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## BOOK REVIEW

### **Girl Time: A Space to Embody a Different Narrative**

**A Review of Maisha T. Winn's *Girl Time: Literacy, Justice, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline*.** New York, NY: Teachers College Press. 192pp. ISBN 0807752002

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### **Introduction**

With a passionate commitment to her participants' stories, Maisha T. Winn provides an opportunity for her readers to engage with the everyday experiences of student artists and their teachers whom she came to know in *Girl Time*, a theater program designed for girls incarcerated in juvenile detention centers and girls who had been formerly incarcerated. Based on interviews with the teaching artists, student artists, and participant observation, this three-year, multi-sited ethnographic work offers representational breadth and a chance to engage with the discourses of a small group of women committed to social justice and the girls they serve. Winn takes her readers into the workshops and performances in the detention centers, shares the reflections of *Girl Time*'s co-founders and teaching artists, and offers examples from the scripts the girls produced. Committed to the study and work of critical literacies, Winn celebrates the pedagogy of *Girl Time*, which is student-centered, and the possibility of critiquing monolithic stereotypes that position young girls of color. She argues that *Girl Time* provides a space for student artists to engender multiple narratives of experience through their creation of ensembles, plays, and performances, and through talking back. Represented evocatively in five acts, Winn provides compelling accounts of the work teaching artists and student artists completed together in a setting too often disregarded or ignored by educators and policy makers—juvenile detention centers.

### **The Acts of Girl Time**

In her prologue, "Dismantling the Single Story," Winn shares her commitment to targeted youth, young Black girls, and to understanding the school-to-prison pipeline. She positions the school-to-prison pipeline as an active process and implicates educators, community members, and policy makers in making routine school push-out for targeted youth. Describing outside-school contexts, Winn includes issues of poverty and inadequate and under-resourced services as structural inequities that contribute to the everyday experiences of targeted youth and their families. With an approach that avoids single-factor analysis, she asks her readers to avoid monolithic accounts of who they think her participants may be. She invites her readers to remember Chimamanda Adichie's warning against a "single story" (p. 4) of representation and embraces the variation of narrative she shares in her text.

Winn addresses her positionality in the prologue, too, an expectation in critical and postcritical ethnographic work that she meets quite well. Throughout the representation of her research, she reflects on the complexity of her roles as a scholar and teaching artist, her commitments to Participatory Literacy Communities, social justice, and education. As an African American woman, mother, wife, professor of educational studies, and former elementary school and high school teacher, she acknowledges with humility and transparency her own insider/outsider status. Winn shares that she experienced insider status as a woman committed to understanding, encouraging, and mentoring "girls who had been forgotten, neglected, and even reviled by many of the adults in their lives" (p. 8). In contrast, she shared that she experienced outsider status, too, because she lacked experience with theater or with youth who had been incarcerated. Though she knew students from her own years in school whom the justice system sentenced to youth detention centers, her only direct experience with a youth detention center had been on a field trip.

Winn frames Act I, "Voices Can Be Heard: Theatre for Incarcerated Girls" with details from her participant observation, particularly the pedagogy of *Girl Time*, which, she argues, promotes critical literacies. Specifically, Winn challenges the idea that youth need spaces in order to find their voices, and instead advances the idea that the young women in *Girl Time* have voices already and need "a space, an opportunity, and an engaged audience so they can share their voices" (p. 20). Indeed, from her interviews with the teaching artists, creating trust in order to generate spaces the girls would fill with their own ideas was the most commonly articulated aim of the theater program.

In Act II, "Yes, and: Teaching Freedom in Confined Spaces," Winn introduces the teaching artists to her readers. Using excerpts from interview data with nine teaching artists and participant observation, Winn invites her readers to consider the philosophy and pedagogy of *Girl Time*. Centering the teaching artists' narratives in the chapter, Winn represents their

embodiments of the pedagogy in practice, their commitments and socializations around issues of social justice and their experiences with theater. She demonstrates across the interviews that

educators working as youth advocates and allies do not have to fit one profile ... Some teaching artists ... wanted to see youth develop self-discipline and learn how to be accountable for choices, while others questioned, critiqued, and challenged schools, the juvenile justice system, White supremacy, and White privilege. (p. 65)

However, what all of the teaching artists had in common, she shared, was “the desire to listen to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls” (p. 35):

[The teaching artists] have also purposefully transformed the way they see and understand incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls in order to hear the multiple stories of the girls in the program. Playwriting, ensemble building, and performing are mediating tools used to excavate the stubborn walls of generalizations and stereotypes. (p. 35)

