

Restorying the Self: Bending Toward Textual Justice

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In this essay, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas and Amy Stornaiuolo explore new trends in reader response for a digital age, particularly the phenomenon of bending texts using social media. They argue that bending is one form of restorying, a process by which people reshape narratives to represent a diversity of perspectives and experiences that are often missing or silenced in mainstream texts, media, and popular discourse. Building on Louise Rosenblatt's influential transactional theory of reading, the authors theorize restorying as a participatory textual practice in which young people use new media tools to inscribe themselves into existence. The authors build on theorists from Mikhail Bakhtin to Noliwe Rooks in order to illustrate tensions between individualistic "ideological becoming" and critical reader response as a means of protest. After discussing six forms of restorying, they focus on bending as one way youth make manifest their embodied, lived realities and identities, providing examples from sites of fan communities where participants are producing racebent fanwork based on popular children's and young adult books, movies, comics, and other media. Situating these phenomena within a larger tradition of narrating the self into existence, the authors explore broader implications for literacy education.

We open this essay about restorying by talking first about *storying*, the process by which stories are shaped and told over time. Award-winning Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) emphasizes that storying is always connected to power—who can tell stories, how many, when, and under what circumstances—and that some stories, if told often enough, can become the sine qua non of a person, a group, or a nation. When people only have access to a single story—one that simplifies and flattens the complexity of human experience and excludes many perspectives from being represented—they

can become constrained in what they imagine to be possible. However, when readers see themselves reflected in texts or read stories about people like them, they can more fully participate in the storying process. To illustrate the powerful effect of seeing oneself in stories, Adichie (2009) recounts a meeting with a reader of her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, a Nigerian woman who was dissatisfied with the ending and had imagined the sequel in detail. Adichie describes being moved by this woman, “part of the ordinary masses of Nigerians, who were not supposed to be readers,” who “had not only read the book, but . . . taken ownership of it and felt justified in telling me what to write in the sequel.” The reader felt justified in imagining the sequel precisely because she had taken ownership of the storying process, facilitated by seeing characters who looked like her and had experiences resonant with her own. This effort to resist the single story by telling a multitude of stories that can humanize and empower, Adichie argues, is vital to counteract incomplete textual renderings that dehumanize and divide.

One form of resistance to the single story, Nigerian author Chinua Achebe suggests, is for those who have been dispossessed or silenced to *restory* themselves in order to establish “a balance of stories where every people will be able to contribute to a definition of themselves, where we are not victims of other people’s accounts” (Bacon, 2000, para. 17). This process of restorying, of reshaping narratives to better reflect a diversity of perspectives and experiences, is an act of asserting the importance of one’s existence in a world that tries to silence subaltern voices. We believe that young people today are restorying popular narratives in response to a noted lack of diversity in children’s book publishing and media (W. D. Myers, 2014). Relatively few titles feature children and teens of color, especially in comparison with the size of the population of children and youth of color in US schools and society (Cooperative Children’s Book Center, 2013). In this essay, we use the concept of restorying to theorize how young people are using powerful new media tools to inscribe themselves into existence in response to efforts to silence, erase, consume, or ventriloquize them within children’s and young adult literature, media, and popular discourse. In the digital age, youth and young adults are using available textual tools to restory the self and the world.

Given the potential for young people to inscribe diversity into existence via participatory tools and social networks, we explore here how young people are engaged in restorying practices that respond to and resist a single story. Lewis (2000) argues that “interpretation itself is a social act” and that “understanding the transaction between reader and text involves examining the many social conditions that shape the stances readers take up as they interpret and respond to literature” (p. 258). We take up this call by arguing for an examination of the ways that the social conditions of digital media may be inviting young people to transform the meaning-making process through collective and creative restorying practices.

We begin with a section that examines how reading transactions between authors, audiences, and texts (Rosenblatt, 1938) are fundamentally shifting in a world with participatory cultural practices, ever-emerging digital tools, increasingly accessible networked communities, and globally circulating people and artifacts. We then theorize what the process of restorying entails in a digital age, discussing six forms of restorying: time, place, perspective, mode, metanarrative, and identity. In the subsequent section we examine *bending*, or reimagining stories from nondominant, marginalized, and silenced perspectives, as one form of restorying that draws from and makes manifest embodied, lived realities and identities. In the final section we link restorying efforts like bending to broader educational practices, particularly for educators navigating the fraught terrain of formal schooling who seek opportunities to position youth as critical agents in their own learning.

Texts, Storying, and Struggle

We are at a significant juncture in our cultural meaning-making practices, with texts—indeed, the very nature of textuality itself—changing more rapidly than at any time in recent memory. As people engage in mobile and digital communicative practices across vast differences and distances, what constitutes a text is undergoing significant cultural redefinition. Not necessarily bound to page or screen—or any particular medium—texts are now more broadly recognized as “any instance of communication in any mode or any combination of modes” (Kress, 2003, p. 48). Whether via written text on the pages of a book or a voice-mail sent via a mobile phone, texts involve fixing (or materializing) communication in a particular shape through semiotic work. In classrooms, educators are experimenting with new forms that reflect more expansive understandings of texts, as youth create artifacts like digital stories or podcasts that orchestrate meaning across semiotic modes (Hull & Nelson, 2005). A more expansive definition of what constitutes textuality has significant implications for the ways that stories are told, circulated, and retold.

