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Recognizing and Sustaining #BlackGirlMagic: Reimagining Justice-Oriented Approaches in Teacher Education

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Recognizing and Sustaining #BlackGirlMagic: Reimagining Justice-Oriented Approaches in Teacher Education

Tia C. Madkins

Many educators and teacher educators have (re)committed to pursuing justice, sharing stories, and centering joy and self-care as our education, race, and global public health crises continue to converge. Losing in-person entertainment options (e.g., Broadway shows, concerts) inspired new ways to enjoy our favorite shows and books (e.g., Quarantine TV; [Dr. Rabadi-Raol's Tell-a-Tale](#)) and dance the night away (e.g., [DJ D-Nice's Club Quarantine](#)). Maintaining traditions of storytelling and healing through music, artists shared renditions of their favorite songs and gave free virtual performances (e.g., [Deborah Cox and Tamia performed "Count on Me"](#), [Lizzo's live meditation](#)).

Other stories highlighted the pervasiveness of White supremacy and injustice in schools. Many of these stories make clear how inequalities disproportionately affect Black, Indigenous, and Latinx children's lives (Katayama et al, 2020). Yet, even during COVID-19, when most people significantly increased time spent online (Koeze & Popper, 2020) witnessing growing disparities in our society—Black girls' and womxn's lives and stories *still* remain largely invisible, devalued, or unbelievable (Cooper, 2020; Reid, 2020). Lorde (2017, p. VIII) reminds us that although our “silence will not protect” us, when “speaking as a Black [girl or] woman,” we are among the most vulnerable in our world.¹

What if, instead, we used this moment as a “portal, a gateway between one world and the next” where we value and fight for Black girls' lives (Roy, 2020)? We would have more cohesive approaches for supporting these vulnerable learners, celebrating the diversity of Black girlhoods, and disrupting monolithic views of who Black girls are and are becoming. In this reimagined world, using justice-oriented pedagogies (i.e., strengths-based approaches fostering development of learners' agency, critical thinking skills, and critical consciousness) is central to all educators' work. Though pursuing justice for Black girls varies *across* PK-12 contexts, Black girls' humanity, contributions, and brilliance will be affirmed *within each* learning context.

In this essay, I argue that one way to accomplish this is for P-12 educators to recognize and sustain [#BlackGirlMagic](#), which [CaShawn Thompson](#) defined in 2013 as Black girls' and womxn's universal awesomeness and brilliance. First, I define constructs and share my researcher positionality statement, telling the story of how my experiences shape my lens. Next, I review origins of [#BlackGirlMagic](#), considerations for its use, and recent scholarship on teacher education and Black girls' schooling experiences. Building upon this research prioritizing storytelling, I then discuss one way Black communities have reimagined our world. Using the [VerzuzTV music battles](#) developed during the pandemic, I discuss how Black girls and womxn are both hyper-visible and invisible. Finally, I share ideas—without being prescriptive—about how practicing educators and teacher educators (working with either aspiring or practicing educators) can make [#BlackGirlMagic](#) visible.

1 The most vulnerable populations of girls and womxn in the US and globally are Indigenous (Hopkins, 2020). To this end, Department of the Interior Secretary Deb Haaland established an investigative unit for missing and murdered Indigenous girls and womxn in her first month of office (Native News Online, 2021).

Constructs defined. I intentionally use *Black*, rather than *African American* or other terms, because there are several African Diaspora ethnicities within this racialized identity (e.g., African, African American, Afro-Asian, Afro-Indigenous, Afro-Latin@, Black American, Caribbean, and multiracial). I define *Black girls* as school-aged learners identifying as Black and female (knowing some learners we see as Black girls have gender-fluid or non-binary identities), usually between ages 4 and 18 in P-12 environments. Finally, I use *learners* instead of *students* because *all* the children that educators interact with in any context are always learning, in and out of schools.

Researcher positionality statement. I mainly write in first person (i.e., *I*), but also write using the collective *we* to emphasize our familiar yet unique experiences *and* my identity as a Black girl who became a Black woman. Much of my childhood was spent with my two younger sisters learning to love and celebrate our Black girlhoods in suburban Atlanta, Georgia. I am one of seven children (three sisters, three brothers) whose parents survived the Jim Crow era in Shreveport, Louisiana (mother) and the cotton belt region of East Texas (father), areas with some of the highest rates of lynching in the US until 1950 (New York Times, 2015).

