A strong indicator of Black girls’ beauty and brilliance is their thriving instead of mere surviving in the midst of recurrent psychoemotional hostilities, economic and educational oppression, and assaults on their human dignity. Despite these circumstances across time, they have cultivated (and continue to do so) a style of being that radiates vitality, strength, and finesse—a persona that often defies mainstream U.S. society’s predictability and probability. Given the racist and sexist atrocities that they have endured, one might assume that Black girls (i.e., females, women) would be weak, helpless, perpetually powerless, dependent, and defeated. Quite the contrary is true. Black girls have an inner strength of their own making that radiates grace and dignity. This is especially true of those who are psychoemotionally healthy with regard to their cultural and racial identities, even though at first glance they may not appear to be so. Their strength does not mean being superhuman or having stoic endurance. Instead, it is about creativity, resilience, imagination, and ingenuity in daily living. As Maxine Greene (1984) might say, this beauty is embracing and expanding the aesthetics of one’s own being, which is continually complex and incomplete, because “there are always horizons to be breached, there is always a beyond” (p. 124). That is, there are always other possibilities for imagining and seeking what is, what can be, and what is not yet. Applied to Black girls, this means they are repeatedly transcending prevailing oppressive and restrictive conditions and conceptions; creating their own ways of being aesthetic, graceful, and productive; cultivating and evoking their multiplicities; and always evolving, both individually and collectively.
For us these skills and ways of being are the essence of Black girls’ beauty and brilliance. Because they are encoded and enacted culturally, they often defy recognition and appreciation by outsiders, or if acknowledged they are frequently considered undesirable. Still, within their own African American cultural standards and contexts, psychologically and culturally healthy Black girls got it goin’ on. This idea is consistent with Beverly Bond’s (2017) notion that “Black girls rock!” (https://www.bet.com/shows/black-girls-rock.html) Not all Black girls are so fortunate; some need serious attention and intervention by educators and health care professionals. But, because these needs are beyond the boundaries of our expertise—and because we don’t hear enough about culturally healthy Black girls—we chose to focus our energies here on the latter.

In this chapter we present some case examples of Black girls’ beauty and brilliance as embodied in ideas and actions, and suggest some ways they can be further affirmed and enhanced in teaching and learning. In so doing we are intentional about mixing the past and the present, the self and the other, the exceptional and the ordinary in performative behaviors to illustrate conceptual ideas. We do so because Black girls’ beauty and brilliance result from these multidimensional influences and are manifested in ways beyond mainstream U.S. societal conventions. Throughout the chapter we occasionally “speak” stylistically in ways similar to those whom we write about to further confirm the validity of their own self-presentations. The suggested resources and strategies included are not limited by age, subject, or school level, since they are applicable across these contexts with appropriate developmental adaptations. However, we strongly encourage our readers to be diligent about maintaining cultural and conceptual authenticity as explained here in making necessary adjustments for various intended users and contexts.

**An Idea Personified**

Sometimes it’s best to begin teaching ideas and issues about racial and cultural differences that are beyond our immediate and personal experiences with actual examples. Toni Morrison serves this function for us. She exhibited Black girl beauty and brilliance powerfully and persistently, and exemplifies our counterintuitive conceptions of these attributes. To capture some of the essence of these accomplishments, to understand why she is worthy of emulation, and to be consistent with our notion that Black beauty is communally constructed and culturally contextual, we include some testimonials from several other individuals. They serve the dual function of helping to construct a Morrison portraiture and themselves providing opportunities and guidance for our readers and Black girls everywhere to access their legacies of beauty and brilliance, own them, embellish them, and then pass them on.

In both her personhood and authorship, Toni Morrison was unapologetic about her Blackness. She engaged and propelled the beauty and complexity of being
Black in the midst of dire circumstances and in the face of opposition. She wrote BLACK in topic, content, and tone, not so much in rejection of ethnic others, but in centering her own ethnic people, cultural experiences, and ancestral heritages. She was diligent about developing repertoires of complexity and multidimensionality in crafting her stories and characters to counter the literary and experiential tendencies of many others to present African American people as monolithic. Her Black characters and stories were never only victims or warriors, idiots or geniuses, hopeless or miraculous, criminals or saints, but were presented as striving toward the fullness of being in anything and everything (Abdurraqib, 2019; Evans, 2019; Fokenflik, 2019).

Another aspect of Morrison's Black beauty and brilliance was her celebrating and promoting Blackness about and for her cultural, gender, and racial kinfolks. She understood and embodied the Ubuntu idea that “I am as we are.” That is, recognizing that Black people are inextricably linked together; that one helping others is a necessary factor of Blackness; that “when the many achieve so does the one,” and conversely so. In praising this aspect of her beauty and brilliance, her perpetual becoming better at being herself, Hanif Abdurraqib (2019) said Toni Morrison was genuine in her Blackness. This was not always an easy or desirable thing to accomplish in the United States, where so much trepidation and temptation exist to cover up, mask, or create edited and restricted versions of Blackness for public consumption. In resisting these demands and temptations, Toni Morrison was indeed beautifully and brilliantly BLACK, a benchmark for others’ aspirations.

