

Even Cinderella Is White: (Re)Centering Black Girls' Voices as Literacies of Resistance

The authors describe using counter fairy tales to (re)center the voices of Black girls as literacies of resistance in English education.

Black girls are not seen as human, and they are being erased from classrooms across the country. Black girls are encountering state-sanctioned violence and criminalization in schooling systems that have long supported the educational genocide of the Black body. From Black Codes that were passed in southern states in 1864 to acts of police brutality and zero tolerance policing in 2017, Black people have lived in a society that has long loathed their existence and that has engaged in a collective societal lynching of Black women and girls who sit at the intersections of racism and sexism (as well as other identity categories including nationality, language, colorism, and social class). In the active disposability of Black girls from schools to juvenile justice institutions and within schooling systems that place them into solitary confinement, Black female students are enduring incarcerated spaces that have dejected them into emotionally derogating, inhumane, and racially violent contexts. English language arts provides a space for Black women and girls to express themselves or to find solace in the shared lived experiences of Black women and girls. However, this is impossible if the texts used to educate Black women and girls are void of their lived experiences, beliefs, and cultural norms.

School is a racially violent space that has caused Black girls to be physically assaulted for perceived classroom defiance. These acts of state-sanctioned violence and state-sanctioned incarceration have been historically predicated on Black bodies, and they are simply reemerging within

more contemporary forms. For instance, we recognize literary texts can demonize or eliminate Black girls' racialized and gendered experiences and are a form of racial literary violence. Black women writers and poets, including Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, provide Black female students a purview into the narratives of pain, restoration, and Black suffering from the voices of Black women. Consequently, these forms of literary work are often not included within English education or are seen within a White superiority framework, are misguided, or void the significance of race, racism, and sexism in literature. Exposure to these narratives is at the heart of educational equity. These literary works affirm Black girls and expand the perspectives of all students.

Persistent societal images that negatively portray Black women and girls have contributed to normalcy and the mosaic of Whiteness as pure and innocent while Blackness is seen as inhumane or representing death. Black girls are often characterized as Jezebels, Sapphires, aggressive, or sexualized to the point that they are deprived of having any intellectual currency and curiosity. We posit that the acceptance and reproduction of anti-Blackness in in-school (through school discipline disproportionality, tracking, etc.) and out-of-school spaces (as evidenced in unlawful arrests and mass incarceration of Black communities) have contributed to the hyperpathologization of Black people. Given this consideration, we contend that the afterlife of slavery permeates society and English education classrooms

(we acknowledge that the term “English” education or “English” language arts is in itself a White patriarchal term that is foregrounded in the oppression of marginalized groups across race, ethnicity, national origin, language, and immigration status). The afterlife of slavery is not only evident with over-incarceration of Black people in the prison industrial complex, but also within schooling systems that dehumanize Black students’ bodies, cultural knowledge, and intellect. The afterlife of slavery has created racially misogynistic and violent spaces for Black girls who are often seen within a Black criminality framework. Black girls are living within slavery’s afterlife, and their bodies are often viewed as undeserving of receiving an “adequate” education. Although we focus on Black girls across varying schooling contexts (urban, rural, and suburban), we acknowledge the anti-essentialist nature of Black girlhood as influenced by geographical context and school type (public, charter, homeschool). In consideration of this fact, we assert that Black girls as an identity are upheld to stereotypical connotations of what it means to be Black, female, and a “Black girl” that manifests itself in intricate ways. Literature has the power to oppose or uphold stereotypical depictions of Black girls and women. Thus, we propose authentic and affirmative narratives to (re)center Black girls’ voices as literacies of resistance in English education.

In the rest of this analysis, we contend that the afterlife of slavery has (de)centered Black girls’ voices as experienced and reflected in literary texts in English education classes. We discuss how Black girls can engage with literary texts through counter fairy tales (CFT) as a resistive literary strategy to reclaim Black girls’ narratives and to be reflective of their experiences. Finally, we provide an illustration of how teachers can engage in CFT as a tool of resistance to dominant literary fairy tales, and to promote justice-oriented learning in the classroom.

The Afterlife of Slavery in English Education

The racial violence that Black girls encounter in school cannot be separated from the remnants of the afterlife of slavery within PreK–12 schools and in English language arts classrooms. Although

traditional forms of modern-day chattel slavery have ended, Black girls are still experiencing slavery through more modernized weaponry that has advanced beyond shackles and chains. We unapologetically state that schools not only are prison for Black girls but that schools are actively reproducing slavery in its afterlife in English language arts. When Black girls’ identities, ways of learning, and leadership capacities are symbolically bonded by chains through a White-only curriculum, culturally biased literary texts, and pedagogical standards, Black female students are in fact experiencing normalized racial violence.