While new technologies for creating, sharing, and circulating texts amplify the scale, scope, and nature of people’s communicative efforts, all semiotic tools are profoundly intertwined with shifting social and cultural practices and offer a range of affordances and constraints (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). For example, even as texts, ideas, and people circulate globally with increased speed, distance, and intensity (Appadurai, 1996), they do so within historically rooted systems of oppression and commodification (Lee & LiPuma, 2002). Taking into account the social dimensions of all semiotic practice, Kress (2003) describes how a text emerges as “the result of social action, of work: it is work with representational resources which realise social matters” (p. 47). In other words, texts cannot be separated from their social contexts of production and interpretation; they are always materialized through and situated in relation to

our social and cultural activities and tools. In relation to the process of restorying, in particular, texts are always linked to their readers: a text is “any configuration of signs that is coherently interpretable by some community of users” (Hanks, 1989, p. 95). That is, meaning is never located in the text but instead is made through the work of readers as they interact with a text (Iser, 1978). With new opportunities to connect, collaborate, and communicate, relationships between readers, authors, and texts are being renegotiated.

Such ongoing negotiation is nothing new, however, as the influential work of Louise Rosenblatt (1938) demonstrates. In arguing against then-dominant theories of literature that focused solely on texts without attending to readers or contexts, Rosenblatt characterized the relationship between readers and writers as a transaction—a dynamic, fluid interrelationship instantiated in particular, lived contexts (Appleman, 2000; Rosenblatt, 1994; Sipe, 1999). Later scholarship extended transactional theories of reading to include more sustained focus on the analytical and critical dimensions of reading as well as issues of context and identity (Beach, 1997; Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Cai, 2008; Collins, 2013; Enciso, 1997, 1998; Garcia, 2013; Hayles, 2013; Lewis, 2000; Moje & Luke, 2009; Naidoo & Dahlen, 2013; Willis, 1997). Bakhtin’s (1981) insights into issues of identity and textual interpretation are instructive here; he theorizes that readers and writers are always engaged in a struggle over meaning that influences the development of their ideological selves. This “ideological becoming” is an iterative process characterized by the “struggle and dialogic interrelationship” between many voices and perspectives that attend all textual interpretation (p. 342). Although we acknowledge that these are practices readers have long engaged with, advancements in technology have led to significant change in these interrelationships. Rereading Rosenblatt’s theory of reader response alongside Bakhtin’s notion of ideological becoming, we find the idea of *struggle* to be central to reader-writer-text transactions, as readers shape their identities in effortful dialogic interrelationships.

We are particularly interested in how young people who do not see themselves reflected in dominant narratives engage in interpretive struggles, especially when many have access now to a wide variety of tools and spaces that invite them to create their own textual representations and to push back against dominant perspectives. Critical race theory offers us theoretical purchase as we seek to center the stories of marginalized people, particularly those who have been subjugated within unequal systems of power that undergird much of our culture’s fictional terrain. Emerging from the need to explain the persistence of racial discrimination and social suffering in the United States after the civil rights movement ended, critical race theory embraces storytelling and personal narrative as method, highlighting the importance of telling one’s story and, indeed, of collectively restorying through counternarratives, or narratives that present alternatives to dominant perspectives (Cook & Dixon, 2013). Critical race frameworks inform a transactional theory of reading in a digital age by situating counternarrative formation as collective efforts

that are rooted in the lived experiences of those whose stories and voices are seldom represented in just and equitable ways. Such a framework helps position youth narrative processes at the center of our inquiry. We examine the ways young people are placing themselves at the center of their literate worlds as they read and write themselves into stories that have heretofore marginalized, silenced, and excluded them.

As scholars working from postmodern, critical, feminist, and critical race perspectives, we note that women, people of color, and other marginalized readers have *always* had to read themselves into canons that excluded them. Canonical texts historically assumed a White male readership as their imagined audience, and, in turn, people from other groups had to read those narratives to attain print literacies and acquire the codes of power (Delpit, 1995). Not only was it necessary for people from the margins to identify and comprehend the societal metanarratives and metadiscourses contained within the canon in order to gain access to the professions, but often familiarity with canonical White male subjectivity was also vital for their very survival. Whether literary prose, religious metaphors, or edicts and laws, would-be readers and writers from nondominant groups had to accommodate textual self-erasure while reading written prose, viewing artwork, and the like. Thus, there arose an imperative to read and write marginalized selfhoods into textual existence.

One of the first scholars in the contemporary academy to conceptualize this process of narrating the self into existence was literary critic Noliwe Rooks (1989), who in her consideration of Black women authors of slave narratives writes:

Black women writers have begun the task of reshaping and redefining the patriarchy's notions regarding slave women by offering an alternative view of history—a vision which has Black women at its center. While they have not as yet answered all of the stereotypes of Black women that we have come to accept, they have made a definite start . . . *Black women have begun to write themselves into existence.* (p. 62)

It can be argued that women, people of color, and people from other nondominant groups have read and written themselves into existence since antiquity. Therefore, it is not surprising that marginalized people have been using reading and writing online for the purposes of social justice. Just as publications from Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (2007) and David Walker's *An Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1995) to the present day have directly challenged White cisgender heterosexual male supremacy and institutional power through the use of the printing press, over the past few years observers have noted the mass leveraging of social media by feminist, womanist, queer, critical/Marxist, and critical race activists, thinkers, and writers, characterizing this trend as "digital activism" (Mora, 2013).

In light of the ways that textual transformations are opening up how stories may be told, shared, and revised and the historical antecedents for such

restorying work, we are interested in the ways young people engage in reading practices that position them at the center of their literate worlds. Considering newly participatory ways of engaging in storying and restorying processes, Jenkins and colleagues (2013) insist that we are at a turning point that “will redefine how knowledge is produced and stories shared for future generations” (p. 11). For example, young people engaged in participatory culture produce individual and collaborative content as part of their everyday lives using a wide variety of multimodal tools to make meanings that are increasingly decentralized, crowdsourced, and situated in a multiplicity of contexts (Jenkins et al., 2013). Consequently, we think that the question of reader-author relationships must be revisited in a digital age in which more people than ever before are writing for work and leisure. Today’s readers are connecting with one another in powerful networks, while lines between readers and writers blur and definitions of what counts as text are negotiated and reconfigured in hybrid multimodal and multilingual constellations. Despite the renegotiation of reader relationships, texts and people are still circulating along asymmetrical trajectories where the hierarchies of our world are reinscribed in ways that inhibit justice. We ask, In what ways are digital restorying practices bending stories toward justice?

