the globe show us, Black girls require our precise attention. Their racialized-gendered experiences necessitate spaces, places, and an understanding about literacies that foreground and honor their lives. We dedicate our scholarship and community engagement to centering the identities, lived experiences, and literacy practices of Black girls. We have worked—and are continually working—to help Black girls develop the language to resist the dominant narrative about/against Black girlhood. We also strive to help educators develop pedagogical practices that counter racist, sexist, and classist ideologies in curriculum and instruction.

Black Girl Literacies

Black girl literacies have been defined in complex ways and have typically been situated in a larger sociopolitical environment related to identity, power, and agency. In Black Feminist Thought, Collins (2009) situates U.S. Black womanhood within a "legacy of struggle" (p. 30) that Black women have used to perform their intellectual work—both in the ways they think and, subsequently, respond to their experiences. These ways of performing and knowing are what constitute Black feminist thought. Although Black females are by no means a monolithic group, Collins believes that Black women's sociohistorical experiences— relating to the overlapping systems of institutionalized race, class, and gender oppressions, in general—have led to a "unique standpoint" (Collins, 1995, p. 339) or way of seeing and understanding of the world that is quite different from the worldview of Black men and/or other women (hooks, 2000). Consequently, these experiences have also led a number of Black women to use such sense-making as a means of counteracting multiple forms of oppression that, in effect, becomes the necessary force driving Black feminist thought. In fact, Collins argues: "the overarching purpose of U.S. Black feminist thought is also to resist oppression, both its practices and the ideas that justify it. If intersecting oppressions did not exist, Black feminist thought and similar oppositional knowledges would be unnecessary" (p. 25). Our collective scholarship takes up this notion by resisting deficit literacy practices that claim to fix or remediate Black girls by offering alternative spaces for them to thrive as literate beings. We fully understand that Black women and girls have historically had to resist oppressions and create spaces when one did not exist for them; thus Black girls' sociohistorical

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experiences and literacies become important and necessary to be centered.

Richardson (2003) also speaks to why Black girl literacies matter through a discussion of distinct African American female ways of knowing and performing that she refers to as "African American female literacies" (p. 77), which include practices such as storytelling, signifying, dancing, singing, and quilting, among others. Like Collins (2009), Richardson believes these literacies develop in response to African American females' unique standing—as Black, as female, and often, as economically oppressed individuals—in society. Richardson references the works of Sojourner Truth, Harriet Jacobs, and Zora Neale Hurston as evidence of the kinds of language and literacy practices Black females routinely employ to enact agency within their lives and to fight against oppression. Hence, Richardson's definition necessarily entails a much broader notion of the term "literacy," given Black women's multifaceted readings of themselves and the(ir) worlds.

For these reasons, we employ the phrase "Black girls' literacies" to denote specific acts in which Black girls read, write, speak, move, and create in order to affirm themselves, the(ir) world, and the multidimensionality of young Black womanhood and/or Black girlhood (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016). Furthermore, these are acts in which Black girls have adopted a dual-lensed approach to examining themselves and the(ir) world around them. We identify this approach as dual-resistant in that it describes the counterhegemonic and co-optive methods Black girls use in order to (re)define who they are or wish to become. By counterhegemonic, we are referring to a self-defined standpoint that is in contrast to the predominant view of young Black women (see Brown, 2011; Muhammad, 2015a; Sutherland, 2005; Winn, 2011a, 2011b; Wissman,

2008, 2009, 2011). By co-optive, we mean the ways in which Black girls reappropriate language, images, and symbols (e.g., *bitch* used as a term of power or endearment; bitch becomes *bytch*) in order to meet their own needs (see Marshall et al., 2009; Richardson, 2007, 2009). Likewise, it is important to consider how and why such literacy acts are most visible and accessible within in and out of school spaces (Brown, 2009; Kynard, 2010; Muhammad, 2015b; Wissman, 2008, 2009, 2011) as it is most often in both spaces that Black girls (both individually and collectively) seek to disrupt the quintessential narrative of Black girlhood.