Saidiaya Hartman and Jared Sexton introduced the concept of the *afterlife of slavery* to describe ways that Black people have experienced and are currently living in racialized terrorization through policing, mass incarceration, and surveillance of their bodies. Black girls who are in English education classrooms that deject them to learn from majority White literary texts and devalue works by Black women authors are facing modern-day forms of educational enslavement. English education teachers expose Black students, and Black girls in particular, to mostly Western European thought and tradition that mutes the racial, ethnic, and gendered experiences of individuals who look

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like the students whom they are teaching (Willis et al.). Black students are rarely afforded opportunities to see themselves within the texts that they are reading, or if a Black character is referenced, it is often through slave narrative or racial subjectification. As with *Huckleberry Finn*, *Cinderella*, and *Snow White*, English educators often regard literary texts with predominately white characters as “credible” and “classic” examples of “appropriate” English literature. Hartman and Sexton remind us that an enslaved status (whether physically, intellectually, creatively, or culturally) not only restrains individuals from being engaged in acts of resistance but also seeks to dismantle the development of “freedom dreams” that can cause an individual to critically challenge bondage. When Black girls are prohibited from having *freedom dreams* and remain in an enslaved status in English language arts

classes, then they are being disenfranchised within the spaces where their narratives are necessary for social change. When the only images that Black girls see of themselves in the classroom are rooted in their dehumanization, it sends messages of disaffirmation and educational neglect that may never be emancipated.

The afterlife of slavery and lack of freedom dreaming in classrooms not only encourages racial marginalization and silencing but also reinforces a system of racial injustice and the reproduction of schooling inequality. Collaboratives and non-profit organizations including the Black Girl Literacy Collective, BlackGirlsRock!, and 12-year-old

Black girl Marley Dias's #1000BlackGirlBooks have worked to decriminalize literacy for Black girls. Marley Dias's initiative was birthed from a widespread absence of books that depicted Black girls as the main characters. Like Marley and countless other Black girls who are "missing" from literature or are not the main characters,

young adolescents can see who is valued in the classroom and how that value is assessed based on race and gender classification. Despite efforts to promote the literacy of Black girls in English language arts classrooms, educators and their curricular materials often show a greater degree of illiteracy to the racial and cultural wealth that Black female students like Marley bring into the classroom.

Critical Race Feminism and Black Girls' Literacy in Schools

English educators must contribute to *and* be instruments of change as Black girls orchestrate and lead in their rehumanization. There is a great need for practitioners and researchers to advocate for "literacy practices that afford opportunities for Black adolescent girls to make meaning of their identities within schools" (Muhammad 205). To this end, we believe that engaging in discussions on racial justice in English education requires that Black girls' literacies be seen as intersectional, non-essentialist, and different than the experiences of White girls

and Black boys (Wing). Critical Race Feminism (CRF) can be used as a lens for "studying, analyzing, critiquing and celebrating the educational experiences of African American female students" in ways that "feminism alone cannot address" (Evans-Winters and Esposito). CRF examines voices and experiences of women and girls of color to contest the racialized and gendered oppression that they encounter across social settings. CRF is also a tool for understanding anti-Black female experiences in school and in particular in English education. Gholneshar E. Muhammad and Marcell Haddix suggest that Black female literacies are "multiple in practice, tied to identities, historical, collaborative, intellectual, and political/critical" (325). Black girl literacies are needed to develop Black girl literacy pedagogies in English language arts classrooms can bring credence to the multiple jeopardies and truths that Black female students experience in school.

According to the National Council of Teachers of English, literacy instruction should be responsive to students' identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender expression, age, appearance, ability, spiritual belief, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and community environment) and languages/dialects as they affect students' opportunities to learn. Only 12 percent of middle grades Black girls prefer to write stories compared to other writing tasks, some of which include poems, song lyrics, and plays (Young). All of these mediums of writing lend themselves to personal expressions and connections that are often not being made with mainly predominately White authors and characters.

For too long, Black girls are told to read literary texts with characters that have White skin and non-kinky hair. There needs to be a (re)centering of Black girls' voices in ways that challenge the idea that "even Cinderella is white." Black girls must be exposed to and seen within the subject that they are learning while also given the opportunities for counternarratives and resistance to injustice. Approaches including restorative English education "employ literature and writing to seek justice and restore (and, in some cases, create) peace that reaches beyond the classroom walls" (Winn, "Toward" 126). Likewise, Black girls have used methods including writing institutes focused on telling "her-story," sister circles, and theater to challenge White femininity supremacy in texts (Muhammad). This

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form of strategic resistance to literary work that discounts Black girls illustrates how Black beauty can be found or created in literature.

