EXPANDING THE POWER OF LITERATURE:
AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERARY THEORY & YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

KaaVonia Hinton-Johnson, B.S., M.A.

*****

The Ohio State University

2003

Dissertation Committee:  Approved by
Professor Caroline Clark (Advisor)
Professor Rudine Sims Bishop
Professor Valerie Lee
Professor Maia Pank Mertz

Advisor
College of Education
ABSTRACT

This study examines the intertextual relationship between select young adult (YA) African American women’s literature and literature within the broader African American women’s literary tradition. Given that many secondary teachers are committed to teaching works by and about African American women, particularly those written for an adult audience, it is necessary that scholars discuss the connection that exists between African American women’s literature written for adults and literature classified as YA literature. One of the goals of this study was to contribute to this discussion. The study examined select works by Angela Johnson, Rita Williams-Garcia, and Jacqueline Woodson from a black feminist perspective in an effort to situate the novels within the already established African American women’s literary tradition. The following six novels, two by each author, were analyzed: Angela Johnson’s Toning the Sweep (1994) and Heaven (1998), Rita Williams-Garcia’s Blue Tights (1988) and Like Sisters on the Homefront (1995) and Jacqueline Woodson’s The Dear One (1991) and I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This (1994). The novels were analyzed to see if the works illustrate any of the tenets of black feminist thought, with emphasis on tenets related to individual or cultural identity (i.e., multiple oppressions of race, class, and gender in the lives of young African American women, cultivating sisterhood, discovering voice and subjectivity, etc.).
The data gathered for this study included: six YA novels, published interviews, book reviews, biographical sketches of each author, and articles written by and about authors of the books in this study. The data were analyzed through content analysis.

Literary analysis revealed that there were indeed thematic connections between the novels listed above and select literature within the African American women’s literary tradition. Literary analysis demonstrated that three themes, in particular, are shared: family, African American expressive culture and sexuality. Finally, literary analysis also indicated that key tenets of black feminism, as defined by the researcher, were found in each of the six novels.
Dedicated to Za’id,
My best thing. You have been with me every step of the way.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my advisor Dr. Caroline Clark thank you for believing in my ability even when I doubted myself. To Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop thank you for paving the way for future scholars. Because of you and your work, mine can exist. To Dr. Valerie Lee—your generosity and willingness to make a place for me in your classes made it possible for me to attempt to bridge two worlds—Thank you. To Dr. Maia Pank Mertz your guidance and encouragement motivated me—Thank you.

To Dr. Robert Ransom & the Office of Equity & Diversity—you provided me with a home away from home, Thank you. To Dr. Cynthia A. Tyson—your mentorship is priceless—Thank you. To Dr. Randy Rush—your insight and support was invaluable. To Jonda McNair & April Peters, I am so glad I did not have to travel this road alone, Thank you.

To my brother who always helps me stay grounded—Thank you. To my mother, Shirley Ann Hinton Lassiter, who simply said, “KaaVonia, just do your best,” I love you. And finally, to my son, Za’id, who makes it all worthwhile.
March 18, 1973……………………………………….Born – Ahoskie, North Carolina

1995…………………………………………………..B.S., N.C. A&T State University
Greensboro, North Carolina

1996…………………………………………………..M.A., N.C. A&T State University
Greensboro, North Carolina

1996 – 1997……………………………………….……………Adjunct Faculty
Norfolk State University
Norfolk, Virginia

1998 – 1999…………………………………………..Home Instructor
South-Western City Schools
Grove City, Ohio

1999 – 2000…………………………………………..English Teacher
Grove City High School
South-Western City Schools
Grove City, Ohio

2000 – 2003…………………………………………..Graduate Research Assistant
Office of Equity & Diversity
The Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio

2002 – 2003…………………………………………..University Supervisor
School of Teaching & Learning
The Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio

Spring, 2003…………………………………………..Children’s Literature Instructor
Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio
PUBLICATIONS


FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Education

English Education
   Dr. Caroline Clark, School of Teaching and Learning

Young Adult Literature
   Dr. Maia Pank Mertz, School of Teaching and Learning

Children’s Literature
   Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, School of Teaching and Learning

African American Literature, Women’s Studies, Black Feminist Theory
   Dr. Valerie Lee, Chair, English Department
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapters:

1. **Introduction** | 1

   - Purpose of the Study | 4
   - Research Questions | 5
   - Significance of the Study | 6
   - Review of Literature | 7
   - Culturally Relevant Teaching and Critical Race Theory | 7
   - Identity/Identity Politics | 11
   - The Significance of Multicultural Literature on the Lives of Young People | 15
   - African American Women’s Contribution to the Literary Tradition | 20
   - Moving Towards Defining Black Feminist Criticism | 23
   - Tenets of Black Feminist Criticism & Young Adult Literature | 29

2. **Family** | 35

   - Introduction | 35
   - Mothers & Daughters: Guidance, Distance & Conflict | 44
Othermothers…………………………………………………………..          57
2.1 Women-friends…………………………………………………………..          62

3. African American Expressive Culture: Beauty, Hair and Language Use……………………………………..          69
3.1 Introduction……………………………………………………….          69
3.2 Body Image……………………………………………………….          73
3.3 Skin Color……………………………………………………….          78
3.4 Hair………………………………………………………………..          80
3.5 Language Use……………………………………………………..          84
3.6 Signifying…………………………………………………………          89
3.7 Storytelling………………………………………………………..          90
3.8 Spitting Game……………………………………………………..          92

4. Sexuality……………………………………………………………….          95
4.1 Introduction……………………………………………………….          95
4.2 Sexual Objectification……………………………………………          99
4.3 Teen Sex…………………………………………………………..          102
4.4 Sexual Desire, Empowerment & Consequences………………….          108
4.5 Homosexuality………………………………………………………          116

5. Implications & Final Thoughts…………………………………………          120
5.1 Introduction……………………………………………………….          120
5.2 Teaching from a Black Feminist Perspective……………………..          125
5.3 Implications of This Study………………………………………..          131
5.4 Recommendations for Further Research………………………….          134
5.5 Conclusion…………………………………………………………          135

Appendices………………………………………………………………….          137
A. Definition of Terms………………………………………………………          137
B. Research Procedures and Methodology…………………………….          138
   Introduction…………………………………………………………..          138
   Research Method……………………………………………………..          139
   Research Methodology……………………………………………          139
   Book Selection………………………………………………………          141
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instrument</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coding Categories</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book Analysis Form</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character Analysis Form</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenets of Black Feminism Form</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Analysis Form</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Themes Within the African American Women’s Literary Tradition</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Code Sheet</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenets of Black Feminism Form</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character Analysis Form</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character Analysis Form Part 2</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book Analysis Form</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenets of Black Feminism Form</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Analysis Form A</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Analysis Form B</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. African American Women’s Literature Discussed</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Summary of Young Adult Novels Studied</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Over the last few decades, a large number of teachers have embraced multicultural literature and committed to its inclusion in their elementary, intermediate and secondary classrooms (Rogers & Soter, 1997; Fang, Fu and Lamme, 1999). However, integrating the curriculum with multicultural literature is a small step toward accomplishing the goals of multiculturalists. Though theories on multicultural education express ideas about integrating the curriculum in various ways, Banks & Banks’ (1989) four levels of creating a culturally inclusive curriculum seem to express the views of most theorists.

Banks & Banks (1989) rank the approaches to including content about people of color in the curriculum hierarchically with the most frequently used approach, the contribution approach, occupying the lowest level of the hierarchy. The second level, the additive approach, is also frequently used, but, according to Banks & Banks (1989), it does not begin to address some of the more important goals of the multicultural movement. While it is true that teachers have sundry reasons for including literature by and about people of color, this study is most concerned with the use of multicultural literature to attempt to accomplish some of the higher goals of the multicultural
movement (i.e., self-analysis, critical thinking, and social action). These goals are clearly defined by Banks & Banks (1989) in the third and fourth levels of integrating the curriculum. Approach three, the transformation approach, and four, the social action approach, express the notion that multicultural materials are most effective when they are used to teach students to think critically about themselves and the world in which they live (Banks & Banks, 1989; Bishop, 1992; Willis, 1997; H. Johnson, 2000; Rothenberg, 2000).

Sleeter & Grant (1999) argue that while teachers should strive to help students develop appreciation and respect for other cultures, they should also help students understand sociopolitical factors surrounding cultural groups. In other words, as Bishop (1994) explains, multicultural literature “offer[s] opportunities to examine critically the society in which we live, and the values and assumptions that underlie conflicts, events, and behaviors” (p. xvi). It seems that this can be accomplished if mainstream and Eurocentric values and world views are replaced in exchange for the consideration of the point of view and belief system of the cultural group depicted in the literature.

Traditionally, the Eurocentric perspective and evaluation of literature has been positioned as universal or as the means by which all other literature must be measured (Scheurich & Young, 1996). Black feminist critics (e.g. Collins, McDowell, Christian) operate from a different paradigm (Carmichael, 2000). They suggest, and I concur, that we need to employ “culturally grounded frameworks” when reading literature by African Americans, and people of color in general (V. Lee, 1996, p.2).

African Americans make up a significant number of the United States population (Taylor, 1999). As a result, amongst the first literary works by people of color chosen for
inclusion in the American literary canon were those written by and about African Americans. While including African American literature may have the potential to help African American students gain self-affirmation, mere inclusion alone diminishes the full potential and power of literature. I believe literature will maintain its transformative power if it is taught, as Banks & Banks (1989) suggest, in a way that “enable[s] students to view concepts, issues, events, and themes from the perspectives of diverse ethnic and cultural groups” (p. 192). C. Lee (1993) attests, “One cannot adequately read the literature of a people without knowing something of the culture and the historical circumstances of that people” (p. 4). It seems to me that when one teaches African American literature with C. Lee’s statement in mind, an understanding of the African American literary tradition and the tenets of black feminism are necessary. This way, key concerns—for example, the intersectionality of race, class, and gender on the lives of black people—might be realized and discussed.

In 1997, Hade argued that it is important to discover the value society places on race, class and gender as it is depicted in the literature we read, especially since literature reflects society’s mores. This approach to reading literature is akin to black feminists’ concern with the multiply oppressed black woman in and outside the literary world. Focusing on society’s social issues from the perspective of people of color, in this case African American women, provides a platform for encouraging students to move toward multicultural acceptance and understanding, while ultimately accomplishing some of the other, more difficult to attain, goals of the multicultural movement. Select pieces of African American YA literature can withstand this type of critical interpretation, and I propose that African American YA literature can be used to “empower students to move
from more basic levels of comprehension to the more demanding levels which Scholes (1985) challenges English teachers to approach: interpretation of the significance and meaning of themes in a work of fiction, and criticism” (C. Lee, 1993, p. 5).

**Purpose of the Study**

I propose that African American women writers of YA literature are writing in the African American literary tradition started hundreds of years ago. The purpose of this study is to determine the intertextual relationship between select YA African American women’s literature and literature within the broader African American women’s literary tradition. The study examines select works by Angela Johnson, Rita Williams-Garcia, and Jacqueline Woodson in an effort to situate them within the already established African American women’s literary tradition.

Additionally, in an attempt to view themes and issues from the perspective of black women, the cultural group depicted in the literature in this study, a black feminist perspective was used to read Angela Johnson’s *Toning the Sweep* (1994) and *Heaven* (1998), Rita Williams-Garcia’s *Blue Tights* (1988) and *Like Sisters on the Homefront* (1995) and Jacqueline Woodson’s *The Dear One* (1991) and *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This* (1994) (See Appendix E for summary of novels). The novels were analyzed to see if the works illustrate any of the tenets of black feminist thought, with emphasis on tenets related to individual or cultural identity (i.e., multiple oppressions of race, class, and gender in the lives of young African American women, cultivating sisterhood, discovering voice and subjectivity, etc.). The novels and novelists chosen for this study are of particular importance because they provide readers with contemporary and thought provoking issues (See Appendix B under book selection).
Research questions:

The overall purpose of this study is to identify and describe themes and issues found in select YA works which are also prevalent in novels within the African American women’s literary tradition. Additionally, the study will illustrate that select African American YA literature can endure critical analysis and interpretation even as it connects to students’ lives and enhances their understanding of African American culture and literary tradition. The purpose is to also describe the richness of African American YA literature, as it can be used to meet some of the more challenging goals of the multicultural education movement: self-analysis, critical thinking, and social action.

Washington (1990) maintains that a literary tradition is configured via intertextuality, a relationship between works of literature. The questions that address the actual tracing and defining of the thematic relationship between select YA novels and novels within the African American women’s literary tradition are:

1) Which, if any, tenets of black feminism, particularly those related to identity such as race, class, gender and sexuality are illustrated in select works by Johnson, Williams-Garcia, and Woodson?

2) How might Angela Johnson’s *Toning the Sweep* (1994) and *Heaven* (1998), Rita Williams-Garcia’s *Blue Tights* (1988) and *Like Sisters on the Homefront* (1995) and Jacqueline Woodson’s *The Dear One* (1991) and *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This* (1994) be read, analyzed, and theorized about from a black feminist perspective?
Significance of the Study

V. Harris (1991) points out, “Although African American children’s literature has existed since the 1890s, the amount of research devoted to it has been limited, and conventional studies are sparse” (p.37). Moreover, works with African American protagonists are also, according to Kutenpton & Olmstead (1996), “underpublished, underpromoted, and largely unrecognized...when compared to the number and commercial success of books about African American characters written by European American authors” (p.xii). Many of the studies that focus on the Africanist presence (Morrison, 1992) in literature for young people, position literature by white authors as the primary point of focus, partly because historically, a majority of the literature for children has been produced by whites regardless of stereotypical and racist images. Though it is important to expose inaccurate and inauthentic representations of African Americans for the benefit of young readers, it is also important to make literature by African Americans the focal point of more studies. For, as Christian (1994) contends, literature does not become tangible and commemorated unless it is discussed. Perhaps including more dialogue about YA African American literature and how it parallels the adult African American literary tradition will enhance existing discourse on African American children’s and YA literature.

This study will make multiple contributions to the fields of YA literature, multicultural education and teacher education. This analysis provides more information about both the adult and YA African American women’s literary practices while offering analyses of YA African American novels by authors who have received very little critical attention. A black feminist reading of select works by Angela Johnson, Rita Williams-
Garcia and Jacqueline Woodson, three contemporary African American YA authors, offers an alternative way to approach the reading, and possibly the teaching, of African American YA literature by women. By focusing on the point of view of African Americans, the books’ transformative powers may be enhanced. Pointing out issues and concerns of the black community as a whole, and black women in general, enables teachers to use African American literature to enhance the literacy experiences of African American students and to provide students outside the cultural group with an opportunity to learn how the culture relates to and differs from their own.

**Review of the Literature**

The objective of the following review of the literature is to examine subject matter related to the African American literary tradition as well as the use of multicultural literature and black feminist literary criticism. Prior research projects conducted around these issues have caused me to question how literature by black women YA writers might endure critical scrutiny from a black feminist perspective. Research related to culturally relevant teaching and critical race theory, identity, the significance of multicultural literature on the lives of young people, African American women’s contribution to the literary tradition, defining black feminist criticism, and tenets of black feminist criticism found in YA literature are included in the review of literature.

**Culturally Relevant Teaching and Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory and culturally relevant teaching share some of the goals evident in Banks & Banks’ (1989) transformative approach to teaching multicultural literature (Perini, 1999). Each theory has in common its desire to employ cultural perspectives and ways of knowing common within the home/ethnic/racial cultures of
students in order to build “communicative bridges between school and home” (Prendergast, 2000, p.463). Critical race theory concerns itself with dismantling racism and acknowledging that whiteness operates as a piece of property that must be protected because of its privileges.

In her often-cited book, *Dreamkeepers*, Ladson-Billings (1994) describes culturally relevant teaching as “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p.17-18). Ladson-Billings (1994) also criticizes the assimilationist approach to teaching: teaching students to fit into “one American identity” (p.34). Similar to Ladson-Billings (1994), Hale-Benson (1982) argues that traditional education in the United States was designed for middle-class European American children. As a result, Hale-Benson (1982) urges educators to seek out ways to avoid trying to adapt black children so that they fit into an educational system that was not designed for them.

Together, advocates of transformative pedagogy, critical race theory and culturally relevant teaching suggest that educators change the system itself so that it is more accommodating to blacks, poor whites, and other marginalized groups of students.

Another component common amongst culturally relevant teaching, critical race theory and transformative pedagogy is the insistence upon text selection that seeks to provide students with exposure to books about people of various cultures. Applebee’s 1993 study supports the notion that there is an absence of the black presence, as well as the presence of most people of color, in the English curriculum in public schools. Since critical race theorists believe that racism is a normal, but often unrecognizable, part of our lives, it would be easy to ignore the ingrained racism that influences the selection of texts
used in the classroom (Prendergast, 2000, p.477). Applebee (1993) conducted a study in which he asked the department chairs of 543 schools, 7-12th grade, to report on the titles of required book length works used in their schools (p.12). Applebee (1993) describes the results of that study as follows: “Our examination of the selections chosen for study creates a picture of a curriculum dominated by familiar selections drawn primarily from a white, male, Anglo Saxon tradition” (p. 82).

Further, when studying literature anthologies, Applebee (1993) found that American literature anthologies were contributing more multicultural literature. However, there is still little attention given to diverse literature, and literature by women and multicultural groups is lumped under one heading, the 20th century (Applebee, 1993, p. 114-115). Applebee (1993) maintains,

> It is hard to imagine that the handful of selections by African American, Hispanic, Asian, or Native American authors, for example, is sufficient to leave students with a unique sense of the substance and appeal of these alternative traditions, but neither are these traditions well-integrated into a larger, common tradition (p. 115).

The results of Applebee’s national study clearly indicate that there are aspects of public schooling that maintain the subordination of students of color and the status quo.

Spears-Bunton (1990) and C. Lee’s (1993) studies further expose white privilege while simultaneously serving as examples of culturally relevant teaching. Both researchers reveal that they deliberately chose to use African American literature because it was not traditionally used in the public school classroom. For example, Spears-Bunton (1990) reports that the teacher in her study was unhappy with the “version” of American
lit...e, and, as a result, she decided to include African American literature in her classroom. Spears-Bunton (1990) states that the teacher “opened herself up to criticism from administrators and colleagues” because she was the first to teach black literature in her classroom (p.568). It is also important to note that the students requested that the teacher include black literature because they too noticed the void in the curriculum.