Sharing Our Collective Experiences

In the next section, we share brief descriptions of each of our respective literacy programs created to center the identities and literacies of Black girls. We then share strengths and challenges of program development and implementation. Each program was aimed at helping young girls explore their identity while cultivating their different literacies in K-12 literacy programs/initiatives that highlighted, sustained, and expanded their literacy practices. We follow this section with a summary of our experiences and suggestions for other educators interested in creating literacy spaces for youth.

Digital Literacy Collaborative

Two years ago, Detra partnered with a multilingual/multicultural fifth grade teacher who works in an urban public school in the northeast region of the United States. The classroom was comprised of 23 students from different racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds that mirrored the school's demographics. The purpose of this partnership was to explore the digital literacy practices of urban youth. Detra was specifically interested in learning about the semiotic resources Black girls choose to employ in digital spaces and how those resources mediate their learning with

digital tools. In this project, digital literacies include hybrid digital forms, such as blogs, multimodal texts, web 2.0 platforms, and digital media production. To better understand their work, Detra used ethnographic research methods such as participant observation, field notes, audio recordings and transcripts, photography, and student generated artifacts.

Digital Literacy Collaborative at Wallace Thurman Elementary School (all names are pseudonyms) grew out of a conversation between Detra and the classroom teacher, Cristina. When Wallace Thurman ES recently received a grant to purchase new tablets for the students, Cristina and Detra brainstormed ideas about how they could work together to incorporate digital tools into the curriculum. Both of them were committed to positioning the students as creators of digital content that addressed social justice issues that were important to them and relevant to their daily lives. Cristina and Detra believed incorporating digital tools would provide a real-world platform to disseminate the students' concerns, as well as explore their inquiries. However, as they began to document the students' literacy practices, Detra realized how little she knew about the digital literacies of the Black girls in the classroom. All students were invited to participate in the project, but for the purpose of this research, Detra focused on a subset of data that highlighted the experiences of Black girls.

Over the course of the project, Black girls in the Digital Literacy Collaborative a) created memes in response to literature about racism; b) read poetry about social justice and created and performed spoken word poems that later became a podcast; c) conducted close readings of hip-hop videos to analyze how power and misogamy construct negative images of women; and d) analyzed and discussed topics they curated in magazines on Flipboard about race, gender, religion, and power.

As the students individually and collectively enacted multiliteracies across modalities, Detra documented which modal choices leveraged their ideas and the affordances each tool provided as a means for making visible their academic knowledge.

Digital Literacy Collaborative highlights the potential of technology for leveraging African American girls' digital epistemologies (Vasudevan & Dejaynes, 2013) in the curriculum. In the project, Black girls used tablets and desktop computers to create multimodal projects with apps and Web 2.0 platforms such as Glogster, Prezi, meme generator, padlet, Garage Band, and Flipboard to develop their inquiries, document their process, interact with a global audience, and share findings from their learning experiences. Detra found that the girls saw benefits in the space that matched the strengths of the program:

1. Examining issues of power and equity across modalities to disrupt status quo notions related to gender and race;
2. Being engaged in each step of the process with joy and pride;
3. Working collaboratively with their classmates to highlight their perspectives on issues of race, gender, and power; and
4. Asking questions about how their work could be used to make changes in our society.

Ultimately, engaging in digital literacies created a sanctioned academic space for Black girls to interrupt an incomplete narrative about who they are in our society, to engage in multimodal literacies that excited and ultimately to practice literacy skills. Although Detra's work at Wallace Thurman ES provided an innovative mechanism for Black girls to engage in digital literacy practices, there were two central challenges that emerged during the project. The first challenge was finding ways to center Black girls' literacies and interests without being exclusive.

Initially, Detra wanted to create digital learning experiences for the Black girls' in the classroom that were rooted in Black Feminists Perspectives. That idea was not supported because it was assumed that male students would feel left out, so Detra created an after-school space for Black girls to engage in critical digital literacies. Later, that idea was also not supported because of concern that matching programs were not available for other students. Therefore, Detra and the classroom teacher developed a curriculum rooted in tenets of social justice and critical literacy to support emerging digital literacy practices of the Black girls in the classroom. The second main challenge pertained to the accessibility and availability of technology resources. They had to wait for some time for the school district to rewire the building and deliver the tablets, as well as to work around blocked sites (i.e., Storify; Tumblr) that were part of the curriculum we designed. Despite the challenges, this work highlighted the interests and technological capabilities of Black girls, promoted exploration and creativity, provided opportunities for Black girls to gain fluency and confidence with digital tools, and created space across modalities for Black girls to re-imagine what it means to be a learner.