Our parents taught us to love our faith, family, and cultural ways of knowing and being. My sisters and I spent our weekends engaged with our church community in historic Southwest Atlanta—affectionately called the SWATS—loving but not romanticizing our Blackness. We participated in our church’s Girl Scouts chapter whose members were (and still are) only Black girls. We looked forward to going to the annual battle of the bands hosted by the Atlanta University Center in the SWATS, a longstanding marching band competition among historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), which remains a popular regional event.

In contemporary times, similar cultural events and experiences vary across age groups, Black ethnic groups, and US regions, particularly in the COVID-19 era. This may include Black girls inspiring the creation of social media sensations (e.g., [HersheKissis](#) or [Renegade Creator Jalaiah Harmon](#)) or participating in out-of-school learning designed for Black girls (e.g., [SOLHOT](#) or Jacobs, 2016). These experiences supported my sisters and me in embracing the beauty of sisterhood with Black girls in our neighborhood, the SWATS, and elsewhere.

These lessons were not without complications, because although our parents survived Jim Crow, they carried much of the internalized racism of that time with them. While our suburban life may have equated success as proximity to Whiteness, our racial socialization experiences centered love and appreciation for Black people, cultures, and histories. It was foreseeable that my three siblings who pursued postsecondary degrees graduated from Howard University, a prominent historically Black college and university (HBCU). I attended a historically White institution (HWI), Boston University, where I was one of few Black girls becoming womxn in STEM² with a pre-med emphasis. Within the HWI, my experiences of feeling isolated and undervalued, and the false narratives about being exceptional (Morton & Parsons, 2018; Watkins & Mensah, 2019) contribute to my understandings of why recognizing #BlackGirlMagic is necessary across learning contexts.

Unsurprisingly—but much to my parents’ chagrin—I pursued a career in education rather than medicine with my biology degree. Countless family members were/are educators across (in)formal PK-20 settings, including two of my maternal aunts, who have collectively taught young learners for nearly 100 years in Shreveport, Louisiana. Teaching is a largely feminized profession and not as well-respected or lucrative

2 STEM: science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

as medicine (Griffiths, 2006). But I knew my soul’s work would be satisfied by working with young learners and building upon the historical legacy of Black womxn teachers (Madkins, 2011).

As an educator in both Northern and Southern California, I experienced successes and failures while working with PK-8 learners and their families—especially Black girls—before earning a doctoral degree in education. My collective educational, personal, and professional relationships with Black girls and womxn reiterate the importance of sisterhood and multimodal storytelling, informing my university-based teaching and research.

This intergenerational and experiential knowledge shapes my positionality. I understand how uplifting and loving Black girls is at odds with deficit narratives, internalized racism, and anti-Blackness in teacher education, schooling, and beyond. That’s exactly how White supremacy works. Nonetheless, I remain hopeful *and* committed to drawing upon these generative experiences and centering justice-oriented approaches in my teaching and research. I recognize the privileges I have in engaging in this work (and in life) as a cisgendered, heterosexual light-skinned Black woman. Thus, in this reimagined world, I will leave behind instructional practices in my teacher education courses that make space for White rage or fragility (Anderson, 2016). These emotions and responses only serve to preserve Whiteness in teacher education and avoid self-examination of racist practices (Souto-Manning, 2019).

I will also continue to insist we no longer capitulate to narrow views about Black childhoods that center Black boys. This can be achieved by prioritizing Black girlhoods and womxn in my research and teaching while engaging in professional service duties that amplify their voices and lived experiences. Using the pandemic as a portal means I will work to ensure educators and teacher educators understand the variations in and value of Black girlhoods as we improve our pedagogical practices with Black children across contexts. I will not be overly concerned with how such commitments may influence my university-based teaching or other evaluations. My positionality allows me to employ this particular lens in service to Black girls *and* to protect Black girlhoods. Reimagining Black girls’ educational lives and futures serves as a point of departure for this essay *and* for engaging our work across learning contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

#BlackGirlMagic. Joan Morgan (2017) and others have used Black girl magic or similar phrases for several years to affirm our excellence (Toliver, 2019). By introducing the hashtag, #BlackGirlMagic, in 2013, CaShawn Thompson amplified positive images and contributions of Black girls and womxn, shifting conversations to focus on strengths and achievements rather than deficits and discipline. Importantly, Thompson highlighted how Black womxn are oftentimes “the *only* people supporting us” (Thomas, 2015, emphasis added). Thompson simultaneously demonstrates how Black girls’ and womxn’s brilliance and awesomeness are all-encompassing (i.e., we *all* have these qualities) and how we are often invisible, devalued, and unsupported due to White supremacy, patriarchy, and misogynoir.

