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# And Then the Black Birthed Me: Celebrating Black Girlhood in Middle Level ELA Classrooms Through Afrofuturism

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**Abstract:** The manuscript delves into the dynamic interplay between Afrofuturism and young adult literature and Middle Level English pedagogical inspiration to offer fresh perspectives on intersectionality, agency, and empowerment among marginalized youth. The authors explore how Afrofuturistic young adult literature authors are employing characters who navigate a multitude of identities, challenging traditional power dynamics, and dismantling oppressive structures. Through its incorporation of technological innovation, speculative visions, and the reclaiming of historical narratives, Afrofuturistic young adult literature creates new paradigms of empowerment and self-realization for all students, but especially Black girls. Works such as Kalynn Bayron's *The Poison Heart* (2021), Namina Fornas' *The Gilded Ones* (2020), and Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Warrior* (2017) exemplify the intricate Afrofuturist aesthetics, thereby providing middle level readers with both mirrors to their own experiences and windows into transformative possibilities.

**Keywords:** Afrofuturism, Black girlhood, middle level ELA, young adult literature, representation, empowerment

## Introduction

The emergence of Afrofuturism in young adult literature has transformed the literary landscape, creating a new age of storylines which resist traditional archetypes and boundaries, providing sanctuary spaces (Smith, 2022) amplifying the voices of marginalized individuals, such as middle level Black girls. Afrofuturism is a movement that emerged from a deep commitment to justice, equality, and liberation (Tarran & Benedito, 2022). It provides a critical lens through which to examine and challenge the multifaceted oppressions faced by Black girls (Thomas, 2019a). By emphasizing intersectionality, agency, and empowerment, Afrofuturism has laid the foundation for narratives that not only confront the realities of discrimination and inequality but also celebrate the resilience and strength of Black girlhood at the middle level. Afrofuturism has been instrumental in creating a space for

Black girls' voices in middle school to be heard and their experiences to be validated (Abril-Gonzalez, Aguilera, Linares, Nightengale-Lee, Nuñez, Nyachae, Rusoja, & Templeton, 2021). Through Afrofuturism, Black girls have been able to explore their identities and experiences in ways that were previously impossible. The impact of Afrofuturism on young adult literature and culture has been profound (Holbert et al., 2020; Moudileno, 2020; Thomas, 2019a). It has inspired a new generation of writers and artists to create counternarratives that challenge dominant ideologies and celebrate the diversity and complexity of Black experiences. Afrofuturism has also helped to create a sense of community and solidarity among Black girls, providing a space for them to connect and share their stories (Sunday & Akung, 2022).

Afrofuturistic young adult literature is a powerful tool for middle level educators to foster critical reading and writing skills in their students. By immersing middle school students in Afrofuturistic narratives, educators can expose them to a wealth of speculative ideas, diverse perspectives, and alternative futures that challenge conventional norms. Students can analyze and evaluate these narratives, exploring complex themes of identity, social justice, and the impact of technology on society (Thomas, 2018b; Thomas, 2019b). Engaging with Afrofuturistic literature encourages students to question existing power structures, envision transformative possibilities, and articulate their thoughts in a persuasive and coherent manner (Tolliver, 2019).

This manuscript showcases how analyzing the principles of Black girlhood and Afrofuturism through a critical study of three Afrofuturistic young adult novels can inspire middle level educators in developing transformative and healing lesson plans that cater to the diverse experiences, broadens what counts as canonized literature and provides a healing literary space by offering a glimpse of a future rooted in African diasporic communities' experiences and perspectives. This manuscript is guided by the following inquiries: (1) How can an understanding of intersectionality deepen our comprehension of the unique challenges and strengths experienced by Black girls in middle school as they navigate adolescence and young adulthood; (2) How can Afrofuturism serve as a platform for promoting diversity, dismantling stereotypes, and empowering marginalized voices, particularly within the context of young adult literature; and (3) In what ways does Afrofuturism young adult literature inspire creative middle level lesson plans encouraging individuals to envision a more inclusive and equitable future?