Here, in one of her most interesting points, Winn argues that all educators must make a decision to acquire “such skills ... for (they) are not always inherited” (p. 35). Though Winn does not take the opportunity to describe the teaching force in the United States, the majority of whom are White, middle-class women, or couple explicitly the classed, gendered, and raced socializations of such a teaching force, her explanation and argument imply the discrimination that many teachers perpetuate against targeted youth in their classrooms (Ferguson, 2001; Meiners, 2007; Valenzuela, 1999). Both class and race remain implicit in Winn’s explanation of teachers’ conceptualizations of children who are incarcerated. She implies that the teaching artists cannot draw on the intersections of lived experiences to know already the children with whom they work. They must, I infer, pursue a skill set that will allow them to dismantle monolithic conceptions of children who are incarcerated.

With a strong commitment to critical literacies, Winn represents the narratives of five girls who were formerly incarcerated in Act III, “We Try to Find Our Way Home: Formerly Incarcerated Girls Speak.” Interested in their experiences growing up, experiences prior to incarceration, experiences with the theater program, and their ideas about their futures, Winn coded her data with these four categories in mind. Winding her way through their interactions with the scripts and performances, and her own responses during the interviews themselves, Winn represents the complexity of the outside-school contexts the girls negotiated and moments that revealed her own positionality in the research process. Ultimately, Winn argued that the girls’ stories cannot be consigned to one understanding or a single story.

Winn addresses the prevalence of deficit perspectives in popular culture and public school discourses at the outset in Act IV, “The Trouble with Black Girls: Racing, Classing, and Gendering the School-to-Prison Pipeline.” She captures messages that position the girls as lacking from observation notes about bulletin boards that line the hallway and in the discourses administrators, teachers, and policy makers perpetuate about targeted youth. For example, at the Department of Juvenile Justice, the message on one bulletin board invites the girls to grow a “garden of good character”, which presupposes, Winn argues, that there is an absence of good character amidst the girls. Winn critiques the prevailing discourse that pathologizes individual children rather than the under-resourced education, health, and human service systems they navigate. Leaning on literature from critical scholars and educational research, she documents the promotion of discipline and control over engaged teaching and learning for youth of color. She encourages a discussion of consequence in a system that teaches children and teachers alike that children of color need to be surveilled constantly. Citing Meiners (2007) work on the connections across punitive zero-tolerance policies, disciplinary outcomes, and tracking into the juvenile and criminal justice system, Winn draws attention to systemic issues in U.S. public schools that are disproportionately affecting students of color. Weaving elements of the student artists’ narratives about skipping school, foster homes, and sexual abuse, she extends the context under which she invites us to understand the complexity of the worlds the girls navigate through reference to educational policy, class, gender, and race, truancy law, and social services.

In Act V, “Magic Carpets and Fairylands: Preparing for a Performance of Possibilities,” Winn explicitly asks those individuals working for youth justice to consider supporting programs that engage in generative work and to initiate conversations across organizations and networks to share ideas and resources. Winn prescribes collaboration across families, organizations, and schools to support justice for youth, something she argues rarely happens. Addressing the sustainability of youth justice, Winn describes as an illustrative example one of Girl Time’s long-term goals: Girl Time’s aims include a commitment to establishing relationships between veteran Girl Time student artists and new student artists, in order, she explains, “to create a pipeline of possibilities through which Girl Time Alumni can return to the program as teachers and share their wisdom, insight, and creativity with new ensembles of girls” (p. 126). Winn knows herself what the girls can learn from the veterans. In this chapter she shares her lessons from the students and the teachers alongside her

recommendations: “Trust, I learned, is at the core of theatre; every person involved in theatre is dependent on someone else and no one person is more important than another person” (p. 135). Learning how to create safety for one another and privileging relationships over static conceptions of teacher and student were among the lessons Winn gleaned from her collaboration.