These are not new ideas or critiques, as evidenced by prominent Black feminist perspectives (e.g., Crenshaw & Flanders, 2015; Hill Collins, 2002). But, the global resonance of #BlackGirlMagic is a radical reminder that some Black girls and womxn do not recognize their universal brilliance and awesomeness. Even those of us who ground our teaching and research in our communities’ strengths (e.g., Black womxn equity-focused teacher educators) can be socialized into erasing and/or ignoring the important understandings of who we are (Boveda et al., 2019). Thus, it is important for educators to recognize and sustain #BlackGirlMagic in *all* Black girls, especially those who may not consistently receive and/or internalize positive messages about who they are (Evans, 2020).

Recognizing and sustaining #BlackGirlMagic is full of both possibilities and tensions. The hashtag has inspired:

- special issues of Black women’s magazines, like Essence Magazine, and journal articles (e.g., Ife, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2017)
- merchandise (see Figure 1), a **book club** featuring Black womxn authors and wine from a **Black-owned winery**
- **songs** on streaming platforms
- **BlackGirlMathgic** and
- educational conferences (Tesfamichael, 2019).

#BlackGirlMagic can also serve as an entry point for promoting healing and self-love among Black girls and womxn (Staples, 2017). This work may not *seem* necessary, but we must consider how searches for “beauty” via Google Images or gif apps have historically excluded Black girls and womxn. Why are Black children left out of images of early childhood depicting “innocence” and “beauty” (Nxumalo & ross, 2019)? Why are negative images and vulgar words associated with Google searches for “Black girls” (Noble, 2018)? Why is Beyonce’s song, “Brown Skin Girl,” uplifting the beauty of brown-skinned and dark brown-skinned Black girls, both revered and despised (Kendall, 2019)?



Figure 1. Author (left), wearing a Black Girl Magic T-shirt, with **Dr. Fikile Nxumalo** (right), wearing a **#CiteBlackWomen** T-shirt at merchandise book club meeting

Critiques. We know Black girls are “much more than magic” (Ladson-Billings, 2017, p. 3) and must also consider how using #BlackGirlMagic without intentionality and reflection can reify stereotypes and/or the adultification of Black girls. To be clear, the hashtag and its meaning have been misinterpreted, appropriated, and invalidly critiqued (e.g., **#Blackgirlmagic is racist**). Importantly, scholars point out that #BlackGirlMagic can perpetuate strong, superhuman (i.e., magical creatures) Black women tropes for Black girls (e.g., McPherson, 2020). #BlackGirlMagic can falsely suggest that Black girls are inherently magical, thereby capable and resilient enough *on their own* to respond to the unique challenges they face in schools (McPherson, 2020).

These structural challenges function to reproduce inequalities in Black girls' school lives, even during the pandemic. For example, Black girls are often pushed out of schools via harsh disciplinary practices for minor offenses and have differential opportunities to learn (Cox, 2015; Ife, 2017; Jones, 2017; M. Morris, 2016). As such, educators and teacher educators must acknowledge and address systemic failures to adequately support Black girls' educational futures. Finally, we must be cognizant of how magic is connected to various African Diaspora spiritual practices, and how centering #BlackGirlMagic can be disrespectful towards and/or dismissive of these practices (Dalilah, 2017).

Invisibility of #BlackGirlMagic in teacher education. Teacher education scholars have called out the sociohistorical roots of teacher education that center Whiteness, claim teacher education as White property, and marginalize the work of Black womxn (Ife, 2017; Jones, 2017; M. Morris, 2016; Madkins, 2011; Souto-Manning, 2019). Others have traced educators' deficit views of Black girls, including seeing them as adults rather than children, as impolite, and/or as disinterested in their educational futures (R. Brown, 2013; Cox, 2015, Ife, 2017; E. Morris, 2007).