Cross-generational Black girls can also find inspiration in Morrison's willingness to share the stage and the spotlight with other Black people, especially those who were not her accomplishment peers. One of her admirers described this proclivity as holding the doors of opportunity and possibility open as wide as she could and for as long as she could, so that others could enter. Hence, on “leading” she was committed to being a partner and a helpmate.

In her tribute to Toni Morrison, Michelle Obama noted that she showed us the beauty in being our full selves, the necessity of embracing our complications and contradictions. “And she didn’t just give us permission to share our own stories; she underlined our responsibility to do so . . . , she was . . . deliberate in proving that our stories are rich and deep and largely unexplored” (Obama, 2019, para. 3 & 4).

Expressing similar sentiments, Leah Wright Rigueur said Morrison told us to “wrestle with both the beautiful and the horrifying parts of blackness, and to do it with clarity, love and empathy. She constantly reminded us that writing us “whole,” in all our intricacies and silences, was a necessary part of freedom” (Rigueur, 2019, para. 6).

Danielle Cadet (2019) added that “Morrison’s legacy doesn't only live on through her words. It lives on through . . . the license she gave Black women to tell our
stories, not for others but for ourselves” (para. 6). In her self-explanation of how she dealt with a society that tried to restrict her options and limit her potentiality, Toni Morrison (n.d.) said, “I stood at the border [margins], stood at the edge and claimed it as central. I claimed it as central, and let the rest of the world move over to where I was” (https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/9866511).

**BLACK “Girls” Are Inventive**

Across time and circumstances the inclinations of Black females to create may have been prompted not so much by deliberate design or personal initiative as by the demands of living in psychologically hostile and economically underresourced circumstances. Thus, for them, adversity and necessity have been catalysts for ingenuity, imagination, and creativity. Toni Morrison made a similar observation in noting that “out of the profound desolation of her reality [the Black woman] may very well have invented herself.”

We believe that human dignity cannot be repeatedly assaulted without generating some kinds of counter actions if the victims are to live psychologically healthy and productive lives. For Black females these natural tendencies toward survival and self-protection have generated a rich variety of “reconstructions of self”—of recovery and renewal! They are evidence that Black females do not simply endure the challenges of living in stressful environments; they create in that they develop skill sets that allow them to live better both within, and beyond, the constraints imposed on them. The strength, imagination, and ingenuity that underlie these continuing “reinventions of self” are the essence of Black girls’ beauty and brilliance.

Maya Angelou (1994) captures some of these legacies and abilities of “going beyond” past and present circumstances, and constructing positive narratives of Black femaleness, in her poem “Still I Rise.” Her message is that “you can’t keep Black females down”; they keep rebounding, recovering, and renewing. Like the phoenix they rise again and again! This means that Black females are not just resilient in that they recover or bounce back to the same state of being where they were before encountering hostility and hegemony. Rather, they go beyond in recreating themselves. In so doing they construct new, evolving variations of their beauty and brilliance. Some of these constructions are so performance-based that it is difficult to capture their essence in words. To be fully understood and appreciated, they have to be observed being enacted within context, and viewed through the filters of African American cultural competence. This is understandable because African American culture is grounded in and manifested through oral traditions, or “Nommo, the generative power of the spoken word” (Hamlet, 2011, p. 27). Therefore, it is not surprising that much of Black girls’ beauty and brilliance are transmitted through literal and symbolic “performed talk” (Atwater, 2010; Hamlet, 2011; Jackson & Richardson, 2003). Internet media documentations of the “Black Girls Rock” projects since their beginning in 2006 (such as www.huffpost.com;
www.bet.com; www.youtube.com) are valuable resources for these efforts. They allow the viewer to “see” Black beauty and brilliance both in accomplishments achieved and “real time being,” or “in the moment of occurrence.”

Over time, Black females’ brilliance has generated an impressive repertoire of “gifts” of imagination and ingenuity for fighting back and making everyday living more graceful and endearing. These gifts are both tangible and intangible. Black females continually create alternative forms of their own aestheticism and productivity to counter other people’s negative perceptions and assessments of their value. These creations are particularly evident in “performative talking” through body adornment (undoubtedly a response to an aspect of Black female being that is especially targeted in racist-based psychological attacks), and transcending constraining economic conditions.

One noteworthy area of body presentation in which Black females have turned other people’s conceptions of ugly into their beautiful is hairstyling. According to Thomas Gale (2006), historically hair type rivaled skin color as one of the most distinguished and targeted features of Black women, and “nappy hair” was considered the antithesis of beauty that placed primacy on white skin and straight hair. Over time Black women changed “nappy hair” into “the natural,” and in so doing conveyed the idea that its texture was normal for them, and there was no need to be ashamed of it, to disguise it, to distort it, or to always make it an imitation of White standards. They made routine hair care into an artistic endeavor characterized by a multitude of imaginative styling processes and designs, combining creativity with naturalness. A case in point is the creativity and complexity Black females have vested in braiding. The utilitarian plaits of old are replaced with intricate and artistic braiding designs, twists, cornrows, and dreadlocks that capture the attention and applause of wide reaching and diverse audiences, and even sometimes imitations. But the results are often less than adequate. Black women also are known for experimenting with and frequently changing their hair styles as if to convey the idea that “I am versatile and cannot be easily or singularly defined because of my complexity.” Their body beautification and presentation inventions suggest that Black females are continually evolving, experimenting and adding to the canvas of their own being. They are creating themselves according to their own existential texts and cultural standards. These transcendences, or “going beyond . . .,” are symptomatic of their beauty and brilliance. Studies of the history, science, art, aesthetics, politics, and economics of African American female hairstyling will be valuable for contemporary girls in better understanding, appreciating, and extending these legacies.