### **Girl Time Pedagogy: Centering Student Artists**

Winn argues that, pedagogically, the teaching artists cultivated the process of playwriting and performing as a liminal space between detention and freedom for the girls. For some of the teaching artists, including Kaya, one of *Girl Time*’s co-founders, mentoring and teaching the girls was a calling. For others, like Isis and Mindy, and I would argue Winn, herself, *Girl Time* was a space to deconstruct the “racing, classing, and gendering of the school-to-prison pipeline” (p. 7). One of the ways Winn patterned the different articulations about committing to *Girl Time* was through race. She argued that the White teaching artists, including the two co-founders, Kaya and Anne, “overwhelmingly approached their work with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls from a need to balance their sense of privilege. Black teaching artists approached their work from what Isis characterized as the “this is me” perspective” (p. 55). Mindy described the difference this way: “From what I understand Anne’s impetus for this work is—‘I’ve never been there but I want to give back because I’ve always had so much I want to give to those who never have.’ I’m saying, ‘Oh, I’ve been there and I understand this”” (p. 55). Although Winn does not address the connection, there is an opportunity to engage the different discourses the White teaching artists and the Black teaching artists deploy. She has an opportunity to interrogate the two different discourses and to apply analysis of White teaching artists’ narratives to the possible analogous context of White teachers in U.S. public schools. For at the core of Kaya’s and Anne’s articulation, alongside their steadfast commitment to the work they do with girls who have been incarcerated, is a deficit perspective—a perspective often deployed by White, middle-class teachers to foreclose opportunities for equity.

Across the text, Winn consistently emphasizes what transcends racial patterns. She notes another common goal of *Girl Time*: the centering of the girls and their ideas, their voices, and their work. She argues that the teaching artists’ approach to understanding social justice and the pedagogy of *Girl Time* reveal ways that learning may take place amidst and against the embodied histories and systemic inequities the girls endure:

Girl Time teaching artists’ purpose is to work with girls wherever they are along their learning journey and to co-construct a scaffold getting them from where they are to where they want to be ... Girls who have experienced isolation, abuse, and miseducation recast themselves while forging possible lives beyond labels and stereotypes. (p. 5)

Winn describes the “foremost pedagogical practice of the program” as “Yes, and ...” (p. 33). On her visit with *Girl Time* to one of the detention centers, Kaya reminds Winn, along with the other teaching artists, to be positive:

Remember today we have to be very positive ... We have to affirm everything positive [the girls] do today. Remember to say, ‘Yes, and,’ because we are trying to validate their ideas and help them extend their ideas as well. (p. 33)

Winn argues that “keeping ‘Yes, *and*’ at the center of their teaching is how teachers continue to grow, inspire, question, model, support, and demonstrate their love of youth and youth justice” (p. 35). Though student centered pedagogy has a long history in education, the use of “Yes, and” is a particular tool that educators might utilize when engaging with their students, who more often than not, as Winn documented, hear “no.”

For Winn, among the important connections the pedagogy of *Girl Time* shares with community-driven social justice are the positions the teaching artists take as students. Their commitment to working alongside the girls and listening to their stories opened opportunities for them to learn from the student artists. Though none of the teaching artists refer to social justice pedagogy or Paulo Freire, Winn argues that the shared roles of teacher and student have “much to offer social justice educators” (p. 7), and she names the teaching artists, “Freirian teaching artists” (p. 34). She talks about the teachers’ channeling Freire in their everyday interactions with students and in their commitment to learn about their students’ worlds. Winn is an unapologetic champion of the pedagogy of *Girl Time* and calls for social justice educators to commit to similar pedagogies in order to serve the children they teach.

Educators need to know what happens in the world of the children with whom they work. They need to know the universe of their dreams, the language [with] which they skillfully defend themselves from the aggressiveness of their world, what they know independently of schools, and how they know it. (Freire, 2005, p. 130, as cited in

Winn, 2011, p. 5)

Winn urges her readers to pay attention to the children and adolescents who move between school and detention and those who return to school after detention; to remember those who do not return to public school classrooms after detention; and to question the ways in which the school-to-prison pipeline is classed, gendered, and raced.

### **The Idea of Voice**

The teaching artists introduced the girls to techniques of play writing and performance building in two-day workshops and aided them in the production of short plays. With the girls who had been formerly incarcerated, the teaching artists worked across a seven-day workshop to produce plays that the girls would perform at youth detention centers in the area—centers from which many of the student artists had been released. During the workshops

Student artists and teaching artists engage in physical warm-ups, theater games, and eventually playwriting and performing through which they get to create characters and dialogue, become different characters, and articulate a new desire of who they want to be or of the lives they wish to have. (p. 18)

The process, Winn explained, was to create performances of possibilities. Concurrently, for Winn, Girl Time was “an ideal place to begin to question (and respond to) the ways in which girls experience being pushed out of schools and ushered through the school/prison nexus” (p. 7.) Winn served as a resource and expert on the school-to-prison pipeline for Girl Time and provided trainings on the school/prison nexus. Across the daily and weekly production of scripts, and during downtime with the girls, many of the teaching artists facilitating Girl Time promoted the interrogation of race, gender, and class in the girls’ lives. Winn’s descriptions of “Talk-back” (p. 28), an element of participation in the workshops and the performances, serve as evidence of the girls’ voices. At the end of every performance, talk back provided an opportunity for student artists to engage the script or performance, to ask and respond to questions, and to talk about the process of playwriting and performing. In script development and during post-performance dialogue with the girls, the teaching artists advocated personal agency and choice.