Taken together, scholars who pursue these lines of inquiry demonstrate how #BlackGirlMagic is invisible within teacher education, especially university-based programs. Rarely do we ask educators to identify, examine, and connect their racialized beliefs to their dispositions and instructional practices. To make #BlackGirlMagic visible, teacher educators have to name and reject these tropes about Black girls, decenter Whiteness, and commit to the ongoing, daily work of transforming teacher education.

Research on Black girls. Recently, educational researchers have examined the heterogeneity of Black girls and productive ways of supporting their academic achievement (e.g., R. Brown, 2013; Cox, 2015; Nyachae, 2016; Toliver, 2019). This work provides complex, nuanced understandings of Black girls across learning contexts. Predictably, Black womxn have led much of this work, often using Black feminist perspectives (e.g., Crenshaw & Flanders, 2015; Hill Collins, 2002); music as a tool for teaching and learning (e.g., Waters et al., 2019); and/or storytelling methodological approaches (see Lewis & Hildebrandt, 2019). In and outside of educational research, this mode of inquiry includes:

- counterstories (King & Pringle, 2019)
- digital storytelling (Price-Dennis, 2016)
- narrative inquiry (Gordon et al., 2019)
- photonarrative (Goldston & Nichols, 2009)
- portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016) and
- testimonios (Baez, 2010)

Scholars have used storytelling in its varied forms to amplify Black girls' voices and experiences across subdisciplines within education (e.g., Allen-Handy et al., 2020; Kelly, 2020; Winn, 2019). Others have shared autoethnographic or autobiographical accounts of their lives as former Black girls (e.g., Jones, 2017) or used storytelling to increase their visibility as Black womxn teacher educators (e.g., Skerrett, 2006).

Collectively, this research: 1) illuminates Black girls' strengths and brilliance while moving away from binary representations of Black girls as *ladies* or *loudies* (E. Morris, 2007); 2) contributes to our understandings of how to strengthen Black girls' educational futures; and 3) reiterates the importance of Black girls' and womxn's stories in education. In our reimagined world, aspiring and practicing educators and teacher educators will value these stories by providing space in classrooms for Black girls to tell their stories and celebrate their #BlackGirlMagic. They will also honor the complexity of Black girlhoods and expand their ideas about Black girls' multiple identities and identity development as they work to recognize and sustain #BlackGirlMagic.

RECOGNIZING AND SUSTAINING #BLACKGIRLMAGIC

If our global pandemic is a portal for reimagining a world where Black girls’ educational lives *and* stories matter, then the Verzuz battles—developed by Black performing artists in response to the pandemic—are an appropriate, illustrative tool. **VerzuzTV battles** are entertaining and embody multimodal storytelling for Black communities, especially during difficult times. In the following section, I draw upon three brief, important lessons about visibility, storytelling, and sisterhood emerging from Verzuz battles relevant to #BlackGirlMagic, teaching, and learning. Finally, I offer considerations for *all* educators and teacher educators for using these lessons in their work, especially with Black girls.

LESSONS FROM THE VERZUZ BATTLES

In March 2020, legendary producers Timbaland and Swiss Beatz introduced Verzuz battles as a new form of entertainment (Amorosi, 2020). In these friendly competitions (livestreamed via Instagram), rhythm and blues (R&B), neo-soul, and hip-hop artists, DJs, and producers battle each other to determine who has the best musical catalogue. Artists find ways to weave their personal and professional stories into the battle, where each artist plays one song in each of 20 rounds. Viewers “decide” who won the round and share their thoughts in the comments section of the livestream. Of the 22 battles in 2020, only three featured Black womxn artists³ (see Table 1). Yet these garnered some of Verzuz’s highest ratings, number of celebrity viewers (including First Lady Michelle Obama and Vice President Kamala Harris), and social media presence (Jenkins, 2020). These R&B and neo-soul artists demonstrate the universal appeal of Black womxn artists and embody #BlackGirlMagic.