Similarly, C. Lee’s (1993) study points out the importance of bringing black literature to the “forefront of research” and classroom focus because, as she explains, “Traditionally, research in the teaching of literature very rarely focuses on literary texts by authors who are not white and male” (p. 134). Additionally, C. Lee (1993) mentions that the black literature texts used in her study “are not part of the traditional storage of books that English departments have on hand” (p.139). Further, C. Lee’s (1993) study attempts to validate black students’ experiences while expressing concern for illiteracy amongst black students. Where Spears-Bunton (1990) struggles with whether culture has an influence on response, C. Lee (1993) ponders “how culture affects comprehension of literature” (p. 32). C. Lee (1993) is concerned with signifying, a form of social discourse in the African American community, and how it might be used as a scaffold to teach students interpretive strategies for literary analysis. C. Lee (1993) explains, “I propose that novice African American adolescent readers bring into classrooms a powerful intellectual tool [signifying] which goes unnoticed, devalued, and untapped” (p.13).

The culturally relevant teaching presented in C. Lee (1993) and Spears-Bunton’s (1990) studies support the notions of critical race theory and transformative pedagogy which advocate challenging the idea that white people’s experiences are the normative

I don’t like to find my books condemned…or praised…when that condemnation or…praise is based on criteria from other paradigms.

I would much prefer that [my books] were dismissed or embraced based on the success of their accomplishment within the culture out of which I write (p.342).

Scholars seem to suggest that allowing students the opportunity to read literature about people of color is important, but teaching those students to employ culturally specific lenses when analyzing the literature is equally important.

Identity/Identity Politics

One’s identity, whether cultural or individual, has an impact on how one views her or himself, the world, and even the literature she or he reads. African American women’s literature is influenced by how black women perceive themselves and the world around them. As a result, identity is an important part of African American women’s literature (Hooper, 1994/1995).

Identity is socially constructed and constantly changing (Giroux, 1992; Friend, 1993; Gay, 1994; Nelson-Barber & Harrison, 1996; King, 1997). Race, class, gender and sexuality are all components of one’s identity and are critical in the formation of one’s lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1995). Millett (1990) defines politics in terms of “power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another” (p.23). When the terms identity and politics are combined, they might be
defined as an observance of difference as a result of race, class, gender and sexual orientation (Giroux, 1992; Crenshaw, 1995). Observing differences allows those who are marginalized an opportunity to challenge white supremacy and demand their rightful place as part of the national narrative (Giroux, 1992; Crenshaw, 1995; Bredella, 2000). In this way, identity politics theory acts as a component of multiculturalism, feminism and critical pedagogy (Nelson-Barber & Harrison, 1996; Bredella, 2000).

Identity politics, however, is not a panacea. Identity theorists acknowledge that there are obvious problems with using a theory that maintains “the personal is the political” (Giroux, 1992). For example, identity politics can promote essentialism as well as separatism (Giroux, 1992; Crenshaw, 1995; Bredella, 2000). Amongst white feminists, essentialism manifests itself through “hierarchies of identities and experiences, which… privilege… their own form of oppression and struggle” (Giroux, 1992, p. 173). Crenshaw (1995) agrees with Giroux (1992); yet, she adds the following two problems with identity politics: 1) it does not recognize the individual differences of persons within an identity category and 2) it does not consider the interlocking affect several identity categories might have on an individual. Similarly, Bredella (2000) maintains, “Identity politics leads to regarding the other not as an individual but as a member of his or her group, and tends to define the collective identity of one group in contrast to that of other groups” (p.341). Despite the negative aspects of identity politics, the importance of identity development amongst young people remains uncontested. Of significant importance, is cultural or ethnic identity formation (Gay, 1994; A. Davis, 1997).

According to A. Davis (1997), racial groups, whites excluded, form their identities “around shared cultural norms, common histories of immigration, mythologized
homelands, or racial oppression” (p.237). Whites, however, assume racial superiority even as they tend to believe they have no racial identity (Carter, 1997). A. Davis (1997) further explains, “White Americans do not appear to have a sense of racial identity that is not linked to ethnicity or class, unless juxtaposing themselves against blacks, Asian Americans, or sometimes Latinos/as” (p. 231). Morrison’s (1992) book, noted for having revived new interest in critical race theory and whiteness¹, also argues that white racial identity is forged in opposition to blackness.

Mostern (1999) claims identity politics theory is “always already identified with women of color” (p.4). As a result, identity formation for black girls appears to be slightly different from their white female counterparts due to the intersectionality of race and class as well as societal messages that devalue and debase people of color and the poor. Mostern (1999) argues that being born black and female automatically “differentiate[s]” you from others, particularly white females (p.181). Erkut, Fields, Sing & Marx (1996) seem to agree,

For white girls, gender may indeed be the principal site for struggle and negotiation in terms of personal identity and social place. For girls of color, culturally and linguistically different girls, working-class girls, and girls living in poverty, gender is not the only site for struggle and negotiation, nor is it necessarily the most salient site (p.57).

According to Bredella (2000), “…in a racist society, people attribute certain cognitive, psychological and moral qualities to the color of the skin” (p.339). Historically, qualities attributed to people of color, particularly blacks, have been negative and quite harmful.

¹ I use the term revived here because I believe earlier theorists, W.E.B. Dubois and Franz Fanon, among others, engaged in critical race theory and interrogating whiteness, though these terms did not exist.
Even immigrants who enter the United States, especially those who closely resemble American blacks, have often felt compelled to disassociate themselves from black Americans. For example, Waters’ 1996 study features the children of black immigrants, particularly those from the Caribbean, who consider being identified as African American a “dilemma”. Moreover, Waters (1996) found that many foreign blacks hold some of the same misconceptions of black Americans (i.e., American blacks are lazy, etc.) that mainstream Americans hold.

In most cases, young people of color have to unlearn negative ideas about themselves that have been ingrained in them by the media and society in general since conception. As a result, young people of color often have to first disregard what they have been told about themselves before they can begin to gain positive identity formation. Nikki Giovanni argues that black women “are the only group that derives its identity from itself…we measure ourselves by ourselves….”(qtd. in Mostern, 1999, p.173) This is the first sign of an individual’s unwillingness to accept the degrading images that have been associated with people of color (Bredella, 2000). When this type of re-education does not take place, negative identification sets in and manifests itself through self-hate, self-contempt, and strained interactions amongst peers and family members (Gay, 1994; Bredella, 2000). For the most part, white girls do not have to be re-educated; they can look all around them and feel confident that their identities as white young women have already been affirmed and approved.

Harrison (1996) used identity politics theory in an urban classroom, they found important uses for the theory, uses similar to those shared by those who advocate the use of critical pedagogy and/or multiculturalism:

1) Identity politics allows the teacher to link the curriculum to students’ interests and personal experiences
2) Identity politics helps students understand that there are multiple ways of viewing and comprehending the world
3) Identity politics uses what students already know as a scaffold for learning new information

Nelson-Barber & Harrison (1996) maintain that the “students benefited from a curriculum that was personal and directly linked to their cultural experience, enabling them to feel at home in the classroom, to be themselves” (p. 261). This is similar to multicultural and feminist approaches to teaching and analyzing literature where the focus is on the politics of identity and its relationship to social action. Students who are aware of their reality often become more sensitive to the needs and concerns of others who are also disenfranchised (Gay, 1994; Bredella, 2000).

The Significance of Multicultural Literature on the Lives of Young People

In a review of the literature, Banks (1993) found that during the preschool years, African American, Mexican American and White children recognize racial differences and show a preference for Whites. Perhaps this is because students have not been exposed to the low, though slowly increasing, numbers of books being written that depict people of color in non-offensive ways (Sims [Bishop], 1982). Bishop (1992) maintains that students who do not see their culture reflected in the literature they read may believe
that they have no value and little or no importance in society and in school. As a result, students may become uninterested in school, and their grades may suffer (Spears-Bunton, 1990). According to Spears-Bunton (1990), African American students may be reading at low levels because of what she calls “a cultural mismatch” between the students and the books they read (p.567). Likewise, Menchaca (2000) maintains Hispanic children will do better in school if they are provided with a “culturally relevant” curriculum. Anaya (1992) echoes this sentiment when he claims “…part of the cause for our alarming dropout statistics is this narrow, circumscribed curriculum in language and literature” (cited in Margerison, 1995, p. 259). Growing numbers of teachers and teacher educators realize this and have made attempts to do something about the “cultural mismatch” of reading materials (Spears-Bunton, 1990).

As a result, the research literature provides evidence to support the impact of culturally relevant literature on the lives of young people. For example, in 1983, Sims [Bishop] interviewed a ten-year-old African American girl, Osula, an avid reader. During the interview it was revealed that Osula preferred books that featured “strong black girls.” Though Osula was not a reluctant reader prior to coming into contact with books that contained black girls with agency, it may be safe to assume that reading these books contributed to the even greater possibility of Osula becoming a lifelong reader. While Osula reveled in seeing herself reflected in the books she read, she also enjoyed looking through the window into the worlds of black people who did not have life experiences similar to her own.

As recently as 2000, H. Johnson studied eleven middle school girls in “girls only” literature circles. Not only did H. Johnson (2000) observe the girls during the literature
circle, but she also observed them during regular class time, and she held interviews with each girl. During a discussion, one of the girls asked the others if there is an ideal race for female protagonists. One African American girl, Monica, answered, “I think they are anything except White” (H. Johnson, 2000, p.383). H. Johnson questions Monica’s answer, and Monica explains that she feels this way because the majority of the books she has read, including a number of the books H. Johnson asked her to read, contained white characters. Another student, Luc, says the ideal character is White because “White is all around and stuff…you always see White. And there’s nothing you can do about it” (p.383). One final girl, Ebony, says she would want a female protagonist to be black so that she could accept her own blackness.

The girls’ discussion, initiated by the students themselves, not the researcher, further validates the need for not only the inclusion of multicultural literature, but also the need for discussions based on the perspectives of the cultural group depicted. Employing a black feminist perspective would have made it natural for the researcher to pose questions about how black female protagonists are depicted in the literature as well as how this depiction relates to or differs from how black women are positioned in other forms of media. Also, discussions about how the students perceive black females outside the literary world would have been thought provoking especially since Ebony, a black female, seemed to need to be reassured that it is indeed acceptable to be black and female.

Interestingly, in a recent study of six African American middle school girls, R. Davis (2000) found something quite different. R. Davis’ (2000) a priori theory was that the girls would be drawn to literature by and about African Americans; however, after
seven months of data collection, two interviews and observations, R. Davis (2000) found that this was not the case. The girls gravitated towards literature that focused on characters with similar problems and concerns to their own, rather than towards books that contained characters who shared their racial backgrounds. The girls chose literature that connected with their life experiences, those experiences that transcend racial differences. However, R. Davis (2000) gave no commentary on how the fact that the girls were aware of and had read books written by and about blacks prior to the study affected how they selected books to read during the study.

Despite all of the critics and teachers who voice the importance of including “culturally relevant” texts in classrooms, there are people who contest this idea. Schlesinger (1998) argues that students of color, particularly African American students, will not become better students due to the inclusion of multicultural literature. He states that students can be motivated by writers who do not share their cultural ties. He uses Frederick Douglass’ being inspired by the speeches in *The Columbian Orator* as an example to prove his point. He emphasizes that Douglass was motivated by the authors of the speeches, despite racial difference, and did not find this difference “an insuperable obstacle” (Schlesinger, 1998, p.96). He also offers Ralph Ellison as an example. Ellison wrote that his craft was shaped, not by reading black authors like Richard Wright, but by reading White writers who “seldom, if ever, mentioned Negroes” (cited in Schlesinger, 1998, p.97). Schlesinger does not consider the possibility that the men he refers to, especially Douglass, did not have access to books written by blacks, neither does he question how this might have influenced their reading interests. Schlesinger’s (1998) argument misses the mark because the question is not whether writers outside students’
cultures can motivate students, for we already know that this can be done. The real issue here is that all students need to be exposed to the literature and perspectives of diverse groups of people in order to broaden their knowledge base.

Auciello (2000) agrees with Schlesinger (1998). He contends that using multicultural literature will have little or no affect on students’ academic achievement. Furthermore, Auciello (2000) points out that many of the multicultural books for young adults—he lists *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945)—are too difficult for students who have been labeled “reluctant” and/or “poor” readers. Again there are other scholars who believe that the opposite is true. They argue that if students are engaged in literature that is “culturally relevant,” they better their chances of improving their grades and becoming interested in reading (Spears-Bunton, 1990; C. Lee, 1993; E. Smith, 1995; Menchaca, 2000). E. Smith’s (1995) study offers a good example. E. Smith (1995) describes how three African American fifth-grade students responded to books that contained topics and illustrations that reflected their life experiences and culture. Two of E. Smith’s (1995) research participants, Jordan, a reluctant reader, and Michael, a remedial student, showed an increased interest in reading once they were exposed to books written by and about African Americans. E. Smith (1995) noted that the students did not respond to African American literature in the same way they responded to “culturally disparate” literature (E. Smith, 1995, p.574). Perhaps the response of the students was richer because it resonated with their cultural identities. As a result, there seems to be an absence of studies that focus on the benefits of teaching multicultural literature from the perspective of the group depicted in the literature.
African American Women’s Contribution to the Literary Tradition

Henderson (1984) acknowledges, “Black women almost by definition have always been involved in the generation and sustenance of our literature…One could, in fact, make the case that, the founders of Black American literature, in a formal sense, were women—Phillis Wheatley, Lucy Terry, and Harriet E. Wilson” (p. xxiii). Though a large number—perhaps larger than the number published throughout the history of African American literature—of African American women writers were published in the 1960s and 1970s, this period does not mark the beginning of the black woman’s contribution to the writing of literature (Henderson, 1984; Busby, 1992). A quick glance at the African American literary tradition gives the appearance of male-domination, as if black women did not make major contributions to the tradition from its very beginning. In fact, “Black women…were at the heart, rather than the periphery,” (Holland, 2000, p. 110) of the African American literary tradition and their works operate “within and independent of the American, Afro-American, and female literary traditions” (Bethel, 1982, p. 178).

A sixteen-year-old young woman, Lucy Terry, wrote the first known poem, “Bars Fight,” written by an African American in 1746. Shockley (1988) credits Terry with giving birth to African American literature. However, because the poem was not published until 1895, Phillis Wheatley, who was also what we now consider a young adult when she began writing, is often credited with being the first African American poet (Gates & McKay, 1996/1997; V. Smith, 1997). Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* is significant for two reasons: 1) It was the first book of poetry published by an African American and 2) It was the second book published in
America by a woman (Gates & McKay, 1996/1997; V. Smith, 1997). *Essays; Including Biographies and Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose and Poetry* (1841) by Ann Plato, according to Shockley (1988), is considered to be the first book of essays written by an African American. Additionally, *Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delany* (1868) published under Frances Anne Rollins Whipper’s pseudonym, Frank A. Rollin, is said to be the first biography of an African American who had not previously been a slave (Shockley, 1988). Finally, it is also believed that the first slave narrative was not *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavas Vassa, the African* (1789), but was *Belinda, Or the Cruelty of Men Whose Faces Were Like the Moon* (1787) (S. Russell, 1990).2 Slave narratives are significant within the African American literary tradition because they were the first published works by and about African Americans and because they have greatly influenced African American writing, fiction and nonfiction (V. Smith, 1987; Williams, 1991/1992; Gates & McKay, 1996/1997).

The African American literary tradition began in an effort to prove that black people, Gates & McKay (1996/1997) explain, “…possessed the requisite degrees of reason and wit to create literature…[to prove] that they could indeed write” (p.95). In addition to this, the black women’s literary tradition began in an effort to consciously create a space for black women’s writing and to illustrate a distinction between black women’s reality and the realities of black men, white men, and white women. This may not be evident in historical pieces by Terry and Wheatley, but it certainly begins to become obvious in *Our Nig* (1859) by Harriet A. Wilson, the first novel published by a black woman, and in “The Two Offers” (1859) by Frances E.W. Harper, the first short

---

2 Gates and McKay (1996/1997) credit James Albert Ukawsaw as the author of the first autobiography written by a black person, which largely influenced authors of slave narratives.
story published by a black woman. However, Wall (1982) credits Zora Neale Hurston for being the first black woman writer to tell stories about the experiences of black women. I would contend that this was done much earlier, albeit differently. For example, even Harriet Ann Jacobs’s narrative, though fact packaged as fiction, illustrates the impact of race, class, and gender oppression had on the lives of black slave women.

Because of these early black women writers, the black women’s literary tradition began to take form. One of the main characteristics of the black women’s literary tradition is the writers’ preoccupation with positioning themselves as subjects rather than objects (Cliff, 1990; Morrison, 1994) and their insistence upon creating images of black women that debunk traditional, stereotypical images of black women (Bethel, 1982; Washington, 1990; Collins, 2000). Additionally, black women writers, as Washington (1990) contends, “represent black women in a variety of roles—as mothers, as daughters, as artists and writers, as wives, as domestic workers and teachers, as college students and world travelers, as beauticians, actresses: as subjects acting in history, as agents in their own lives” (p. 5-6). It is through black women’s distinct contributions that the African American literary tradition exists in the way that it does. I propose that an understanding of this tradition will enhance any critical study of literary works by black women.

**Moving Towards Defining Black Feminist Criticism**

Despite the progress the multicultural movement seems to be making, a major concern is that multicultural literature is not being explored from the perspective of the cultural group depicted in the literature (Banks & Banks, 1989). Literature by and about African Americans is one of several types of literature referred to as multicultural literature. I would suggest that one way to consider the point of view of African American
American women when reading African American literature by women is to use black feminist criticism. There does not seem to be a fixed definition of black feminist criticism, for the ideology has often shifted its focus and redirected its gaze throughout the years, but two things have remained consistent: 1) Black women feel it is imperative that they tell and critique their own stories about black women’s experiences and 2) Many black feminist efforts seek to pose questions about both the race problem and gender issues (Wall, 1989; Brewer, 1993; B. Smith, 1994; Beale, 1995). In essence, black feminist criticism is a process of inquiry by which scholars and critics read, analyze and theorize about literary works by black women writers as well as general works or “texts” by all authors even those who do not identify themselves as either black or female.