Another inventive form of Black girls’ brilliance is cuisine, or “soul food.” This includes preparation styles as well as the food itself. An example of this is stretching food items by adding filler ingredients—such as potatoes, vegetables, dumplings, and pasta—to meats to make stews, and cooking rice in beef or
chicken stock, and mixing beans and/or vegetables with it to increase its nutritional value. Hannah Giorgis (2018) captures the essence of these inventions in her observation that

Black people in America and beyond have always made feasts from scraps, transformed the discarded [food items] into the divine. Ham hocks, neck bones, gizzards, [chittlings], and other animal parts unwanted by White families found their way into Black kitchens by necessity; unsung Black cooks turned these disparate bits into craveable dishes. (para. 10)

Invariably, the curators of these edible inventions were Black females. What historically began as necessary resourcefulness to sustain life has become a staple in African American cultural cuisine, and, in some instances, even novelty or adventure foods for others!

A third illustration of Black girls’ economic ingenuity has to do with making their homes more liveable spaces and places of physical comfort, with quilting! There is an impressive body of published scholarship on the history of African American quilt making, but it focuses more on “publicly known” quilters and artists (like Harriet Powers, Faith Ringgold, the Gee’s Bend quiltmakers, Carolyn Mazloomi, and Daughters of Dorcas and Sons), and highly stylized renditions, such as those reported by Floris Bennett Cash (1995), Roland Freeman (1986) Maude Wahlman (1993), and Cuesta Benberry (1990). These legacies should be part of Black girls’ heritages and repertoires of beauty and brilliance, because

quilts can teach us about the culture in which they are made and about the people who made them—from the materials used and patterns selected, these particular quilts are windows into the migration, cultural heritage, and experiences of African American families in this country [USA] (Carey 2019, para. 2).

We give praise to the motivations and effects of “privately unknown” quilters such as our grandmothers and their peers. They are reminiscent of those in the stories told by Patricia Leigh Brown (1996) in “Life’s Threads Stitched Into Quilts” about different girlhood memories of experiencing quilting. Back in the day, many patchwork (or “scrap”) quilts were made by poor Black women for their own families’ use out of necessity, not aesthetics. With little or no money to buy blankets for bedtime warmth, they had to evoke invention instead. They responded to this need by using salvageable scraps from worn-out clothing and turning them into quilts. Creating these quilts was a communal process with females from different families working together on these constructions, first for one household and then others. The process was as much a social gathering as a construction enterprise, and it was an initiation rite for young girls. The quilts also were family narratives (or story
boards), because memories of different family members could be evoked and their stories told through patches taken from unuseable clothes. Over time this necessary activity generated its own aesthetics. Quilters began to create replicable patterns and designs instead of merely stitching the patches together rather haphazardly. Although quilting is now more of a commercial, artistic, and recreational enterprise than an economic necessity, it continues to be a valuable artifact and process for analyzing the legacies of Black girls’ brilliance in personal being and transcending imposed circumstances.

Black girls have been inventive in areas of interpersonal care, too. One technique is sharing caretaking responsibilities for those in need. This practice can be centered in nurturing particular children or caring for the community as a whole. Traditionally, older Black girls routinely helped take care of younger siblings. Hence, they learn early about communal parenting and othermothering. This practice can be observed still in young African American female friendships in classrooms, on school playgrounds, and in homes and communities where one member of a group of young children routinely takes charge and directs the flow of interactions and relationships within the group. These roles and responsibilities that often begin in youth continue indefinitely throughout adulthood. “Othermothers” frequently are not biological relatives. Their identity and significance are conveyed through comments such as, “She’s not really kin to me; she’s just a close family friend, but she is more like a second mother to me.” Female Black teachers who engage in othermothering (Greene, 2020) may be noted by Black girls: “Sometimes they act like your momma”; “They care; they listen; they look out for you; they don’t play you.”

Many other forms of communal caretaking also exist among African American females. These informal assistance efforts have long historical legacies. Graphic ones include abolitionist Harriet Tubman leading enslaved individuals and groups to freedom; house slaves covertly taking food from the masters’ kitchens to give to the field slaves; Sojourner Truth and others demanding that their identity as women be recognized and respected; “rent parties” in urban Black communities of the early- to mid-20th centuries to help needy members pay their housing costs; and across time, Black girls of various ages and stations in life speaking up for themselves and other members of their sisterhood. More recent versions of the rent parties are selling dinners out of community centers and churchyards to help raise money to offset the costs of individual needs and neighborhood projects instead of just making financial donations. Organizing and managing these events require cooperative efforts and complementary resources, and they combine recreation, work, and relaxation with building community cohesion. They allow people with different capabilities to make worthy contributions to the realization of common causes and meeting shared needs. Furthermore, they are consistent with African American cultural values about helping the less fortunate in ways that their human dignity is respected and they do not feel like they are just merely being given handouts. Actions such as these are other conveyors of Black cultural...
beauty as transmitted through and by Black girls. It will be insightful for contemporary Black girls (and their student peers) to investigate current acts of othermothering and communal caretaking among themselves, their families, and community members in both structured and unstructured aspects of everyday living.