## Awakening Spirits: Black Girlhood in Middle School and the Art of Soul Sustenance

Black girlhood embodies a journey rooted in liberation and empowerment, centered on a radical embrace of Black love and identity. However, the conventional educational system often overlooks and fails to nurture this pivotal journey (Tolliver, 2019). Truly honoring and nourishing the

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experiences of Black girls necessitates a radical overhaul of the educational system. This transformation demands a complete reimagination and reconstruction of our educational institutions, encompassing a curriculum that resonates with the lived experiences of Black girls and a pedagogy that authentically speaks to their souls and identities (Smith, 2022).

Awashed in memories  
of futures yet imagined,  
I was first an amalgamation  
of gas and dust;  
a divine collision  
caused a shockwave  
to propel into  
this present;  
And then  
the Black  
birthed me;  
All at once,  
I came undone  
and was reformed  
by stitching together  
starlight  
and moonbeams forming  
a melanated masterpiece  
luminescent from the  
inside from out.  
(Smith, 2023)

Within the context of the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE)'s *This We Believe* (2021), a guiding principle for middle-level education emphasizing effective practices during this crucial phase of learning, the focus remains on acknowledging and embracing the unique experiences of Black girls within our schools. It urges the creation of inclusive and empowering spaces for these young individuals, recognizing the challenges they may face and celebrating the diverse identities they bring. The ultimate goal is to ensure that Black girls feel not just seen but deeply valued, heard, and supported throughout their educational journey. AMLE's framework provides a foundation for promoting equity and establishing an environment that genuinely honors and celebrates the varied experiences and perspectives of Black girls in middle-level education.

At its heart, Black girlhood is a multifaceted concept that encompasses the unique experiences, identities, challenges, and triumphs of young Black girls as they navigate the intersectionality of race, gender, and age. It involves understanding their history, heritage, and the diverse narratives within the Black community, acknowledging the diverse ways in which Black girls experience their girlhood, and appreciating the cultural richness that shapes their identities. Black girls' journey of resilience, strength, and empowerment is a testament to their ability to define themselves within a society that often imposes limiting stereotypes and expectations (Jacobs, 2017; Abril-Gonzalez, et al., 2021).

Black girls in middle school often face a unique set of experiences that are both racialized and gendered. These experiences can vary depending on the context, such as whether the school is predominantly white or racially diverse (Smith, 2022). One common experience is the phenomenon of racialized tracking, where Black girls are often placed in segregated classes within racially diverse schools. This can limit their exposure to diverse, inclusive, and comprehensive instruction, particularly in areas like Black history and culture (Katz & Acquah, 2022).

Black girls often face both racial and gender bias in school settings. They are more likely to be suspended or arrested at school compared to their white counterparts (Jacobs, 2017). This disciplinary disparity can have significant consequences, including lower academic scores and decreased likelihood of attending a four-year college. The concept of "adultification bias" is another common experience, where Black girls are perceived as more mature and are held to higher standards, leading to more frequent and harsher discipline. This bias can result in Black girls being disproportionately pulled out of class for being perceived as too loud, too assertive, too sexually provocative, too defiant, and too adult-like. Despite these challenges, Black girls also demonstrate resilience and awareness of their identities (Epstein et al., 2017). They are aware of the difficulties in navigating educational settings, but this awareness is often coupled with parental support that promotes positive gendered racial identities. Afrofuturistic young adult literature plays a protective role in their identity development and helps them navigate the challenges they face in school (Holbert et al., 2020).

Incorporating the exploration of Black girlhood in public education English classes is essential for fostering inclusivity, empathy, and a comprehensive understanding of the human experience (AMLE, 2021). By delving into the stories, voices, and struggles of Black girls, students can gain a broader perspective on social justice, equity, and the importance of representation in literature and society (Smith, 2022; Tolliver, 2019). It allows students, regardless of their own backgrounds, to engage with diverse narratives, challenge biases, and appreciate the unique strength and resilience that Black girls embody (Edwards et al., 2016). Furthermore, incorporating Black girlhood into the curriculum promotes critical thinking, cultural competence, and a more holistic and accurate depiction of history and contemporary society, contributing to a more inclusive and empowering educational experience for all students (AMLE, 2021).