During the 1970s, several celebrated black women writers published novels (i.e., Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, A. Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is not enuf*) that shook the male-dominated sphere known as the African American literary canon. The 1970s also seem to mark the beginning of a rigorous effort to rediscover the literary works of long ago African American female writers, which resulted in a rebirth of literary works by black women (Wall, 1989). With that rebirth of literature came black feminist criticism, which leans on the foundation of early black feminist work done by Anna Julia Cooper, Maria Stewart, and a number of others. Finding no place within African American literary criticism to discuss sexual politics, black feminist criticism was needed (B. Smith, 1994). Though black feminist criticism has changed drastically since 1970, it continues to be an important avenue by which black women, black men and others can discuss the valuable experiences of black women found in literature.
Mary Helen Washington’s (1990) *Black-Eyed Susans/Midnight Birds: Classic Stories By and About Black Women* is a significant contribution to the study of black women’s literature. Mary Helen Washington’s work was mostly concerned with the recovery of texts written by African American women. Like Washington, many critics during the seventies focused on finding lost works by black women writers from Lucy Terry to, according to some, the literary foremother, Zora Neale Hurston. Scholars were primarily concerned with trying to establish a literary tradition. Though many black women writers of the 1970s knew who their paternal literary ancestors were, they did not know their literary foremothers. Once those lost or forgotten works by black women were found, most black feminist critics summarized the works and discussed intertextual themes amongst the literary pieces (Washington, 1990). In 1972, Alice Walker (1983) wrote her groundbreaking essay, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens.” Walker (1983), probably because of the indifference the Anglo-American feminist movement has shown towards black women since the nineteenth century, chose to adopt what she calls womanism, an ideology that focuses on black women’s love of self and community, among other things. Walker’s (1983) essay insists that present-day black women writers owe their freedom to create to the existence of numbers of unknown African/black female artists. Walker (1983) argues that despite the intermingling of oppression based on race, class and gender, some black women still found ways to express their creativity.

B. Smith (1994) followed Walker in 1977 and took the conversation on black feminist criticism further. Most critics and scholars agree that B. Smith’s (1994) essay completely changed the direction of black feminist criticism. In the groundbreaking work, B. Smith (1994) argues that “all segments of the literary world…do not know, or at
least act as if they do not know that black women writers and black lesbian writers exist” (p. 410). As a result, B. Smith (1994) calls for a black feminist criticism, and she tries to create a precise definition of the ideology. She systematically lays out specific points of reference one might use to analyze a text using a black feminist approach:

1). Explore how both sexual and racial politics and black and female identity are inextricable elements in black women’s writings.

2). Work from the assumption that black women writers constitute an identifiable literary tradition.

3). Realize that black women writers incorporate the traditional black female activities of root-working, herbal medicine, conjure, and midwifery into the fabric of their stories.

4). Find innumerable commonalities in works by black women.

5). Look for precedents and insights in interpretation within the works of various black women. In other words, [the black feminist critic] would think and write out of her own identity and not try to graft the ideas or methodology of white/male literary thought upon the precious materials of black women’s art.

6). The critic should be aware of the political implications of her work and would assert the connections between it and the political situation of all black women (pp. 416-417).

B. Smith (1994) ends the critical essay by reading Morrion's *Sula* as a lesbian novel. Though critics have critiqued B. Smith’s essay, particularly the lesbian reading, rather harshly at times, it is an important essay in the development and the struggle to define black feminist criticism. Nevertheless, it is clear that B. Smith’s position on what constitutes black feminist criticism is not without its faults. For instance, Awkward (1994) points out that B. Smith (1994) excluded black men, white men, and white feminist critics as possible theorists and practitioners of black feminist criticism. Awkward writes: “Smith assumes that the black feminist critic will necessarily be a black
woman, that whites and black men are incapable of offering types of analyses she advocates because they ‘are of course ill-equipped to deal [simultaneously] with the subtleties of racial [and sexual] politics’’ (p.362).

In 1980 another key essay that helped lay the foundation for black feminist criticism was published. In it, McDowell (1994) refers to B. Smith’s (1994) call for a precise definition of black feminist criticism. McDowell (1994) argues: “To date, no one has formulated a precise or complete definition of feminist criticism” (p. 428). However, she does state that black feminist critics have agreed to expose the white male dominated literary critical tradition. Like B. Smith (1994), McDowell exposes the racism of Anglo-American feminists. She accuses them of viewing their own experiences as normative and failing to recognize that they have continuously neglected to include works of women of color in critical studies and anthologies. Additionally, she writes that black male critics also ignore the works of black women. In essence, McDowell (1994) shares B. Smith’s (1994) opinion of how the literary works of black women writers get “mishandled” when in the hands (or not in the hands) of black men, white men and white female feminist critics. McDowell (1994) concludes: “The recognition among Black female critics and writers that white women, white men, and Black men consider their experiences as normative and Black women’s experiences as deviant has given rise to Black feminist criticism” (pp.429-430).

McDowell (1994) goes on to state that even though in 1980 there is still no set definition of black feminist criticism, black feminist critics are “resurrecting” past works by black women writers, and they are “revising misinformed critical opinions of them” (p.430). Further, McDowell (1994) points out that black feminist criticism is practical
rather than theoretical. Then she praises B. Smith’s article and calls it “groundbreaking” and claims that it is “[t]he earliest theoretical statement on Black feminist criticism.” However, McDowell (1994) does find fault with B. Smith’s (1994) failure to be precise and detailed in her description of black feminist criticism. McDowell brings up some valid points. For example, when B. Smith (1994) says that black women use rootworking, herbal medicine, midwifery, etc. in their literature, McDowell (1994) maintains that black male writers do also. McDowell (1994) also questions B. Smith’s claim that black women writers have a unique black female language. Additionally, McDowell (1994) wonders how that language is different from the way black men use language, and she also questions whether black women of different social classes share this language that B. Smith (1994) writes about.

Moreover, McDowell (1994) argues that black feminist critics need to define their methodology and decide how much, if at all, they want their criticism to intersect with the work that white feminist critics do. Finally, McDowell, like Williams (1994) after her in 1986, asks black feminist critics to eliminate separatist tendencies. Williams (1994) states: “…[T]o focus solely on ourselves is to fall into the same hole The Brother has dug for himself—narcissism, isolation, inarticulation, obscurity” (p.520). McDowell (1994) and Williams (1994) both suggest that critics move away from identifying negative images of women in black men’s literature. McDowell (1994) suggests that instead, black feminist critics should look at how black men and black women write about the same subjects differently. For example, Morrison and Ellison both write about incest and rape from different perspectives and positionalities (du Cille, 2000). On the other hand,
Williams (1994) argues that black feminist critics should analyze what black male writers have written about themselves in their literary works.

By 1987, theorists and scholars had noticed McDowell’s (1994) plea for a more productive approach to black feminist criticism. McDowell (1994) stated, “Unfortunately, black feminist criticism has been decidedly more practical than theoretical….,” (p. 430). This statement stimulated more conversation on black feminist criticism and it caused some critics to become defensive while it angered others. Christian (1994) argues that “…people of color have always theorized,” yet they do not do it in the same way that white Westerners do (p.349). According to Christian, black people theorize “in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, [and] in the play with language….,” (p. 349). Further, Christian argues that now that black women writers are being recognized and taught in academies, there is a move toward abandoning literary texts in exchange for theoretical readings. Christian views this “race for theory” as another attempt to silence the voices of black writers and as another opportunity for academic elitism to flex its muscles. She argues that it is too easy for theory to become “prescriptive, exclusive, elitist” and hegemonic (p. 354).

Awkward (1994) disagrees with Christian (1994). He argues that if black feminist critics want black women’s literature to maintain its popularity or “continue to make inroads into the canon,” critics must do more than summarize the literary works; they must “master the discourse of contemporary literary theory” (p. 365). Awkward (1994) insists that literary theory should be used by black feminist critics to “discuss...works in as full, complex and sophisticated ways as possible” (p. 366). Gates (2000) agrees with Awkward (1994); he says literary theory should be used whenever it is “useful or
appropriate” (p.302). Conversely, McDowell (2000) argues that critics miss one of Christian’s (1994) main points: what white Westerners refer to as theory is “reductively defined,” and though black feminist critics do “theorize,” the type of theory they engage in is not valued or acknowledged by the academy, and it does not coincide with the white-male dominated literary tradition that has existed for years (p. 569). McDowell (2000) concludes that the debate about theory is “boring” and it causes critics to give less attention to “understanding how theory has been constructed as an exclusively Western phenomenon” (p. 570). These earlier critical works provide some insight into the evolving nature of black feminist criticism. However, black feminist criticism is not fixated or overly prescriptive. Though black feminist theory is now referred to in the plural form, there continues to be some agreement on a few basic tenets of the ideology.

**Tenets of Black Feminist Criticism & YA Literature**

Black feminists have long been preoccupied with establishing an African American women’s literary tradition. In 1991/1992, Kiah began to define a YA black women’s literary tradition. Beginning in the 1700s with Phillis Wheatley, Kiah (1991/1992) traces this tradition and concludes that during the time of her article there are only fifteen black women writers of YA literature. This number excludes writers like Morrison, Walker, Brooks, etc., who write mainly for adults, but also have titles that are widely read by young people and/or are actual children’s titles. Kiah (1991/1992) also created a framework for classifying the YA novels she studied. She maintains that the works in her study contain three components that reflect the black experience: “The Patrimony of Africa”, “The Patrimony of Domination and Dependency,” and “The
Patrimony of Survival” (Kiah, 1991/1992, p. 82). Kiah’s (1991/1992) study is important because it begins to lay a foundation for tracing the YA black women’s literary tradition.

Another important critical work that could be classified as a black feminist project, is D. Johnson’s (1990) study of Lucille Clifton’s body of work. In D. Johnson’s (1990) discussion, she situates Clifton’s work within the African American female literary tradition while simultaneously focusing on concerns specific to black feminists that appear within the works. Also, D. Johnson (1990) discusses themes and motifs in Clifton’s works that are also prevalent in the works of other black women, particularly Zora Neale Hurston. For example, establishing community and “attending to family” (D. Johnson, 1990, p. 81) are key issues of black feminism that are also major topics within Clifton and other black women writers’ works.

Though black feminist projects take on many forms, issues that affect women and young girls are at the root of most studies. Groves (1996) offers a black feminist reading of several books by YA African American writers. She is particularly concerned with how the process of the coming-of-age of black girls is depicted in YA literature by blacks. Groves (1996) describes six threats—invisibility/otherness, negative self-image, sexual and other violence, drug abuse and crime, lack of faith in black men, and loss of voice—to black girls’ attempts at coming-of-age as they are presented in six books with female main characters (p. 51). The six books Groves (1996) analyzes are interesting and exemplary of the nature of a black feminist project for three reasons: 1) They are a mixture of fiction, autobiography, and at least one collection of speeches and essays; 2) One of the books is authored by a black man, Walter Dean Myers, and 3) It is debatable whether or not a few of the books are “YA literature.”
An analysis of the experiences of black women is key when reading from a black feminist perspective. Other topics of interest when reading through a black feminist lens are black girls/womens’ methods used to form identity, find voice, and resist oppression. For example, in Hooper’s (1994/1995) critique of *The Bride Price* and *The Bluest Eye*, she is particularly concerned with the similarities between African and African American literature. She looks closely at motifs such as flight and identity formation within the two novels. Toward the end of her study, Hooper (1994/1995) concludes, “When one examines these particular motifs in African and African American texts within the context of black feminist criticism, it becomes clear that the criticism enhances the reading and therefore the analysis of the text” (p.75).

Other critics seem to agree with Hooper (1994/1995); for example, Kay E. Vandergrift, a white scholar, has done a number of analyses of African American literature from both a feminist and a black feminist viewpoint. Many of her studies are also concerned with how black girls/women construct their own identities and find their voices in a society that renders them invisible and mute. In “And Bid Her Sing: A White Feminist Reads African-American Female Poets,” Vandergrift (1994) analyzes poetry by black women writers who write mainly for adults, that has often been taught to adolescents. The focal point of her study is black women’s voices and how they have articulated their experiences and epistemologies in various ways over time (K. Smith, 1994).

Another tenet of black feminist thought focuses on building community through relationships with mothers, “othermothers,” and “sisters.” The development of relationships between mothers and their children, particularly their daughters, is of
of the function and importance of “othermothers” on the lives of children and the community. According to James (1993), the concept of “othermothering” is rooted in West African tradition. For some blacks, “othermothering” stems from the belief that blacks must take responsibility for all members of the race (James, 1993). In an interesting article, Hilary Crews (1994), also a white feminist, compares both black and white feminist views and scholarship concerning mothers, daughters, “othermothers” and other familial relationships. Crews (1994) examines these relationships in the works of YA authors, Jacqueline Woodson, Virginia Hamilton, and Sharon Mathis, in addition to works by authors who write mainly for adults. Community and sisterhood also prove to be important topics. Collins (2000) argues: “Black women writers have led the way in recognizing the importance of Black women’s relationships with one another” (p. 104). The studies discussed here illustrate a commitment to not only reading African American literature by women, but also analyzing and critiquing the literature from a black women’s perspective.

**Overview of Chapters**

This overview points out the primary points of discussion found in the dissertation. The first chapter describes the purpose and significance of the study, and it also contains a discussion of recent research related to the study. The following three chapters provide a close reading of the six novels chosen for analysis. The novels are discussed from a black feminist perspective, emphasizing themes that are also prevalent in works that make up the African American women’s literary tradition. Three major themes emerged during the literary analysis: family, African American expressive culture
and sexuality.\(^3\) Since identity is an important motif found in African American women’s literature, each theme was discussed with this in mind. Though the themes reflect concepts related to identity issues presented in the novels, I recognize that these themes are connected, as family shapes sexuality, and vice versa, while beauty, and other modes of self-expression, is influenced by sexuality, etc. For example, Joyce (Blue Tights) utilizes her sexuality in an effort to gain validation of her beauty. Yet, Joyce’s ambivalence concerning actually becoming sexually active is largely influenced by her relationship with family, particularly her mother and her aunt.

Within the three thematic discussions, references are made to how select YA novels have an intertextual connection to certain novels within the African American women’s literary tradition. All of the novels used in the study are referred to for analysis purposes. The novels chosen for discussion in the chapters were those that were most relevant to the discussion. Summaries of the remaining dissertation chapters are provided below.

In chapter two, “Family,” attention is given to the multiple meanings—meanings often influenced by one’s cultural identity—of family and the function of individual family members. The chapter also focuses on the influence of family history, cultural knowledge, and familial relationships—specifically, mothers and daughters as well as platonic friends—on the identity development of young girls in the novels studied.

African American expressive culture (i.e., language, physical appearance, music, literature, etc.) is the focus of chapter three. The beginning of the chapter includes a brief discussion of references to African American music and literature found in the novels studied here. The next section describes the impact mainstream America’s ideas

\(^3\) A detailed discussion of the methodology used is in Appendix B.
concerning body image, beauty, skin color, and hair texture have on adolescent black girls. The final section of this chapter discusses how the novels validate Black English Vernacular as well as the components of the African American oral tradition—storytelling, signifying, and spitting game.

The subject of chapter four is sexuality. I describe and discuss how sexuality is explored in select African American YA literature and in literature within the African American women’s literary tradition. In this chapter I also emphasize several sex-related topics (sexual desire, sexual empowerment, homosexuality, etc.) found in the literature that connect to the lived experiences of most adolescents once they begin to form their own sexual identities. The premise here is to encourage young people to think critically about these topics and about their own sexual behavior.

The final chapter, five, contains a summary of the conclusions of the analysis as well as the implications for teachers. I discuss how utilizing a black feminist theoretical lens to read and teach African American YA literature by and about African Americans might help teachers reach some of the goals of the multicultural education movement, particularly self-analysis, critical thinking and social action. I also discuss how helping students recognize intertextual connections between African American YA literature and literature within the African American women’s literary tradition might help enrich the study of literature for students within and outside the African American culture.
CHAPTER 2

FAMILY

Introduction

Family, from its structure to the function of specific members within the unit, has a significant influence on one’s identity development (Leadbeater & Way, 1996). The importance of family and one’s unique place in it is one of the themes found in select YA novels as well as in literature within the African American women’s literary tradition. Analyzing family from the perspective of black women, the cultural group depicted in the YA novels included in this study, provides African American students with an important connection between home and school culture, while it allows students who are not African American an opportunity to experience family from, possibly, a different point of view that will hopefully lead to a better understanding of the diversity that exists within cultural groups.

This chapter begins with a discussion on the significance of family as a theme of interest for African American women writers. I describe the use of the theme in black women’s literature, focusing specifically on how Johnson, Williams-Garcia and Woodson’s focus on family is reflected in the literary tradition. Additionally, I describe how female protagonists in the novels discussed here 1) grapple with the definition of family, 2) exist in family units that deviate from the traditionally prescribed nuclear
family, and 3) develop a sense of personal and cultural identity as they embrace family and African American history.

It is important that I acknowledge from the beginning that though there are some similarities in the treatment of family as a theme in literature for adults and young adults, I realize the inclusion of the theme operates in different ways depending upon whether the literary work is intended for adults or young adults. Characters in YA novels are more likely to struggle to find their identity within a family or to grapple with whether or not they belong in a particular family than protagonists in adult literature. Additionally, YA literature seems to be more likely to include a moral or message intended to change the reader’s perspective. For example, one of the projects of each of the YA novels analyzed here is to encourage the reader to think differently about the concept of family and how individuals are shaped by family interaction. This is not always clearly evident in adult literature. In adult literature, family tends to be more of a backdrop for the execution of the more dominant themes at work.

