

Family Stories, Counter-Storytelling, and Chronological Overlaying: Exploring Black Historical Consciousness in Elementary Social Studies

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Social studies in general, and Black history in particular, are marginalized at the elementary level. When Black history is taught, it tends to focus on a handful of the same figures at each grade level—Ruby Bridges, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Rosa Parks. The ways Black history has been taught are problematic, focusing on either celebrating civil rights heroes or lamenting the oppressive treatment of Black people, thus flattening the rich and varied histories of Black people. An almost singular focus on the civil rights movement excludes other histories, including stories of everyday people—their lives, jobs, means of resistance, collaborations, and accomplishments. Moreover, there is an overwhelming emphasis on oppression and resistance, with less emphasis on culture, beauty, joy, and the full emotionalities of Black people. As a result, children are deprived of learning that captures the full range of humanity within Black histories.

In this article, we present three alternatives to the traditional instructional approaches to Black history education at the elementary level: family stories/oral histories, counter-storytelling, and chronological overlaying. We provide a description of the Black Historical Consciousness framework, connect theories that fit within this framework to explain our pedagogical recommendations, and share instructional approaches.

Black Historical Consciousness in Elementary Social Studies

LaGarrett King's Black Historical Consciousness (BHC)

framework¹ provides a new way of teaching Black history and U.S. history that centers Black humanity while simultaneously providing pedagogical practices that aim to dismantle oversimplified teachings of Black history. A key understanding of Black Historical Consciousness is that it emphasizes the plurality of Black experiences that shift our understandings from a singular version of Black history to expanded, multifaceted knowledges of Black histories. King's revised BHC framework offers eight principles to incorporate into social studies pedagogies to improve the teaching of Black history in elementary classrooms: (1) Power and Oppression; (2) Agency, Resistance, and Perseverance; (3) Africa and the African Diaspora; (4) Black Joy and Emotionality; (5) Black Identities; (6) Historical Contention; (7) Community, Local, and Social Histories; (8) Black Futurism.²

Applying the Black Historical Consciousness framework in elementary social studies classrooms is essential as it (re)inserts humanity into the teaching of Black people and their histories, while being cautious of not teaching Black history through a white lens. Social studies standards and other curriculum materials tend to diminish Black history to one essentialized version of the past that limits Black people and their significance to events such as enslavement or the civil rights movement, positioning them within binaries of oppression or liberation,³ without clearly and explicitly naming terms such as *racism* and *white supremacy* as being the cause for their oppression.⁴ For example, Virginia's fourth-grade social

studies curriculum framework situates Black resistance as a response to oppression during enslavement, Jim Crow, and the civil rights movement, but does not name the cause of the oppression (e.g., racism, white supremacy) or acknowledge its permanence within society.⁵ Without naming these structures, students could be left wondering how the U.S. justified enslavement and why, after the abolishment of enslavement, Black people were still subjected to oppression and violence and continue to resist and persevere for their civil rights. The Black Historical Consciousness framework pushes back against this limited framing of Black history by explicitly naming that the injustices Black people experienced were because of racism, white supremacy, and anti-Black societal structures, and that all throughout history they have actively resisted these structures (See BHC Principles 1 and 2).

Even more, when Black history is situated only as a response to oppression, Black historical figures are depicted as either possessing a singular emotion or are rendered emotionless.⁶ For instance, curriculum materials often describe Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as a non-controversial figure⁷ who only possessed emotions such as optimism or hope, but they fail to discuss other emotions he may have simultaneously felt, such as fear or rage. Principle 4 of the BHC framework emphasizes a focus on historicizing Black emotions such as pain, love, and rage, identifying Black joy as essential. In efforts to humanize Black people and to teach Black histories accurately, an inclusion and examination of the wide-ranging emotions Black people experienced throughout history is necessary. This framework guides our instructional approaches.