### **Beyond Boundaries: Afrofuturism and the Liberation of Black Girlhood**

Young adult Afrofuturism represents a cultural blend of African diaspora traditions with technological innovation. This philosophy combines elements from science fiction, historical narratives, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism, forming a vibrant cultural expression found in music, art, fashion, and technology. Beyond merely featuring Black characters in futuristic settings, Afrofuturism deeply roots itself in celebrating the ingenuity and distinctiveness of Black culture. In this genre, Black girls find a canvas to envision futures that

embrace Black and African perspectives on technology, mythology, and worldviews. It's a platform that rejects conventional beauty and femininity standards, encouraging them to embrace their own definitions of glamor. Thomas (2019a) boldly asserts:

The traditional purpose of darkness in the fantastic is to disturb, to unsettle, to cause unrest. This primal fear of darkness and Dark Others is so deeply rooted in Western myth that it is nearly impossible to find its origin... No matter what the reasons were for the way our culture came to view all things dark in the past, the consequences have been a nameless and lingering fear of dark people in the present (p. 13).

It is crucial to challenge these stereotypical perceptions to ensure Black girls aren't misrepresented, misunderstood, or denied their individual identities. Giving voice to their experiences, vulnerabilities, dreams, and challenges is essential (Jacobs, 2017; Smith, 2022; Tolliver, 2019). This approach offers vital insights into the realities of Black girls' lives and helps combat the damaging impact of adultification bias and stereotypical portrayals. Ultimately, challenging these misconceptions plays a pivotal role in fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for Black girls. It's about providing them with the same level of care, protection, and nurturing as their peers, creating a space where their voices are heard, and their experiences respected (AMLE, 2021). There is a dark and troubling danger when we do not teach our students to critically analyze colorblind and racist portrayals.

By not noticing race, writers and other creatives do the work of encoding it as taboo. While silence and evasion around race in dystopian science fiction is 'understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture', implying the inevitability of a post-racial future, this silence also has the effect of confusing readers (Thomas, 2019a, p. 53).

The significance of young adult Afrofuturism for Black girls lies in its ability to liberate their imaginations from conventional narratives. It provides them with representations in futuristic realms, enabling exploration of themes like identity, empowerment, and resilience within speculative contexts (Thomas, 2018a, 2019b). Through engagement with Afrofuturist literature, Black girls discover inspiration, empowerment, and a profound connection to their cultural heritage (Holbert et al., 2020; Tarran & Benedito, 2022). Across literature, visual arts, music, and other expressive forms, Afrofuturistic young adult novels such as Kalynn Bayron's *The Poison Heart* (2021), Namina Fornas's *The Gilded Ones* (2020), and Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata Warrior* (2017) offer Black girls a space to explore themes of identity, empowerment, and resilience, contributing significantly to a more diverse and inclusive representation of Black culture in speculative genres. The lesson ideas presented in the next section can be utilized to jumpstart lesson planning for Middle Level English/language arts classes.

## Building Bridges to Tomorrow: Afrofuturism Lesson Ideas in ELA Classes

Afrofuturism, which includes science fiction, fantasy, and dystopian literature, offers a rich landscape for educators to integrate into their lesson plans. Teachers can use speculative fiction to prompt discussions about the impact of new technologies on society, ethical dilemmas, and the consequences of present actions on future generations. Middle level educators can incorporate activities such as writing assignments, creative projects, and critical analysis of speculative fiction works to enhance students' analytical and imaginative skills. By utilizing Afrofuturism in lesson planning, educators can create an engaging and thought-provoking learning environment that encourages students to explore complex themes and develop a deeper understanding of the world around them. Try delving into these young adult novels to take you into brave new worlds.