The focus on family was of particular importance for women writers of slave narratives. Women writers often focused on how slavery separated families, especially mothers from their children. Moreover, attention was given to how family complicated a slave woman’s decision to run away. According to Roberts (1997), “The typical runaway slave was a lone man between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five, who paid the price of losing all contact with family” (p. 43). In Douglass’ narrative he makes no mention of children or family ties that will hinder him from attempting to obtain his freedom. However, Harriet Ann Jacobs hesitates to escape slavery, and then finally resorts to living in the crawl space of her grandmother’s attic in order to be near her
children. While in the attic, she watched her children through a “peep” hole for several years before finally running north.

Contemporary black women writers of neo-slave narratives (e.g. Morrison, Cooper, Williams and Butler) have complicated the image of the slave woman and her commitment to family ties. Women in neo-slave narratives abscond and take their children with them. For instance, when Alice, a character in *Kindred*, decides to escape slavery, she makes plans to give her baby opium so she does not cry while they are running (Butler, 1979). Conversely, in *Beloved* Sethe sends her children to Ohio long before she attempts to join them (Morrison, 1987). And like Sethe, Dessa is pregnant and soon to deliver when she escapes (Williams, 1986; Morrison, 1987). Whether via slave or neo-slave narratives, women writers emphasize the struggle black families endured during slavery to physically stay together.

During the early twentieth-century the purpose of family in African American literature changed, particularly in literature about passing (i.e., Nella Larsen’s *Passing & Quicksand*, etc.) (Denard, 1997). According to Denard (1997), the focus was on “divided family loyalties and bloodlines” and the “strength and sustenance of the Black family” (p. 266-267). Between the 1930s and the 1950s, family was treated as a less significant theme in African American literature (Denard, 1997). However, during the 1960s and 1970s, in conjunction with the civil rights movement and the black power movement, the emphasis was on family history and “the valued role of the family elder …in maintaining cultural history,” M. Walker’s *Jubilee* and Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* are examples (Denard, 1997, p. 268). This use of the family theme is vivid in *Like Sisters on the
*Homefront.* Gayle obtains knowledge of family and African American history from Great, the family matriarch.

Black women writers like A. Walker, Jones, Naylor, and Morrison to the chagrin of some, began to create literature that put the black family under scrutiny (McDowell, 1989; Denard, 1997). Specifically, these black women writers concentrated on “family weaknesses—wife and child abuse, in-group rivals, and color consciousness” (Denard, 1997, p. 268). Additionally, these writers illustrated the resourcefulness of black extended family. Similar themes that expose the humanity and vulnerability of individuals who make up family in the YA novels analyzed here include controversial topics like teen pregnancy, teen sex, sexism, homosexuality, etc.

Race, class, and gender influence one’s understanding of family. In the United States, mainstream society “advanced” what has come to be known as the ideal family structure: heterosexual parents of shared racial and ethnic cultures with one or more biological children (Collins, 2000). Largely because of Africa’s influence, African Americans tend to embrace a different notion of family structure, one that often includes extended family. The girls in the YA novels in this study forge their own definitions of family as they discover the importance of family history and develop a general understanding of African American history. One of the purposes of this chapter is to focus on the ways in which the girls in six YA novels define family and realize the significance of familial relationships and friendships. Here, family is an expansive term that includes individuals who are not necessarily biologically related, as family, friends and community members all have a direct impact on the identity development of the protagonists (Leadbeater & Way, 1996)
Nearly all of the girls use the European family model to measure against their own before concluding that the alternative family structure they are a part of has just as much value and legitimacy as the traditional family structure purports to have. When reflecting on the impact of watching her mother abandon her and her father, Marie, the protagonist of *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This*, thinks, “A different kind of family now, our house filling up quickly with my mother’s absence” (Woodson, 1994, p. 48). Similarly, Afeni, of *The Dear One*, lives in a single-parent home; her father divorced her mother, remarried and has another daughter leaving Afeni to live with her mother. When Afeni has difficulty understanding her mother’s personality and the two quarrel, she reminds herself: “We were not some TV family where everything was perfect all the time” (Woodson, 1991, p.85-86). Gayle in *Like Sisters on the Homefront* and Joyce the protagonist of *Blue Tights* both live in single–parent homes too though their families have low socioeconomic status.

The girls mentioned above seem to accept their alternative family structures, though reluctantly, while Marley, the protagonist in *Heaven*, struggles to understand the concept of family, as she looks inward at her own and outward into the families that make up her community. She is forced to reconsider her definition of family when she learns she is adopted. Before this, self- identity is not an issue for Marley; she believes she knows who she is in relation to her peers and family members. Yet, news of her adoption robs her of everything she thought she knew about herself and her family; as a result, she spends most of the novel trying to regain her identity, trying to rediscover herself and the people she believed were her biological family. Her friends and the people
in the community in which she lives help her negotiate multiple meanings of family. Within the community and amongst her friends, are several examples of families.

Turning first to her best friend Shoogy, Marley believes that on the surface the Maples appear to be a perfect family; however, once Marley begins to take a closer look at the dynamics of the Maple family, she realizes that the Maples, and no family for that matter, is perfect, nor is there a model family that others can measure themselves against. The families in the small town of Heaven, Ohio, seem to be working class, but the Maples differ. The Maples are middle-class; they indulge in luxuries not available to the other families. For example, Shoogy’s parents encourage her to compete in beauty pageants while they play tennis, drive a luxury car, and hire landscape artists to manicure their lawn.

Several times throughout the novel, the Maples are referred to as perfect. However, ironically, Shoogy Maple tries to distance herself from her family. Unlike her siblings, she gets angry when her parents buy a Cadillac because it symbolizes middle class values and it further distances the family from other families in the community. Shoogy seems eager to rebel against capitalism and middle-class values. Even when Shoogy shares some of her family’s interests, for instance, her appreciation of classical music, she refuses to admit this to her family. When Shoogy’s mother enters the house while she is playing classical music, she abandons the classical music in exchange for rap music. At age six, Shoogy begins to mutilate herself, stabbing her thighs with a fork and cutting her hair with nail clippers, in an effort to deal with the pain she feels because she cannot be the perfect daughter she believes her parents want. Cutting or self-mutilation appears most often among white, middle-class girls. Perhaps because of painful
emotional problems and an unwillingness to accept her family’s social class, Shoogy engages in cutting herself. Marley says, “Shoogy told me when I first met her that she used to cut herself so it would block out pain….She told me that she couldn’t cut deep enough” (A. Johnson, 1998, p. 93).

When looking towards her other close friend, Bobby Morris’ family, Marley sees yet another definition of family. Bobby is raising his daughter, Feather, alone, yet his small family does not seem to contain less love. Even Ma, the owner of the Superette, though childless, has found a son in her nephew, Chuck. Marley observes, “Chuck was better than a son to Ma and he wasn’t her blood son” (A. Johnson, 1998, p.77).

The multiple composites of family types presented to Marley force her to look inward at her own family whom she feels has been dishonest with her because they concealed her adoption. She slowly comes to realize that family are “the people who have always been there for you” as she recalls that her adoptive parents have symbolically given her the stars and the moon despite the fact that she is not their biological child (A. Johnson, 1998, p. 99). While Marley’s parents come close to the traditional family mold, *Toning the Sweep* is the only novel out of the six referred to here that contains a protagonist who lives with her two biological parents. However, Emily’s father is not a full character in the novel; rather, he is only briefly mentioned.

Several of the novels studied illustrate how learning family history helps the girls develop cultural identity. The girls are given knowledge about themselves and family members they come in contact with daily as well as those who impact their lives from the grave. Learning family history, ritual and tradition are significant in *Toning the Sweep*. David asks, “Do you think about your people, Emmie, your people and their rituals?” (A.
Johnson, 1993, p.94). Toward the end of the novel, Emily, with her mother’s help, tones the sweep for her grandfather. According to Gregory (1995), toning the sweep “…is reminiscent of a West African ritual in which the community comes together and shrieks at the moment of a person’s death to strengthen his or her passage between one form of life and another” (p.494). Emily realizes that she has stumbled upon a family tradition when her mother recalls that her grandfather toned the sweep when her grandmother died.

A similar connection to tradition and ritual control much of Like Sisters on the Homefront. Family members wait for the opportunity to be present when Great “Tells” the family history just before she dies. Aunt Virginia wants the information for her dissertation on oral history; yet, Great chooses to “Tell” Gayle, the one who needs her family’s history most though she fears she will not be able to remember it. Aunt Virginia tells Gayle, “If all you remember is how valuable our family history is, then you’ve got it all” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.158). This suggests that family history is an integral part of one’s identity.

Throughout the course of Toning the Sweep, Emily gains an understanding of who she is and what she is capable of enduring. One of the ways Emily discovers her sense of self is by learning who her grandmother, her deceased grandfather and her mother are. Right away Emily takes this task on, believing that she must accomplish it alone. She says, “Haven’t really done much by myself…I should find out everything about Ola on my own…” (A. Johnson, 1993, p.22) What Emily does not consider is the way in which Ola’s story encompasses her grandfather’s, her mother’s and her own. It becomes difficult to learn about one without learning about the other. Videography is the vehicle Emily uses to learn about her family and by extension, herself. While standing behind the
video camera, Emily learns several shocking truths about her family history, including the source of her mother’s bitterness toward Ola, her nonconventional grandmother, and Emily’s mother’s dislike of the desert. Some of what Emily learns hurts her and makes her feel she has been excluded from information about her family that she deserved to know, while other things help her piece together remnants of her mother’s adolescence. David, for instance, casually tells Emily that Ola discovered he and his siblings were abandoned when she nearly drove her Buick convertible into him.

Similarly, in *Like Sisters on the Homefront*, Gayle is surprised by what she learns about her family. Her first surprise comes as her uncle drives onto the family property in Georgia. While looking at her aunt and uncle’s home, she thinks, “…*they black. Black like my butt, living like this*” [Italics in original] (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.28). Gayle’s surprise is genuine as their lifestyle is a far cry from the existence Gayle, who has to carry her clothes for the trip in “[a] cheap plaid suitcase and two A&P shopping bags,” is accustomed to (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.15). Slowly uncovering details about her family throughout the course of the novel, Gayle learns that her great-great-great grandmother Mahalia managed to acquire her master’s property after courageously protecting his son’s life, and her grandfather was active in the civil rights movement. Gayle’s great-grandmother has a wealth of information she is willing to pass on to her to help develop an appreciation of her cultural identity, including family recipes for love potion and “healing tea” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.50).

Initially, Gayle does not see the importance of knowing family history or respecting family heirlooms. When Gayle is taken to her room and shown the baby’s bed, her cousin Cookie says, "It's the family crib…." Gayle replies, “A new crib woulda been
nice” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.29). Confused, Cookie says, “But, Cousin, everybody used this crib. Auntie Ruth Bell, Daddy, me, Grandpa, Great-grandpa. It's about one hundred and twenty years old." “Looks it,’ Gayle snapped....” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.29). A similar interchange takes place involving the quilt Emanuel will use: Cookie says, "Thought you'd like the quilt. Aunt Ruth Bell helped stitch it...." Gayle says, "My mama don't go by no Ruth Bell. She goes by Ruby. And as for this quilt...what yawl got against buying a brand-new one?" (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 30). Gayle does not realize until the end of the novel, after she has developed an interest in and understanding of family history and identity, that the quilt in Emanuel’s crib illustrates the family history and is therefore priceless.

Relationships with family members are just as important as knowledge of family history as these relationships help adolescent girls develop a sense of self-awareness, pride and individuality. The most significant relationships in each of the YA novels included in this study are between daughters and mothers, othermothers, and friends.

**Mothers & Daughters: Guidance, Distance, & Conflict**

Scholars such as Joseph & Lewis (1981), Joseph (1991) and Collins (1991, 1994, 2000) argue that white feminist theoretical undertakings concerning the study of mothers and the mother daughter relationship are not appropriate for studying black mothers largely because white feminist theory rarely takes race and culture into consideration when analyzing these roles. Collins (1991) asserts that motherhood within the African American community is made up of “three conflicting perspectives ”: white, African, and African-American (p.46). Further, Collins (1991) writes,
The cult of true womanhood, with its emphasis on motherhood as woman's highest calling, has long held a special place in the gender symbolism of White Americans. From this perspective, women's activities should be confined to the care of children, the nurturing of a husband, and the maintenance of the household (p.43).

Yet, black women were excluded from the cult of true womanhood. As a result, black women have subscribed to dominant definitions of motherwork and have expanded that definition to include wage-earned work outside the home. Ironically, black women’s work outside the home included jobs as maids which limited black women’s work to the care of white children and forced them to endure sexual abuse from white women’s husbands while they managed white women’s households (Collins, 1991).

Further, Collins (1994) argues for the significance of including the lived experiences of black women when thinking critically about motherhood. Recently, scholarly attention has been given to how race, class, and gender merge to influence how black mothers and daughters form relationships (Crews, 1996). Guidance, distance and conflict are primary themes that shape the mother daughter connections in the six novels in this study though mother daughter relationships are not the primary focus of any of the novels.

Several of the novels depict moments when mothers and daughters bond while participating in various activities. Amongst black women, styling hair has often been viewed as a form of bonding just as talking, laughing and sharing secrets are. Black women writers of adult fiction and the authors of the YA novels discussed here have particularly emphasized this notion in their novels. For example, before Afeni goes to
school, her mother braids her hair as they make plans to celebrate Afeni’s birthday.

Similarly, in the midst of mother daughter quality time, Minnie styles Joyce’s hair in various ways: “bangs…twists to the side, or…a wild ‘fro’” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.19) or they go shopping together. Diane, Marie’s mother, shares a closeness with Marie that is complete with secrets and heartfelt discussions. Marie recalls: “These secrets, my mother warned, were words that only mothers and daughters understood…” (Woodson, 1994, p.8)

One of the most significant ways mothers bond with their daughters is by offering them advice and guidance in an effort to shape their identities, though it is often unsolicited and sometimes contested. Daughters seem to ignore their mothers when they try to encourage them to enhance their physical appearances, largely in reference to clothing. Catherine and Minnie both complain that their daughters do not put enough time into maintaining their clothes. Even though it is Afeni’s birthday, she refuses to put care into her appearance. Her clothes are wrinkled and her mother cannot convince her to wear a dress. Catherine urges, “You have to start caring a little more about the way you look….You’re getting too old to dress like that” (Woodson, 1991, p.11).

Throughout *Blue Tights* there are continuous references to Joyce’s inadequate clothing. Joyce feels uncomfortable changing clothes after dance class because she believes “[h]er white cotton underwear [are] inferior to the colorful matching sets that the other girls wore” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.37). Minnie also believes Joyce’s clothing is inadequate, yet she suggests that it is because of Joyce’s style of dress. Minnie argues, “You’s too womanly to be dressing like some wild junior high school ditty-bop…. you’re in high school. A middle-class high school. You should be more ladylike” (p.44).
In essence, mothers are concerned with their daughters’ projected self-images and overall development into womanhood. Because black mothers know their daughters will be judged harshly based on physical appearance regardless of what they wear, they argue that an inappropriate physical appearance will further compound this problem for black girls. This notion is associated with mothers’ need to teach their children survival skills in a racist society.

Wade-Gayles (1984) asserts that black mothers "socialize their daughters to be independent, strong and self-confident" (p.12). This can be difficult because while black mothers want to teach their daughters these concepts, they must also prepare their daughters to live in a society that devalues them. This is seen clearly in an exchange between Catherine and Afeni. Afeni says, “There’s always going to be someone deciding what I can and can’t do. If it’s not because I’m a kid, it’ll be because I’m a woman. If it’s not because I’m a woman, it’ll be because I’m black” (Woodson, 1991, p. 31). Catherine replies, with “something like fear” in her facial expression, “Don’t ever feel like you don’t have power….” (Woodson, 1991, p.31) This response expresses the contradictory teachings of black mothers. Though Catherine wants to prepare Afeni to live in a world that does not value her, she is still unwilling to teach her daughter to feel powerless.

Afeni’s mother also strives to teach her about African American pride amongst middle-class black professionals. Her mother is the vice-president of a public relations firm, and her mother’s friends, Marion and Bernadette, are an attorney and teacher respectively. Catherine wants Afeni to see that black professionals are important and valuable to the black community. She also suggests that Afeni learns the significance of black people of middle-class standing working together to help others. Catherine makes
this evident to Afeni when she joins with Marion to help a college friend’s pregnant
daughter.

In a similar vein, Diane teaches Marie to respect all people regardless of
cocioeconomic levels. Though her father repeatedly refers to poor whites as trash, her
mother insists that they be referred to as people. For her, it is important that Marie learns
that “[w]e [are] all just people here” (Woodson, 1994, p.59) and that she should
acknowledge that poor people, regardless of race, are disenfranchised, which is one of the
hallmarks of black feminism (King, 1995).

In Joseph’s 1991 study, she expressed a particular interest in how adolescent
mothers socialize their daughters. Joseph (1991) writes:

> As the children of the adolescent mothers grow older, what
> messages can the mothers give their daughters about marriage;
> about men; about getting ahead in the world and getting an
> education? These are the major lessons that traditional Black
> mothers give to their daughters, and they are important ones (p.101).

Because of bitter and hostile experiences with men, Aunt Em and Minnie attempt to
advise, and in some cases warn, Joyce about men (Bethel, 1982). At sixteen, Aunt Em
became pregnant and gave herself a coat hanger abortion when she realized that the
baby’s father had deserted her. Also a deserted teen mother, Minnie had Joyce just before
she turned sixteen, Minnie becomes frightened when she learns J’had is interested in
Joyce. Minnie tells Joyce, “Don’t you be no fool. He only want one thing” (Williams-
Garcia, 1988, p. 86). Yet, earlier in the novel, during one of Minnie and Joyce’s bonding
periods, Minnie encourages Joyce to marry a “green-eyed” (read light, near white) man to avoid having “strange-looking kids” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.19).

Though there are no scenes in Like Sisters in the Homefront that reveal that Gayle and her mother are close, her cousin Cookie does enjoy a close relationship with her mother. When Cookie becomes curious about sex, she goes to her mother for guidance. This perplexes and angers Gayle because Gayle wants Cookie to confide in her. Gayle also becomes angry when family members assume she bonds with her mother. Gayle tells Cookie, ”Just ‘cause you and yo mama hold hands don’t mean me and Mama act like that, so don’t go making pictures of me and Mama baking cobblers on Sunday” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.34).