Black Girls W.R.I.T.E.!

Six years ago Gholdy created summer literacy collaboratives for Black adolescent girls, ages 12-17 years old, that met three days a week for three hours across 4-5 weeks each summer. At the time, there were programs for Black males and girls (and their parents). Gholdy desired for Black girls to have spaces of their own. These literacy groups were named Black Girls W.R.I.T.E. (Writing to Represent our Identities, our Times and our Excellence). Gholdy sought to center multiple ways of being a Black girl, as well as using writing as a tool to respond to our social times and the excellence embodied in Black girlhood. In these spaces, a group of girls (whom we called Sister Authors), and Gholdy

read Black women's literature and then wrote across our multiple and complex identities (Muhammad, 2015b; Muhammad & McArthur, 2015). There is a wealth of literary writing by Black women written for purposes of self-definition, to combat false depictions of who we are, and to advocate for social change (Newman, Rael, & Lapsansky, 2001; Waters & Conaway, 2007), and the sister authors wrote for these same purposes. Yet, there is a scarcity of research and resources that informs educators on the writings and writing development of Black adolescent girls. Therefore, each summer Gholdy inquired about questions such as: *How do Black girls engage in writing? What do they write about? How do Black girls write about their identities? What is needed pedagogically to advance and strengthen their literacies and writings?*

Black Girls W.R.I.T.E. reflected Black women's female literary societies from the early nineteenth century and the ways in which early Black women engaged in literacy practices became a blueprint for engaging girls today. Gholdy's ultimate goal was to reorient their histories to contemporary literacy practices involving Black girls. She therefore designed multiple qualitative studies to examine the writings of Black girls and the instructional variables that supported them as they wrote across genres of writing including poetry, personal narratives, essays, public addresses, letters, blogs, journals, and short stories. Each session started with layering multimodal text (print, image, video) that carried meaning and incited new thought. Following this, the girls engaged in discussion about the texts they had read, and then wrote. Gholdy based the literacy instruction on four historical literacy goals. Each helped to advance the girls' 1) skills and proficiencies; 2) intellectual development; 3) identity development; and 4) criticality (the ability to read and writing to understand truth and power). These collective goals allowed them to move beyond goals aimed to only improve the girls' writing skills and to

reconceptualize purposes for writing that were authentic and historical. The collective goals were also a great strength of the program, as school sanctioned learning is usually void of identity development and criticality.

Another strength of Black Girls WRITE was that it creatively blended multiple theoretical approaches to literacy instruction and writing pedagogy. For example, Gholdy and the Sister Authors worked to build writing skills and intellectual development (following a cognitive theoretical orientation) as well as identity (sociocultural theory; Black feminism) and criticality (critical theory). This synthesis made for rich and engaging writing exercises where the girls were highly motivated to read, write, and think. For example, as the girls were building literacy skills, they were engaging intellectually to think through issues of social change affecting their communities. They connected with and saw themselves in the literature they read.

 Another strength is the connection to history. The girls were immersed in a social literacy space that reflected their literary, ethnic, and gendered cultural identities as well as their literary histories. When examining school practices with African American youth, Gholdy found that instruction is often ahistorical. The sister authors engaged in similar literacy practices from 19th century Black literary societies. Some of these practices include reading and writing diverse literatures, critiquing each other's writings, and building multiple types of literacies. Because of these program strengths, the sister authors received both personal and academic benefits—and helped to make sense of their identities.

 Gholdy is reminded that this work takes commitment and patience to not only influence more girls in out of school spaces but also inside school classrooms. Thus, her main challenge now pertains to building capacity to involve more girls.

Typically, Gholdy facilitated these programs alone, and she is currently thinking of ways to prepare others to hold similar programs across communities. Related to this goal, Gholdy also asks, how do I transfer this type of space into school classrooms and expand the school sanctioned learning? Whether in- or out-of-school learning, Gholdy is constantly asked, "Why Black girls?" This question is not so much a challenge for her, yet she finds this lack of understanding to be problematic for others who believe that Black girls do not matter, or matter less. Gholdy consequently finds herself defending and justifying their needs and the voices of Black girls in her scholarship and community work. It remains a constant fight and struggle at societal levels, but the young girls' voices remind her each time that these literacy spaces are necessary.