### This Poison Heart (2021)

*This Poison Heart* by Kalynn Bayron is a captivating young adult novel that follows the story of Briseis, a teenage girl with a natural affinity for plants. As an adoptee, she discovers that her birth mother has left her a house with an apothecary and a garden full of poisonous plants that only she can handle. The novel weaves together elements of Greek mythology, mystery, and family, offering a modern take on classic stories. With its engaging narrative, diverse characters, and themes of self-discovery, *This Poison Heart* provides a refreshing and enchanting reading experience that brings much-needed inclusivity and contemporary flavor to the teen fantasy genre (see Appendix A).

### The Gilded Ones (2020)

*The Gilded Ones* by Namina Forma is about a sixteen-year-old teenager, Deka, who has a guiding gift of intuition. Her village has a blood ceremony for girls that determines if they belong in the village; red blood signifies that someone is a member while gold blood represents impurity and unimaginable consequences. When Deka and the village make the discovery of her gold blood, making her an alaki, a woman proposes for her to join an army of girls who share the same unique trait to assist the emperor in saving their empire. Deka makes the decision to leave home, although yearning to be accepted by her home village, and commence training for the emperor's army to defeat other monsters. As the book explores feminism and a sense of belonging, Deka's experiences highlight the importance of not basing one's self-worth on traditional, patriarchal beliefs and how the power of sisterhood provides the internal strength necessary to build self-love (see Appendix B).

### Akata Warrior (2017)

The fantasy novel, *Akata Warrior*, by Nnedi Okorafor, follows Sunny Nwazue, a young girl of Nigerian descent with magical abilities, as she navigates the complexities of a hidden world of magic. In this sequel to *Akata Witch*, Sunny, along with her friends, enters the magical realm of Leopard Knocks to undergo training and discovers her role in a secret society known as the Leopard People. As they face various challenges

and adversaries, including a malevolent force threatening both magical and non-magical worlds, the novel explores themes of identity, friendship, and the responsibilities that come with extraordinary powers. *Akata Warrior* is rich in its incorporation of Nigerian mythology, cultural richness, and diverse characters, making it a noteworthy contribution to the Afrofuturism genre (see Appendix C).

## Conclusion

Through powerful storytelling and insightful plots, Afrofuturism becomes a tool for middle school Black girls to challenge and redefine societal norms, nurturing a sense of agency and self-expression. In essence, young adult Afrofuturism stands as a creative and empowering platform for middle school Black girls, fostering the envisioning and shaping of their own futures (Moudileno, 2020). It becomes a celebration of cultural heritage while serving as a vehicle to challenge societal norms (Sunday & Akung, 2022).

Transforming the educational system goes beyond textbooks; it encompasses altering environments, fostering inclusivity, and instilling a continuous, holistic nourishment that transcends the limitations of traditional academic calendars (Edwards et al., 2016). In a world where Black girls are under siege every day, providing a sustenance of the soul that is constant and unwavering becomes an imperative, ensuring they are perpetually fed, nurtured, and fortified to face the challenges and celebrate the triumphs of their unique journeys (Smith, 2022).

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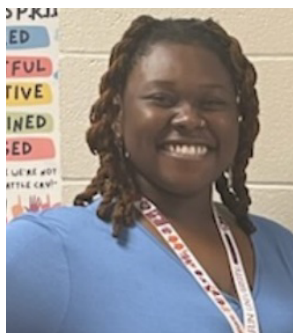
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### About the Authors



Dywanna Smith is an Assistant Professor in the School of Education at Claflin University. As a scholar-educator, Dywana's research examines the intersections of race, literacies, and education and equipping teachers with equity pedagogies to successfully teach linguistically and culturally diverse students. She has presented nationally and internationally on these subjects. Her book, *Transformational Sanctuaries in the Middle Level ELA Classroom: Creating Truth Spaces for Black Girls*, is available on Amazon.

Kenesha Johnson is an Assistant Professor in the School of Education at Claflin University. Her research focuses on the racial disparities in literacies and the educational system while providing teachers with research-based practices for diverse learners. Kenesha has presented locally and nationally on these subjects.