Transforming Stories: Forms of Restorying

Restorying has been conceptualized in the narrative analysis tradition in qualitative research as a method for researchers to break down the participants’ stories into their constituent parts—plot, characters, themes—and then synthesize them in new ways to make meaning of myriad experiences of the same phenomenon (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004; Georgakopoulou, 2006; Ollerenshaw & Cresswell, 2002). We find that restorying can also characterize the complex ways that contemporary young people narrate the word and the world, analyzing their lived experiences and then synthesizing and recontextualizing a multiplicity of stories in order to form new narratives (Freire & Macedo, 2005). In other words, as young readers imagine themselves into stories, they reimagine the very stories themselves, as people of all ages collectively reimagine time, place, perspective, mode, metanarrative, and identity through retold stories (figure 1).

Restorying Time and Place

One of the most common forms of restorying involves readers changing the location of narratives to alternate times and places. In classrooms, this practice might include shifting canonical works into current settings, like Ricardo Pitts-Wiley did with a group of incarcerated youth in Rhode Island as they restoried *Moby-Dick* for current times, with Ahab as a powerful drug dealer (Jenkins et al., 2013). Taking characters and situations to new locations is prevalent in fiction and fan fiction (e.g., *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*).¹ The speculative

FIGURE 1 *Forms of restorying*

fiction genre known as alternate history features stories that have an identifiable point of divergence from the history of our present reality, although some alternate histories also feature anachronism, magic, or advanced technology. Similarly, within fan communities, a phenomenon known as alternate universe (AU) fanwork— fan art, fan fiction, fanvids, and fan meta essays— explores divergences from source texts.² For instance, young fan fiction authors imagine the young adult lives of the characters from the Harry Potter series between the final chapter of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* and the epilogue, which takes place many years later, moving Rowling's narrative forward in time (Bond & Michelson, 2008). Some of this fan fiction imagines the wizarding world in other locations and during other historical periods. This is important work that disrupts predominant metanarratives and epistemologies that lock people into a single story (Adichie, 2009).

Restorying Perspective

From *Wide Sargasso Sea* to *Grendel* and the more recent *The Wind Done Gone*, telling stories from a nonprotagonist's point of view has long been the prov-

ince of parallel novels and avant-garde Hollywood movies. Playing with perspective has also long been a hallmark of storytelling in comics and graphic novels (Sousanis, 2015), as well as in popular television series like *The Wire* and *Game of Thrones*. However, as noted previously, people from nondominant groups—people of color, women, religious and sexual minorities, and the disabled, among others—have always had alternate stories to tell and have used many different means of telling them. Therefore, young people in digital communities who sympathize with unsympathetic characters, like Draco Malfoy in the Harry Potter series (Sklar, 2008), or want to know more about characters in the margins, like Rue in *The Hunger Games* (Garcia & Haddix, 2014), are participating in an age-old tradition of restorying from different points of view. Retelling the same story through a number of perspectives has the power to build empathy and understanding. For, as postcolonial theorist Shaobo Xie (1999) notes, “to speak from an other’s thought is to redefine and renarrativize the world” (p. 1).

Restorying Across Modes

In addition to digital media, whenever young people retell stories through, for instance, hip-hop, the visual arts, dance, or slam poetry, they are engaging in yet another kind of narrative transformation. Thomas Philip and Antero Garcia (2013) note that

traditional texts can be transformed by ease of access as well as by their availability through new modalities. Students’ experiences outside of the classroom, encapsulated by images, video, sound, notes, and GPS tags, can ever more easily become texts for study. New technologies have also multiplied the prospects for students to create and exchange multimodal texts. (p. 311)

While Philip and Garcia rightly note that it is ultimately the job of teachers to facilitate discussions about cultural relevance and power during multimodal lessons in the classroom so that multimodality is connected to academic literacies, we have observed youth and young adults engaged in multimodal restorying in out-of-school spaces as well. A growing body of literature talks about the potential of out-of-school literacies, such as virtual affinity communities,³ to inform effective classroom practice, including the work of Valerie Kinloch (2009), Ernest Morrell and Jeff Duncan-Andrade (2002), and Maisha Winn (2011).

Restorying Together

Today’s teens and young adults are increasingly using new forms of communication to engage in textual and visual production that is collaborative, patched together with pastiche and allusions, and shared in what has been characterized as environments of “digital intimacy” (Thompson, 2008). Digitally intimate virtual communities have their own ever-evolving rules, norms, and assumptions about meaning-making processes, authorship, and compos-

ing. As young people participate with one another across these affinity spaces (Gee & Hayes, 2011) and networked publics (boyd, 2008), they engage in participatory cultures “in which everyday citizens have an expanded capacity to communicate and circulate their ideas . . . [and] networked communities can shape our collective agendas” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 7).