FROM CONCEPTUAL IDEAS TO INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIONS

School age Black girls, prekindergarten through college, need to be explicitly and intentionally taught their legacies and heritages of beauty and brilliance. While most of them probably know this heritage intuitively, this is not enough for their maximum well-being in a society and world that continue to foist psychological abuse upon them. Instead, intuition needs to be complemented with intentionality, and implicit knowing needs to be enhanced by explicit identification of attributes and skills that constitute Black beauty and brilliance (such as those described earlier). This can be accomplished in many ways. We offer three possibilities here.

COLLABORATIVE CULTURAL HERITAGE AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Black girls’ cultural heritage and development studies should be used, in which components of their predecessors’ and their own beauty and brilliance are thoroughly examined. A wide variety of observations, self-studies, oral histories, portraiture, testimonies, and literary analyses are useful techniques for these pursuits. Some instructive examples of these are presented by Bond (2017) and Cannie (2018). It is also beneficial for these studies to be collaborative endeavors, thereby continuing the historical tradition of Black females combining resources and efforts to “make a way out of no way,” or do the seemingly impossible. Also, educators must hold themselves accountable for intentionally regularizing these learning activities by placing them in the center of routine curricular, teaching, and learning activities.

Another useful “selfhood” learning technique for Black girls, proposed by Carter Andrews et al. (2019), is creating critical conversational spaces (CCSs). These “spaces” are:

- discussion opportunities that support storytelling and oral history in the African diasporic cultural tradition…where experiential knowledge and narrating are encouraged. . . . Black girls’ voices [are] amplified in empowering ways . . . [and] their experiences, . . . voices, thoughts, and feelings are . . . valued. (pp. 2536–2537).

Thus, these CCSs can help Black girls of all ages navigate both toxic and constructive living conditions.
Activity 1

POWER OF POETRY

Our content and methods preferences for teaching these Black girl heritage studies and creating critical conversational spaces are reading, writing, and analyzing poetry. By “poetry” we do not necessarily mean this genre as it is formally characterized in a literary sense (although these forms are valuable, too), but as the aesthetic and style of African American thought and speech in routine matters and everyday living. If or when Black girls evoke their cultural communicative proclivities in these conveyances, the results are likely to be poetic! This is so because, as Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor (1982) explained, Black people have

a way with words.... We be word wizards.... We’re masters of the comeback.... Ours is an exciting, practical, elegant, dramatic, ironic, mysterious, surrealistic, sanctified, outrageous, and creative form of verbal expression. It’s a treasure trove of vitality, profundity, rhythm—and, yes, style. (p. 138)

In addition to being a communicative form that is highly compatible with African American cultural styles, poetry has some intrinsic attributes that are very conducive to conveying Black girls’ unique forms of beauty and brilliance. Poetry captures and conveys feelings along with facts, presents situations vividly and poignantly, and uses language that is at once instructive and aesthetic. Its literal nuances fit well with characterizing Black beauty as something that is more a style or way of being, a strength of character and will, than a physical trait, and brilliance as more about ingenuity than intellectuality. As Vern Kousky (n.d.) suggested, poetry “helps us find our inner voice, ... lets us positively share our feelings, ... and provides windows into the thoughts and feelings of others” (paras. 6, 7, and 9). Chris Borris (n.d.) added that “poetry personalizes information” (para. 9). It allows us to speak ourselves from the inside out in imagery rather than descriptive fact. And, Adrienne Rich reminded us that “Poetry can break open locked chambers of possibility, restore numbed zones to feeling, recharge desire,” and “poetry is the liquid voice that can wear through stone” (as quoted in Popova, 2016).

Based on quantitative data from psychophysiology, neuroimaging and behavioral responses analysis, Wassiliwizky et al. (2017) demonstrated scientifically that poetry is a powerful stimulus for eliciting peak emotional and corollary physiological responses in the body and brain. Certainly, scrutinizing conditions that obstruct Black girls’ beauty and brilliance, and reconstructing them, requires more than factual information conveyed in descriptive language. Instead, the language of conveyance should approximate the issues and audiences of concern. If finesse, style, and imagination are endemic to Black girls’ intuitive senses of beauty and brilliance, then similar attributes should be present in the explicit and intentional
techniques used to further develop these abilities. Poetry (in content and form) offers these compatibilities, and thus is a viable tool for teaching Black female identity and efficacy past, present, and future.

**ACTIVITY 2**

**A MANIFESTO FOR ENHANCING BLACK GIRLS’ BEAUTY AND BRILLIANCE**

We also recommend developing and teaching a *culturally appropriate manifesto* for teaching to and about Black girls’ beauty and brilliance. It should include the three key components of *beginnings*, *being*, and *becoming*, since they are dynamic, contextual, and continually evolving. We borrow some ideas from Margaret Burroughs (1968/1992), Stephanie Lahart (n.d.), and Danielle Milton (2014), respectively, to describe the key features of each component of the proposed manifesto. The “beginnings” part of the manifesto deals with the beautiful and brilliant heritages of Black girls. In “Homage to Black Madonnas,” Burroughs (1968/1992) reminds contemporary Black girls of the many different personas and identities their predecessors have inhabited over the years, and why these are equivalents of beauty and brilliance. Throughout the poem she praises Black women for their magnificence, humanity, struggle, endurance, gentleness, perseverance, resourcefulness, militancy, discretion, genius, courage, vigilance, dignity, vibrancy, and optimism. In part, she says,

Black women of genius, brilliant women

Walking through the hateful valleys

In dignity, strength and such serene composure

That even your enemies tremble insecure... . .