Instructional Approaches

Family stories and oral histories, counter-storytelling, and chronological overlaying are three approaches that are grounded in Black Historical Consciousness. It is important to first acknowledge the connections among these approaches. Family stories and oral histories hold important narratives that animate pasts and voices that have been missing or inaccurately and harmfully represented in traditional social studies curriculum. Collecting, reading, hearing, researching, and interpreting Black family stories and oral histories can increase access to more authentic representations of Black histories as well as deepen and more fully concretize existing primary sources and curricular materials on Black histories and other histories. Given the prevalence of inaccurate and singular representations of Black histories in traditional social studies curriculum, Black family stories and oral histories may also provide counter narratives, stories that dismantle or resist oppressive and limiting depictions of Black lives, experiences, and contributions. Representing

significant, meaningful events in Black history through a chronological approach helps children understand the interconnectedness of and relationships among events. Thus, these approaches could be taught independently or in conjunction with the others and could be used at the lower-elementary and upper-elementary levels.

Family Stories and Oral Histories

People are naturally engaged by family stories.⁸ Storytelling and oral tradition provide children a personal connection with elders and the unique stories, life events, and circumstances that have shaped their identities and their present. Younger generations enjoy hearing these stories and are interested in understanding their families and themselves. In Black communities, oral histories have a special tradition: “Among African Americans, storytelling has been a method of intergenerational communication and connectivity for centuries, as well as a way in which younger generations can learn about cultural and family values, and methods of resilience specific to the African American experience.”⁹ Centering family stories and oral histories in social studies curriculum has the potential to realize all six principles of the Black Historical Consciousness framework, specifically helping young learners engage in identity work and understand how their families and others have navigated historical injustices, illustrating agency and resilience and cultivating joy.

Family stories are highly compatible both with lower-elementary social studies standards, which tend to focus on what life was like in the past at the family, school, and local community level (e.g., how people lived, worked, and were educated), as well as with upper-elementary social studies standards, which focus on U.S. history and democratic values, civic participation, and the purpose, structure, and function of government. Children’s family members and members of the local community serve as ideal resources from whom children could learn. It is exciting and meaningful for children to learn about life in the past by crafting their own inquiries, conducting interviews, handling personal artifacts, and examining photographs and maps. Yet, students are not the only beneficiaries of this kind of learning—the interviewees could feel valued as knowledgeable sources and appreciative of additional opportunities to preserve and further their histories and legacies. We suggest a six-step interview process to be conducted with Black family members, friends, and community members.

1. Build relationships with students’ family members and explain that the students will be conducting interviews about life in the past. To encourage authentic and meaningful relationships, creating

and sustaining a welcoming community within and beyond the classroom should begin as early as possible, be ongoing, and be reflected upon. It is critical for family members and friends to feel valued and for their experiences and knowledge to be respected.

2. Gather information from family members and friends through a survey, short conversation, or a community-building event about the topics they might want to share or for their child to learn. Be sure to communicate that the family member may also share objects to enhance the interview. Note that Black children's families should be considered expansively, beyond biological and immediate family members, to include "kin—extended family members, friends, and community members."¹⁰
3. Collaborate with children to plan the visit, write interview questions, practice asking interview questions, and prepare a short presentation for the visitors about the broader context of what they are learning. When inviting the visitor, suggest that they bring artifacts or photographs to share.
4. Invite the family members for a classroom visit (or plan a trip to a site that is integral to the topic). Assign children responsibilities such as welcoming the visitor, providing them a tour of the classroom, and making sure they are comfortable.
5. During the visit, invite children to deliver their presentation about what they are learning, and then ask the visitor the prepared questions. Audio- or video-record the interview (with permission and a clear explanation of how any recordings will be used).
6. Following the visit, children can create an oral history with clips of the interview and visuals.