Black Girls' Literacies of Resistance in English Education: Building a Case for Counter Fairy Tales

Early literacy experiences have enduring effects on the perceptions and aspirations of children. This is especially important for Black female learners, given the lack of representative characters in the *timeless classics* such as fairy tales. These stories often depict a white male or female protagonist or reflect cultural traditions representative of the dominant group. However, representative characters and experiences of nondominant groups are equally important. One possible way to address these concerns is to promote literacies of resistance. In Phil Hunsberger's article on a call for connectedness in literacy, he discusses the need for classroom teachers to vigilantly present counternarratives that "confront stereotypes regarding Black students." Henry

A. Giroux expands on this idea by explaining that students' understandings of themselves cannot be separated with how they are represented in society. Therefore, if students are never presented with positive visions of their own lived experiences in the stories they read, there is a need for them to create their own stories through the use of counternarratives in writing instruction.

In 1965, Nancy Larrick wrote the article "The All-White World of Children's Books" in response to a five-year-old Black girl's question regarding the invisibility of Black characters in children's books. Four years later, the Coretta Scott King Award was created to promote understanding and appreciation of African American culture and universal human values. Hence, we argue that aside from addressing the misrepresentation of Black people in literature and society, it is equally important to (re)center Black voices. One mechanism to facilitate this process is to reclaim literary spaces by retelling classic stories from the perspective of nondominant groups of learners. This process provides all learners a creative space to express themselves as equally



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important participants in the English language arts community of practice.

Counter Fairy Tales

Following this premise, a model called counter fairy tales (CFT) was developed to leverage Black girls' experiential and communal funds of knowledge. This is necessary to support more inclusive practices in literacy instruction. The CFT model encourages these girls to take traditional fairy tales and rewrite the narrative from their perspective. Many of these stories include or suggest that the protagonist is both White and female. This practice often prevents many Black female learners from envisioning themselves as queens or princesses. These subliminal messages facilitate self-loathing and maladaptive constructions of what it means to be beautiful or desirable.

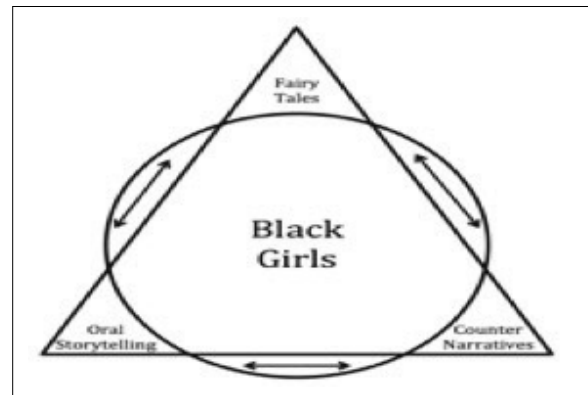
Schooling practices that criminalize traditional Black hair care methods and styles further perpetuate this. These policies are often upheld despite medical evidence that suggests that these natural hair care practices promote healthier life-

styles for Black women and girls. Aside from providing affirmation for Black girls and women, we also posit that this process can inform teachers and other students to the nuances that distinguish the realities of Black girls from their teachers and peers that can lead to cultural discontinuity. Adding relevant context can shape the quality and

experiences of the teacher, Black girls, and their peers. Black girls and the teacher have a shared understanding of the traditional fairy tale, but the Black girl understands how lived experiences may deviate or contradict the elements of the story.

Figure 1 presents a conceptual model to support the implementation of counter fairy tales. At the center of the model are Black girls and their lived experiences. Peripheral to the experiences of Black girls are oral storytelling, fairy tales, and counternarratives. An oral tradition is a commonly cited component of the Black familial experience. Therefore, oral storytelling was adopted in the

FIGURE 1. Counter Fairy Tale (CFT) Model



model to facilitate the authentic construction of counter fairy tales. As noted earlier, the experiences of Black people are often absent or misconstrued, thus facilitating the need for counternarratives to respond to these challenges. Finally, fairy tales were selected because they represent a set of narratives that most young children are exposed to in early literary interactions or through educational children's programs. Together the model represents the interactions between fairy tales, counternarratives, and oral storytelling from which Black girls and other culturally and linguistically diverse learners can extend or adapt the traditional narrative to better represent their experiences and cultural funds of knowledge.