Interestingly, mothers within the novels referenced here do not explicitly advise their daughters to obtain an education. Instead, this message is implied in choices mothers make concerning their daughters’ lives. For instance, Catherine continues to enroll Afeni in a prestigious private school, and Minnie encourages Joyce to attend an alternative high school outside her neighborhood where she takes honors classes and is proud of the grades she earns. It can also be assumed that mothers have expressed the importance of education prior to the time in which the novel takes place since several of the girls are already academic achievers when the novels begin. This suggests that perhaps earlier in their lives they were taught to value education. Afeni’s father refers to her as the smartest girl at Roper Academy while Joyce has trouble deciding which papers marked with “As” she should keep: “Maybe just keep the ones with 90 or better. But that was all of her papers” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p. 5).
In spite of a degree of mother daughter closeness within the majority of the novels, mothers also tend to be distant. The distance between mothers and daughters can be labeled as physical or emotional distance. Physical distance refers to the actual physical separation of mothers from their daughters for various reasons, most of which include some type of work. Emotional distance involves the mothers’ inability or unwillingness to express affection toward their daughters. Both types of distance are detrimental to the mother daughter relationship.

Wade-Gayles (1984) suggests that black women have an approach to mothering that is influenced by their socioeconomic standing in society. For this reason, a number of the mothers in the novels studied here work full-time jobs. *Heaven* and *Toning the Sweep* are the only novels that do not present mothers’ work outside the home as an impediment to forming mother daughter physical and emotional closeness. In these two novels, work is presented in vague terms and is only briefly mentioned. Perhaps this is because these mothers are also wives who benefit from an additional income earned by their husbands. Marley’s mother’s job is referred to twice, and it is not clear what she actually does. However, the fact that she works in an office is mentioned. Similarly, Emily’s mother works sporadically and is described as having various employment experiences. The settings of both *Heaven* and *Toning the Sweep* situate mothers primarily within the home where they have very little interaction with people outside their immediate families.

In *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This*, physical distance is not related to work, but abandonment. Marie’s mother, feeling “sick and tired,” leaves her and her father when she is ten-years-old (Woodson, 1994, p. 73). By way of her father, Marie learns that her mother once dreamed of becoming an artist, and it can be assumed that her dreams were
unfulfilled because she became a wife and mother instead. However, it is not clear whether Diane’s bout with depression also influenced her decision to leave her family, or if she simply wanted to write a new script for her life, one devoid of the role of mother and nurturer (Decosta-Willis, 1994). Through postcards, without return addresses, from different parts of the world, Marie’s mother maintains voice and presence within the novel. However, the mother daughter separation does cause the closeness Marie once shared with her mother to dissipate:

My mother became… unreal….Her familiar handwriting on the back of the postcards was beginning to remind me of the letters we got from distant relatives. Maybe we’d see them again soon. Maybe we wouldn’t. Either way life would go on (Woodson, 1994, p. 91).

Though single-mothers are also situated in the home, protagonists repeatedly refer to the amount of work their mothers do, or to their mothers’ physical distance because of work. Several times throughout the novel, Joyce and Minnie’s relationship is described as being similar to a relationship between sisters, partly because of the closeness between their ages. Yet, there are also times when Minnie distances herself from Joyce because she chooses to focus on her career. As a teenager, Minnie leaves Joyce with Aunt Em while she dances professionally. By the time Minnie decides to stop dancing, Minnie tells Joyce she is “too big for all of that ‘come-to-Mommy’ nonsense” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.102). Then Minnie goes to college to pursue a degree in nursing. This decision, coupled with Minnie’s decision to marry a man with several children, takes her further away from Joyce. Working a part-time job and attending school, the mother-daughter
gap widens and physical distance continues to be a problem even after Minnie earns a nursing degree.

Though Afeni’s mother works “sixty to seventy hours a week,” initially Afeni does not realize this is unsettling because she considers herself to be a “true-blue loner” (Woodson, 1991, p.86). Afeni thinks, “I liked being by myself and thinking thoughts no one else knew about, not even Mama” (Woodson, 1991, p.86). This assessment changes when Afeni is given the opportunity to see her relationship with her mother through Rebecca’s eyes: “You want a career and stuff. You don’t have time for a daughter,” (Woodson, 1991, p. 83) Afeni accuses Catherine. It is important to note, however, that Afeni feels comfortable having such a difficult conversation with her mother, which suggests that the two share a certain amount of closeness despite emotional distance.

Conversely, Gayle does not enjoy the comfort of communicating with her mother. In fact, it is clear that Gayle does not know her mother well long before Auntie says, “I get the feeling you don't know your mother” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 117). Gayle’s mother, Ruth Bell, is the sole provider for her family; as a result, she spends a significant amount of her time working outside the home. This is problematic for Gayle as it makes it easier for her to participate in adult practices such as sexual intercourse. Because Ruth Bell cannot be home to supervise and educate her daughter thoroughly, she is unaware that Gayle’s affair with a married man ignites in her home and ends with Gayle’s first pregnancy. Physical distance makes it difficult for Ruth Bell to actually mother Gayle.

When Gayle goes into labor, she is refused anesthesia because she has no advocate to protest on her behalf since, as Gayle explains to Cookie, “Mama couldn’t take off from work early and I didn’t have no doctor….” (p.45) When Ruth Bell does
request a day off, not only is she penalized due to lost wages, but her dignity is compromised also. Gayle listens as Ruth Bell uses her “best ‘work voice’” while talking to her employer and surmises, “now Mama was angry because she had to sound like a child begging permission to take care of business” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.2). 

Ruth Bell’s inability to be physically close to Gayle weighs heavily on how Gayle feels emotionally about her mother. When Aunt Virginia tells Gayle about her mother’s past, particularly her relationship with her father, Williams-Garcia (1995) writes, “[Gayle] didn’t want to understand Mama, because understanding would loosen the grip on her heart” (p. 120). Ruth Bell seems to be partly responsible for Gayle’s tough exterior. After Ruth Bell forces Gayle to get an abortion, “[She] wouldn’t give Gayle room to vent her feelings about her ordeal….” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.9) Refusing to allow anything to make her cry, not even the pain from the abortion, Gayle tells Cookie, “Me cry so Mama could start hollering ‘What you crying for?’ Please” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.45). 

Collins (1991) asserts, ”For far too many Black mothers, the demands of providing for children are so demanding that affection often must wait until the basic needs of physical survival are satisfied" (p.55). Similarly, King (1995) maintains, “[W]hen black women become the primary or sole earners for households, researchers and public analysts interpret this self-sufficiency as pathology, as deviance, as a threat to black family life” (p.298). Black women view their labor quite differently, however. For them, work outside the home is an expression of love for their families, particularly their children, not negligence. When J’had refuses to be intimate with Joyce, Joyce feels rejected and becomes upset. Minnie cannot fully understand why Joyce would jeopardize
her future in exchange for intimacy with J’had. Nevertheless, Joyce simply views her motive as a desire to be loved. Upon hearing this, Minnie becomes even more perplexed, as she insists that she gives Joyce love: “Don’t I feed you? Put a roof over your head? Scrimp and put up with trash on the job so you can go to any college you want? That’s all for you” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.113). Joyce does not understand Minnie’s way of expressing love.

Afeni is also not aware that she and her mother interpret love and affection differently. Several times throughout The Dear One, Afeni feels her mother does not care about her, yet she never considers that her mother grew up in a family that was not affectionate. Catherine tells Afeni, “Don’t you ever let me hear you say I don’t love you, because if I’m not showing it with words, I’m showing it with actions! ‘I love you’ is in every meal you eat, every piece of clothing you wear, and every clean sheet you sleep on!” (Woodson, 1991, p.84).

The exchanges between mothers and daughters stated above are suggestive of a similar dialogue between Hannah and Eva Peace in Toni Morrison’s Sula (1973). Like the girls in several of the novels discussed here, Hannah questions her mother’s love for her and her siblings. Eva, obviously bothered by Hannah’s insinuation, replies,

…You settin’ here with your healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you? Them big old eyes in your head would a been two holes full of maggots if I hadn’t…. With you al coughin’ and me watchin’ so TB wouldn’t take you off and if you was sleepin’ quiet I thought, O Lord, they dead and put my hand over your mouth to feel if the breath was comin’ what you talkin’ ‘bout

54
did I love you girl I stayed alive for you can’t you get that through
your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer? (p.68-69).

Later, in the novel Eva unquestionably proves her love for Hannah by throwing herself
out of a second floor window in an attempt to extinguish the fire that threatens to
consume Hannah.

Emotional and physical distance between mothers and daughters often lead to
conflict. Mothers and daughters in the novels analyzed here express differences in
opinion via verbal disagreements, and in at least one mother daughter duo, physical
altercations. *Like Sisters on the Homefront, Toning the Sweep, The Dear One* and *Blue
Tights* offer complex mother daughter relationships. Tension exists between Gayle and
Ruth Bell for several reasons. Early in the novel, Gayle admits that Ruth Bell “be pissing
her off” partly because of Ruth Bell’s treatment of her and also because she believes her
brother is her mother’s “favorite” because he looks like his father. According to Gayle,
Junie receives preferential treatment; for example, he is allowed to "lay up in the house
doing nothing while Gayle did all the housework" (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.3). This
brings to mind the dated adage, “Black mothers raise their daughters and love their sons.”

A large part of the antagonism between Gayle and her mother is the result of Ruth
Bell’s discovery of Gayle’s second pregnancy. Immediately, Ruth Bell exerts control
over Gayle, insisting that she get an abortion and move “down Souf” with extended
family. On the way to the clinic, Ruth Bell argues, "As long as you fourteen and in *my*
house, you mines....Only one woman in my house. I say what goes on in my four
walls....” [italics in original] (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.4 ). Mother and daughter seem to
be in a tug-of-war even when it appears that Ruth Bell is in control. In her final effort to
prove Ruth Bell wrong, Gayle verbally attempts to exercise her right to keep the baby, maintaining, “That ‘doption sounds good” even as she realizes “it was hype. Ain’t nobody breaking they necks to adopt black babies” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.6). Gayle, fully aware that she must submit to Ruth Bell’s wishes, gets the abortion, though forced to request local anesthesia because “[t]hey didn’t have extra money for sleep” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.7). Powerless, Gayle also goes on the life-changing trip to Georgia to live with her uncle and his family.

Diane, also powerless at fourteen, harbors anger for her mother. The sudden move to Alabama, along with Ola’s failure to communicate with Diane about her father’s murder and what it must have meant for Diane to find his dead body, strains the mother daughter relationship.

Afeni’s mother is an alcoholic. As a result, Afeni was forced to grow up quickly and assume adult-like responsibilities. This has weakened their mother daughter bond. The initial conflict between Afeni and Catherine arises when Afeni objects to Rebecca, a pregnant teen, moving into her mother’s home. Another conflict between Afeni and Catherine involves the validity and purpose of Jack & Jill. While Catherine argues that the bourgeois social club for black children is beneficial to the black community, Afeni points out the elitist and exclusive tendencies of the group.

Conflict between Joyce and Minnie is increased by fear. One of the first causes of Minnie’s fear occurs when Joyce tells Minnie that her stepfather is looking at her inappropriately. Minnie’s first reaction is to slap Joyce. However, when Minnie observes that her husband’s “eyes are follow[ing] the twelve-year-old girl in and out of the living room,” she leaves him (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p. 21). The tension and fear further
increases when Joyce, feeling neglected by her aunt and her mother, begins to reach out to J’had. Angry and confused because she does not know how to prevent Joyce from repeating her mistakes, Minnie tells Joyce she does not love her. Joyce believes this, and continues to look for love elsewhere.

**Othermothers**

In West African societies, acknowledges Collins (1991), "Mothering was not a privatized nurturing 'occupation' reserved for biological mothers...." (p.45) Instead, caring for children was viewed as "a collective responsibility" and a "woman-centered" activity (Collins, 1991, p.45). This notion of othermothering redefines motherhood in a way that includes biological mothers as well as other women (or men) within the community who take on the responsibility of rearing children. In sum, as Joseph (1981) fittingly states, “…the concept of motherhood cannot be reduced to a biological function” (p.83).

Several of the novels selected for this study have characters who benefit from a relationship with an othermother. Within these novels, othermothering proves to be vital to the child, ensuring her or his survival. Similarly, the act of othermothering, as described in the YA novels, is significant to othermothers, as illustrated in their reasons for becoming othermothers. Othermothering is often a step toward social activism (Collins, 1991; James, 1993). For some of the characters, othermothering stems from the belief that blacks must take responsibility for all members of the race while other characters become othermothers when biological mothers cannot or should not be left to raise their children alone (Collins, 1991; James, 1993). In these novels, othermothers are not presented as superior to biological parents, for they are often described not as replacements for biological mothers but as supplementary to the mothering role. In many
instances, othermothers are portrayed, as bloodmothers sometimes are, as imperfect and unable to completely mother children.

The novels describe othermothers who have world views that contribute to their identities as othermothers and to the relationships they maintain with the children they nurture. The world view of othermothers expressed in *The Dear One* is one of responsibility for friends and family who need assistance. Catherine, her best friend Marion, and Marion’s lover, Bernadette, take care of Rebecca during her last trimester of pregnancy as a favor to Rebecca’s mother and because of a personal belief in “taking care of [their] own” (Woodson, 1991, p. 85). Their social class allows them to provide Rebecca with comforts and necessities she does not have access to while living with her mother, who is on welfare. Though Catherine and her friends provide a comfortable environment for Rebecca and are able to take care of her in ways her mother cannot, Rebecca longs to return home to her own mother and often makes comments about her mother's love. Catherine, Marion and Bernadette lead busy lives because of professional careers and do not always make time for personal interaction with Rebecca or Catherine's daughter, Afeni. This suggests that othermothers are not infallible beings, and oftentimes young people do not view othermothers as replacements for biological parents.

In *Like Sisters on the Homefront*, Aunt Virginia essentially becomes the surrogate mother to fourteen-year-old Gayle and her seven-month-old son, Emanuel, because Aunt Virginia believes family members should support each other. Aunt Virginia and Ruth Bell feel Gayle is incapable of raising Emanuel alone. Though Gayle has first her mother and then Aunt Virginia’s help, both women make it clear that their presence does not alleviate her of her obligation to him. Gayle is a “supported primary parent” (Apfel &
Seitz, 1996) because her family offers a limited amount of help to her. Similarly, Minnie, in *Blue Tights*, is also a “supported primary parent.” Minnie gives birth to Joyce shortly before her sixteenth birthday; as a result, she relies on her sister, Aunt Em, to raise Joyce for several years while she performs around the United States with a dance group. Aunt Em seems to be mentally unstable, as she is consumed with her religious beliefs. Nevertheless, Aunt Em is able to provide Joyce with an adequate home and parental guidance.

[Other] Motherhood is interestingly portrayed in *Heaven*, for Marley does not realize she is being raised by an othermother until she learns that her own mother was killed in a car accident when she was a baby. Much of the novel is devoted to Marley’s coming to terms with the notion that a mother does not always share a biological connection.

According to Joseph (1991), "Most women …as mothers, workers in the home, workers away from home, and active participants in community and church affairs are women who share with, look out for, and help each other" (p.101). This is an impetus for the othermother relationship presented in *Toning the Sweep*. After Ola finds that David and his siblings have been abandoned by their parents, she takes care of them. Later, they are put under Martha’s foster care where they remain though many (she has over 20) of her foster children come and go throughout the years.

Using gender to redefine ideas of mothering, *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* and *Heaven* include male othermothers, suggesting that "affective nurturing" is not a "female domain" (Collins, 1991, p. 48). These othermothers are fathers with daughters who have been abandoned by their mothers. Marie's father has difficulty expressing affection
toward her, yet he is sensitive to her needs. Conversely, Bobby openly expresses his love for Feather. He is described as having “that cover-them-in-a-soft-blanket thing going on,” (A. Johnson, 1998, p.34) and he often “looks at Feather as if she is the only baby in the whole world” (p.26). Marley recognizes Bobby’s look because she has seen it in her own parents' eyes, particularly her father’s. Marley’s adoptive father shares a connection with her unlike the one she has with her adoptive mother. It is her father who knows the exact moment he needs to go to her in the middle of the night when she is having a nightmare. It is also her father who hung the stars and the moon on her ceiling and knows exactly which stars to replace when they refuse to shine.

The concept of othermothering is based on the notion that motherhood is loosely defined. Othermothers are an intricate part of the lives of the characters in the novels studied here. Their presence in these novels suggests that othermothers are necessary to the durability of the community, as their motivation for othermothering stems from their desire to help others (James, 1993).

Many of the girls in the contemporary novels discussed here have special relationships with their grandmothers. Grandmothers are significant members of the African American community, and many of them take on the othermother role. I found it particularly interesting that the novels in this study that include religion in any way employ a departure from traditional religious views customarily espoused by members in the African American community. Grandmothers, frequently known for advocating religious beliefs, do not preach religious messages in these novels. In fact, they tell their granddaughters that God is dead, or they contend, as Afeni’s grandmother does, that they no longer believe in God or attending church. Afeni’s grandmother explains what
prompted the change in her religious world views, “I stopped believing in waiting…If something is going to happen to me after I die, then it will. No use worrying and praying while I still have plenty of this life to live” (Woodson, 1991, p.35).

In *Toning the Sweep*, Emily is quite surprised when she hears her mother praying while on the plane that takes them to Ola’s home in the desert. Emily thinks,

I didn’t know that Mama believed in God until I heard her in the bathroom in the airport praying….She acted like she knew God, had spoken to him before and everything ….I haven’t ever prayed to God in my whole life (A. Johnson, 1998, p.5-6).

Characters in *Blue Tights* and *Like Sisters on the Homefront* are religious, yet there is a certain degree of negativity attached to characters with religious views. For example, Aunt Em is portrayed as blindly religious, yet her pastor doesn’t even know she exists. Nevertheless, she continues to give the church money. Conversely, Joyce finds it hard to take religion seriously. Joyce also has trouble believing God is an infinite being who has the power to solve all of her problems: “God don’t answer prayers….Ain’t no way a true God would give her love and take it away. Ain’t no way a God of any kind would let her hurt so much or make her lonely all the time” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.108).