Table 1. Most Popular Verzuz Battles: March to September 2020

Featured Artists and Date	Number of Viewers	Social Media Impressions (Exposure to Content)
Erykah Badu vs. Jill Scott May 9, 2020	710,000 total viewers via Instagram Live (becoming the highest-rated battle at the time)	1 billion+ impressions
DMX vs. Snoop Dogg July 22, 2020	3.4 million total viewers via Instagram Live and Apple Music/TV	1.75 billion+ impressions
Brandy vs. Monica August 31, 2020	6 million total viewers via Instagram Live, YouTube, and Apple Music/TV	5 billion+ impressions
Gladys Knight vs. Patti LaBelle September 13, 2020	3.7 million concurrent viewers via Instagram Live and Apple Music/TV	3 billion+ impressions

Sources: Amorosi, 2020; Gunn, 2020; Jenkins, 2020; Vasishta & Aswad, 2020; & **VerzuzTV**

Visibility. The male-centric Verzuz battles demonstrate Black girls and womxn’s (in)visibility. Despite critiquing Verzuz creators’ lack of accountability to and the invisibility of Black womxn (Jenkins, 2020;

³ Alicia Keys, the only other female artist featured in 2020, battled John Legend **on Juneteenth**; both are known for their ballads and piano skills.

Thompson, 2020), Black womxn artists were excluded from battles until early May (i.e., **Erykah Badu vs. Jill Scott**). Once Black womxn became increasingly *visible* in the battles, Verzuz gained popularity, as evidenced by viewership and social media impressions (see Table 1), **streaming platforms** and corporate sponsorships.

Black womxn's invisibility was also demonstrated during the only **gospel music battle**, with icons **Fred Hammond** and **Kirk Franklin**, just as the world began protesting the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and others. In a **#SayTheirNames** segment, the artists read the names of Black boys and men killed by police or vigilantes—leaving out Black girls and womxn. Fortunately, Black womxn celebrity viewers like **Amber Riley** and **Lena Waithe** reminded them via livestream comments of the Black girls, womxn, and trans individuals who were *also* killed (D. Brown, 2020), forcing Kirk and Fred to **#SayHerName**.

There are important parallels here for teaching and learning as we work to recognize and sustain **#BlackGirlMagic**. Similar to Verzuz battles, important national and local educational initiatives have focused on Black boys (e.g., **African American Male Achievement, My Brother's Keeper**), erasing Black girls from narratives about improving education for Black children (i.e., making Black girls invisible). In contrast, focusing solely on regulating Black girls' attitudes and behaviors makes their presence across learning contexts hyper-visible, contributing to Black girls' adultification, criminalization, and positioning as less capable learners (M. Morris, 2016). Instead, we should seek to make Black girls and their **#BlackGirlMagic** *visible*—rather than invisible or hyper-visible—in ways that center their universal brilliance and awesomeness. In doing so, we position and affirm Black girls as capable, engaged learners and promote justice (Green et al., 2020; M. Morris, 2016; ross, 2018).

Another lesson to learn from Verzuz battles is to include Black girls *from the beginning* of our planning efforts to meet their academic and socioemotional needs. In addition to inviting Black girls to share their stories and insights and take leadership roles, this might include welcoming Black family and community members into schools and university-based classrooms to provide their perspectives on working effectively with Black girls.

Multimodal storytelling. Varied forms of storytelling (e.g., digital, oral, visual, and/or written) became an integral part of Verzuz battles as they increased in popularity. Artists and viewers alike found sharing their stories served as a way to explain histories, uplift, and heal. One way this was evidenced was during a round of **Gladys vs. Patti**. After playing “**If You Asked Me To**,” originally released in 1989, Patti LaBelle declared, “I did it first!” This was in reference to **Celine Dion's successful 1992 cover of the song**, which prompted Patti to share her stories. She not only asserted her **#BlackGirlMagic**, but demonstrated how she became invisible in the narrative about the song's success.

This is an important lesson about sharing our lived experiences for educators and teacher educators. Prioritizing storytelling while working with Black girls in *any* learning setting provides space for sharing, appreciation, healing, and sensemaking (Staples, 2017). In so doing, Black girls have opportunities to witness **#BlackGirlMagic** in themselves and other Black girls, which is important for *all* learners. In giving attention to **#BlackGirlMagic** and multimodal storytelling, educators and teacher educators not only demonstrate they value Black girls' and womxn's contributions, they also position Black girls as capable learners and foster inclusive classrooms.