In fact, some scholars have noted that the digital age is merely facilitating a return to a previous era before the advent of the printing press and the rise of the novel (Ong, 2013; Pettitt, 2007; Sauerberg, 2009), when stories belonged not to individual authors but to the collective and evolved according to the needs of the times.⁴ Therefore, if “the reader’s construction of . . . new texts is the source of meaning in reading” (Smagorinsky, 2001, p. 134), today’s readers are using the tools of social media to collectively make meanings that are not just independent of authorial intent but that can also deliberately contradict it. In other words, meaning itself is in the process of becoming crowd-sourced and jointly imagined. The Twitter campaign #WeNeedDiverseBooks offers a compelling example of this restorying work, as people together challenge the predominantly White world of children’s and young adult fiction by offering alternate readings of “normal” families portrayed in most published books for youth. These collective forms of restorying can challenge metanarratives through collective action by offering an alternate reading.

Restorying Identity

One of the most prevalent forms of restorying we explore in our research and critical work is the restorying of identity as young people change the identities of characters to more accurately reflect the diversity of the world, to blur boundaries between traditional categories, or to create characters whose identities more closely mirror their own. We have found young readers’ restorying of identity to be particularly visible in the fandom practice of bending characters to make them more diverse.⁵ In online spaces, racebending occurs when artists, fan fiction writers, video makers, and others create fanworks about popular, usually White, characters but change their racial or ethnic makeups (“What Is ‘Racebending?’” 2011). Although there has been some significant backlash to racebending (and analogous forms of bending, such as genderbending and queerbending), it is clear that young people are not only writing themselves into existence (boyd, 2008; Dyson & Daulatzai, 2009; Rooks, 1989; Vasquez, 2014) but also *reading* themselves into existence (Bishop, 2007; Low, 2013). They are doing so within a contemporary youth mass media environment that Nancy Larrick (1965) famously described as the all-White world of children’s literature and that Christopher Myers (2014) calls the “apartheid” of children’s literature. Even though attention to racebending in fan communities has taken root in recent years, it has been more than a decade since educational researchers Mica Pollock (2004) and Luis Moll (2004) synchronously observed racebending as a social phenomenon in diverse schools and communities. While racebending in classroom interaction seems to be an

adaptive strategy where youth choose to emphasize certain racial features and characteristics in order to fit in, we argue that racebending of characters from popular children's and young adult stories within fan communities has the potential to be culturally transformative.

Background: Studying Racebending

Avidly involved in digital fan communities since the turn of the millennium, Ebony first noticed the frequency with which her fandom friends on Tumblr were sharing racebent fanwork in the winter of 2014.⁶ As a literacy scholar working in the tradition of reader response theorists such as Louise Rosenblatt and Lawrence R. Sipe, she studies how identities and social subjectivities are navigated in transactions between readers, writers, and texts using qualitative research methods such as interactional ethnography, autoethnography, and discourse analysis. An outgrowth of Ebony's larger program of research on race and the imagination in children's and young adult literature, her observations about racebending were sparked by her experiences as a Black teen, a young adult, an acafan participant in more than a dozen fan communities, many years of urban public school teaching at the elementary and high school levels, and engagement within the virtual social communities of the digital world.⁷ After sharing these experiences with Amy, whose research is focused on digital literacies in local and global contexts, we realized our need to conceptualize the racebending phenomenon in order to design qualitative research to capture it.

However, researching fandom can be difficult for many reasons: the desire for privacy among fan artists, the challenges of ascertaining identity in virtual communities, legal action from copyright holders, and the possibility of social ridicule (Bennett, 2013; Bore & Hickman, 2013). Furthermore, as Nakamura and Chow-White (2012) highlight in their description of online digital technologies as "complex topographies of power and privilege, made up of walled communities, new (plat)forms of economic and technological exclusion, and both new and old styles of race as code, interaction, and image" (p. 17), seeking out fandom participants at the margins carries considerable risk. However, despite these risks, people of color and women use the Internet to vigorously articulate their own types of virtual community, avatar bodies, and racial politics (Nakamura, 2008)—including bending.

As an initial step of this collaborative work, Ebony invited artists in fandoms where she was a participant whose racebent fanwork had been frequently shared on social media to talk more about their rationale for doing such work. She solicited respondents entirely via social media, asking an initial question via Twitter or Tumblr: "What inspired you to racebend this character?" These digital conversations helped us understand artists' efforts to restory the self through their reimaginations of books that had entered popular culture. The

participants' responses to the questions Ebony asked provided a critical perspective that informed our efforts to theorize how young people are restorying themselves by reading and writing themselves into existence. The four respondents, all self-described as being between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five, generously gave us permission to share their art and their thoughts about the racebending phenomenon.

How Youth and Young Adults Are Restorying the Self: The Case of Racebending

In the digital world, the concept of racebending emerged as a campaign from the fan community around *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Aghast at the casting discrimination in the 2010 film adaptation of the animated television series, fan activists began the grassroots organization Racebending.com to call attention to the ways Hollywood studios and casting directors change the race or ethnicity of characters to discriminate against people of color. This bending of race or ethnicity, with White actors used to represent characters from under-represented communities, has historically been used to silence, marginalize, and minimize communities of color and deny their inclusion "in the American storytelling landscape" ("What Is 'Racebending?'" 2011). We highlight this history of bending in fan communities to illustrate how young people are claiming the practice to read and write themselves into existence, to become the media producers who cast characters in their own likeness or the likeness of people around them to better reflect the reality of their worlds. While the fan activists of Racebending.com contend that only occasionally is the practice used by studios to add diversity or new perspectives to stories (one example being casting Samuel L. Jackson as Nick Fury in the Marvel films), we look to youth practices on social media platforms that are creating alternative representations that challenge "official" narratives.