Gayle does not express much faith in God or religion either as indicated in the following conversation with her cousin Cookie:

Let [Great] meet Jesus with peach liquor on her breath?

Meet Jesus? Cookie, be serious. Gayle laughed.
Cousin Gayle, don't you want to be saved?

Hell, no, Gayle declared. Save what? We living to be living.

Not to be saving [italics in original] (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 43).

This is ironic since Gayle’s uncle is a preacher, following the footsteps of several generations of men who came before him.

**Women-friends**

Many of the novels express the importance of finding “family outside of…family” (A. Johnson, 1998, p. 123). People within the community and close friends act as family members. Certain novels amongst the six studied here depict the beauty of friendship between adult women. This is indicative of the black women’s literary tradition, as Washington (1987) points out in each of her anthologies. Washington (1987) found that black women writers “emphasize this concern with female bonding and suggest that female relationships are an essential aspect of self-definition for women” (p. xxi).

The bond between women-friends is vividly portrayed in *Toning the Sweep*. Though Ola has a daughter and granddaughter who live thousands of miles away, her “family” also consists of her women-friends, Martha and the aunts. Bethel (1982) describes the bond between women-friends as: “… emotionally intense, …[an] integral… part of the black community” (p.186). Ola, the aunts and Martha form a network of women-friends who do a variety of things together: canning, gardening, quilting and telling stories. They are courageous, choosing unconventional jobs with the state; for example, Ruth “was one of the first women to work on a road crew” (A. Johnson, 1993, p.40).
When they are together they fill each other with laughter, and they create a world for themselves devoid of men. Together, the women celebrate life, love and happiness and they try to pass what they know about each on to the people around them. Toward the end of the novel, the community comes together to have a party for Ola, who will leave the desert to spend her last days in Ohio battling terminal cancer. During the party, Emily looks through the lens of the camera while her grandmother does the fandango. Margaret Title explains, “It’s a celebration dance. A dance of life” (A. Johnson, 1993, p. 100). Later, Emily says, “One of the boys in a straw cowboy hat says that I need to learn to fandango. He teaches me, and I dance into the night. I hear Ola laughing….I see her and Martha on a conga line. All the aunts take part” (A. Johnson, 1993, p.100).

Friendship amongst women and girls are a vital part of the girls’ life experiences and identity development, so much so several of the girls become desperate at the thought of being without close friends. Gayle believes her life and sanity rests in her friendship with her “southside homegirls”: "… being without the girls, her sisters, was being cut off from life itself” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 13). When in several crises, Gayle’s trust in friendship is revealed:

Times like these called for getting with the homegirls....The southside homegirls. Tight since daycare, holding on through junior high....Like sisters on the homefront, looking out for one another. All Gayle needed was to get with the girls....Her girls. How was she going to get to her girls? (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 11,16).
A similar sentiment is expressed in *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This*, which includes an interracial friendship. The protagonist, Marie, forms a close bond with Lena, a poor white girl. Initially her father opposes the friendship arguing, “I don’t want this girl to come into your life, call you nigger and leave” (Woodson, 1994, p. 69). Yet, Marie insists on forging a friendship with Lena. The two grow closer and closer until Marie reaches the point of desperation at the thought of losing Lena’s friendship: “If Lena and I couldn’t be friends, I was sure I’d fall right down and die” (Woodson, 1994, p.75). Marie feels a painful sense of loss when Lena runs away from her father who is sexually abusing her and her sister.

Developing and maintaining friendships is not always an easy task. Before Rebecca moves in, Afeni only has one friend, Caesar. Caesar refuses to visit Afeni at her home because Afeni’s mother, while drunk, insulted her because of her biracial identity—she is Native American and black. Though Afeni is opposed to Rebecca, a pregnant teenager, moving into her home in an all-black Pennsylvanian suburb, she manages to develop a meaningful friendship with Rebecca. Rebecca considers herself streetwise and knowledgeable of reality; she ridicules Afeni and questions her blackness. For example, Rebecca doesn’t think Afeni talks black enough. While attempting to teach Afeni about some of the details of black culture, Rebecca and Afeni have the following dialogue:

“All the kids get nicknames in Harlem, Bobo, Boo Boo, Cee Cee,
Little man.”

“Who names them?”

Both Afeni and Caesar, because of their middle class standing, find it difficult to understand that Rebecca is poor. While Afeni suggests that Rebecca’s family should get some nice things, Caesar wonders what happened to Rebecca’s family’s money. Afeni, however, manages to grasp the concept of capitalism quicker than Caesar, who continues to have trouble understanding why Rebecca will not have a cotillion when she is sixteen or why Rebecca doesn’t attend private school. Woodson positions Afeni and Caesar as naive because of their social class. It is suggested that working class people are genuinely more knowledgeable of reality.

In contrast, people who operate within the same social class seem to bond instantly even across racial lines. While walking, Afeni and Rebecca encounter a poor white girl. Initially labeling them both “coloreds,” the girl allows Rebecca’s class to transcend her race (Woodson, 1991, p.110). She stares angrily at Afeni’s clothes, which indicate her wealth. Yet, she connects with Rebecca and nearly smiles at her as she offers her advice about childbirth.

Race and class differences are also prevalent in *Blue Tights*. Race and class are factors that influence how Joyce’s peers view her. It is Joyce’s race and class that makes it nearly impossible for her to find friends at Cardoza High. Specifically, race and class make it difficult for her to interact with white students while social class separates her from black students. The bus driver’s treatment of Joyce is a summation of how most
people view her—and by extension young, black, poor females in general—“She was nobody” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.23).

Feeling out of place and lonely in honors classes filled with white students, Joyce skips class until she is allowed to enroll in classes where she might be able to form friendships:

Ducking under the stairways or going down to the basement was her way of escaping from those people who had to have tans…had to touch her hair, had to know exactly what she meant by this or that—then run it in the ground (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.90).

Joyce’s interactions with blacks are not any better. The West Indian girls, Cindi and Jay-Jay, whom Joyce longs to be friends with, are from privileged families. Joyce juxtaposes her neighborhood against theirs: “No projects. No three liquor stores to a block. No boarded storefronts” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.126). They have had the benefit of privileges that are inconceivable to Joyce, which contributes to their decision to refuse to let Joyce be a part of their group of friends. Williams-Garcia (1988) writes, “Cardozo had rules. Social rules. Even the black clique spoke a little different and socialized different from the folks on the home ground. They weren’t white, but they weren’t ‘round-the-way either” (p.37-38).

When Ms. Sobol does not allow Joyce to have a part in the ballet performance, Joyce suggests to Cindi that Ms. Sobol did not want to have more than one dancer of color in the performance. However, Cindi does not believe race is a factor. Cindi replies, “[I]f you’re good it don’t matter” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.33). Cindi and Jay-Jay have attended prestigious dance schools and have taken lessons from some of the best dancers
in New York while Joyce has to consider selling her blood in order to pay for lessons. Perhaps Joyce’s race does not have anything to do with Ms. Sobol’s refusal to let Joyce dance, but her body type, the shape and size of her buttocks, a physical characteristic she can do very little, if anything, about does influence Ms. Sobol’s decision. Joyce soon realizes that Cindi and Jay-Jay have no intentions of befriending her and accept every chance offered to them to make her look ridiculous.

The protagonists in *Blue Tights*, *The Dear One* and *Like Sisters on the Homefornt* all believe in the importance of friendship but their friends often let them down. Before Gayle left New York, her friends were never home and rarely had time for her. When she goes to Georgia, things do not change. While she repeatedly writes letters to them, they go unanswered. Her boyfriend does not try to contact her either. Similarly, when Rebecca arrives in Pennsylvania her boyfriend does not contact her. Yet she boasts to Afeni, “My boyfriend is going to buy me all kinds of things….” (Woodson, 1991, p.98). But Afeni is accustomed to Rebecca’s lies, so she says, “Just like your friends are going to write you all the time” (Woodson, 1991, p.98). Though the girls may not be able to maintain all of their friendships, they recognize the importance of friendship and manage to form new relationships that are important to their social development.

In this chapter, I identify family as one of the intertextual themes found in literature within the black women’s literary tradition and in select YA literature. I discussed the multiple definitions of family, and by extension friendship and community, presented in select YA novels. In most cases, family continues to be an important institution amongst African Americans as it is often considered to be one of the few institutions primarily controlled by blacks (McDowell, 1989). Over the last decade,
black women writers of adult literature have presented readers with a view of family that differed from most. Failing to subscribe to a “fantasy family” (McDowell, 1989) or an ideal image of the black man and woman’s place within it, a large part of black women’s literature, and I would argue that select YA literature “rethinks and configures [the family’s] structure…” (McDowell, 1989, p.85) “[A]s the fabric of the nuclear family progressively frays,” (McDowell, 1989, p.84) a number of people despite ethnicity have turned to defining family in multiple ways. Critically examining family in select YA literature might allow students to see across cultural differences as they are encouraged to focus on commonalities between themselves and people in other ethnic groups.
CHAPTER 3

African American Expressive Culture:
Beauty, Hair and Language Use

Introduction

Multiculturalism resists the notion that people of color must assimilate in order to become accepted in society. Advocates of multicultural literature hope that students will, while reading and discussing the literature, develop an appreciation of the depicted group’s unique cultural identity. As a result, cultural difference is “recognized, acknowledged, and respected, without its individual members being coerced into a single homogenized amalgamation” (Ibieta & Orvell, 1996, p.4). This concept is especially important when considering the ways in which cultural groups express themselves in terms of language use, physical appearance and other modes of expression (i.e., music, literature, etc.).

Collectively, the YA novels in this study contain numerous references to African American expressive culture unrelated to physical appearance or language use. Music particular to black culture such as jazz, hip-hop, gospel, reggae, etc. is alluded to in Heaven, Toning the Sweep, Like Sisters on the Homefront, and I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This. References are also made to writers, specifically black women writers, (i.e., Zora Neale Hurston—Heaven—and Audre Lorde—I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This), to social and/or historical events important to the black community—church burnings in the South (Heaven), civil rights movement (I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This and Like Sisters on the Homefront), and the L.A. riots (Toning the Sweep)—and to African folk traditions or to Africa in general—conjure, hoodoo, and root-work (Toning the Sweep and Like Sisters on the Homefront) flying Africans (Like Sisters on the Homefront), African
royalty, (*Toning the Sweep* and *Like Sisters on the Homefront*), and toning (*Toning the Sweep*).

African American expressive culture is also an important part of literature within the African American women’s literary tradition. In this chapter, I discuss African American expressive culture as it relates to the beauty aesthetic, specifically skin color and hair styling, and language use. My purpose is to emphasize the significance and meaning of the theme as it is explored in select YA literature. First, I include passages from literature by black women, written primarily for adults that illustrate a continuous dialogue between black women writers about how beauty is defined, expressed and often used as a form of oppression. I also describe how the six novels in this study contribute to the ongoing conversation about beauty in discreet, yet significant ways. Finally, I discuss how language use within the novels is reflective of the African American oral tradition.

Black women writers often write fiction about beauty standards and the destructive nature of hair and skin politics on women’s lives (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Ebong, 2001; Rooks, 1996, 2001). Characters often convey contempt for a beauty standard that excludes people of the Diaspora, as it is suggested that white or light skin and long, straight hair equate beauty (Leeds, 1994; Rooks, 2001). *Black-Eyed Susans/Midnight Birds: Stories by and about Black Women* (1990) reveals what Washington (1990) refers to as a consistent obsession amongst black women writers with physical beauty. This obsession, according to Washington (1990), is an indication of how black women writers are “deeply affected by the discrimination against their skin and the texture of their hair” (Washington, 1990, p. xiv-xv).

A number of the works in *Black-Eyed Susans/Midnight Birds: Stories by and about Black Women* (1990) include protagonists who dislike their physical appearances, or blackness. As a result, they find themselves longing for white physical features or hating white women because they have been used as the model by which women of color
are measured. A disturbing example of this is Pecola from *The Bluest Eye*. Longing for white physical characteristics, Pecola’s end is a tragic one that leaves her insane.

Gwendolyn Brooks’ only novel, *Maud Martha*, offers another example of a black woman who is deeply affected by others' perception of her skin color and cultural identity. When Maud Martha watches her husband pull a “white as white” girl on to the dance floor, she realizes that her husband does not approve of her color. Maud says, “He keeps looking at my color, which is like a wall. He has to jump away up high in order to see it. He gets awful tired of all that jumping” (Brooks, 1990, p. 119). This notion is echoed by Reena, in “Reena” by Paule Marshall, who explains that two of her past lovers did not approve of her skin color. One of Reena’s lovers terminates his relationship with her after his parents voice their disapproval of her skin tone.

In another relationship, this time with a white man, Reena learns that he is using her skin color to anger his father. As a result of Reena’s personal struggle with blackness, an older, wiser Reena confesses, “I had my share of dreams of waking up to find myself with long, blond curls, blue eyes and skin like milk” (Marshall, 1990, p.92). However, an older mature Reena no longer wishes to be white or have blond hair. In fact, this Reena has discovered that,

> We live surrounded by white images, and white in this world is synonymous with the good, light, beauty, success, so that, despite ourselves sometimes, we run after the whiteness and deny our darkness, which has been made into the symbol of all that is evil and inferior (Marshall, 1990, p. 92).

Each of the literary works mentioned above reveal how the African American community as a whole, not just women, have been socialized to devalue blackness. This hatred for black skin is also transferred to hair texture.

Thick, curly hair texture, like dark skin color, can be problematic for black women. Additionally, hair can be a controlling force in black women’s lives as it helps
to decide if one will be viewed as beautiful by society in general, as well as by members within the black community. Straight and long hair has traditionally been considered feminine while short and natural hairstyles have been viewed as masculine and/or militant (Rooks, 1996). Brownmiller (1984) maintains, “Hair indeed may be trivial, but it is central to the feminine definition” (p. 76). Terms such as “good hair” and “bad hair” have plagued and perplexed me simultaneously. Where I grew up, someone with “good hair” had hair that looked like white people’s, straight and silky. On the other hand, a person with “bad hair” had hair that looked like mine. I thought this was unfair, and I became quite angry when I realized black people were the only people with this type of hair. I can remember feeling affirmation and a sense of kinship with Marguerite when I read the first book in Maya Angelou’s autobiographical series, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The following passage was particularly important to me:

> Wouldn’t they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blonde, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn’t let me straighten?…Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair….

(Angelou, 1969, p.3)

Angelou’s passage, which juxtaposes black and white hair types, was definitive of my own understanding of beauty, and it resonated with how I felt as a young girl running around slinging my toweled head from side to side.

Similar to Marguerite, Hagar, a character in Morrison’s (1977) *Song of Solomon*, thinks beauty and long, straight hair are synonymous. In the following dialogue with Pilate, Hagar surmises that Milkman’s disinterest in her is a result of his contempt for her hair:

> “He don’t like hair like mine….,”
“It’s his hair too. He got to love it.”
“He don’t love it at all. He hates it….”
“How can he love himself and hate your hair?”
“He loves silky hair.”
“Hush, Hagar.”
“Penny-colored hair.”
“Please, honey.”
“And lemon-colored skin.”
“Shhh.”
“And gray-blue eyes” (p. 319).

The YA novels studied here explore the beauty aesthetic differently. For example, a scene in *Like Sisters on the Homefront* makes for an interesting comparison to the above quotes from Angelou and Morrison's books respectively. As Gayle sits in an abortion clinic, she looks around at the other girls in the room. She spots an “East Indian-looking girl with perfect brown skin and a ponytail long enough to sit on” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 5). Similar to Marguerite, Gayle also imagines herself with long hair: “Gayle imagined herself with that long ponytail, then snapped out of it. The thought of being dragged around the schoolyard by the hair was not pleasant, as Gayle was always starting something with the biggest gal she could find” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 5). Gayle differs from Marguerite in that there are no hints that Gayle is self-loathing or has an unnatural longing for long hair. In fact, she resists the idea of having such a hairstyle as it interferes with her personality and way of being. This seems to suggest that Gayle is firm within her sense of self and does not believe she needs long, straight hair to be beautiful.

**Body Image**

In much of black women’s writing, notions of standardized physical beauty are destructive, as Johnson-Feelings (1994) emphasizes, and illustrate that beauty is political...
as beauty standards are put in place by the dominant culture and transmitted into society. Not only is this true of ideal skin color and hair texture, but it is also true of suggested ideal body images. Cauce, Hiraga, Graves, Gonzales, et. al. (1996) assert that “The ‘American’ ideal feminine figure—petite proportions, slim hips, and small facial features—is not often seen among African American women” (p.103). Similarly, McDowell (2001) maintains, “Thinness is prototypically embodied by the white woman” (p.298). Traditionally, black women have been described as big, fat, “black black” (Walker, 1983) and boisterous, similar to the Sapphire stereotype in film and literature as well as in other forms of media.

The novels in this study do not adhere to stereotypical body images when describing black women. Instead, these novels describe black women’s bodies in a variety of ways. In some cases, a number of the images of black women seem to purposefully reverse stereotypes. For instance, A. Johnson (1993) depicts Ola as the exact opposite of the big, black woman image: “short and delicate like she’d break if you held her arm too tight. She wouldn’t, break though” (p.20). Similarly, while Gayle’s mother, Aunt Virginia and Cookie are all described as big and tall or “big-boned,” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.31) Gayle “inherit[ed] Great’s petiteness, her features, her ways” (p.88). Other characters in each of the novels also reveal the diversity of body types that exists amongst African American women. However, Blue Tights takes this one step further. The novel offers an illustration of the damaging affects of standardized beauty ideals concerning body type on the lives of young black girls.