Another lesson we can learn from Verzuz battles is the need to make Black girls' intellectual, social, and other contributions visible. Within (in)formal K-12 contexts, this means finding ways to recognize Black girls as they see themselves, instead of through the White gaze—in comparison to White learners, especially White girls—or in comparison to Black boys. In university-based classrooms, teacher educators should diversify course syllabi (Appleton, 2019) and include scholarship uplifting the work of Black womxn scholars, educators, and activists (e.g., Muhammad et al., 2020). They should also ensure that readings and activities in methods courses decenter Whiteness and deficit views of Black girls.

Sisterhood and relationships. Finally, the Verzuz battles offer important lessons about sisterhood and relationships. One of the best moments of the Gladys vs. Patti battle was Patti stating, “**We are not working together, we are *being together*.**” Here, she centered the idea that sisterhood is about *being together* in community rather than positioning one person as more important than another. She also signaled that *working together* means *being* in a collaborative, noncompetitive, and generative space with others—a nonjudgmental place *to be* where you and your ideas are shaped by *and* shape others. We also witnessed during Brandy vs. Monica how sisterhood and relationships can be complicated. They shared their successes and longstanding conflicts with each other (Cochrane, 2020), demonstrating how they continue to work through their unresolved interpersonal issues, like many adult womxn.

In reimagining relationships with Black girls (learner-learner, educator-learner), there are important lessons from the battles about how simply being together, building community, and handling conflict are relational norms. Given the hyperfocus on regulating Black girls' attitudes and behaviors in education (Epstein et al., 2017), it is especially important to understand that Black girls' engagement in conflict should not equal criminalization. Instead, we can view interpersonal and other types of conflict as opportunities for storytelling, reflection, and problem-solving, knowing that the conflict may not be resolved. What matters *more* is that Black girls are given space to productively engage in resolving conflicts without being adultified or their situation being sensationalized, if we are to learn from Brandy and Monica. By making sensemaking processes *visible*, we also offer Black girls opportunities to reflect, offer reciprocal feedback, and normalize working through conflicts over time.

Another powerful lesson stems from the Erykah vs. Jill battle: the importance of fostering and maintaining spaces for healing, relaxation, and appreciation. In schools, Black girls are often viewed in comparison to White girls; they have their worth and abilities questioned and are held to unrealistic standards (Waite, 2021). As such, they need spaces in and out of schools where they are not made to feel they must strive for perfection. Educators and teacher educators can also provide spaces where Black girls can learn how sisterhood means holding and making space for others to heal, shine, and *simply be together*.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this historical moment, we can celebrate Black girls' lives, stories, brilliance, and awesomeness. Recognizing and sustaining #BlackGirlMagic is one way for teacher educators and educators to push back against deficit narratives about Black girls (and the Black womxn they will become). In this essay, I shared ideological perspectives on *why* this work is necessary, lessons learned from Verzuz battles, and examples of *how* we might carefully engage this work in our reimagined world. I must also remind all educators and teacher educators—especially those who are non-Black—not to engage in cultural appropriation, essentializing, or romanticizing of Black girls and womxn. These actions defeat our collective purpose and potentially reify stereotypes and negative images of Black girls.

Taking this work seriously requires *all* educators and teacher educators to identify, confront, and reject deficit thinking about minoritized communities, especially Black girls. This means examining our biases and the ways we may have (un)intentionally internalized deficit narratives grounded in White supremacy. We also have to build, maintain, and value relationships with Black communities surrounding our schools and universities, who play an important role in recognizing and sustaining #BlackGirlMagic.

Finally, if we are to disrupt the status quo in service of Black girls while learning from the Verzuz battles, we cannot be afraid to acknowledge and address historical and contemporary racist practices within teacher education. This is particularly important in our graduate courses (e.g., research trends and the history of teacher education), where we are often training the next generation of teacher educators and researchers. This is risky work in academia, and as such, mid-career and senior scholars must advocate for their colleagues—especially their junior colleagues. Facilitating these powerful learning experiences can result in being unfairly penalized in their university and teaching evaluations, for which Womxn of Color already typically receive lower scores (Flaherty, 2019). Using the pandemic as a portal, we can choose to fight for Black girls’ lives and educational futures and thrive in our reimagined world.

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