See the video by an oral history club at The James and Grace Lee Boggs School in Detroit, Michigan as an example of children interviewing community elders about their lives in the past.¹¹

Counter-Storytelling

Counter-storytelling is one of the tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT).¹² It serves as an alternative approach to dominant culture narratives or master narratives with the goal of highlighting and amplifying the stories, experiences, and narratives of communities that have often been silenced or marginalized.¹³ As King pointed out in

his original Black Historical Consciousness framework, Black joy, Black identities, and Black historical contention have not been implemented in most educational spaces; they have received far less attention than the first three principles.¹⁴ With counter-storytelling from Black children's own families and community and from others of the African diaspora, children are exposed to the varied stories that include but edge out the suffering to reflect the power and joy that they and their ancestors have known and relied on to survive and thrive. Counter-storytelling can do the important work that King has advocated for, moving toward "historical contentiousness (a history that is comfortable with competing perspectives about the ethos of America)."¹⁵ Counter-storytelling can help history education more fully and compassionately represent the diversity of thought, perspectives, and experiences within and beyond Black histories.

Examples of counter-stories are that Black schools were not inferior to white schools¹⁶ and that people who were enslaved were literate.¹⁷ Because of the prevalence of dominant or master narratives in textbooks and children's literature,¹⁸ centering these counter-stories is critical. Here are guiding questions that children can use when reading accounts of life in the past in their textbooks or classroom materials. These questions could be answered in whole-group, small-group, paired-discussions, or individually. The teacher could have students use a graphic organizer to answer.

1. Who is the story about?
2. Who is telling the story?
3. How does the story change if someone else is telling it?
4. How does this story differ from other accounts of this story you've heard?

By engaging with these questions, children can begin to understand that historical accounts are shaped by who authors them and whose experiences are centered. These and other questions can be useful when engaging with other genres, such as speculative fiction.¹⁹ Even young children can grasp the notion of perspective and how one's perspective shapes how one views the world. After responding to these questions, children can then be provided different accounts that serve as counter-stories. In the sidebar at the end of this article, we offer a list of children's texts that provide counter-stories.

In addition to investigating counter-stories of existing historical accounts, children can study the histories of places that are often neglected in textbooks and standards,



Historical Marker of Idlewild

such as Idlewild, known as the “Black Eden of Michigan,” one of the few resorts in the country where Black people were permitted to vacation and own property prior to the 1964 Civil Rights Act.²⁰ Black writers, intellectuals, doctors, entrepreneurs, musicians, and entertainers were among those who were able to relax and enjoy themselves at Idlewild. W. E. B. Du Bois, who owned property there, commented that it was a place where “everybody knows everybody, and the world is happy.”²¹ Edna Brown, who visited Idlewild as a baby in 1940 and later retired there, shared, “Everyone was like family to you....And you knew that there was no door that would ever be closed to you here.”²² In later decades, middle- and working-class Black families enjoyed the resort, including a first-class nightclub, 24/7 eateries, playgrounds, and activities such as boating, deer hunting, and ice skating—leisure activities for Black families to experience joy and to escape the racism and discrimination they experienced in other settings. Reflections and photographs of Idlewild’s visitors present a powerful counter-story. Idlewild dispels the myth that Black people did not own vacation homes or have their own resorts. Centering stories of Idlewild, where Black people enjoyed camping, swimming, boating, fishing, hunting, horseback riding, roller skating, and evening entertainment reflects the Black Historical Consciousness principle of Black Joy.²³

Chronological Overlaying

The third approach we recommend focuses on understanding the relationships among events over time through an approach we call chronological overlaying. The National Council for the Social Studies’ C3 Framework explains chronological reasoning as “wrestling with issues of causality, connections, significance, and context with the goal of developing credible explanations of historical events and developments based on reasoned interpretation of evidence.”²⁴ Chronological reasoning is critical to understanding change over time, the relationships among events, and the comparison of past and present.

An entry point into political, intellectual, social, and civic chronologies can be personal stories. Family and local histories can hook children’s interest in studying about life in the past. Those stories have meaning and value for children as stand-alone classroom activities. Yet, their meaning can be enhanced when they are connected to larger significant socio-political narratives in history. We do not mean “historically significant” in terms of their presentation in standards documents and traditional textbooks, but rather, historically significant in Black communities. As King has argued, “what is historically significant to white people may not be historically significant to Black people.”²⁵ Events such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the election of President Barack Obama, Shirley Chisholm running for U.S. President, the first episode of Oprah Winfrey’s syndicated talk show, the Million Man March, the election of Vice President Kamala Harris, and Juneteenth becoming a federal holiday are historically significant to Black people.