We propose that bending is a particular form of restorying, one that takes advantage of new forms of textuality for both pleasure and activist purposes. The narrow scope of children's and young adult literature and media, along with the easy availability of online groups about popular books, television shows, and movies, has led to fanwork that, in the words of poet Langston Hughes (2004), makes the world anew. As literacy scholars, we characterize bending as agentive reader responses that are growing in frequency and scope as youth and young adults bend characters from popular fantastic stories, from the Harry Potter series to *The Silmarillion*. While it is likely the case that young readers and viewers have always made text-to-self connections by imagining characters differently, digital social media makes possible global fan communities that foster bending practices.

For our first example, we consider the widespread social media response to the animated motion picture *Frozen*, Disney's rendering of Hans Christian Andersen's classic fairy tale "The Snow Queen." Expressing dismay at what they viewed as yet another all-White Disney production, youth began engag-

ing in racebending through artwork. Over a relatively short period, the most popular racebent drawings of *Frozen*'s Princess Elsa were shared hundreds of thousands of times (Guillaume, 2015).

The popularity of racebent *Frozen* fan art on social media sites like Tumblr resulted in not only widespread media attention but also considerable backlash. The KnowYourMeme website summarizes the controversy, suggesting that the indigenous Sámi people that were being depicted in the fairy tale would be categorized as White in the United States (Horan & Ussir, 2014). Opposition to racebending fairy-tale princesses like Andersen's Snow Queen comes from the argument that such fanwork is historically inaccurate. Yet, as medievalist Andrew B. R. Elliott (2011) has noted, "it is most often when the forum of the medieval world does not align with our own image of the period that we are most likely to take exceptions, not to its *accuracy* per se, but its *authenticity*" (p. 214). Thus, audiences may reject seeing fairy-tale characters of color because, contrary to historical evidence, fictional Europe has come to be depicted as all White (Dewalt, 2014).

In an e-mail interview, Malisha Dewalt, founder of the popular Medieval-POC Tumblr and website, talked about sociopolitical reasons for audience resistance to the racebending of fantasy and fairy tales.

Emotional investment in the Whiteness of fantasy culture, fantasy fandoms, medieval studies, renaissance festivals, you name it, is not something that can be corrected with citations and evidence. This problem was created in the first place by flooding the popular consciousness with a whitewashed version of the past, and that includes but is not limited to medieval Europe (think [about] popular films about Ancient Greece and Rome; Renaissance period films like *Elizabeth*; books and movies set in the 1800s). The only thing that can fight a pervasive cultural assumption that was purposely created is to in turn *purposely* create an accessible, shareable, citable, *visual* counternarrative that can inspire people's imaginations via history in the same way that it has for Whiteness. (personal communication, June 8, 2014)

Youth and young adults from all over the world are now engaged in the purposeful creation of racebent fanworks of traditionally White iconic characters and sharing them via social media. Some of these fan creators are young people of color who have not often seen themselves represented in fantasy. For instance, Ariel is a twenty-one-year-old fan artist who draws characters from *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy specifically to reflect her own heritage (see image 1): "I picked Mexican because that's what I am, and . . . it fits really well." Ariel also notes that along with racebending, artists in her fandom are increasingly genderbending and queerbending characters in their fanwork: "There's also the ideas, head canons that dwarves are more gender fluid than the strict male/female dynamic" (personal communication, January 23, 2015).

Not all young readers and creators who racebend are people of color. White fans across fandoms racebend characters as well. Twenty-three-year-old Jes-

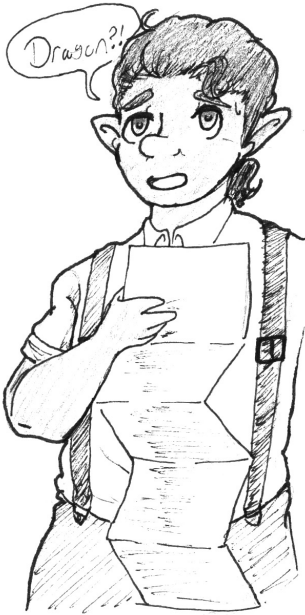


Image 1. Racebent Bilbo Baggins, by Ariel Martinez. Retrieved from <http://adventurousskitten.tumblr.com/post/106579427785/adventurousskitten-that-night-in-bag-end-when>. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

sica credits growing up seeing diversity in Marvel Comics as an influence on her popular racebent Varda drawings. Varda Elentári is the High Queen of the Valar, a powerful goddess of the stars and the night sky and beloved among Tolkien's Elves. In officially commissioned artwork, as well as in fan art, Varda is often drawn as very pale with silver or golden hair, perhaps due to her description in *The Silmarillion*, the legendarium of Tolkien's Middle-earth universe: "With Manwë dwells Varda, Lady of the Stars, who knows all the regions of Æa. Too great is her beauty to be declared in the words of Men or of Elves; for the light of Ilúvatar still lives in her face" (Tolkien, 1977, p. 26). Varda is considered the most beautiful of the Valar queens and the greatest opponent of the evil Melkor. Often, heroic and beautiful characters in fantasy are not depicted with dark skin (Heng, 2011). Therefore, Jessica's artistic choice to draw Varda with brown skin is quite imaginative indeed. Taking her initial inspiration from the darkness of the night sky itself, Jessica told us that she was influenced by the iconic comic book character Storm (Ororo Munroe) from Marvel's popular *X-Men* series.

Storm's Tolkien-speech and regal presence from the cartoon . . . I did seem to take a lot from her character . . . when thinking up Varda's design. It might have been an unconscious decision on my part, because I know I didn't plan for it at the time, but I think it's interesting how something from our childhood can stick with us without even realizing it. (Personal communication, January 19, 2015)

Much as Tolkien himself was inspired by history and mythology, Jessica's *Silmarillion* drawings of Varda were also inspired by medieval iconography and historical costume (see images 2, 3, and 4).