Stephanie Lahart (n.d.) offers Black girls some worthy advice about how—and why—they should *be* in the here and now of their self-perceptions, expressions, and behaviors. The underlying message is that Black girls should judge their own racial and personal worth by their African American cultural standards and experiences rather than by outside impositions. In other words, they should never be apologetic about or compromising of their Blackness. Specifically, Lahart advises Black girls to

- Not be afraid to speak with boldness, conviction, and purpose; your thoughts, feelings, opinions, and ideas are just as important as anyone else’s
- Be courageous, confident, and truthful to yourself
- Live life fearlessly but responsibly and respectfully
• Stand out from the crowd and dare to be different
• Embrace your raciality, and remember that your skin tones represent beauty
• Always believe in yourself whether others do or don’t
• Be confidentially and genuinely yourself
• Always be your best self
• Love, respect, and be good to yourself
• Be persistent in all that you do, never give up, and always push for that which is important to you
• Be mindful that not everyone will be supportive of you and your best interests
• Be happy for yourself and always focus on the best of yourself
• Be realistic about who you are now and your potential to become
• Let your beauty and strength shine from within

In her letter to her future daughter, Danielle Milton (2014) cautions Black girls about challenges they are likely to encounter to their cultural identity, integrity, and authenticity in the course of everyday living as they matriculate through different levels of education. She also offers some explanations for why it is important to resist these challenges, and how to do so. Her warnings emphasize the need to reaffirm historical legacies of Black femaleness in crafting future variations of Black girls’ beauty and brilliance. In so doing she gives operative meaning to the *becoming* dimension of our imagined manifesto. The poignant messages are underscored by the recurrent reframe, “Don’t lose yourself, little Black girl” throughout the letter, along with places and interactions that are potential sites for Black girl students to lose their cultural selves and, conversely, where their beauty and brilliance can be revived and renewed. These include

• Both formal and informal interactions in the halls, classrooms, and playgrounds of elementary schools
• In the midst of predominately White educational environments across different levels of schooling
• While questioning your beauty and worth during the adolescent years and while experiencing high school
• Processing college admissions requirements such as taking standardized tests
• Living on college campuses, joining organizations, socializing, and building friendships
• Engaging in various technological means and social media
Milton (2014) also offers some protections for Black girls against the possibility of losing themselves. These protections include being bold, fearless, and phenomenal; recognizing their beauty; and always remembering their heritages, uniqueness, radiance, strength, and brilliance.

The sample texts in the list that follows speak to and about females across the age spectrum, and offer diverse centers of emphasis for teaching and learning Black girls’ beauty and brilliance. They also can be complemented by works in other literary genres, such as books for young Black girls about their racial and cultural identities, inspirational quotes, and contemporary praise songs. Some other valuable poetry references by and about Black women and girls are

- “My Black is Beautiful” (n.d.)
- “I am a Black Girl” (theonlychase, 2017)
- “Dear Black Girl: Letters From the Souls of Black Women” (Harris, 2015)
- “Must Read Poetry Books by Black/African American Women” (Canyon, 2019)

**Additional Ideas**

Teachers, parents, and friends should help African American girls (and others, too!) to personalize the ideas and images embedded in our manifesto by analyzing the extent to which they apply to themselves. These girls also can create their own dialogic poetry by “telling their own stories”; analyzing the “beauty and brilliance” perceptions and presentations of other female visual, vocal, literary, and performing artists and scholars; and conducting interviews with female family members, neighbors, community residents, and agemates about their own beauty and brilliance, and then converting the results into praise narratives. Questions for the interviews can be based on some of the observations made by authors such as those we referenced. For example, (1) what does it mean行为表现urally for Black girls to be bold, brilliant, beautiful, radiant, strong, ingenious, imaginative, and have style and finesse; and (2) to what extent are the responses similar across age, socioeconomic status, residential location, educational level, and other demographics? While we imagine this “research” being conducted primarily by Black girls about, with, and for Black girls, because they should be primary in creating their own self-definitions, it might be instructive to include perspectives of diverse Black males on Black girls’ beauty and brilliance as well. If students are a bit intimidated about writing poetry, then they can use other expressive genres such as songs, spoken word, letters, art, sociodramas, and interactive dialogues. The point of these “self-constructions” is to create counternarratives to attacks on Black girls’ claims to beauty and brilliance.
Another valuable teaching and learning technique is to have Black girls make “self-application contracts” to enact and exemplify different aspects of their own and each other’s beauty and brilliance. In these contracts, the Black girls would declare behavioral commitments and specify consequences for violating the terms of them. In other words, they make contractual agreements to being their genuine selves, according to African American cultural criteria, and to holding each other accountable for doing likewise. Thus, they become mindful that constructions and manifestations of Black girls’ beauty and brilliance always involve combinations of individuality, collectivity, complexity, and, to an extent, productive uncertainty (Brown, 2013; Bond, 2017).