Through “the oppressive gaze of the dominant culture,” which Ms. Sobol symbolizes, Joyce learns of the oppressive nature of standardized notions of beauty. Ms. Sobol views Joyce’s body as “an eccentric black body,” (Peterson, 2001, p. xv) adorned in a loud blue and orange dance uniform:

[Joyce's] waist [is] a narrow stem for her heart-shaped buttocks. Her breasts… ample but not her main feature. Standing in profile at
the barre, Joyce ruined the line of twenty would-be Makarovas, all slight in stature, with her blue tights and her big butt (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.27). (Italics are mine)

Joyce’s body and taste in fashion differs from Ms. Sobol’s and the other girls in the class, including the middle-class black girls. Ms. Sobol presents herself as ideal: white, thin, appropriately dressed, complete with flawless make-up. Thus, this juxtaposition of Ms. Sobol’s white body and Joyce’s black one is indicative of how black and white women’s bodies have been positioned against one another in texts (Weigman, 1991; V. Smith, 1998; T. Harris, 2001). For instance, Ms. Sobol and Joyce “reiterate the traditional dichotomies governing black women and white in dominant U.S. film” (Wiegman, 1991). However, Joyce does not see Ms. Sobol as ideal. To Joyce, Ms. Sobol is “a perfect stick figure” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p. 27) who has “absolutely nothing on her body to make a man look twice” (p. 28), while Joyce puts her hands on her shapely hips and boasts “…God made me a real woman” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.4).

Individuals conceptualize beauty differently based upon race and class. In a recent study of how girls decipher idealized notions of beauty presented in teen magazines, Duke (2000) found that “…white girls were striving for a narrowly defined body size and shape, [while] Black girls saw unattractiveness only at the far reaches of either side of the weight continuum….they were far more likely to describe a girl as too thin than too heavy” (p.385).

Ms. Sobol puts Joyce on display like the Hottentot Venus and objectifies her. Constantly calling attention to Joyce's butt, Ms. Sobol even tries to push Joyce’s butt down as she yells, “Tuck that butt under!” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p. 29). Ms. Sobol, and others, focus on Joyce’s body so much, Joyce begins to feel uncomfortable, so she refuses to undress in the locker room in front of the other girls after dance class because “she knew they all wanted to stare at her round tail….” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p. 31) Several characters in the novel suggest that Joyce is less than human because of her
shapely buttocks. This damages Joyce psychologically, but it also leads her to question the sanity of the oppressive nature of the dominant culture’s notion of beauty: “What’s wrong with white people, anyway? Don’t they know that this is just how black folks are made? How come she don’t see nothing wrong with any of these no-tail, no-hips, no-nothing nons? Just me (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p. 29). (Italics in original) While Joyce wants to be accepted as a dancer, she resists the temptation to accept a Eurocentric standardized definition of beauty (Leeds, 1994).

Unlike heroines described by Christian-Smith (1990), Joyce does not try to transform her image or conform to society’s idea of what is acceptable. Instead, she seeks comfort in her own culture where she finds acceptance. Finally, Joyce is invited to participate in an African dance troupe, where she auditions and gets the lead role in Kwanzaa Suite. This helps to build Joyce’s self-confidence especially when she sees the other female dancers “dancing with vigor and grace, uninhibited breasts and buttocks jiggling to the demands of the movements. Their shapes and sizes had such variety that she lost her uniqueness in the studio. She was just another dancer” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p. 60).

Christian-Smith (1990) employs the mirror image to reveal girls’ obsession with physical beauty and the social acceptance it affords them. According to Christian-Smith (1990), girls peer into several mirrors aside from the one that actually hangs on the wall; for example, boyfriends, peers and society all operate as mirrors. Initially, Joyce avoids looking at herself in the mirror on the wall because the metaphoric mirrors she comes in contact with lead her to question her beauty. Yet, as she gains confidence, she begins to look at her image and actually, like what she sees. The last line of the novel reads, “[Joyce’s] focus remained in the mirror, at something wonderful opening up before her eyes” (p.138). Joyce's refusal to allow society's conception of beauty to control her self-image exemplifies an important tenet of black feminist theory: black women must define
beauty for themselves while simultaneously committing to loving themselves despite physical appearances.

If the examples cited above reveal the mental anguish and disdain of women who feel they have been coerced into striving toward a beauty ideal they can never hope to achieve, the other novels analyzed here seek to redefine and disregard this alleged standard of physical beauty (Christian-Smith, 1990). As Duke (2000) points out, during adolescence, girls, more so than boys, “experience… stress, declining confidence, and self-image disturbance” (p.2). Further, Duke (2000) explains that girls fear that they will not be embraced by peers if they do not have a socially acceptable physical appearance. In Dukes’ 2000 study of girls’ opinions about a “media-endorsed standard of beauty,” (p.377) an African-American participant “argued that the experience of being a racial minority made Black girls less apt to buy into a value system that placed a premium on a standardized way of looking” (p.385). While this statement is certainly debatable, a number of the girls in the YA novels analyzed in this study seem to convey a similar sentiment. However, Christian-Smith (1990) found something quite different when she analyzed girls’ notions of beauty in YA romance novels dated between 1960 and 1980.

As expected, Christian-Smith (1990) noted that black and white girls differed in their levels of self-consciousness concerning skin color. For black girls, self-acceptance, as well as, the acceptance of others concerning their skin color was problematic. For example, often the girls expressed frustration brought on by an inability to conform to white standards of beauty. Christian-Smith (1990) concludes that black girls in the novels revealed “the pain involved in accommodating someone else’s definition [read whites] of self” (Christian-Smith, 1990, p.53). Conversely, the novels in this study were published during the 1990s, and they express a different sentiment concerning white standards of beauty. Johnson’s (1998) *Heaven* offers a good example of this when Shoogy, who is described as so beautiful she competed in beauty contests, challenges the notion that beauty is defined in a distinct way, in a way that makes it possible for only a few
exceptional people to be “beautiful.” When Marley asks, “Do you think Jack would have kept me if I was beautiful?” Shoogy replies, “We’re all beautiful….” (Johnson, 1998, p. 74) The premise here is that beauty must be defined by the individual, not by outside forces such as the media or the movie industry, which both promote the notion of white standardized beauty.

**Skin Color**

Walker (1983) credits Zora Neale Hurston with being the first black woman writer to create black female characters “naturally in all the colors in which they exist” (p.301). Prior to Hurston, writers like Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset, and those writers as far back as Harriet E. Wilson and Frances Watkins Harper, created mulatto characters, biracial characters, primarily black and white. While it is true that African Americans vary in skin color, literature written in the early nineteenth century did not attest to that. Collins (1994) maintains, that “[t]he range of skin colors and hair texture in contemporary African-American communities bears mute testament to the powerlessness of African-American women in controlling [the rape of black women by white men]” (p.53). Njeri (1996) agrees with Collins (1994) on one hand, but on the other she points out that “[f]or centuries, Africans mixed with myriad ethnic groups before any were enslaved and shipped to the New World” (p.526).

Following the tradition Hurston seemed to have started, the six YA novels in this study also depict African American characters in an array of shades of brown and black. In this way, a color hierarchy does not appear to exist. In *The Dear One* Afeni’s mother’s skin is “dark brown and smooth everywhere,”(Woodson, 1991, p.7) baby Afeni has “chocolate-brown fingers…and wide gray eyes” (p.139) and Grandma has dark brown skin. Further, Bernadette’s parents are from Kenya, and her lover, Marion, “could be white but says she isn’t. Her skin is the color of sand and her gray eyes have flecks of gold in them” (Woodson, 1991, p.23). The characters in *Blue Tights* are described in
various shades of brown too. When the women in the African dance ensemble come on stage, Williams-Garcia (1988) writes: “Tamu led the magnificent spectrum of multicolored maidens, from the flawless ebonies and earthy cafes to the clay reds and creamy yellows” (p. 120). Joyce’s, the protagonist of Blue Tights, skin is “A smooth, cinnamon-brown,” and she has “dark eyes, a blunt Bantu nose, and perfectly defined lips” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.94).

A few of the books only include subtle references to African American characters’ skin color, for example, Shoogy and Bobby, characters in Heaven, are described as having brown legs, while Feather has “caramel skin” (Johnson, 1998, p.24). In I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This, Marie and her father are simply described as dark, while skin color is scarcely mentioned at all in Toning the Sweep. In Like Sisters on the Homefront Gayle believes she is “a fine yella honey,” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 50) and her son Emanuel has “buttermilk-colored legs” (p.2). It is not clear whether Gayle believes she is attractive simply because she has light skin. On one hand the inclusion of a variety of skin colors for African American characters suggests that the authors celebrate the diversity in skin color that exists amongst African Americans while also suggesting that black skin is “natural and undemonic” [italics in original] (Walker, 1983, p.299).

On the other hand, books like The Dear One and Blue Tights appear to be subversive in their use of skin color. In these novels, light skin and eye color, traditionally deemed pretty or beautiful because it reveals a connection to whiteness, is depicted negatively and in some cases demonically. For example, Afeni recalls that her grandmother told her that people with gray eyes were evil. As a result, several times throughout the novel Afeni thinks of Rebecca’s gray eyes this way. hooks (1997) writes that blacks and whites are socialized to believe “that whiteness represents goodness and all that is benign and nonthreatening,” yet this image of what is characteristically viewed as white often does not hold true for blacks who associate whiteness with terror. When
one considers images of whites in the black imagination, hooks says, “whiteness [often]
makes its presence felt as terrorizing imposition, a power that wounds, hurts, [and]
tortures…” (hooks, 1997, p. 169). This idea is prevalent in literature by black women
writers. Take, for example, the following passage from Morrison’s (1987) Pulitzer prize-
winning novel, *Beloved*:

> …anybody white could take your whole self for anything
> that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but
> dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself
> anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and
> couldn’t think it up (p. 251).

Morrison (1987) makes vivid, more than any of the authors mentioned here, how
the “white equals heavenly” image is a mere construction brought about to uplift
whiteness and “demonize” blackness in the black and white imagination (Morrison, 1992,
p. xi). Sethe’s acknowledgement and understanding of the white/good contradiction or
untruth suggests that through her experiences and ways of knowing she is able to uncover
her own “truth” about whiteness.

Williams’ (1986) *Dessa Rose* reveals a similar sentiment concerning whiteness.
Because of Dessa Rose’s experiences with whites, she also vilified whiteness and equated
it with evil and terror. Dessa maintained: “White folks had taken everything in the world
from me except my baby and my life and they had tried to take them” (Williams, 1986,
p.173). When Dessa looked at Rufel she did not admire her beauty, her whiteness; she
did not envy her hair or long to possess it. Instead, she looked at Rufel’s hair and saw
fire and blood, and at her mouth and said it “was like a bloody gash across [her face]”
(Williams, 1986, p. 86).

In *Blue Tights*, likable characters are described as being “raisin-colored”
(Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.58) or as having “face[s]…carved in fine detail from a smooth
black stone” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.60). The boy who offers Joyce encouragement at
an audition has skin that “could have been a night shadow with no end to its blackness” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p. 49). Conversely, antagonists, for instance, Cindi and Jay-Jay, are described as having Caucasian-like features. In fact, Cindi’s West Indian heritage is obscure: “Only the thick West Indian clues in her voice and the waves at the root of her brown-near-blond tresses saved her from being Caucasian” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.24). Similarly, Jay-Jay is described as having “shoulder-length hair and… fine features” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.25). Moreover, the boys who try to take advantage of Joyce are described similarly. The Davis twins who spread rumors about Joyce look like “yellow siamese piglets,” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.2) and Andre Miller, another boy who humiliates her, has “green eyes, golden skin, and curly hair” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.129).

Skin color is significant outside and within the black community (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992). This obsession with skin color within the black community has been called intraracism and/or colorism, among other things. Colorism, according to Walker (1983), is “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people” based on skin color. The mistreatment Joyce suffers at the hands of light-skinned, middle class schoolmates in Blue Tights suggests that colorism exists for her. Moreover, perhaps middle-class black characters are depicted with Caucasian-like features to note the disparity that exists between light and dark-skinned blacks socioeconomicly. According to Njeri (1996), in the early nineties two white social scientists reported that a “social and economic gap” exists between light and dark-skinned black people (p.515). Further, they claimed light-skinned blacks earned 30 cents more per dollar than dark-skinned blacks.

Hair

According to Jones (1994), “hair is the key racial signifier after skin [color]” (p.296). Historically, black women’s hair has been demonized, as noted in advertisements that date back to the early nineteenth century (Rooks, 1996; Byrd & Tharps, 2001).
These advertisements, along with personal dissatisfaction with their own hair, led black women to use grease and chemical straighteners to alter the texture of their hair. While there has been an ongoing debate concerning the degree to which a conscious or subconscious desire to appear white or possess white-like characteristics influenced black women’s decisions to change their hair texture, few fail to acknowledge that a large number of black women view hair as an accessory or type of adornment that has more to do with creative expression than a desire to assimilate (Jones, 1994; Rooks, 1996; Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Yet, hooks (1999) explicitly states, “The reality is: straightened hair is linked historically and currently to a system of racial domination that impresses upon black people, and especially black women, that we are not acceptable as we are, that we are not beautiful” (p.225).

In terms of choice of hairstyle, the girls in the six novels in this study do not adhere to a European ideal (Leeds, 1994). As a result, none of the girls or women in these novels appear to have chemically straightened hair. Instead, the hairstyles the girls wear function as a tool to suggest political awareness and pride in African ancestry (Rooks, 1996; Byrd & Tharps, 2001). A number of the female characters wear natural hairstyles or braids.

The characters in *Blue Tights* wear an array of hairstyles typically worn by African Americans. For instance, Joyce’s hair is described as “a mop of natural hair” that either she or her aunt straightens with a hot comb and braids (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.5). Even, Marley, the protagonist in *Heaven*, has “big hair” reminiscent of an Afro. Other female characters wear braids with and without beads. Bernadette (*The Dear One*) has “cornrows gliding down her back,” (Woodson, 1991, p.113) and the protagonist, Marie, in *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This*, wears her hair in short braids. Additionally, Gayle takes pride in the fact that “[t]he homegirls would hook up Lynda’s braids with red and yellow beads,” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 12) while the protagonist of *The Dear One*, Afeni, has natural hair that her mother French braids even though it immediately
begins to frizz before Afeni can look into a mirror. In the same way that the “Afro’ or ‘natural’ became the definitive mark of a woman who embraced black identity” in the 1960s and 1970s, braids serve a similar function today (Leeds, 1994, p.148).

For women, short hairstyles are rarely considered beautiful or feminine, yet a number of the girls in these novels wear their hair this way. For instance, Rebecca has “curly hair cut short like a boy’s,” (Woodson, 1991, p.45) while Emily, the protagonist of Toning the Sweep, a budding hairstylist who likes to cut people’s hair, wears her hair short, opting to shave most of it off rather than style it repeatedly. A few of the older women, particularly those described as “free spirits,” have liberated hair (Walker, 1988; hooks, 1999) that literally stands on top of their heads. For instance, Martha “cuts her hair short, and some times it sticks straight up, but she doesn’t care” (A. Johnson, 1993, p.18).

Toning the Sweep certainly challenges standardized definitions of beautiful hair. While focusing on her grandmother through a camera lens, Emily thinks: “For the first time in my life I really look at my grandmother. She’s beautiful. Her dreads fall over her face when she moves and her skin glows from sweat” (A. Johnson, 1993, p.32). Similarly, when speaking of her dreadlocks Ola tells Emily:

I love the way my hair feels….I do wonderful things
with it. I ignore it….Hair should be kept at home—not
loaned out to people who want to put strange objects and
creams in it, then twirl you around in a chair….(A. Johnson, 1993, p.44)

Ola considers her hair to be her only vanity; consequently, she refuses chemotherapy in an effort to preserve it. Ola’s attention to her hair allows Emily to think differently about her own hair: “I can’t get all of it between my fingers, but I love the way the kinky waves feel” (A. Johnson, 1993, p.45).

Within the novels studied here, there seems to be a conscious effort to depict black hair in ways that affirm African American culture while simultaneously suggesting
that these hairstyles are acceptable marks of beauty. These images are reminiscent of the sentiment black women writers express concerning African American hair as illustrated in the following poem by Gwendolyn Brooks (1980):

TO THOSE OF MY SISTERS
WHO KEPT THEIR NATURALS

Never to look
A hot comb in the teeth.

Sisters!
I love you.
Because you love you….
You reach, in season.
You subside, in season.
And All
Below the richrough righttime of your hair.

You have not bought Blondine.
You have not hailed the hot-comb recently.
You never worshipped Marilyn Monroe.
You say: Farrah’s hair is hers
You have not wanted to be white.
Nor have you testified to adoration of that state
with the advertisement of imitation,
(never successful because the hot comb is laughing too.)

But oh the rough dark Other music!
the Real.
the Right.
The natural Respect for Self and Seal!
Sisters!
Your hair is Celebration in the world!
(p.12-13). [italics in original]

Language Use

An affirming depiction of BEV and elements of the African American oral tradition are also included in the novels analyzed here. The language an individual uses is often a reflection of his or her cultural identity. Madhubuti (1984) maintains “To
accurately understand the soul of a people, you not only search for their outward manifestations…but you examine their language” (p. 154). Since slavery, African/African Americans have used a language system that combines their native tongue with the language spoken by their oppressors (Madhubuti, 1984; Smitherman, 2000). Dialect, black idiom, Black English Vernacular (BEV), African American English Vernacular (AAEV) or the more recently popularized, Ebonics are just a few of the labels linguists use to describe the language spoken by blacks. For African Americans, the spoken word has been linked to complex matters concerning “intelligence, creativity, literacy, culture, politics, race, and representation” (T. Harris, 1997, p.687).

Today, within the black community a wide range of dialects and languages are used. According to Smitherman (2000), in any given dialogue spoken between blacks, one might hear a combination of BEV, Mainstream American English (MAE)⁴, nonstandard American English, or some foreign language or derivative (i.e., Swahili, Spanish, etc.). The novels included in this analysis, confirm that a monolithic black language does not exist as blacks choose to express themselves in various ways (O’Neale, 1984). While the novels are written in Mainstream American English (MAE), a few of the characters in some of the novels use either urban street language, generally referred to as BEV, nonstandard English, code-switching or MAE with some usage of the deletion rule (i.e., ‘cause rather than because).

The majority of the characters in Angela Johnson’s novels, Toning the Sweep and Heaven, tend to use MAE combined with the deletion rule, while other characters use MAE entirely. The opposite is true for Williams-Garcia’s novels, Blue Tights and Like Sisters on the Homefront. In these novels the protagonists and a number of the supporting

---

⁴ I borrowed this term from Stanback (1985).
characters use BEV. In the following example, a woman, whose race is not indicated, tells Gayle: “Babies’ eardrums pop from the compression. It helps to have something to suck on” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 22). Gayle replies using BEV: “See this bottle in his mouth?…mind ya bizniz. Okay?” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 22).

