

DISCUSSION GUIDE TO



A
PHOENIX
SIXTEEN STORIES OF BLACK GIRL MAGIC,
FIRST MUST
RESISTANCE, AND HOPE
BURN

EDITED BY PATRICE CALDWELL

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"IT SEEMS ONLY FITTING THAT THE TITLE OF THIS ANTHOLOGY COMES FROM [OCTAVIA] BUTLER'S *PARABLE OF THE TALENTS*, A NOVEL THAT IS EVER RELEVANT. THE FULL QUOTE IS 'IN ORDER TO RISE FROM ITS OWN ASHES, A PHOENIX FIRST MUST BURN.'" —PATRICE CALDWELL

One of the most fascinating (and disturbing) aspects of the colonized world is its ability to elevate narratives it wants centered and entered into the collective consciousness by incorporating them into the school system. This has resulted in the deliberate omission of much mythology, folklore, and stories of personal power belonging to those of women and the African diaspora. This book and its accompanying educator guide will support those in educational spaces and beyond working to bring these stories from the margins to the center, more specifically, stories centering Black girls and women. It is an act of resistance to, as bell hooks says, "critically intervene in a way that challenges and changes." As you undertake this call to action, the intention of this guide is to serve as support and an invitation in the work of critically intervening and what Kenyan writer and academic Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o refers to as "decolonizing the mind." It is by no means an encyclopedic catalog of all that you will encounter within the pages of *A Phoenix First Must Burn: Sixteen Stories of Black Girl Magic, Resistance, and Hope*, but it will give you many places to enter into an exploration of Black girlhood and its intersections with fantasy, science fiction, folklore, and so much more.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Evoking Beyoncé's *Lemonade* for a teen audience, these authors, who are truly Octavia Butler's heirs, have woven together worlds to create a stunning narrative that centers Black women and gender-nonconforming individuals. *A Phoenix First Must Burn* will take you on a journey from folktales retold to futuristic societies and everything in between. Filled with stories of love and betrayal, strength and resistance, this collection contains an array of complex and true-to-life characters in which you cannot help but see yourself reflected. Witches and scientists, sisters and lovers, priestesses and rebels: the heroes of *A Phoenix First Must Burn* shine brightly. You will never forget them.



THEMATIC CONSIDERATIONS AND ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

POWER: Throughout history, Black women and girls have experienced involuntary removal of power and dominance or forceful removal of personal power by society and individuals. Examine the ways each story attempts to explain the relationship between Black girls and women and personal, social, or institutional power. How does each protagonist grow into showing her personal power? How does she overcome oppression? Consider the ways power manifests externally and internally.

BLACK GIRLHOOD: Black girlhood is not one experience; it is many intersectional experiences differentiated by cultural, geographic, ethnic, and other factors. Consider the ways the stories in *A Phoenix First Must Burn* challenge your preconceived notions of what it means to identify as female and a person of the African diaspora. How does each story confirm or conflict with your ideas of Black girlhood?

ADVENTURE: Think about adventure stories you have read. They often follow a cycle wherein a central figure experiences tests and trials they must overcome in order to reveal hidden talents or strengths. Traditionally, in the Western world, heroes of adventure stories are disproportionately male. These stories expand and elaborate upon traditional ideas of heroism and what it means to be female. Which of the tales would you consider to be an adventure? What hidden talents or strengths are revealed throughout the course of the story?

SPIRITUALISM/MAGIC/MYTHOLOGY: Stories of mysticism and magic in the Western European canon historically depict witches (and women) as evil. As a consequence, magic and spiritualism are affiliated with evil and women often take on that label by association. To contrast, the stories in this anthology include characters who use spirituality and magic as a power for rising up against oppression and for shaping the worlds they inhabit to their liking. There are witches who use their powers for good, not evil, and those who work to undo generational curses. Which stories capture elements of spiritualism that resemble those of the African diaspora such as Santeria, candomblé, or voodoo? What elements of mythology or folklore belonging to the people of the African diaspora can you find in these stories? Consider fantastical and supernatural beasts you may be familiar with from other stories, such as mermaids or sirens from Greek mythology and vampires of Eastern Europe. Which elements and entities are the same? Which are different?

THEMATIC CONSIDERATIONS AND ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

DIVINITY: Africa is not a country, it is a continent, and as such, the African diaspora includes many people with many different spiritual traditions originating in tribes across the great continent that have transformed and spread around the world. What types of deities are present in these stories? What powers do they have? How can you connect them to religious philosophies of the past or the present? How do they affect the characters in each story?