Furthermore, teachers can use these various texts and techniques to learn about Black girls’ beauty and brilliance first for themselves, and then incorporate the resulting insights into school curricula and instruction to make them more culturally reflective of and empowering for Black girls. These changes will challenge pejorative notions (or stereotype threats—Spencer et al., 2016) about Black girls and many conventional educational practices that they are supposed to accommodate, and rightfully so. After all, Black girls have to navigate school and societal “normalcy” every day of their lives, so some reciprocity is due. Moreover, teachers can find some consolation in knowing that the more they challenge the status quo and engage in culturally responsive teaching for Black girls (and other diverse students, too), the more normal, natural, and easy it becomes. Eventually (and hopefully!) a “new normal” will emerge in which Black girls’ own culturally defined beauty and brilliance are paramount.

Vignette: Black Girls Are Precious Gifts: Educators, Don’t Be Kryptonite

_Samantha Pugh_

As a leader and a teacher I want my students, especially the Black girls, to have breath breathed in them to awaken their magic. Many have asked me what are the conditions that make Black Girls. I remind them that Black Girl Magic can’t be bottled up and sold, but there are culturally relevant best practices that teachers, especially white teachers, can do to not be kryptonite to Black Girls. Here are a few:

1. Believe for Black Girls even when they can’t—speak aspirations and inspiration every day. Tell them who they are and who they can and will be, even when Black Girls are showing up under their invisible cape of pain and trauma. They need this in a world where they are surrounded by images that are anti—their magic.
2. Remember Black Girls are children—handle them with childlike (not childish) love and admiration. Far too often, Black Girls are treated and seen as adults, especially by those of us who had to grow up quickly because of what was happening in our own homes and communities. Humanize them and teach them.

3. See Black Girls and their humanity for all the greatness that it is—color-blind teaching negates the rich and excellent herstory that is ours. Learn about it, teach it, and celebrate it every day. Show them images of people that look like them; read stories of characters who have experiences similar to theirs.

4. Check yourself and your privilege, and be OK when corrected/challenged—children, Black Girls come to us with greatness; it’s in their history and DNA. So, your job is to cultivate that and bring it out. You aren’t there to save Black Girls or give them what they already have.

5. Teach Black Girls and love doing it—there’s nothing better than seeing teachers who are excited to teach and excited to see kids learn, even if they struggle. When you value teaching them, they will value who and what you are teaching. Let kids see that you love learning, and you love learning about them.

6. Advocate for Black Girls and take risks for them. Loving Black Girls can’t start and end behind the walls of a school. You have love, support, and advocacy in your homes, with your friends, where you go, and in everything that you do outside of the school. Use your superpower of privilege to make cultural, community, and systemic change. Have courageous conversations about race and classes. Don’t be afraid to lose a few friends and family members. Speak up and out about racism, even when it’s not popular.

7. Take what you do seriously, and handle it with care—in your classes you have Kamala Harris, Michelle Obama, Martin Luther King, Jr., Sojourner Truth, and Ida B. Wells, but you also can have Sandra Bland, Emmett Till, Breonna Taylor, et cetera. The decisions that you make about your teaching and what you say either lifts up or tears down. You have the power to breathe life or death into our children. That should be taken seriously. Be willing to be challenged and called out if you aren’t. Leverage those challenges to learn more about the community and the Black Girls that you serve. Use them to learn about yourself and make necessary shifts to add onto kids’ lives. You can’t love our rhythm and hate our blues.

8. Focus on teaching Black Girls, not teaching the curriculum. Know and understand what the Black Girls you are in contact with need, and act on this knowledge. Study and ask them what they want to learn and how they learn best. No matter how much material you cover, if Black Girls don’t learn, then you have failed them.

(Continued)
9. Understand the movement of Black Girl Magic, but know that it takes more than magic to educate and inspire Black children. You have to work hard at it; you have to be intentional and relentless. This is marathon work, not a sprint, and it’s certainly not automatic. It takes time, effort, passion, drive, courage, humility, and expertise to “make the magic happen.”

In the book, *The Alchemist*, Paulo Coelho says, “The simple things are also the most extraordinary things, and only the wise can see them.” Take time to see the magic; it’s really easy to see if you take the time to look. When you realize how simple it is but understand our complexities, you have the power to shape and change the world. If you had the power or magic to do that, wouldn’t you?

My name is Samantha Pugh, I am an educator and leader. My superpower is Black Girl Magic. What’s yours?

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*The subsequent vignette, by educator Shannon Gibney, employs her eighth-grade voice in a letter to her social studies teacher, explaining what neither he nor her other teachers could see of her experience in school. The view from inside her eighth-grade body is so clear, and her suggestions for change so tangible, it is impossible to walk away from this vignette without the motivation and intention to begin making change. Educator Judy Osborne’s vignette follows, with a description of what empowerment felt like to her as a third grader, with an evocative and generative description of a teacher who modeled so many of the strategies laid out in this book.*

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**Vignette: Dear Mr. Guillen**

*Shannon Gibney*

Dear Mr. Guillen,

Eighth grade sucks.