African Ascension

Erica's quest into the lives and literacies of Black girls began more than seven years ago after she spent several months observing in a White female teacher's 9th grade English classroom. During this time, Erica began noticing common patterns amongst all of her Black female students, each of whom appeared to be silent, withdrawn, and nearly invisible. Over the course of a particular unit on the Holocaust, the Black girls actively avoided the texts and one another; meanwhile, their teacher was no less active in avoiding them (e.g., not encouraging the girls to participate and permitting them to sleep in class). Erica then wondered, too, about her own experiences as a high school English teacher and how often she had been responsible for silencing or ignoring the voices of young Black females in her classroom. Rather than simply pondering over such circumstances, she elected to examine the lives and literacies of Black girls.

> **"Each of the girls located her struggles with confidence, abandonment, and body image within the larger nexus of race, class, and gender oppression."**

Over the course of two years, Erica had the privilege of meeting with a group of Black girls ages 14-21 for an hour and thirty minutes each week to read, write, and speak about their realities, including their relationships, school experiences, future goals, and identities. Erica chose a reserved section of a local library located within a predominantly Black urban neighborhood as their meeting place. The girls' agreed-upon name, "African Ascension," marked their collective ascent and advancement as young Black women. In their weekly sessions, they spent time analyzing poetry, song lyrics, fiction, and non-fiction; writing autobiographical pieces, reader responses, poetry, and journal entries; and opening each session with announcements of upcoming events or of anything significant that happened in their lives.

In considering the larger significance of the program, Erica invited the girls to engage in autoethnography—a methodological approach to examining the self (Camangian, 2010; Dyson, 2007; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Erica and the girls engaged in autoethnographic approaches that included: selecting individual topics, collecting literacy artifacts related to those topics, and creating digital products through the use of Prezi and Pinterest to share with family and friends. For the girls, it was essential that they use text, graphics, and video within such digital spaces in order to disrupt public ideologies of Black girlhood.

The strengths of African Ascension stemmed from the girls' growing self-awareness and broader construction of what it means to be young, female, and Black. Each of the girls located her struggles with confidence, abandonment, and body image within the larger nexus of race, class, and gender oppression. For example, one participant associated

her mother's abandonment with the hardships that could derive from teen pregnancy. Another participant recognized that her hair struggles derived from societal perceptions of beauty (i.e., straight, long, blond hair) that sometimes caused her to feel frustration, marginalization, and pain. Participants digitally pinned inspirational messages, artwork, photographs, and more to re-present commonplace images of Black girlhood, Black fatherhood, Black female relationships, Black female body image, and Black families. Consequently, these kinds of autoethnographic approaches help to conceive how Black girls "do" literacy. Through these critical lenses, the girls each articulated the ways in which society places lesser value on young Black woman- and/or Black girlhood and also the ways in which each of them employed autoethnography as a tool to resist such perceptions.

Still, challenges arose in the instances when some of the girls had already internalized self-deprecating views of themselves. Such was the case when one participant revealed that sometimes she wished she were White, "so [she] had like the better hair." Statements like these revealed how damaging internalized racism can be, which suggests why acknowledgement and appreciation of Black girls' lives and literacies is so critically important. Erica found that one solution to combatting such beliefs and attitudes lay in the process of unpacking one's own individual experiences through autoethnography, while simultaneously engaging in a collective processing (or consciousness-raising) of those same experiences. In other words, each of the girls became interested in understanding her own story and experience through the stories and experiences of the larger collective of Black women and girls in African Ascension.