Kiana Eddy is a dedicated middle level educator who seamlessly integrates literacy strategies into her classroom. Kiana's dynamic teaching style emphasizes critical thinking and active participation, instilling in her students the skills they need to succeed academically and beyond. Her commitment to cultivating a supportive learning environment ensures that every student feels valued.

**Appendix A: *This Poison Heart* (2021)**

<p><b>Author</b></p>	<p>Kalynn Bayron</p>
<p><b>Magical Quotes</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Imagine plants are kind of like people. Tell a person they’re worthless, hurt their feelings everyday—they’d wither, too.” She let her delicate fingers dance over the surface of the counter, then up to her lips. Her eyes were like the centers of Velvet Queen sunflowers, brown and blazing. She held my gaze. “But imagine telling someone they’re beautiful, magnetic, stunning. Every single day. Imagine how they’d flourish” (Bayron, 2020, p. 160).</li> <li>● “Whenever you hear a story about villainous women, you should ask who’s telling the story. Medea’s tale has been told and retold a dozen times, but always by men who seem to revel in her heinous actions without addressing what caused it” (Bayron, 2020, p. 190).</li> <li>● The people we love are never really gone from us,” Mom said. “Try to remember that. I know it’s hard. It feels like the whole world should just stop spinnin’, but it doesn’t. And we’ve gotta find a way to pick up the pieces (Bayron, 2020, p. 2).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Content Lesson</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Types of Conflict (Internal vs. External)</li> <li>● Character Analysis</li> <li>● Genre Study: Folklore; Mythology; Science Fiction</li> <li>● Theme</li> <li>● Motif</li> <li>● Figurative Language</li> <li>● Author’s Perspective</li> <li>● Allusions</li> <li>● Imagery</li> <li>● Tone</li> <li>● Word Choice</li> <li>● Style</li> <li>● Contextual Influences</li> <li>● Citing Textual Evidence</li> <li>● Analyzing theme development</li> <li>● Analyzing how setting and plot impact character development</li> </ul>
<p><b>S.C. 2023 EA Standards</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● ELA.6.OE.1 Read and write for a variety of purposes, including academic and personal, for extended periods of time.</li> <li>● ELA.OE.3 Make inferences to support comprehension.</li> <li>● ELA.6.OE.5 Cite evidence to explain and justify reasoning.</li> <li>● ELA.6.OR.6 Create quality work by adhering to an accepted format.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.1: Evaluate and critique key literary elements that enhance and deepen meaning within and across texts.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.2: Evaluate and critique the development of themes and central ideas within and across texts.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.3: Evaluate how an author’s choice of point of view or perspective shapes style and meaning within and across literary texts.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.4: Evaluate and critique how an author’s perspective and purpose shape style and meaning within and across informational texts.</li> <li>● ELA.R.1: Use critical thinking skills to investigate, evaluate, and synthesize a variety of sources to obtain and refine knowledge.</li> <li>● ELA.C.2: Write informative/expository texts to analyze and explain complex ideas and information</li> </ul>