Universally, this is true, but for a nerdy mixed Black transracially adopted girl like myself, the suckage is tenfold. The fact that I don’t even know what half of these words mean yet, or how and if they connect to my identity in any way, should tell you all you need to know about why I will always look back on this year and the year before it as the worst years of my life.
The way the Black girls snicker when I walk by with my too-frizzy hair, too-skinny body, and too-light skin. (This last part I will only realize years later, when I learn about color-struck Black communities.) The way the Black boys look at each other knowingly when I speak in class, and once it is over, yell, “Oreo!” as we leave class and enter that interstitial space called the hallway. Teachers walk through the hallway, but somehow they are not teachers there. They don’t hear the verbal sparring between popular kids and the outcasts, and they are somehow blind to even the minor physical altercations that are impossible to miss. But the power of invisibility that is mysteriously bestowed upon the socially powerful is elusive to kids like me. No, my skin and hair and white speech mark me like a siren in the hallway. There is no escaping the name calling and bullying, except when I hide in the bathroom stall.

The one thing I have going for me in the brutal social hierarchy of middle school is my athleticism. I can run harder, longer, and faster than many of the boys in my grade, and in gym class I am still always the first girl picked on volleyball, kickball, soccer, and even baseball teams. This continues the long-standing trend from elementary school. I will not “lend” my homework to other kids to copy, and I don’t show off, but I don’t hide my academic abilities either. I care about how I look, but I don’t understand fashion or how to dress in a cool way, and my parents will not buy me expensive brands like Esprit, Benetton, or Guess! Nor will they let me wear makeup, although that seems like too much trouble anyway.

I’m not saying that any of this is your fault, Mr. Guillen. I want to be clear about that. You did not create the fascist cesspool that is Clague Middle School in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1988. And you are not responsible for the endemic meanness that seems to be bred into the very marrow of the American preteen. When I look back on some of the things I said to some of my peers who were as precariously located on the social ladder as I was, I can say without a doubt that I was not only a victim of this system, but also a perpetrator in my more insecure moments. Plus, you were not only my homeroom and social studies teacher, you were also the only Latino male teacher I remember having in school. Ever. So, I can only imagine how hard that must have been, especially in the 1980s. I mean, the term microaggressions didn’t even exist yet! But I’m sure that even though they didn’t exist yet, the microaggressions were flying faster than the spitballs across the room, from students as well as your peers. I think that’s why, all these years later, you were the only middle school teacher I felt any kind of connection to. I could not have said it at the time, but we were both brown, and both structurally, socially, and even culturally alone within the ecology of that school. This mattered to me, although again, I never could have articulated it at the time. And it matters now, too.

I know you had to teach us about the politics and cultures of the Middle East, the one child rule in China, and the bifurcated German state that resulted from the

(Continued)
Cold War. I was 12 and 13, and had basically seen and imagined only the American Midwest at that point. But I wish we could have also spent some time discussing American racial politics, the Great Migration, even the complexity of American families in your social studies class. Because what had been an itch, a minor irritation during my elementary school years, was now a full-blown disease: This white family who loved me, who I loved in return, but who understood nothing of what it meant to be Black in America, and who therefore could not pass on this essential knowledge to me, because they didn’t know it themselves. It was beginning to feel like an uncomfortable, semipublic secret, this white family of mine who had a mixed Black transracially adopted daughter.

I knew no one like me, and had begun to fall into the understanding of myself as something of a freak. This is what happens when you don’t know that your socially determined identity is structurally isolating through no fault of your own. Perhaps we could have written some first-person ethnographies of our classmates, to create more empathy between us. And then followed it up by discussing the individual in terms of their understanding of their socioeconomic, religious, racial, linguistic, gender, and yes, racial identities. Maybe we could have even expanded the project outward, so that we could have also interviewed some older folks in our community about their experiences with identity, folks who had lived through social movements like the civil rights movements or gay rights. I think that would have given me some perspective. Made me see that I was not a freakish aberration that had just basically fallen from the sky, but rather, just one point in an interlocking set of ongoing historical processes.

I know that back then, we didn’t have books like Mariama Lockington’s middle grade novel Black Like Me, or my own young adult novel See No Color, which I basically wrote for my 12-year-old self. But what if we had? What if I had had the chance to see myself, a Black transracial adoptee tween, as the protagonist of my own story? How would that have changed my confidence and my profound sense of social dislocation from my middle school peer group, as well as my growing antipathy to Black kids, Black adults, and Blackness itself? I think I would have at least had a starting place for processing my experience, which is so unlike 99 percent of my peers—Black and otherwise. I think I would have been able to begin to see Black culture as an unfolding process and set of expressions that I could choose to participate in, rather than feel confused and oppressed by. I think I would have begun to see that the many ways of being Black could include mine, too, however tainted it was by whiteness, and middle-classness, and a multiracial family. As it was, I had hints of these truths from writers like James Baldwin and academic competitions like the NAACP’s ACT-SO (Afro-Academic, Cultural, Technological and Scientific Olympics) in high school, but they were few and far between, and I still always had to make the effort to extrapolate that kind of Blackness to my own. And it really wasn’t until college that I began to accept that my particular
mixed Black girl raised by white people in a majority white college town Blackness was legitimate. It took until my late 20s to locate my identity as an adoptee within the context of my Blackness.