Beyond Your Perception

During her five years as an elementary educator, Sherell witnessed various community organizations implement several programs for Black males within the school, but none put forth for Black girls. Sherell started her doctoral program and became a research assistant for an urban institute that aimed to focus on the needs of the community while she was a classroom teacher. This urban institute lacked specific programming for girls, although there were gendered programs for Black male high school students. Sherell made note of this absence and decided to co-create a critical media literacy collective, Beyond Your Perception (BYP), with eight Black high school girls. BYP created a space for the girls to explore personal identity construction and community engagement by using hip hop media and representations of Black women and girls as a springboard for discussion. The collective, created out of necessity due to a lack of racialized-gender spaces for Black girls, focused on history, healing arts, and healthy civic action. Sherell wanted to explore how Black girls were affected by hip hop media and how they resisted it by providing a platform for Black girls to express their experiences with hip hop in their own voices. BYP used an approach that was participatory, practical, collaborative, emancipatory, contextualized, and critical and. As a result, the program bridged the gap between theory and practice, thereby creating liberatory implications for culturally responsive teacher practice using media literacy.

During the time of the study, all eight participants were high school seniors, taking college courses organized through the urban institute where Sherell served as a research assistant. BYP operated over the course of 14 weeks, meeting twice each week for two hours each session, and connected the popular culture that the girls engaged to historical representations of Black womanhood. Sherell and her co-facilitator provided a historical overview of stereotypes of Black women—Jezebel, Mammy, Matriarch, Welfare Mother, and Sapphire—and the girls were able to relate those tropes to

contemporary examples. Media literacy is significant to not only engage students in materials and ideas that are important to the youth but also to teach them to be critical consumers of the media they engage. Along with teaching critical media literacy, the significance of this work resided in Sherell's deliberate elimination of the power differential between her and the girls. By inviting the girls into her life, they seemed more comfortable inviting her into theirs. This act also guided the healing arts of the collective, enabling all of the participants, including the facilitators, to talk through past hurts, pains, and frustrations in a safe and supportive space. Intentionally destabilizing the power differential mobilized the collaborative nature of the collective, which the girls considered open and therapeutic. While the collective was successful in developing a critical media consciousness, the strength of the collective also was embodied in the sisterhood.

Black girls need spaces where they can dialogue about their experiences in the world, as well as, be taught how to be analytical and critical of the ways in which they engage in the world. Although the eight participants and the facilitators found the space opening, therapeutic, as well as a learning environment, the challenge of the work was defending the need for the creation of Black girls' spaces. Although the girls endorsed BYP to the administration of the urban institute, gaining support to continue the second iteration of BYP proved difficult because of the need for Sherell to constantly champion the program's necessity. After designing and implementing a program that was considered successful—developing a space for Black girls to deconstruct and reconstruct their identity, engage in self-reflection, and heal—was not fully supported. The needs of Black males seemed to be understood over the unique racialized-gendered needs of Black girls, which contributed to an environment where Black girl programming was

dispensable. Yet Sherell and all of the authors contributing to this essay continue to do this work, ensuring that if anyone overlooks Black girls, this authorial team will not be complicit in disregarding their unique racialized-gendered needs.

The Dark Girls

The Dark Girls program was first conceptualized after Marcelle participated in a community screening and panel discussion of the 2012 documentary Dark Girls, by filmmakers Bill Duke and D. Channsin Berry. The film explores issues of colorism, gender, and race among people of color and, particularly, Black women and girls (for discussion on colorism, see Brooks, Browne, & Hampton, 2008). The community response to this screening was overwhelming; hundreds of "dark girls" attended the event to break silences and be heard, to feel empowered, and to seek affirmation of deep-rooted and internalized identity norms. During the post-screening discussion of the film, Marcelle listened to middle and high school Black girls share narratives of being teased and bullied because they were "too dark" or "too high yellow" or because they had "good hair" versus "nappy hair." One member of the audience asked what schools and teachers are doing to help Black girls, and all children of color, maintain a positive sense of their cultural identities and histories. In retrospect, the audience members were asking for the spaces where Black girls can see their identities and literacies represented and affirmed, spaces that enact transformative pedagogies. As a response to the need for these spaces, Marcelle worked with community partners and university students, all Black women, to pilot a four-day program that would take place every Saturday during the month of March at the local community folk arts center. Each Saturday's curriculum focused on exploring Black girlhood through a different creative medium--visual art, writing, dance, and performance. Community artists led the workshops, and educators

and university students were on hand to serve as mentors to middle and high school participants. On the last Saturday, they had a small ceremony honoring the girls and affirming their journeys into womanhood.