Timelines can facilitate children’s understandings of chronology by providing visualizations of temporal relations.²⁶ We recommend an approach to timelines in which children overlay family members’ life events with significant socio-political events. There could be two, three, or more “lines” that represent different kinds of events: personal, political, artistic/cultural, etc. Children could place significant events along each of these lines and then notice which kinds of events occur within the same time frame. In doing so, children can see how these events intersect and how socio-political events may influence personal life events, and they can then put socio-political events into a chronology that is meaningful, personal, and accessible to them. Sixth-grader Amara (pseudonym) learned more about segregation and integration efforts during the 1950s and 1960s through historical texts and her family’s lived experiences during that time. Note how Black joy is present in the family history line, specifically in Grandma’s recollection of experiences and people who brought her joy. Blackpast.org includes candidates for events to include on a timeline.²⁷

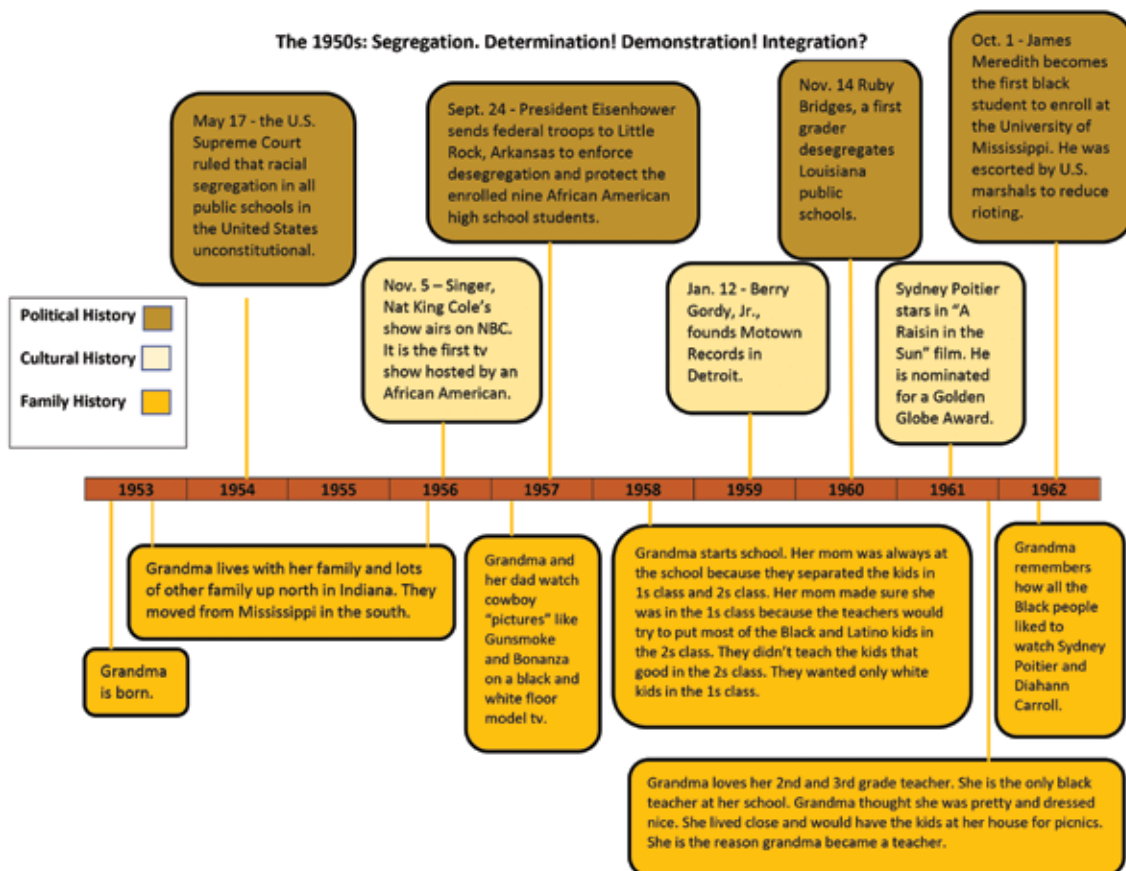
Conclusion

The question that lies at the heart of this work asks, “In what ways can educators in elementary school classrooms strengthen their teaching of Black histories that reflects the complex narratives of Black people?” The approaches we suggest here are only a few examples of what is possible as educators teach their students whole narratives of Black histories. In the words of Assata Shakur, “It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains.”²⁸ The strength in Black communities lies within the complexity of its histories along with the ongoing resilience in the face of anti-Blackness.