**Appendix B: *The Gilded Ones* (2020)**

<b>Author</b>	Namina Forna
<b>Magical Quotes</b>	<p>“I will not die in this horrible place. I will not die before I discover the truth about myself. I’ll survive, and I’ll do so long enough to leave this place, long enough to find someone who cherishes me the way Katya’s betrothed does her. All I have to do is be brave for once” (Forna, 2020, p. 150).</p> <p>“Even then, I know it’s real, know that it’s the truth. White Hands told me to trust this voice, trust the power hidden inside of me, and I do [...]” (Forna, 2020, p. 242).</p> <p>“Besides, I’ll always have Britta. The feelings I have for Keita always makes me warm, but Britta’s the one who’s forever there by my side, ready to support me, to push me when I’m being silly, to laugh with me when I need cheer. I’ve learned many things these past few months, and if there’s one thing I know, it’s this: Britta is my dearest friend, and my kinship with her is the foundation I stand on” (Forna, 2020, p. 306).</p>
<b>Content Lesson</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Types of Conflict (Internal vs. External)</li> <li>● Character Analysis</li> <li>● Genre Study: Folklore; Mythology; Science Fiction</li> <li>● Theme</li> <li>● Motif</li> <li>● Figurative Language</li> <li>● Author’s Perspective</li> <li>● Allusions</li> <li>● Imagery</li> <li>● Tone</li> <li>● Word Choice</li> <li>● Style</li> <li>● Contextual Influences</li> <li>● Citing Textual Evidence</li> <li>● Analyzing theme development</li> <li>● Analyzing how setting and plot impact character development</li> </ul>
<b>S.C. 2023 EA Standards</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● ELA.OE.3 Make inferences to support comprehension.</li> <li>● ELA.OE.5 Cite evidence to explain and justify reasoning.</li> <li>● ELA.OE.6 Create quality work by adhering to an accepted format.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.1 Evaluate and critique key literary elements that enhance and deepen meaning within and across texts.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.2 Evaluate and critique the development of themes and central ideas within and across texts.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.3: Evaluate how an author’s choice of point of view or perspective shapes style and meaning within and across literary texts.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.4: Evaluate and critique how an author’s perspective and purpose shape style and meaning within and across informational texts.</li> <li>● ELA.R.1: Use critical thinking skills to investigate, evaluate, and synthesize a variety of sources to obtain and refine knowledge.</li> <li>● ELA.C.2: Write informative/expository texts to analyze and explain complex ideas and information.</li> </ul>



**Appendix C: Akata Warrior (2017)**

<p><b>Author</b></p>	<p>Nnedi Okorafor</p>
<p><b>Magical Quotes</b></p>	<p>“A core characteristic of being a Leopard Person is that one of your greater natural ‘flaws’ or your uniqueness is the key to your power” (Okorafor, 2017, p. 3).</p> <p>“Superstitions are like stereotypes in a lot of ways. Not only are they based on fear and ignorance, they are also blended with fact” (Okorafor, 2017, p. 63).</p> <p>“Fear of failure leads to more failure! And you won’t fail this time! You will be able to leave this place, trust me” (Okorafor, 2017, p. 170).</p> <p>“Leopard People read books by everybody and everything. We look outside <i>and</i> inside. But you have to be secure with yourself to do either...” (Okorafor, 2017, p. 313).</p>
<p><b>Content Lesson</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Types of Conflict (Internal vs. External)</li> <li>● Character Analysis</li> <li>● Genre Study: Folklore; African Mythology; Science Fiction</li> <li>● Theme</li> <li>● Motif</li> <li>● Figurative Language</li> <li>● Author’s Perspective</li> <li>● Allusions</li> <li>● Imagery</li> <li>● Tone</li> <li>● Word Choice</li> <li>● Style</li> <li>● Contextual Influences</li> <li>● Citing Textual Evidence</li> <li>● Analyzing theme development</li> <li>● Analyzing how setting and plot impact character development</li> </ul>
<p><b>S.C. 2023 EA Standards</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● ELA.OE.3 Make inferences to support comprehension.</li> <li>● ELA.OE.5 Cite evidence to explain and justify reasoning.</li> <li>● ELA.OE.6 Create quality work by adhering to an accepted format.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.1 Evaluate and critique key literary elements that enhance and deepen meaning within and across texts.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.2 Evaluate and critique the development of themes and central ideas within and across texts.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.3: Evaluate how an author’s choice of point of view or perspective shapes style and meaning within and across literary texts.</li> <li>● ELA.AOR.4: Evaluate and critique how an author’s perspective and purpose shape style and meaning within and across informational texts.</li> <li>● ELA.R.1: Use critical thinking skills to investigate, evaluate, and synthesize a variety of sources to obtain and refine knowledge.</li> <li>● ELA.C.2: Write informative/expository texts to analyze and explain complex ideas and information.</li> </ul>