From the pilot program, Marcelle realized with greater clarity the need for a sustained program, but one that served Black girls within school contexts. Although she was able to do transformative work in an out of school Saturday context, the girls who attended often shared stories about the challenges that they faced within their school walls on a regular basis. Marcelle felt that her charge then was to identify ways to continue this work, but with an intentionality to affect change in spaces where Black girls felt misunderstood, misrepresented, and mistreated.

The challenge, however, was forging a relationship with a school partner that would understand the need for this program and not co-opt it to fit larger curricular demands or the institutional infrastructure. The program eventually ran as an afterschool program for middle school students. Each week, approximately 20 middle school girls and 20 university women participated in afterschool activities, including art, yoga, dance, fashion design, vocal training, and reading groups. The program drew on the collective yet individual experiences of Black girls and women to not only transform the identity development of Black adolescent girls but to claim an affirming space within and beyond the school context.

The strength of this program lay in the commitment of the Black girls and women that participated and who committed to cultivating the Dark Girls sisterhood. A key objective was that this was a space where Black girls and women could "just be." The success of this program hinged on the direct communication between Marcelle and members of the school staff. The transition into the school space

was prompted by communication with one of the school's teachers, a White woman teacher. Essentially, Marcelle had to trust that the teachers wanted the best for their students, and the teachers had to realize the power and potential of the work that we do and honor the importance of Black girl spaces.

A major challenge, however, lay in the collaboration with the mostly White woman school staff members. The school staff (all White woman teachers and one Black woman school resource officer) wanted to collaborate with the Dark Girls group to provide afterschool programming for their Black girls. The infrastructure for the school's afterschool programming required that school personnel be present and stay after with the group. It became apparent rather quickly that having White woman teachers and a security guard in the space would alter the environment for the girls in harmful ways, mainly because many of the school staff held certain preconceived ideas and prejudices about the girls' behaviors and school identities. Therefore, a challenge was to develop the program within a school context that housed negative conceptions of Black girlhood yet not jeopardize the potential positive outcomes for the participants. Despite this constraint, my primary goal for this program was and remains to give Black adolescent girls the opportunity to further develop and use their voices in the telling of their stories and their truths.

Learning from the Strengths and Challenges of Creating Black Girls' Literacy Spaces

As Black woman educators and academics who are committed to centering Black girls' epistemologies and literacy practices, we create and enter partnerships with school and community members with the understanding that challenges will ensue. In this section, we discuss our collective strengths and challenges of creating literacy spaces. While the above programs provide specific contextual factors

that shape how each program is implemented in different geographic and physical spaces, there are several themes that connect our work with Black girls. Reading across our experiences invites us to consider the social, emotional, cognitive, and pedagogical benefits of designing programs to cultivate and maintain Black girls' literacies. Collectively our programs highlight the following strengths and challenges.

Strengths

Across the five programs we learned that cultivating Black girls' literacies requires the ability to navigate and advocate for in-and out-of-school spaces to do this work. Specifically, our work demonstrates the need to 1) honor the *intellectual agency* of Black girls; 2) work with Black girls to develop awareness and fluency with the application of *critical literacy practices and activism*; and 3) foster holistic spaces for *identity development, healing, and joy*. Our work with Black girls seeks to support them as they learn how to reimagine and construct narratives about their evolving identities, while simultaneously disrupting perceptions/discourses that do not acknowledge or honor their potential or current contributions to our society.

Each of our programs focused on *intellectual agency*. We cultivated spaces where girls were seen as co-constructers of knowledge and thinkers. In each program, the girls were able to read and discuss issues requiring social change. They had to think across problems and enact the agency in writing and talking across potential solutions. Our programs also were undergirded in criticality or *critical literacy practices*, which include the ability to read,

write, and think to understand power, authority, oppression and social justice.

As Collins (2009) research states, Black girls' positionality in society is surrounded around oppressions and misrepresentations imbued on their lives, which creates an urgent need to resist. Thus, their literacies are embedded in resistance and activism. Either silent or more prominent, activism involved using acts of literacy to work toward social justice due to the uneven times of society (Muhammad & Gonzalez, 2016). Each program became a site for literacy resistance and pushing back on falsehood or narratives about their identities that were incomplete.