King’s Black Historical Consciousness framework challenges educators “to explore Black identity through complex and nuanced narratives that attempt to get at the full humanity of Black people,” and the revised framework on page 4 in this issue tailors these principles to the elementary classroom.²⁹ This work seeks to challenge, invigorate, and provide reassurance for educators in the processes of implementing such a framework so students can benefit from studying the rich yet complicated stories of Black people. We recognize that these approaches pose challenges, especially given that white teachers tend to be fearful of classroom discussions focused on race.³⁰

However, we believe that the instructional approaches suggested here can not only develop in students the knowledge, skills, and democratic values embedded in standards but can also provide them perspectives, knowledges, hope, and joy that are neglected in those materials. As educators use the approaches outlined in this article to strengthen and/or refine their classroom practices, it is incumbent upon them to ensure that such activities also permeate their schools, professional learning communities, and workshops. Additionally, we recognize that our instructional approaches ask Black families and communities for their gift of time and knowledge which we do not take for granted, nor do we want to create classroom environments where educators position Black students and families as class experts. Instead, we hope that before assigning these activities, educators take time to build authentic relationships and trust with the families and communities rather than assuming that they might be open to this engagement.

As social studies state standards and uncritical curriculum materials leave out and/or whitewash the complex narratives of Black history, it is the duty of educators not to simply fight for educational liberation but to ensure that classrooms are centered on the premise that “*we have nothing to lose but our chains.*”³¹ ■