CONFLICT: As conflicts arise, each of the stories presents a problem or situation that the protagonist and supporting characters must confront. Some common conflicts are: character vs. self, character vs. character, character vs. nature, character vs. the supernatural, and character vs. society. Which conflicts does each of the protagonists face, and how do the conflicts shape them? Consider internal and external conflicts.

NATURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT: As enslaved people left Africa traveling the Middle Passage, they were brought to places all over the world. The living descendants of enslaved people have traveled all over the globe. As people of the African diaspora mixed with local cultures, new languages, customs, belief systems, and ways of being evolved. What role does the environment or setting have in shaping the events and characters of each tale? How does changing time or geographic location affect your ability to interpret the events of each story?

FAMILY: Historically, Black families have been viewed (somewhat controversially) as matriarchal. Examine family relationships in any of the stories, in particular the roles of mothers and grandmothers. Though many have tried to assert that men in Black families are absent, several of the stories in this collection have men who are loving and present. Analyze the relationships between men and women that exist within families. What conflicts and connections exist between each protagonist and their family and/or friends? What barriers exist between them? For example, ancestors attempting to communicate from the spirit world.

FATE VS. FREE WILL: The eternal question in any tale of adventure or heroism is whether fate or free will is more responsible for the story's outcome. What is the role of fate or free will in each story? Which of the forces is stronger?

THEMATIC CONSIDERATIONS AND ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

TRANSFORMATION: Black women of the African diaspora have always had to consider what it means to transform physically and spiritually. Part of colonization mindset is that all those who are different from colonizers must buy into the belief that assimilation is the only way to gain power in a society that seeks to dominate and oppress. What transformations occur in these stories? Consider both internal and external transformation and the consequences of each.

RESISTANCE: So much of Black identity in the African diaspora has involved resistance against oppressive individuals and power structures that seek to suppress, erase, or destroy individuals. In the act of resistance, we often find a higher calling to transform the world for the better, not just for ourselves, but for others as well. Which stories are stories of resistance that involve social transformation? Which are stories of personal resistance that involve individuals rising up to create better conditions for themselves and those around them? During which stories does social or personal resistance occur? How is it transformative?

HOPE: Which moments require characters to express or retain hope or faith in themselves or those around them?

LOVE: A few of these stories involve love and intimacy between Black people. How do the stories confirm or disrupt your ideas about how Black people love one another? Consider the role of sexuality in some of the stories. Does it serve as a creative, transformative, or destructive power? Does this confirm or problematize your understanding of how sexuality operates in society and among individuals?

This guide was written by Julia Torres, a veteran language arts teacher librarian in Denver, Colorado. Julia facilitates teacher development workshops rooted in the areas of anti-racist education, equity and access in literacy and librarianship, and education as a practice of liberation. Julia works with students and teachers locally and around the country with the goal of empowering them to use literacy to fuel resistance and positive social transformation. Julia also serves on several local and national boards and committees promoting educational equity and progressivism. She is the current NCTE Secondary Representative-At-Large, a Book Love Foundation board member, and an Educator Collaborative Book Ambassador.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES AND ESSAYS

PRE-READING

1. Read the introduction to Dr. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas's *The Dark Fantastic*, which begins with "There is no magic." Consider the role of Blackness in imaginary worlds in order to gain an understanding of where you stand as a reader entering into the work of unpacking preconceived notions about what is and isn't possible for Black people in imagined worlds. Journal a response to the following questions: What Black characters or people have you seen in sci-fi or fantasy movies or heard about in sci-fi or fantasy stories? What powers did they have? What relationship did they have to characters around them who were not Black? Were they male, female, or gender nonconforming? How were they treated by the world around them? How did they differ from Black people (or your concept of Black people) in the real world?

DURING READING

2. Choose one of the stories and use [Freytag's plot pyramid](#) to plot the events of the story. Then create annotations for your chart that explain how the protagonist changes as a result of each of the events in the story.
3. Using one of the stories in the anthology, research the backstory or companion story for one of the myths or supernatural creatures mentioned. Remember that many of these stories originate in mythology from the African diaspora. [This site may be useful to you](#) as you write your companion story.
4. Choose one of the stories and compare the supernatural, science fiction, or mythological elements in the tale to those you may have already heard of, e.g., Percy Jackson, Twilight, or the Hunger Games. What comparisons can you make? What differences are there? Using Google Drawings, create a diagram using shapes and symbols to represent different events and relationships between the characters, e.g., a heart to represent love relationships, or a star to represent magical elements. Remember to annotate your drawing with text boxes to explain your thinking.
5. Many people believe that mythology and folklore were and still are humanity's way of explaining natural phenomena or events they could not explain. Science fiction is a way for creators to imagine a world beyond the one we currently live in, and in that imagining, visualize solutions for societal ills. The supernatural

ACTIVITIES CONTINUED

world has always existed, and in it, humanlike creatures, often with magical powers and abilities beyond those of everyday humans. Some might say this is a way of imagining what we might do if the limits of time, space, and nature were not what we have decided they are. As you read, keep a journal reflecting on the following quotes. Designate each story as having science fiction (SF), supernatural (S), or mythological/folklore (M/F) elements (or a combination of each), then justify your designation.