I could go on, Mr. Guillen, but I won't.

I know you have things to do, books to read, grandchildren (maybe even great-grandchildren?) to tend to. I know that, like all of us, you did the best you could with the resources and information you had at the time. And support. And lack of support. So, this letter is neither complaint nor revisionist history. It is merely meant as an invitation to conversation. A shared imagining of how you and I and others might do it differently now—engage all our students, including those who may be Black transracial adoptees—in the fullness of who they are in the classroom. I teach writing at an urban two-year college in downtown Minneapolis now, and though my students are adults, I do have some who are adoptees. So, in some way we all eventually become subjects and objects in what Paulo Freire and bell hooks would call “liberatory pedagogy.” We have to help our students learn to tell their stories in a way that makes them more free, so that they can see themselves and their own power. That’s what I wish I would have had access to when I was 12 and 13. Would eighth grade still have sucked? Absolutely. But would I have had to go it so alone? Would I have realized that it wouldn’t always be that way? And would I have had a better understanding that I was not actually a freak, but actually a “normal” mixed Black transracially adopted young woman trying to find her way in the world, and that that was always going to be a messy and difficult process? Probably.

Sincerely,
Shannon

Shannon Gibney lives and writes in Minneapolis. She is the author of Dream Country and See No Color, which both won Minnesota Book Awards. She teaches writing at Minneapolis College.

Vignette: So You Wanted to See the Wizard

Judy Osborne

So you wanted to see the wizard. Let me tell you that you’ve come to the right place.

—The Wiz

(Continued)
The year is 1975. I am a lanky, wide-eyed third grader in the rebellious city of Newark, New Jersey, a place of young, riotous protest and a spirit demanding survival of the fittest. I am one of 30 Black youngsters in Ms. W’s dynamic classroom. Ms. W. is a beautifully chocolate, Afro-haloed, no-nonsense powerhouse of a teacher. She, who fills our classroom with bright smiles, resistance poetry, finger snaps, and pointed questions: “Are you sure about that, or do you want to think about it some more?”

The big day has finally arrived. We are noisy eight-year-olds, jittery with excitement, boarding a yellow bus on a cold winter morning. There is a Tony-award-winning Broadway musical just across the George Washington Bridge in New York City that we will be lucky enough to witness. None other than *The Wiz*. By then we had all seen some version of the original *Wizard of Oz* on television with Dorothy and her trusted crew sorting themselves out. But as we were warned in the days leading up to the journey, *this time* would be different.

We are not disappointed. Nearly everyone on the stage is a varying shade of me: ebony blacks, cocoa browns, and bronzy tans. It is absolutely electrifying. The lyrics dance with sky-high riffs and low, soul-stirring runs. There’s sashaying of hips, stomping of feet, golden lights flashing, emerald sequins flying everywhere. I cannot sit still. For the first time that I can remember, I am completely in love with myself.

Back at home in the privacy of my room, I am immediately in front of the mirror, hair freshly cornrowed for the day’s excursion. A comb becomes a microphone. I see myself so clearly. No more Hollywood imaginings of *The Brady Bunch* or *The Partridge Family*. I am smart and beautiful and brilliant and free. Spinning around and around and around . . .

The year spent in Ms. W’s class and that unforgettable Broadway visit in 1975 were both powerful and empowering educational experiences for this Black girl. By that time I had already had three young white women as teachers in kindergarten through second grades. Statistics now point to the benefits all students gain when learning from and interacting with teachers of color, but at that time even my eight-year-old self recognized (though perhaps could not articulate) that it just felt so good. But why? I remember that she brought her entire self to that classroom, including mannerisms and colloquialisms that were familiar. But she worked equally hard to connect us academically in ways that challenged the mostly white literature and images that seemed to swallow us at every turn. Even a slight expression of interest in poetry earned you a stack of Gwendolyn Brooks poems to take home and memorize. Some connections were organic, but even more were noticed and nurtured. She was a relationship builder. That’s super important for teachers to remember. Prior to and beyond the bells and whistles of technology, truly innovative teaching to help Black girls thrive requires vulnerability and authenticity: Are you creating safe enough spaces for relationships to grow?
Racial group differences are not biological, just as race itself is not biological; both are social fictions. Race is a social construct that was created to justify the dehumanization of Black people through systems and institutions and to promote the financial gain and a national belonging of those declared white in the United States. Black children and white children are not biologically wired to learn differently. But learning is not just a reflection of biological wiring; learning, for Black girls, is a practice of freedom. In the next chapter, “Learning to Listen to Her: Psychological Verve With Black Girls,” Drs. Darla Scott and Ashley Griffin describe research originally conceived by Dr. A. Wade Boykin, which describes and delineates culturally based learning differences between large groups of Black and white learners. Verve does not explain all learning styles of all children, but it does help clarify why many white educators believe, for example, that a quiet environment is critical to concentration, while many Black educators have a more expansive notion of the different types of learning environments that facilitate concentration. Very few educators have been exposed to the research on verve, which is a concept that will transform how you think about learning spaces that center Black girls. For more background on this concept, see Dr. Darla Scott’s chapter in The Guide for White Women who Teach Black Boys (Corwin, 2018).