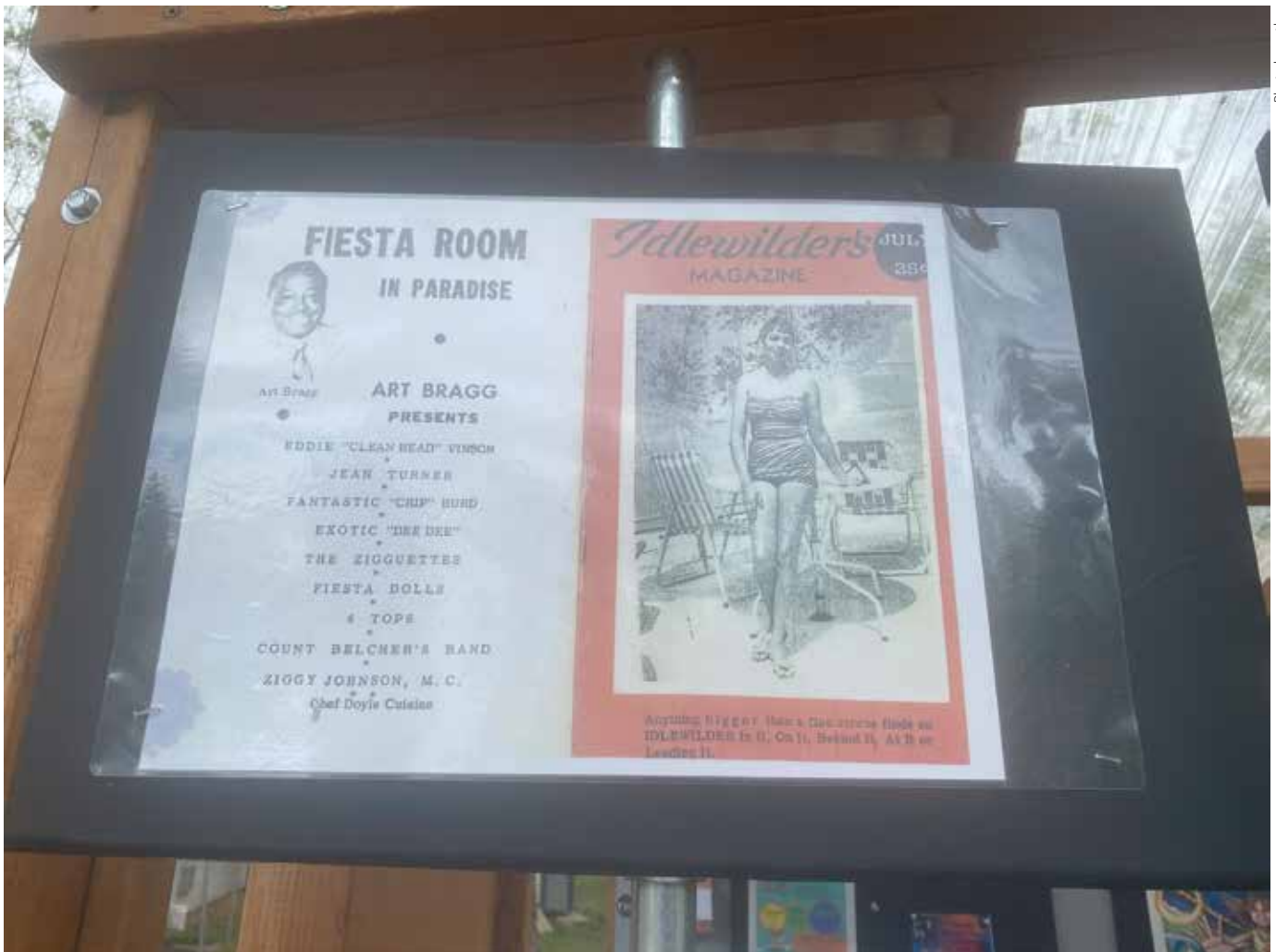
Notes

1. See the revised framework in this issue, LaGarrett J. King, "Introduction: How Do I Start Teaching Black History?" *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 34, no. 3 (2023): 3–4. Our work draws on King's 2020 framework and incorporates the revised changes for elementary classrooms. The original framework can be found in LaGarrett J. King, "Black History Is Not American History: Toward a Framework of Black Historical Consciousness," *Social Education* 84, no. 6 (2020): 335–341.
2. See the revised framework on page 4 in this issue.
3. Wayne Journell, "When Oppression and Liberation are the Only Choices: The Representation of African Americans within State Social Studies Standards," *Journal of Social Studies Research* 32, no. 1 (2008): 40–50.
4. Anthony L. Brown and Keffrelyn D. Brown, "Strange Fruit Indeed: Interrogating Contemporary Textbook Representations of Racial Violence toward African Americans," *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 1 (2010): 31–67.
5. Virginia Department of Education, *Standards of Learning for History & Social Science: Standards of Learning Documents—Adopted 2015*. www.doe.virginia.gov/teaching-learning-assessment/k-12-standards-instruction/history-and-social-science/standards-of-learning.
6. Brittany L. Jones, "Feeling Fear as Power and Oppression: An Examination of Black and White Fear in Virginia's U.S. History Standards and Curriculum Framework" *Theory & Research in Social Education* 50, no. 3 (2022): 431–463. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2022.2069529>.
7. Derrick P. Alridge, "The Limits of Master Narratives in History Textbooks: An Analysis of Representations of Martin Luther King, Jr." *Teachers College Record* 108, no. 4 (2006): 662–686; Ashley N. Woodson, "We're Just Ordinary People: Messianic Master Narratives and Black Youths' Civic Agency," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 44, no. 2 (2016): 184–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2016.1170645>.
8. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
9. Chaneé D. Fabius, "Toward an Integration of Narrative Identity, Generativity, and Storytelling in African American Elders," *Journal of Black Studies* 47, no. 5 (2016): 424.
10. Pearl Stewart, "Who is Kin?: Family Definition and African American Families," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 15, nos. 2–3 (2007): 163–181.
11. Raconteuse (2014). "Oral History Club at The James and Grace Lee Boggs School 2014," <https://vimeo.com/113865923>.
12. Richard Delgado, *The Rodrigo Chronicles: Conversations about America and Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1995).
13. Aja Y. Martinez, "A Plea for Critical Race Theory Counterstory: Stock Story vs. Counterstory Dialogues Concerning Alejandra's 'Fit' in the Academy," *Composition Studies* 42, no. 2 (2014): 33–55.
14. King, "Black History Is Not American History."
15. King, 340.
16. Vanessa Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
17. James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).
18. See Alridge, "The Limits of Master Narratives in History Textbooks"; Rudine Sims Bishop, "African American Children's Literature: Researching Its Development, Exploring Its Voices," in *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*, eds. Shelby A. Wolf, Karen Coats, Patricia Enciso, and Christine A. Jenkins (New York: Routledge, 2011), 225–235; Joyce Elaine King, "Culture-Centered Knowledge: Black Studies, Curriculum Transformation, and Social Action," in *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education*, 2nd ed., eds. James A. Banks and Cherry A. McGee Banks (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 349–378.
19. See Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, *The Dark Fantastic: Race and Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* (New York: New York University, 2019).
20. Ronald J. Stephens, *Idlewild: The Rise, Decline, and Rebirth of a Unique African American Resort Town* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2013).
21. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Hopkinsville, Chicago, and Idlewild," *The Crisis* 22, no. 4 (1921): 160.
22. Geoffrey Baer, "Idlewild: Michigan's 'Black Eden,'" <https://interactive.wttw.com/chicago-on-vacation/destinations/michigan/idlewild-michigan-black-eden>.