Winn’s disclosure across the Acts convinces me of her own commitment to racial and social justice, and from the interview data she provides from the teaching artists, there is ample evidence of their commitments as well. What becomes striking, though, is the contrast between the unambiguous cry for justice from the teachers and the absence of even a reference to an issue of gender and race by the girls. None of the 21 girls Winn interviewed discussed race when talking about their experiences growing up, in school, or with Girl Time, and often their references to gender remained implicit. Although Winn provides evidence of scripts that reflect powerful women embodying their agency through decision-making and action, and examples of the girls’ engagement in the process of writing, performing, and talking back, what remains elusive are the girls’ self-declarations of reflection and change. It is Winn’s own language, her own discourse, and her research references to critical scholars and critical race scholars that dominate the text where issues of race and the school-to-prison pipeline are addressed explicitly. However, that is not to say that the girls did not reflect, or interrogate, or learn. They did. And, in fact, Winn is most effective in her work when she represents the girls’ interviews and scripts from an emic perspective – the perspectives of the participants – rather than from theoretical ones that include a phenomenon that has been named the school-to-prison pipeline. What the girls said they learned included writing a play, recognizing that everyone has talent, continuing to perform even “when you mess up”, and “having confidence in yourself” (p. 28)—all laudable achievements.

### **Commitments and the Practice of Research**

Although Winn seemed to plan for a text that revealed the intersections of everyday school experiences for girls of color and the school-to-prison pipeline, the eloquence of her narrative analysis revolves around the richness she produces in describing the girls’ outside school context. Encounters with discipline policies at school appear in only two of the five interviews she chose to represent of the girls’ experiences. One student shares with Winn that when she was searched at school after an altercation over her sexual orientation, school officials found a pocketknife. She was sent to juvenile detention for three months. Another student admitted to being a bully at school but her sentencing to juvenile detention was related to her role in her boyfriend’s theft of a car. A third student shared that hitting her cousin resulted in her incarceration at a juvenile center, but that problems at school did not start until after her release. What is most prominent in each of these narratives is context that is distantly or only indirectly related to school. Winn wants to tackle punitive zero-tolerance policies, discrimination, and racism in school discipline policies, and the injustices students of color are

experiencing every day in U.S. public schools; however, the girls' narratives of outside-school experiences dominate what little they shared of in-school experiences.

As an ethnographer, I infer that Winn represented that to which she had access and for which she had data. That is to say, I believe that her work reflects the profound significance that outside-school contexts have on these girls' lives. In my own work with 18-25-years-old who were taking college courses while incarcerated, I focused on school growing up and school in prison (Anders, 2007; 2011; Anders & Noblit, 2011). In contrast, although Winn prepares for a critique and analysis of school experiences in the school-to-prison pipeline in *Girl Time*, her participants instead provide richness, complexity, and tragedy in their narrations of experiences outside school spaces. What is missing is direct confrontation with the politics of zero-tolerance policies, No Child Left Behind, the regime of the high-stakes testing movement and test scores coupled with job promotion and job security for teachers, disproportionate numbers of students of color tracked into special education and remedial classes, and the absence of required education courses on class, disability, race, gender, and sexual orientation in teacher education programs.

I know Winn's politics by the time I read Acts III and IV, but her data limit her ability to engage in analyses of the school-to-prison pipeline directly. The students provide scant evidentiary material for her to study where interactions with administrators, teachers, guidance counselors, and other students have occurred. In contrast, the girls offer explanations that include their relationships with their boyfriends. Although Winn critiques popular culture, including Tupac's "Me and My Girlfriend" and the remake by Jay-Z and Beyoncé, for perpetuating destructive stereotypes of couples working together illegally and the subordinate positioning of the female in that relationship, she does not analyze the relationships between the girls and their boyfriends. Following research by Chesney-Lind and Pasko (2004) and Robinson (2007), Winn could provide additional context for understanding the ways men, through the performance of a relationship and the use of coercion, manipulate young women to work illegally.