Janie is a teen fan artist whose work reimagines another of Tolkien's Valar queens, Indis the Golden, as a woman with dark-brown skin.⁸ On Tumblr, Janie, who self-identified as White, responded to our questions about her inspirations and motivations by pointing to current trends in Tolkien fandom:

I think what made me want to draw a racebent Indis was the fact that the movies that are dedicated to our particular fandom (*Lord of the Rings* and other Tolkien things) are so overwhelmingly White. Given this, a lot of fan interpretations also end up White and not only does this exclude a majority of the world from being



Image 2. *Racebent Varda*, by Jessica Popescu.
Retrieved from <http://sycamoreleaf.deviantart.com/art/Queen-of-the-Stars-407812449>. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

represented, it also gets really boring. If all the inspiration for character design, clothing, and culture come from Western Europe, it leaves so little room for making the different cultures of this fantasy world actually different . . .

I don't remember there being anything in the description of this character that would make her undoubtedly White. I knew she had golden hair but not only do dark-skinned people with blonde hair exist on our planet, this is fantasy. If we can have immortal beings and walking trees, we can and should have cultural and racial diversity. (Personal communication, January 26, 2015)

The phenomenon of bending is not merely limited to visual depictions of characters in popular stories. Some of the clearest examples of restorying work can be found in online fan fiction, as people take established stories and characters and breathe new life into them by “extend[ing] storylines, creat[ing] new nar-

rative threads, develop[ing] romantic relationships between characters, and focus[ing] on the lives of undeveloped characters from various media” (Black, 2009, p. 398). A growing number of fan fiction authors are choosing to play with the backgrounds of their characters, who are often from groups that have been marginalized within canons and source texts. Some researchers have observed that fan fiction writing is “a method by which female viewers co-opt media properties originally targeted at male audiences” (Barnes, 2015, p. 74), thereby “appropriating, transgressing, subverting, and resisting the source material” (Tosenberger, 2008, as cited in Barnes, 2015, p. 74). Thus, changing facets of a character's identity in fan fiction can be an agentive response to perceived textual erasure.

Moreover, young readers are choosing to read characters as mirrors of their own experiences. After a viral *Buzzfeed* article by Alanna Bennett (2015),



Image 3. *Racebent Varda* (“What a lovely cloak!”), by Jessica Popescu. Retrieved from <http://sycamoreleaf.deviantart.com/art/what-a-lovely-cloak-445556004>. Reprinted with permission from the artist.

“What a Racebent Hermione Really Represents,” was shared among Harry Potter fans online, a new social media movement formed which insisted that Hermione’s description in the popular novels meant she was really Black. The Tumblr tag “Hermione is Black” featured a 2015 post that has been shared more than seven thousand times.

One author of “Hermione is Black” posts, Breianna Harvey, talked about growing up with the Harry Potter series as a child and reading the überpopular girl protagonist of the series as a mirror of her self:

Prior to Tumblr, I had thought Hermione was like me and [the film] was my first experience at being upset with deviations from the book, specifically casting. But like many other Black girls in my situation, I kept my mouth shut. It wasn’t until Tumblr that I started to speak up about it. I saw drawings of Hermione . . . where the artists would subconsciously draw Hermione darker than everyone



Image 4. *Back and front view of mantle, 1804–1807, Spain. Retrieved from www.metmuseum.org. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1954.*

else. Then my friend started posting fancasts of [multiracial Welsh actress] Jessica Sula as Hermione and I really loved it. Then I started to see fanart where she was darker than Jessica and followers were engaging in conversation with me about how much a Black Hermione would make sense along with speculation of her origins. (Personal communication, November 12, 2015)

Breianna's reading of Hermione as a Black girl is quite radical, yet she is not alone. "Hermione is Black" posts have been shared hundreds of times by Tumblr users. Along with the "racebent Hermione" tag, this reading demonstrates that the phenomenon of bending is not simply a matter of fan art but may indeed have implications for the phenomenology of reading—what young people imagine as they make sense of the story as written on the page. As Jennifer Barnes (2015) notes,

There is evidence to support the idea that readers contribute imaginatively to the fictional stories they consume. Prior research has shown that readers will project a gender onto a character whose gender is not specified, import real-world facts into fictional worlds, and misremember the details of a story to make it more congruent with stories from their own culture . . . Different readers may experience the same text differently, just as two actors may have a different interpretation of the same role.⁹

If readers are bending characters, plots, and settings in order to identify with stories, then arguments about authorial intent must be reconsidered in our literary pedagogy and assessment. Increasingly, young people are looking for mirrors, windows, and doors into others' experiences and also for their own experiences to be represented in literature and, by extension, in the literacy

curriculum. When educators encounter students like Breianna, who imagined that Hermione looked like her as she read, their attempts to make connections between text and self may be misunderstood as a lack of comprehension. Since, as Barnes notes, different readers experience the same text differently, the differences among readers themselves must be taken into account in the classroom, lest some text-to-self connections be privileged over others.

In response to the counterargument that children and teens do not necessarily need to see themselves inside of books in order to learn from them, prominent children's literature scholar Rudine Sims Bishop (2012) notes:

It is true, of course, that good literature reaches across cultural and ethnic borders to touch us all as humans . . . However, for those children who historically had been ignored—or worse, ridiculed—in children's books, seeing themselves portrayed visually and textually as realistically human was essential to letting them know that they are valued in the social context in which they are growing up . . . My assessment was that historically, children from parallel cultures had been offered mainly books as windows into lives that were different from their own, and children from the dominant culture had been offered mainly fiction that mirrored their own lives. All children need both. (p. 9)

Taken alongside similarly genderbent and queerbent youth reader responses, it is clear that bending seeks to center *all* youth as protagonists in *all* stories. Bending iconic texts signals a continued dialectic of struggle as well as a radical decentering of cisgender, heterosexual middle- and upper-class male Whiteness as the default reader position. As children's and young adult stories have become increasingly digital, bending by youth and young adults needs to be considered not only as a response to discourses of deprivation (Campano, 2007) but as evidence that members of a new, global, digital-age generation are in the process of becoming cosmopolitan and intellectual of their own accord (Campano & Ghiso, 2011; Stornaiuolo, 2015). Young people today are responding to textual and contextual erasure by reading and writing diversity into existence (Vasquez, 2014). As fan artist Ariel noted about her rising generation, "We just love the stories so much, and we felt like there needed to be a bit more color."