Photo by author



The Flamingo Club at Idlewild



Program for Fiesta Room in Paradise and the cover of Idlewilders's Magazine

Sample Children's Literature on Black Histories and Experiences

The Brownies' Book by W. E. B. Du Bois.

When the Beat Was Born: DJ Kool Herc and the Creation of Hip Hop by Laban Carrick Hill, illustrated by Theodore Taylor

The Great Migration by Eloise Greenfield, illustrated by Jan Spivey Gilchrist

This is the Rope: A Story from the Great Migration by Jacqueline Woodson, illustrated by James Ransome

Freedom's School by Lesa Cline-Ransome, illustrated by James Ransome

Maritcha: A Nineteenth Century American Girl by Tonya Bolden

Opal's Greenwood Oasis by Najah-Amatullah Hylton and Quraysh Ali Lansana, illustrated by Skip Hill

Sugar Hill: Harlem's Historic Neighborhood by Carole Boston Weatherford, illustrated by R. Gregory Christie

A Day for Rememberin': Inspired by the True Event of the First Memorial Day by Leah Henderson, illustrated by Floyd Cooper

The Book Itch: Freedom, Truth & Harlem's Greatest Bookstore by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson, illustrated by R. Gregory Christie

23. King, "How Do I Start Teaching Black History?" 4; King, "Black History Is Not American History."

24. National Council for the Social Studies, *College, Career, & Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K–12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History*. (Silver Spring, MD: National Council for the Social Studies, 2013), 45.

25. King, "Black History Is Not American History," 335.

26. Pat Hoodless, *Time and Timelines in the Primary School* (Bloomington, IN: Historical Association, 1996); Marjan de Groot-Reuvekamp, Anje Ros, and Carla van Boxtel, "Improving Elementary School Students' Understanding of Historical Time: Effects of Teaching with 'Timewise,'" *Theory & Research in Social Education* 46, no. 1 (2018): 35–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2017.1357058>.

27. Blackpast.org, "African American History Timeline," <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history-timeline/>.

28. Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, with forewords by Angela Davis and Lennox S. Hinds (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987), 52.

29. King, "How Do I Start Teaching Black History?" 4; King, "Black History Is Not American History," 337.

30. See Michael L. Boucher, Jr., "The White Conundrum," in *Marking the "Invisible": Articulating Whiteness in Social Studies Education*, eds. Andrea M. Hawkman and Sarah B. Shear (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2020), 239–268.

31. Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 52. Emphasis added.

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