Where Winn excels is in her detailed descriptions of her participants' every day experiences with *Girl Time*. Outside-school experiences and experiences with *Girl Time* are the most convincing elements of the girls' narratives, and, I argue, the strength of Winn's ethnographic work. The girls' tellings provide Winn with a chance to emphasize the importance of including outside-school context whenever ethnographers, scholars, administrators, teachers, or court officers encounter young women of color, and to build a representation of *Girl Time* that is complicated and multi-faceted. For me two of the most evocative examples of the latter include Jada's reflections on her participation in the theater program and a script that Sanaa wrote in *Girl Time*. Jada shares with Winn:

... in my neighborhood, there's not a lot of good things going on over there. There's a lot of drug dealing, and shooting, and fights ... it kind of brings you down and you start doing stuff that you know you don't do ... Being [in *Girl Time*] brings me away from all that hoodness and the drama with the police and all the mess going on there. I love being here. It just brings me out into a whole different environment. It's like I'm under a whole new sky or something. (p. 95)

Sanaa, who is the student whose boyfriend stole a car, wrote the play "Ride or Die" (p. 85) in *Girl Time*. Winn uses the play as an example of the teaching artists' developing knowledge of their students' worlds. Here, I highlight the layers of Winn's work and the implicit rapport she has developed through building ensembles and working with girls like Sanaa over the years. Sanaa explains to Winn what ride or die means:

"Ride or Die" [usually refers to] a man and his woman, and the woman is like his sidekick. Whatever he does, she does—that's the ride part. The "die" part is if you are not going to do it, then you are going to take the consequences that I am going to give you. That's what most of these girls get in trouble for, their boyfriends. They really not realizing that they are taking the blame for whatever their boyfriend is doing ... (p. 85)

In the play when Sanaa's protagonist, Star, finds out her man, Smoke, has killed his wife, she decides to turn him into the police. In disbelief as a cop reads him his rights, Smoke asks Star: "You gon let this go down like this! ... I thought you were my ride or die chick!" To which Star replies: "I was down for the ride but I ain't down for the die!" (p. 160). Winn frames Sanaa's play as an example of making choices and describes the teaching artists as responding to it as a breakthrough because Star, as the female protagonist, was not represented as a "sacrificial lamb" (p. 87). What is most interesting to me and what I claim is the strength of Winn's research is what Sanaa shares about her own work. Sanaa explained:

When I first got locked up it was some boyfriends that I was taking the blame for whatever they was doing ... I am not going to snitch on nobody. I knew the people I was hanging out with. If you would have told them—they was

crazy and they would do whatever they got to do to get the problem away from them. So, it's like I was their ride or die girl, but now just like Star when I finally realize what I was doing was not making any sense ... I was just getting myself in more and more trouble. I had to stop or I knew that I was gonna be somewhere I didn't want to be at. I was either going to be just like the wife. He would get tired of me and go to somebody else and he would probably kill me or whatever. So, I didn't want to put myself in that situation. (p. 88)

In her prologue, Winn cautions against interpreting Girl Time as a panacea or even a factor related to recidivism, and she included critiques of education programs themselves, arguing alongside others that what targeted youth and what young Black girls need is power and not just programs. Though one might argue that Jada's reflection and Sanaa's narrative are examples of the success of Girl Time, I share them here to mirror two points Winn argues convincingly throughout her text: The experiences our children navigate outside school matter and affect the life of every child, and that unjustly the decision of living or dying demands attention from too many young children of color, and ought not to be routine, and ought not be a decision for any of our children.

### **Closing Thoughts**

Winn introduced her work with two frameworks. Both sociocultural activity theory (Engeström, 1999, 2001) and performance ethnography (Madison, 2005) guided her research design and data collection. She describes centering the playwriting and performing with sociocultural activity theory and utilizing questions from performance ethnography to interpret and represent her data, but she leaves both theorists behind after her prologue.

What Winn represents best is an emic approach to her data. She compassionately and economically argues through the girls' narratives that outside- school context is always already related to inside-school context. The idea that the two are separate is false. The belief that street kids are not school kids and that school kids are not street kids is naïve. A child embodies and negotiates both spaces, and others, and sometimes other spaces include youth detention centers. For middle- class educators and educational researchers, particularly those who are White and middle class, imagining a child as the sum of experience or behavior bounded by a street name or a neighborhood prevents teaching and understanding from anything other than a deficit perspective and forecloses preparedness for the return of children who have been incarcerated to our schools. Worst, it hinders our opportunities to seek justice for all targeted youth. Winn encourages her readers to follow her participants into the narratives they tell, and it is easy to do so. She has embraced with intricacy of detail and intimacy the lives they shared with her. Through her own participation as a teaching artist and through her long-term commitment to Girl Time returning summer after summer to participate in the program, Winn demonstrates her commitment to following the voices of the girls and the teaching artists and to embodying grassroots work toward racial and social justice.

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