Bending Toward Textual Justice: The Potential of Restorying

Considering the profound shifts in the literacies and lives of the young people we teach, mentor, and study—many of whom are from the very groups engaged in much of this restorying—has brought us to a crossroads. On the one hand, we are researchers in a field informed both by Rosenblatt's transaction theory of reading, which emphasizes the dialogic construction of relationships between readers, texts, and authors (Galda & Beach, 2001; Iser, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1994; Sipe, 1999), and by theories of the participatory possibilities of new literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). On the other hand, we are teacher educators grappling with the implications of the Common Core State Standards for the English language arts, which emphasize close read-

ing, text complexity, and greater focus on informational texts and literacies (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and CCSSO, 2012). However, we find that there is little emphasis on the creative capacities of making meaning beyond the limitations of the four corners of the text (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 4).¹⁰

Given such a landscape, we take heart in the imaginative work of educators who embrace culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995), responsive (Gay, 2000), and sustaining (Paris, 2012) pedagogies that frame teaching and learning as centrally concerned with nurturing the language, literacy, and cultural practices youth bring with them, moving beyond the four corners of texts to explore the intersections between identities, contexts, and author/reader/text transactions. Our research demonstrates that the degree to which reading is “an event involving a particular individual and a particular text, happening at a particular time, under particular circumstances, in a particular cultural and social setting, and as part of the ongoing life of the individual and the group” (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 100) is shifting in a participatory culture where more young people engage collaboratively with digital and social media inside and outside of school (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2006). We contend that this shift is happening not so much because adolescent and young readers themselves are so very different from those in the past, but because texts—indeed, the very nature of textuality itself—is changing rapidly. Literacy must be reconsidered in an age when youth and young adults engage together in struggles to restory themselves and the world around them, to significant effect, as they shift and disrupt the broader narratives and metanarratives that so powerfully shape people’s lives through their historical legacies.

We have proposed that the concept of restorying offers a useful framework for understanding how young people are reading and writing themselves into existence in the social media age. We focus on one popular form of restorying, bending, to call attention to the ways that young people are responding as they witness people’s lived identities being represented, misrepresented, or erased. While there are many forms of restorying we might have focused on, bending calls particular attention to issues of identity that we think are at the heart of current literacy practice, particularly as relationships between readers, authors, and texts get renegotiated. Networked readership and authorship provide powerful means to resist being “victims of other people’s accounts,” in Achebe’s words (Bacon, 2000, para. 17). Highlighting young people’s restorying practices shifts the focus away from privileged voices that have traditionally narrated or published single stories and occupied primary subject positions and opens spaces for multiple stories to emerge.

Keeping these ideas in mind, we provide the following recommendations for educators interested in engaging in restorying work with their students.

Restorying time and place. Educators and others who work with youth and young adults could ask students to retell stories in other times and places. In addition

to making rich text-to-self connections by restorying a narrative within their own context, another prompt might be to imagine the same characters and events happening in the students' hometown but in the past or future. Inviting students to shift stories to other times and places has the potential to foster understanding about what remains essential about the human condition.

Restorying perspective. Stories differ according to the perspective of the teller. A useful current example is the popular musical about the life of US founding father Alexander Hamilton, *Hamilton*, in which the same events are retold through the eyes of different people who experienced them. Inviting students to restory events from the point of view of a character other than the protagonist, especially characters from nondominant backgrounds and perspectives, has the potential to foster empathy toward diversity and difference.

Restorying across modes. From hip-hop Shakespeare lessons to graphic novel versions of canonical classics, the literacy curriculum encourages the retelling of stories among myriad modes. Although multimodal projects are nothing new in classrooms, asking students to think about how stories change as they move from one mode to another may provide rich classroom conversations. Which stories get retold, and how? What is lost and what is gained when a story is told through a picture book, a novel, or a comic? How about television shows or films?

Restorying together. We are witnessing the ways in which young readers and writers are not simply petitioning arbiters of authority for equity or demanding that their voices be heard. Instead, they are positioning themselves as always already the center of their literate worlds. If an author's plot or ending does not suit them, or if an author excludes, misrepresents, or erases diverse characters, locations, or perspectives, they avail themselves of options not available to them before the digital age. They may choose to tweet authors, post a message to an official Facebook page, make a YouTube video, leave a review on Goodreads, create a post on Tumblr, or do all of the above.¹¹ And they do all of the above in the company of other readers, networking in ways that were not previously possible. Unlike writing a letter to an author or publisher, this sort of public, networked confrontation in the digital realm often leads to official responses from authors and their representatives concerned about managing public perceptions. A class, or even an entire school, might brainstorm ways to shift the narrative in similar ways—restorying for the common good.

Restorying identity. Working with new tools that allow them to subvert, challenge, and overwrite those representations, youth are composing new stories with and for other people like themselves, bending the world to look more like the one they inhabit and imagine. Encouraging bending projects in the classroom—with a caveat about the challenges of writing from unfamiliar perspectives without doing research and learning from people inside

that group—might, as Jessica’s racebent Varda shows, help students reconsider whose stories are valued and which people are most often centered in narrative.