To minimize the lived experiences of Black girls demonstrates what Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie called *the danger of a single story*: the complexity of Black girls' lives reduced to a single, often stereotypical narrative weakens their humanity. Adichie and organizations such as We Need Diverse Books and Teaching Tolerance have encouraged ELA teachers' intentional and careful selection of literature that presents windows, doors, and mirrors to Black girls that promote their positive identities, hopes, and dreams. Additionally, culturally responsive and/or relevant teaching in English language arts classrooms has been heightened to deconstruct biases and create safe spaces for marginalized Black girls. With culturally inclusive and supportive classroom libraries and activities that employ the CFT model, English language arts educators can empower Black girls' voices and actions to be enslaved no more.

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Counter Fairy Tales in Practice: A Teacher's Reflection

The following narrative is a firsthand reflective account of a teacher's experiences in using CFT to examine point of view with a group of Black girls.

As I was pulling a small group of fifth graders who had not passed the first administration of state Reading assessment, I decided to use the CFT framework I recently learned about instead of traditional test preparation materials. I selected a fairytale that all my students were familiar with—"Goldilocks and the Three Bears." We read the story aloud, each student taking a part of the text to read and summarize to his or her peers. I drew the diagram on the whiteboard and wrote the exposition, laying out the characters, the setting, and the introduction of the plot. I needed the students to be involved as much as possible in completing the plot diagram so that they would feel comfortable and confident in doing it on their own in independence practice.

When the plot diagram was completed, I asked the students to think of Goldilocks as a young Black girl. "How would the story change? And in what ways would the character's traits, the setting, or the author's point of view become different if the Goldilocks was an 11-year-old Black girl from your neighborhood?" It was important to remind students of the lesson objectives in case there were misconceptions. Then I informed my students that they had seven minutes to reflect, brainstorm, and share ideas with their peers before they wrote their CFT, asking them to steer clear of stereotypes. I gave students a blank plot diagram and offered them the choice of working in pairs or by themselves, and all of them elected to work independently.


For 20 minutes, my students were deeply engaged in changing Goldilocks into someone they could culturally relate to, as well as in fulfilling the academic objectives of the lesson, before sharing their CFTs with the class. As a class, we completed a Venn diagram comparing and contrasting the traditional story of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" and one of the CFTs that they thought was the most creative and authentic.

As I reflected on this lesson, I am surprised by the ability of these girls to apply a variety of sophisticated literary devices such as situational and dramatic irony, anthropomorphism, and allusion. All contained irony, as it was a major part of

the traditional narratives. Of the eight CFTs written, four had nonhuman characters with urbanized behaviors. Three made literary references to plot structures, settings, or characters from Sharon G. Flake's *Money Hungry*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, and George Lucas' *Star Wars: Episode VII—The Force Awakens*. Most notable was the powerful confirmation for culturally responsive teaching provided by CFTs. Through their CFTs, these girls proved that urban students have a wealth of healthy life experiences (though they may be entrenched in urban references or circumstance), yet still have a quality that individuals of all races and ethnicities can find relatable, including teachers.

In this reflective account, CFTs were used to engage students in a remediation activity designed to prepare them for a state reading assessment. As noted in this account, the teacher was able to make the material more accessible and meaningful for the students because it allowed them to present their voice in resistance to a story they understood but was not reflective of their lived experiences. Other traditional fairy tales can also serve as a bridge to CFTs.

Conclusion

In this analysis, we discussed how Black girls could engage with literary texts through counter fairy tales as a resistive literary strategy to reclaim Black girls' narratives and to be reflective of their experiences. We propose the inclusion of counter fairy tales as an instructional tool to capture these funds of knowledge to leverage and increase their opportunities to receive relevant literacy instruction. It is important to note that we recognize that CFT is only one method to facilitate the (re)centering of Black girls' voices as literacies of resistance. Appropriately, multiple approaches are warranted, given the numerous instructional and institutional challenges facing Black girls in public schools. Nonetheless, we hope that this one example can foster dialogue and action to better support the unique needs of Black girls. In conclusion, Maya Angelou proclaims, "A bird doesn't sing because it has an answer, it sings because it has a song." However, without the (re)centering of Black girls' voices as literacies of resistance, the songs of this population of learners will remain unsung. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Students work together in small groups to read, discuss, and analyze fairy tales. After compiling a list of common elements, students collaborate on original fairy tales—based on events from their own lives or the lives of someone they know. The lesson follows a process method that includes peer review and encourages using picture books from a variety of cultural backgrounds as models. <http://bit.ly/2DMhvvP>

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