> **"As academic development was advanced, so was the personal development of Black girls and they engaged in identity meaning making and used literacy to heal and recover."**

Finally, the spaces were steeped in *identity development, healing, and joy*. As academic development was advanced, so was the personal development of Black girls and they engaged in identity meaning making and used literacy to heal and recover. While doing this work, they experienced joy, which is something that often goes ignored in such high-stakes testing times. We use the term joy to convey a *feeling of great pleasure and happiness* that comes from the process of understanding that despite of what have happened to young Black girls and the ways in which they have had to resist dominant discourse, they can still move forward, live and claim space.

Challenges

Although each program highlights the important and dynamic interactions and benefits to creating sustainable programs that develop Black girl literacies, each author faced many challenges when engaging in this work. Creating authentic reciprocal

university-school-community based partnerships is a challenging endeavor (Campano et al., 2010). There are always last-minute changes to the schedule, a need to secure funding and resources, the planning of field trips, and absences to account for when working closely with children. Detra and Marcelle have developed programs located in schools and have to work directly with school staff, administration, and district policies. Detra experienced multiple delays with the delivery of the students' digital tools, compounded issues with the updated school network infrastructure, and restrictive district policies website access.

Although Marcelle's program took place after school, she worked closely with the teachers and school staff at the school. Marcelle's challenges stemmed from negotiating with school staff about access to the space and without compromising the collaboration among the Black girls that defined the space. Gholdy's challenges involved building capacity, replication of the program in different contexts, and the constant needs to justify the need for work that focuses on Black girl literacies. Sherell had similar challenges, specifically the need to defend the creation of Black girl spaces. The challenges Erica encountered stemmed from the self-deprecating views the Black girls in her program had internalized.

Each author had to grapple with the complexities of doing work to foster Black girls' literacies in a society that does not see their value. Thus, across the programs we find each author drawing upon different pedagogical or methodological approaches to resolve the evolving challenges they confronted. For example, Detra and Marcelle met with the staff and administration to discuss concerns and brainstorm alternative solutions to the issues. Gholdy has begun to develop a set of inquiry questions and framework informed by her work to share with classroom teachers. Sherell partnered with her university to support and sustain the program she created. Erica relied on autoethnography and visual imagery to combat the issues Black girls in her program shared.

Suggestions for Practice and Conclusion

Our work in these programs addresses the need to focus on the lives and literacies of Black girls in educational research. Given that the lives of Black girls are continually framed through discourses of tragedy, lewdness, and failure (Frazier et al., 2011), teachers should then consider questions like: *What more can be learned about and from the lives and literacies of Black girls? What other theories, methodologies, and pedagogies can be used to affirm the lives and literacies of Black girls? Further, how else can we engage in practices for and with Black girls?*

One approach to work toward creating in- and out-of-school literacy spaces that honor Black girls' multiple histories, identities, and literacies is by framing learning spaces around the Black Girls' Literacies Framework (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016). This framing is inclusive of the strengths of our individual programs as well as the rich history that we discussed in the introduction of this essay. This framework was developed by two of the authors when conducting a literature review on Black girl literacies across the past decades. Similar to Black feminist thought and Richardson's (2003) conceptions of African American female literacies, the BGLF conceptualizes Black girls' literacies as being: 1) multiple, 2) tied to identities, 3) historical, 4) collaborative, 5) intellectual, and 6) political/critical. Collectively, when educators engage Black girls' learning inclusive of these six areas, Black girls begin to reach their highest potential in academic and personal achievement. This framework advances traditional school sanctioned practices that typically define literacy as reading and writing skills—therefore, all youth can benefit from the BGLF in their learning spaces.

To challenge deficit perspectives of young Black women, educators must consider Black female lives and literacies from a strength perspective. We argue that given the sociohistorical context of Black woman- and Black girlhood, our programs provide time and space for Black girls' collective healing, collective consciousness, and ultimately, collective transformation. Further, we must begin with their histories. As the opening historical artifact details, Black women and girls have existing lineages and traditions of organizing to authentically be themselves as they cultivate their minds. This history must not be forgotten, overlooked or dismissed. Instead, educators must return their practices to this unearthed historicized literacy and engage girls today in similar ways. The writer of this historical document purposefully urges readers to give Black girl literacy spaces *strict attention*—and we could not agree more. Our young sisters deserve our focus and investment.

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