We close with an example of an author-reader interaction that occurred during a high school field trip that Amy and her research team sponsored. The students went to the local library to hear author Ta-Nehisi Coates talk about his acclaimed 2015 book *Between the World and Me*, a powerful treatise on the destructive history and persistent imaginary of race in America written as a letter to his teenage son. A young man the same age as the son stood to ask Coates a question on behalf of his class, first offering an interpretation of the title that they developed from their own experiences navigating the world as young men and women of color. The young man then asked Coates, “What we all wanted to know is, how did *you* interpret the title?” After a pause and a laugh, Coates responded, “I don’t want to tell you now,” adding, “That’s pretty cool,” in reference to the students’ collective interpretation. He went on to explain: “No, that[’s] how it works. If you say that’s what the title means, that’s what the title means. I’m serious about that. You shouldn’t privilege my interpretation over yours—yours is just as legitimate as mine.” Coates, like Adichie in the opening example, welcomed and invited readers to take ownership of texts. By casting the young man’s act of imaginative freedom as legitimate, Coates pushed back on largely unspoken understandings that the author’s interpretation is the correct one. Such an act of imagining oneself through the text, especially for young people whose voices and perspectives are rarely taken into full account, Coates affirmed, was not only appropriate but *legitimate*.

We imagine readers might be thinking that such a straightforward, even routine, interpretive act as imagining the meaning of a title in relation to one’s own experience and perspective is not as transformative as racebending texts. Yet, we want to highlight the ways both acts are forms of restorying, with young readers pushing back on official interpretations to create counternarratives that assert, *I exist, I matter, and I am here*. We ponder what it would look like if schools and educators encouraged young people to take ownership over texts, to engage in restorying processes that place them at the center of their literate worlds and that foster collaborative understandings which affirm their lived experiences and identities.

We submit that attending to young people’s digital practices, especially their imaginative play with new tools and audiences as they restory themselves, can help push schools and educators to imagine new possibilities. These possibilities extend beyond textuality, and the struggle over whose stories are told and circulated, to the positions that educators take up in relation to authors and narratives. When youth are invited to push back, to reimagine, and to restory the world from their own perspectives, they engage in new forms of becoming. The rising generation is moving toward a kind of collective restorying—Achebe’s suggested “balance of stories” (Bacon, 2000, para. 17)—to begin

to address persistent inequities in literature, literacy education, and beyond. While we question whether it is possible to achieve a balance of stories in our present educational landscape of persistent inequality, we applaud young people's resilient efforts to author themselves in order to be heard, seen, and noticed—to assert that *their lives matter*—by bending the world around them. For as Martin Luther King Jr. (1965) said, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” We invite teachers, researchers, and policy makers to join us in noting this bend and in facilitating youth restorying that has the potential to transform our nation and this world.

Notes

1. Fan fiction is fiction written about characters or settings from a book, comic, television show, film, play, or other original creative work (known as “canon” or “source material”). Also known as “fanfic” or “fic,” fan fiction is created by audiences—readers, viewers, and fans—instead of commercial or corporate entities. Most fan fiction authors write their stories for free, although there are exceptions (such as Kindle Worlds or licensed novelizations or comics). Although fan fiction predates the Internet, the age of social media has made it far easier to circulate fan-made content.
2. Like fan fiction, fan art is artwork created featuring characters or settings from a book, comic, television show, film, play, or other original creative work (known as “canon” or “source material”). Traditionally, fan art covers original amateur artistic work created through traditional or digital methods; more recently, the term has also been used to describe photo manipulation, .gif sets created from film or TV footage, banners, icons, and avatars. Fanvids are amateur videos featuring characters or settings from a book, comic, television show, film, play, or other original creative work. There are music videos, animations, fan commentaries, and a growing number of fan films featuring new plots, characters, and settings. Fandom meta describes essays about fandom, fannish conventions or behaviors, fanwork, or the original creative work on which the fandom is centered. Some fandom meta is quite complex and intellectually sophisticated.
3. Affinity spaces or groups are education scholar James Paul Gee's (2005) name for interest-driven social communities on the Internet. Fan fiction and fan art communities are affinity spaces that allow participants to not only share fanwork but also edit and critique it.
4. Before the advent of print culture, and in parts of the world that retain oral storytelling traditions, the concept of authorship differs from that found in the contemporary United States. In cultures that value oral traditions, the act of storytelling can be as privileged as the stories themselves.
5. A fandom is an affinity group whose interaction centers around a book, comic, television show, film, play, or other original creative work. Participants in a fandom celebrate the original work through discussions and the sharing and critique of fanwork. Today's fandoms exist in both digital and face-to-face communities.
6. Tumblr is a micro-blogging platform with social networking features that allow users to post text, images, audio, and video. It is a popular tool for sharing fan art. The site can be accessed at <http://www.tumblr.com>.
7. The term *acafan*, an academic fan, was popularized by Matt Hills in *Fan Cultures* (2002).
8. This is a pseudonym.
9. Reprinted from *Poetics*, 48, Jennifer L. Barnes, Fanfiction as imaginary play: What fan-written stories can tell us about the cognitive science of fiction, pp. 69–82 (2015), with permission from Elsevier.

10. "The Common Core State Standards place a high priority on the close, sustained reading of complex text, beginning with Reading Standards 1. Such reading focuses on what lies within the four corners of the text" (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 4). Many educators interpret the four corners concept to mean containing one's reading to what is explicitly located in the words of the text.
11. Goodreads describes itself as "the world's largest site for readers and book recommendations." The site can be accessed at <https://www.goodreads.com>.

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