

Researcher studies how Black young women use language to fight back

September 29 2020, by Claire Miller

How can Black women push back against the instances of racism, sexism, stereotyping and oppression they've experienced in their lives, in the media and in society at large?

It can begin with their own words, penned in response to what they've encountered and advocating for the changes needed to make life better for Black [women](#).

Associate Professor Gholnecsar (Gholdy) Muhammad and the University of Georgia's Sherell McArthur (Ph.D. '14) co-authored "Pens Down, Don't Shoot: An Analysis of How Black Young Women Use Language to Fight Back," a study published in *Urban Education* highlighting the history of Black female writers and investigating how Black women today use their voices to make sense of the difficulties they face.

Three alumni from Black Girls WRITE—Muhammad's annual summer writing institute that gives young Black girls a space to read, think and write about racial and social injustices—participated in this study. Muhammad and McArthur interviewed the participants and asked them to submit a written piece related to two main research questions: How do young Black women respond to the current state of racism and Black girlhood in the U.S., and in what ways do the participants discuss writing as a tool to resist racism?

"Participants recognized the various microaggressions in their daily

social and school experiences, and were aware of the respectability politics surrounding their racialized gender," Muhammad and McArthur wrote. "These three Black, [young women](#) were cognizant that the world often judges Black girls, harshly, in lieu of seeing their intelligence, diversity and ingenuity."

Participants also explored how they could use their own voices and stories to fight back against the oppression they experience—just as Black female authors like Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Fannie Lou Hamner, Audre Lorde and Angie Thomas have done.

This study's findings have important implications for school systems, demonstrating why teachers should educate themselves about racial injustices, create anti-racist reading and writing spaces for students and find ways to support young Black girls as they find their own voices.

"Educators (of all races) must strive toward achieving their own racial literacy to create a curriculum and a classroom environment that pushes back against racism and empowers voices that have been made marginalized," Muhammad and McArthur wrote. "Furthermore, educators need to teach racial literacies in the classroom throughout their curriculum and instruction so that youth can make sense of their own identities and the world around them."

More information: Sherell A. McArthur et al. Pens Down, Don't Shoot: An Analysis of How Black Young Women Use Language to Fight Back, *Urban Education* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0042085919893734](https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085919893734)

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