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## Perhaps a Black Girl Rolls Her Eyes Because It's One Way She Attempts to Shift Calcified Pain Throughout Her Body

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# Perhaps a Black Girl Rolls Her Eyes Because It's One Way She Attempts to Shift Calcified Pain Throughout Her Body?

*Fahima I. Ife*

My spirit is unsettled each time I read my secondary English education students' reflections about their placement sites. As is typically the case in teacher education programs, in each cohort most of my students are White women, and a few are White men; there are always fewer than five students of color. As they prepare to enter middle and high school classrooms as full-time English teachers, my students participate in required field experiences in schools throughout East Baton Rouge Parish, where they encounter mostly Black and Brown students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. For many, this is their first time being surrounded by students whose bodies and lived experiences differ greatly from their own.

I do not join my students in their field sites. I wait for them at the university, in our English methods courses, where they bring many reflective stories. Mostly, their narratives feel like greedy gossip. They relay tales of hostility witnessed as fights break out each day. They report standing on the sidelines, spying young Black bodies clawing at one another. They mumble desires for strategies to “manage” their future students. My Queer-Black-woman self has learned to wander between the spoken and unsaid. Deeper within their reflections lies another narrative—a clear disdain toward Black girls' expression. My students are angered when Black girls roll their eyes, suggest they develop more backbone in their teaching, adamantly refuse another rudimentary reading of *The Crucible*, or loudly assert their needs and objections in the classroom.

Why do my students register Black girls' actions as impolite, rather than seeing them as animated responses? Why must Black girls continue to enter classrooms where teachers aspire to refashion their behavior and to forcibly eradicate loud, wild, and sassy expressions of Black girlhood, rather than “celebrate” (Brown, 2013) their vibrant spirits? Perhaps a Black girl rolls her eyes because it's one way she attempts to shift calcified pain throughout her body? Perhaps she's disinterring historicized pain, meticulously shifting transatlantic memories of an earlier time's forced breeding (De Veaux, 2014; Shange, 2010; Spillers, 2003), of yesterday's slanders against her sexual nature (Morgan, 2000;

Richardson, 2013), and of today's appropriation of her genetic legacies (Bey & Sakellarides, 2016) and envisioning tomorrow's dissolution of hardened slabs of salt flowing freely throughout her healed body? Perhaps she's signaling her need for creative outlet, a mythical opportunity worthy of her sentence?

Perhaps a Black girl rolls her eyes to intervene against daily assaults against her humanity in hostile classes? Where being Black-and-girl incites dehumanization and despiritualization? Where *being* "loud Black girls" (Fordham, 1993; Koonce, 2012; E. Morris, 2007) summons state-sanctioned incarceration, underreported police fatalities (Crenshaw & Ritchie, 2015), and minimal space to address its impact (Love, 2017)? How can my future-teacher-students cultivate empathy for Black girls if they do not understand their kaleidoscopic expressions, if they cannot understand their multiply overlapping intersections of marginality, if they have never absorbed their literary imaginations, if they do not personally know or love any Black girls whose lives do more than gesticulate Whiteness?

But this isn't entirely their fault. They are undergraduate English majors who are largely unfamiliar with the worlds curated by Black women writers, whose works are rarely included in British and American literature courses.

So, I meddle.

Because t/Terror times demand intervention, I introduce my students to the silent, elliptical attacks against Black girlhood. We synthesize Monique Morris's (2016) *Pushout* and #SayHerName reports from the African American Policy Forum (Crenshaw, 2015; Crenshaw & Ritchie, 2015). I ask them to consider Black girls' needs—and they do, perhaps for the very first time—as they begin sculpting curricula.

Because Pre-K–20 courses rarely center the experiences of Black girls and women, and because I've grown tired after years of my own eye-rolling, I designed and taught an undergraduate survey of African American women's literature, "#BlackGirlMagic Across Time & Space." Thirty-three students enrolled, 24 Black women and nine allies.<sup>1</sup> Nearly half our class openly or quietly identified as LGBTQ, and a few Black women discussed their nonmonogamous and polyamorous expressions of love. Many openly discussed their yearnings for love.

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1 Three White women, three Black men, two Latina women, and one White man also enrolled in the course.

Using novels, poetry, music, film, and scholarly pieces, we examined how Black girls, in real and imagined scenarios, cultivate sites for expressive freedom. We opened with individual definitions of #BlackGirlMagic and Jamila Woods’s (2016) ode to Chicagoan #BlackGirlMagic in her album *HEAVN*. We considered origins of #BlackGirlMagic as social media phenomenon brought to life by CaShawn Thompson in 2013 (Wilson, 2016). We read closely, relying upon Black feminist critiques, including those about intersectional legacies of trauma (Crenshaw, 1991), geographical (re)imaginings of Black girlhood/womanhood (McKittrick, 2006), and (re)articulations of eroticism (Lorde, 1984). Indigo’s girlhood conjure in Ntozake Shange’s (2010) *Sassafrass, Cypress, & Indigo* initiated our thinking about the magical and subversive aspects of #BlackGirlMagic.

We continued with an erotic interlude on transatlantic memories, “other heres,” and beautiful human evolution in Alexis De Veaux’s (2014) *Yabo*. Anyanwu’s shapeshifting and healing in Octavia Butler’s (1988) *Wild Seed* helped us consider bold assertions against patriarchy. And Celie’s spiritual and sexual awakening in Alice Walker’s (2003) *The Color Purple* solidified our understandings of how intertwined eroticism is with magic and creative expression. Students located evidence of #BlackGirlMagic and its mechanisms and interventions in novels and course readings and wrote in creative reflective journals and analytical #BlackGirlMagic commentaries.

Between novels, we read scholarly critiques and blog posts by Black women and shared media “play dates” where we listened to music and crafted magical items such as wish jars, collages, and poetry. We listened to Solange Knowles’s (2016) *A Seat at the Table*. We also viewed D. C. singer-songwriter-filmmaker Be Steadwell’s (2014) short film, *Vow of Silence*, and Beyoncé’s (2016) visual album, *LEMONADE*.

After listening and viewing, we ruminated on heartache and healing in student-facilitated talkbacks. We co-curated a digital media archive holding links to interactive sites, blogs, songs, documentaries, opinion editorials, animated series’, and other electronic artifacts portraying our expansive, collective definitions of #BlackGirlMagic. Toward the end, we discussed ownership, reflecting on Clover Hope’s inquiry, “Who Gets to Own ‘Black Girl Magic?’” (Hope, 2017). We concluded with an art fair, where students showcased both individual and collaborative creative projects based on their own redefinitions of #BlackGirlMagic.

Here, in what became an incredibly q/Queer expressive course, Black girls’ eye rolling and side-eyeing were embraced as rhythmic creativity. #BlackGirlMagic was rearticulated as a spiritual antidote to

Western conceptions of learning, discussion, and being in venues of higher education. Throughout our time together, we giggled, we gathered in talking circles, we smiled, we snapped our fingers in recognition, we were shameless, we shouted in exasperation, we danced, we sealed our wishes in jars, we reported harm, we created, we cried, and we invited one another to tenderly hold parts of our humanity rarely broached in humanities courses.

“#BlackGirlMagic Across Time & Space” intentionally centered emotional and social justice in the lives of Black women. It evolved into a spiritual training ground, a creative space where Black women (and allies) continually existed in “full abundance” (Staples, 2016). Perhaps a Black girl rolls her eyes because there are so few spaces where she can simply *be*, shifting and twirling through various emotional states? Yet, by persistently replenishing living, breathing archives, they/she/we curate magical spaces, animated by brilliance. And through steady creative motion, we heal.

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