Story Title	Science Fiction, Supernatural, or Mythology/Folklore	Quote Evidence with Justification
"Hearts Turned to Ash" by Dhonielle Clayton	Supernatural	"She'd always known her family's and town's superstitions were more than just that, and that roots and conjure were as everyday as the herbs in most folks' kitchen gardens. But the magic, if you could call it that, always felt like something far away, a horizon she could never touch, a thing that didn't affect her life. Or so she'd thought." (161)

6. Use the DIDLS acronym to analyze Diction, Imagery, Details, Language, and Syntax in any of the stories. Create a chart with diction you find to be especially meaningful, imagery you find that captures the imagination, and imagery that paints a picture in your mind. Record specific language that transports you to a specific time, place, or way of thinking, and syntax that indicates to you that you're reading about people outside of your everyday context. After you've used DIDLS to gather examples, write an analytical essay or create a multimodal presentation using ThingLink or TikTok to make an argument for why one of the elements is most important to the story in achieving the writer's purpose.

POST-READING

7. Using the [Heroine's Journey Arc](#) or another arc of your choosing, create a story map tracing the arc of one of the protagonists from one of the stories. If you cannot fill out all the stages, determine whether the tale you have chosen is instead a journey of healing or of integrity. If your tale doesn't fit any of these, create your own story arc with stages of your own making. Don't forget to match stages in the story to stages in your story arc.

ACTIVITIES CONTINUED

8. The book's tagline refers to it as "Beyoncé's *Lemonade* meets Octavia Butler." Watch all or part of *Lemonade* so you are familiar with the visual story and read [This](#) article with the lyrics to the album as well as [this](#) article about Warsan Shire (the poet behind many of the lyrics in *Lemonade*). After reading a story, or stories from the anthology, what do you think you know about Black girlhood? What do these articles share that is new information? Consider the following themes from *Lemonade*: **intuition, denial, anger, apathy, emptiness, loss, accountability, reformation, forgiveness, resurrection, hope, and redemption**. Make connections to where they appear in the short story anthology by identifying quotes and/or imagery. Then make your own visual story by editing together still pictures or video to capture the themes from *Lemonade* that appear in one story from *A Phoenix First Must Burn*.
9. Independent reading extension: Choose one of the authors who contributed to the anthology and read another short story or novel she has or they have written. Alternatively, read one of Octavia Butler's works. What elements of Black girlhood, e.g., survival, resistance, transformation, or hope, etc., do you find that cross over between the two stories? Create a [book trailer](#) for your peers that will persuade them to read the book and short story you have read.
10. Use the [sci-fi plot generator](#) to create a short story involving characters of your creation. Center cultural myths or supernatural creatures from a cultural or ethnic group *you identify with*. Remember, integrity is important. Co-opting someone else's cultural or ethnic traditions for your own creative purposes is called [cultural appropriation](#), and it is problematic, particularly if you belong to a group that has historically marginalized or oppressed others.
11. Create a virtual museum using Google Slides that takes you through key moments in a short story and the novel you've chosen to read. Create key scenes and props in the scenes with links to further information for visitors.
12. JOURNAL PROMPT: Read Octavia Butler's [letter to herself](#), then write a similar letter to yourself. What would you imagine for your future self if there were no limitations?

PRAISE FOR A PHOENIX FIRST MUST BURN

FIVE STARRED REVIEWS!

★ “Lovers of Octavia Butler will find her spirit in this **SMOLDERING ANTHOLOGY.**”
— *Publishers Weekly*, starred review

★ “Magical and real, this collection lives up to its goal with stories as diverse as the Black experience. **#BLACKGIRLMAGIC INDEED.**”
— *Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

★ “**LUMINOUS READING.**”
— *Booklist*, starred review

ABOUT THE EDITOR

PATRICE CALDWELL

is a graduate of Wellesley College and the founder of People of Color in Publishing—a grassroots organization dedicated to supporting, empowering, and uplifting racially and ethnically marginalized members of the book publishing industry. Born and raised in Texas, Patrice was a children’s book editor before becoming a literary agent.

She’s been named to Forbes’s “30 Under 30” list, a *Publishers Weekly* Star Watch honoree, and featured on Bustle’s inaugural Lit List as one of ten women changing the book world.



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