MAE usage marks class distinctions in Woodson’s two novels, a number of the characters in Woodson’s *The Dear One* use MAE. Catherine and Marion, professional black women of substantial means, only use MAE, while Rebecca, a poor pregnant teen, primarily uses urban street language. It is suggested that this is largely because of where Rebecca is from, Harlem, as well as her social class. Nevertheless, the novels also make it clear that within the black community MAE usage is often seen as distinguishable by race. Hence, MAE users are often accused of “actin’ white.” For example, when Afeni does not understand some of the terms Rebecca uses, Rebecca becomes frustrated with her and exclaims, “Learn the language already…. God! You’re black. Talk like it” (Woodson, 1991, p.68). Afeni refuses to allow Rebecca to have the last word, and interestingly, toward the end of the novel, Afeni’s language use changes as she finds a way to negotiate BEV and MAE usage by combining the deletion rule and nonstandard terms like “nah” (Woodson, 1991, p. 122) though the majority of her conversation encompasses MAE. Afeni, like many of the other characters (i.e., Joyce, Rebecca and Marie’s father) learned to codeswitch. Codeswitching can be described as a variance of discourse largely based on audience and objective (Richardson, 2002).

Researchers have found that a large number of blacks, regardless of class or educational attainment, use some form of BEV (Stanback, 1985; Smitherman, 2000). In *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This*, Marie’s father, a middle-class, black, college professor
primarily uses MAE, yet he speaks differently when he is talking to Marie under relaxed conditions. When having serious conversations with Marie or when speaking to her friends, her father uses MAE. However, when they are engaged in a game of basketball, he uses BEV. Conversely, Marie and other black characters in *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This* generally use MAE. The opposite is true for *Blue Tights*; the majority of the characters chiefly use BEV, even despite educational accomplishments. For example, Minnie’s nursing degree does not interfere with her use of the words “ain’t,” or “’causa,” neither does it stop her from saying such things as “Don’t you be no fool” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.86). Perhaps when Minnie is at work she employs codeswitching as Joyce does at school and within the community. Joyce is an “A” student, which implies she is adept at schoolwork, but when she talks to friends or others outside educational settings she frequently uses BEV statements like the following: “Yo, yo, Sheeeeilah! Sheeeelaaah!” Williams-Garcia, 1988, p. 9).

The novels strongly suggest that class and educational opportunity, not race, are more salient determinants of mastery and use of MAE. For this reason, most of the characters in *Blue Tights* who live in Joyce’s community are BEV users while the majority of the characters in Marley’s (*Heaven*) suburban community are not. This is also suggested when Rebecca and Afeni (*The Dear One*) wander into a poverty-stricken area of town, and encounter a white girl who employs nonstandard English similar to Rebecca’s urban language: “There’s no coloreds livin’ over cross this side” (Woodson, 1991, p.110). Similarly, Marie (*I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This*) tells Lena, who is physically white, “You talk like a black girl” (Woodson, 1994, p. 19). Yet, Marie and her close friend Sherry, who is also black, use MAE. This causes one to wonder: What black
girl is Marie comparing Lena to? To complicate matters more, Sherry adamantly suggests that Lena is white trash as if this clearly explains why she “talks black.” Is being black and poor one or the same and is therefore equal to white trash, which makes someone white, appear black yet obviously different from Marie and Sherry?

Smitherman (2000) suggests that the black community is linguistically divided into two groups: the “haves” and the “have-nots” (p.39). Those classified as the “haves” have a firm understanding and manipulation of mainstream American English brought about through educational attainment while “have-nots” do not (Smitherman, 2000). To the preceding statement, I would add that whites are divided in this same way. Lena drifts in and out of school and from school to school, and as a result, her grades are mediocre. Thus, Lena’s use of nonstandard English is a direct result of her class status as well as her limited education.

Another dimension to the “haves” and “have-nots” theory of MAE acquisition and its tie to educational ability relies on the eagerness of those who have to correct and instruct those who have not as seen in the following exchange between Cookie and Gayle: Cookie says, “You called the baby ‘it.’ It’s a him. Just a small point of grammar…” To which, Gayle replies, “Yo look girlie…don’t be telling me about him and it. Schools out. Okay?” [italics in original] (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.28) This theme is intertextual, as there is a nearly identical scene in *The Dear One*: Rebecca says, “Look at all those fishes.” When Afeni corrects her, Rebecca responds, “Look! Just ‘cause I’m in your ritzy house…doesn’t mean you gonna teach me how to talk….you better consider yourself lucky I’m here, whether I’m here saying ‘fishes’, ‘fish,’ or ‘fried fish’!” In the examples above both Gayle and Rebecca are positioned as the “have-nots” financially.
and educationally. Yet, they are able to use wit and sarcasm to signify or get smart with /tell off their offenders. At will, sophisticated BEV users, like Gayle and Rebecca, can employ elements of the oral tradition with ease.

Oral communication has traditionally been of extreme importance in the black community. Via oral communication, individuals learn about themselves and the world around them (Smitherman, 2000). Significant elements of the African American oral tradition, storytelling, signifying, and spitting game,⁵ are found in several of the novels included in this study.

**Signifying**

Smitherman defines signifying as a “verbal art of ceremonial combativeness in which one person puts down, talks about, ‘signifies on’ someone or on something someone has said” (Smitherman, 2000, p. 255). According to Smitherman (2000) and Gates (1988), signifying has been a part of the African American literary tradition for quite some time. C. Lee (1993) utilized signifying as a scaffold for learning and relating to literary works in an important study. Though the texts C. Lee (1993) used were largely written for adults, several of the YA novels in this study also use this rhetorical strategy. The examples below use signifying, not as a game of insult such as the dozens, (Gates, 1988; Smitherman, 2000) but as a means to criticize or insult a person indirectly without references to his or her mother or other family members. For example, when Aunt Em (Blue Tight) sings “Going Up to Yonder” in an effort to sing louder than Smokey Robinson, Minnie says, “Well, go soon so we can hear our record” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p. 19).

⁵ Smitherman (2000) calls this love rap, a discourse men use when speaking to women they are interested in pursuing.
Other examples found in *Like Sisters on the Homefront* are similar. After Ruth Bell learns that Gayle is pregnant a second time she exclaims, “What you think I’m running? Does my door say South Jamaica Welfare Hotel? No. Do you see Hoe House on my mailbox? No. It say 150-11 South Road. Have the nerve to say ‘Whitaker’ on the welcome mat” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 4). Even Great insults Gayle though it takes Gayle a moment to realize it: Great says, “You the one like to taste the breeze high up ‘cross the crease your backside” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 42). Later, Great is more obvious with her criticism of Gayle: Great says, “Something ugly as you otta be sweet.” First Gayle ignores Great’s insult because she is busy recalling the times boys have told her otherwise, but when Great says it a second time, Gayle asks, “Granny, is you trying to break [signify] on me?” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 50).

Gayle enjoys exchanging insults. More than once, Gayle hopes Cookie will join her in a game of insults:

‘That’s your name? Constance? …They don’t call you that all day long, do they? Con-stan-suh. Hurts my throat.’ Had she been true, homegirl would have said, ‘Like Gayle’s so hot.’ Instead she sang cheerfully, ‘Everyone calls me Cookie,’ which was why Gayle couldn’t like her (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.30).

**Storytelling**

Richardson (2002) asserts: “Storytelling remains one of the most powerful language and literacy practices that Black women use to convey their special knowledge” (p. 687). Oftentimes when individuals within the African American community wish to make a point memorable, they result to storytelling. The stories evoke images that help
the listener to internalize a particular idea or concept. Rich in the African American literary tradition, storytelling is a device used in YA literature. In *Like Sisters on the Homefront*, storytelling is used to help Gayle develop cultural identity and an understanding of her mother’s view of the world. Sensing that Gayle can benefit from knowledge of her ancestors more than anyone else in the family, Great entrusts the family history to Gayle who gathers self-worth and motivation from it. It is also because of storytelling that Gayle develops a desire to be a better daughter to her mother. The “love story” Aunt Virginia tells Gayle based on her mother and father’s past helps to reveal Ruth Bell’s vulnerability and plight. This information helps Gayle become sympathetic to her mother’s situation. She no longer sees Ruth Bell as an adversary, but as someone like herself, someone bombarded by obstacles difficult to overcome.

Similarly, through story Emily (*Toning the Sweep*) discovers cultural identity and a heightened understanding of her mother. Emily’s use of the video camera allows her to capture and collect stories about her mother and grandmother told by members of Ola’s community. It is while videotaping stories, that she learns that her mother found her grandfather’s body after he had been killed as a result of a hate crime. She also learns of her family’s strength, pride and commitment to hard work.

In *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This* and *The Dear One* there are references made to stories about African American history recalled by the girls. For example, Marie repeatedly recalls that her father participated in the civil rights movement, and she realizes that his participation helped shape who he is and how he has raised her. Similarly, when Afeni sits in class listening to the teacher talk about Native Americans, she recalls what she has been taught about them outside of school and criticizes the
teacher for not revealing the whole truth about the Native Americans’ experiences with Europeans. Those girls who have been told stories about their family and/or African American history appear to have a firm grasp on their cultural identities.

**Spitting Game**

Spitting game is an updated term for what Smitherman (2000) refers to as love rap, discourse traditionally used by men to acquaint themselves with women. According to Smitherman (2000), this type of communication allows a black man who is unfamiliar with a particular black woman, to engage in a conversation with her devoid of animosity. Further, Smitherman (2000) claims “black women are accustomed to…[this type of] verbal aggressiveness from black men” (p.209). For instance, Gayle tells Cookie about the appeal of a man’s verbal game: “…find a boy who knows all the moves, all the talk, and forget it. You be dropping your drawers before you know it” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 68). Additionally, Gayle realizes that spitting game is not an exclusively male domain. Gayle encourages Cookie to “[g]o on over there and say ‘praise the Lord’ or whatever yawl say to get that rap going” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 99).

While black women may be accustomed to this type of language, some black women view it as offensive. The two novels by Williams-Garcia illustrates this. Gayle seems to support Smitherman’s theory concerning black women and their tolerance of black men who spit game, yet Joyce does not. This type of discourse, participated in by an individual who is physically attracted to someone, does not work unless the individual being pursued is in compliance. If the individual being pursued is a black woman who verbalizes noncompliance, animosity between the woman and the man spitting game occurs. Somehow a black woman’s refusal to quietly, or silently, tolerate this type of
discourse, is perceived as disloyalty by the black man spitting game. Thus, when Joyce refuses to be cordial to a man who is spitting game at her, he verbally insults her “and makes like he [is] going to come after her” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p. 55). Joyce’s actions can be perceived as her feminist stance against the sexism she faces on a daily basis from men who, though probably unknowingly, offend her and make her feel like an object rather than a human being.

In this chapter, I described how black girls and women in select YA and novels within the black women’s literary tradition express themselves via physical appearance and language use. Making connections between the female characters’ perceptions of beauty and choice of expression via hair style and hair texture helps to create an opportunity to think critically about how people of color, particularly blacks, have often had to resist the dominant cultural group’s definition of beauty in order to establish self-esteem and self-affirmation. This has not been an easy task, for as Wallace (1990) explains, “The black woman [has] not failed to be aware of America’s standard of beauty nor the fact that she [is] not included in it…[unless] her hair [is] straight, her skin light, and her features European; in other words, if she [is] as nearly indistinguishable from a white woman as possible” (p.157-158).

The YA and adult novels discussed here are similar in that they depict cultural expression as an individual choice. The overarching premise of each of the novels—YA and adult—concerning beauty is that beauty is individualized, and everyone is beautiful in a unique way. These books offer positive portrayals of black expression and cultural identity. Further, the novels present a different way of viewing dark skin, naturally thick and curly hair, culturally specific hairstyles and language use unique to African
Americans. This view of African American expressive culture helps readers understand that often African Americans resist European American beauty standards and MAE as they choose to embrace and connect with their own culture.
CHAPTER 4
Sexuality
Introduction

Today, there are a number of works by black women writers that focus on black female sexuality, but this was not always the case. Washington (1987) reports that stereotypes (i.e., jezebel, welfare queen, whore, sapphire, etc.) attached to black female identity since slavery have led black women writers to exercise caution when writing about black female sexuality. Similarly, Glenn’s (1994) study of black and white female protagonists in YA novels revealed an inconsistency in relation to black and white protagonists’ sexual development. Glenn (1994) writes, “…the mention of sexual development in the sample texts featuring Black heroines was almost non-existent” (p.261). Glenn (1994) contributes this “conservatism” to YA writers’ determined attempts to debunk myths and stereotypes surrounding black sexuality. The prevailing idea seems to suggest that silence concerning sexuality as well as providing alternative depictions of black females will discredit stereotypes. One of the contentions here is that silence around issues of sexuality eliminates the opportunity to critically examine sexual discovery, preference, desire and oppression.

In this chapter, I acknowledge that sexuality is an important theme explored in black women’s literature within the literary tradition and select YA novels. First, I briefly discuss select works within the black women’s tradition that focus on sexuality. Finally, I devote the remainder of the chapter to describing how select African American YA
literature offers an opportunity to think critically about issues concerning sexuality while simultaneously encouraging self-analysis and social action. Specifically, attention is given to how black girls in contemporary young adult novels are perceived in sexual terms, express sexual desire, develop sexual empowerment and understand homosexuality. For the purpose of this study, sexuality pertains to girls’ awareness of and/or participation in sex related acts (i.e., kissing, fondling, intercourse, etc.).

Though it is true that black women writers have been somewhat skeptical about exploring sexuality in literature, the theme was included in literature as early as the slave narratives. For example, both Mary Prince and Harriet Ann Jacobs, among others, argued that black slave women’s sexuality was perceived as primitive and promiscuous (Francis & Bennett, 1997). Stereotypes and misconceptions have threatened the sanctity of black womanhood. These stereotypes purposefully describe black women as hypersexual or “oversexed” while ignoring the precarious position of black female slaves, maids, etc. who could not refuse the abuse of white or black men (Wallace, 1990; Tolman, 1996; Collins, 2001). Throughout the centuries writers have used literature to “set the record straight.” Writers such as Harriet Ann Jacobs as well as contemporary novelists like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison divulge the sexual, emotional, and physical oppression women have suffered during bondage and contemporary times.

Sexism within the black community, though rarely mentioned within the community, gradually became one of the topics of interest for black women. Historically, females were socialized based on Christian principles that required women to be submissive, docile, obedient, and accepting of sexual inferiority (hooks, 1980). As a result of this type of socialization, a large number of women accept(ed) and enforce(d)
beliefs and practices that sought to oppress them. Feminists of the 19th century like Anna Julia Cooper, among others, recognized this and spoke out against both sexual and racist oppression (hooks, 1980; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Cooper argued that black women are concerned with both a “woman question and a race problem” (qtd. in Guy-Sheftall, 1995, p.1). Since then, others have joined the dialogue and declared that black women endure and combat multiple oppressions: race, class, gender, and sexuality (King, 1995; Beale, 1995; V. Smith, 1998). Yet, in the 20th century, a large number of black women felt that fighting sexual oppression was unnecessary, as the battle against racial oppression seemed more important (hooks, 1980).

Black women writers, Walker, Shange, and Morrison, to name a few, began speaking out against sexism in the black community during the 1960s and 1970s, though they were verbally assaulted and publicly criticized. Critics, mostly males, argued that these black women writers, and others like them, betrayed the black race in exchange for feminist views when they failed to portray what McDowell (1989) calls the black “family romance” (p. 80). Instead of the family romance, some black women writers used fiction to describe the tension that exists between black men and women. hooks (1980) suggests: “Black men have shown the same obsessive lust and contempt for female sexuality that is encouraged throughout our society. Because they, like white men, see black women as inherently more sexual and morally depraved than other groups of women, they have felt the greatest contempt toward her” (p.110). Jones’ Corrigedora, for example, illustrates this commingling of the black man’s desire of and contempt for black women.
Another topic related to sexuality found in literature by black women concerns issues of sexual orientation. During the 1980s, according to B. Smith (1990) and Christian (1985), a number of black women writers began a dialogue via fiction about lesbianism. Christian (1985) notes that during this time black women writers seemed to more openly explore “lesbian relationships among black women and how these relationships are viewed by black communities” (p.183). *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) and *The Color Purple* (1982) are two examples Christian (1985) cites. In *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), suggests Christian (1985), “Naylor…points up the fears of heterosexual women….” (p.196) However, this is not to discredit those writers who made this topic a part of their cultural project long before the 1980s (Gomez, 1983; Shockley, 1983). For example, during the 1970s, Rosa Guy—probably one of the first YA black women writers to do so—published several novels for young adults that include characters who were either lesbian or exploring the possibility of being lesbian. Writers who created what today might be called lesbian literature existed beyond 1970 as well: Angelina Weld Grimke and Nella Larsen. B. Smith (1990) firmly states: “An openness in discussing Lesbian subject matter is perhaps the most obvious earmark of Black feminist writing and not because feminism and lesbianism are interchangeable, which of course they are not” (p.216). Nevertheless, discourse on homosexuality continues to be limited even within black feminist circles (B. Smith, 1990).

Black women’s literature also includes complex accounts of sexual desire. Once again, sex-related stereotypes impact how women perceive and write about every aspect of black female sexuality, as these writers attempt to write “within and against prevailing stereotypes of women” (Francis & Bennett, 1997, p. 654). For characters in *Passing* and
*Quicksand*, sexual desire is both repressed and compromised (Francis & Bennett, 1997); however, characters are permitted a little more freedom to explore sexual desire in works like *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *The Color Purple* and *Sula*. Nevertheless, characters are rarely allowed to pursue their sexual desires without consequences. Sula’s sexual desire seems to be at the root of much of the animosity the community directs at her, animosity that leaves her virtually alone when she needs people most. Without remorse, Sula sleeps with the husbands of the women in the community, including Jude, her best friend’s husband, and then discards them all. Sula’s sexual relationship with Nel’s husband ruins the close friendship the women shared. However, the community does not completely shun Sula until she does the unforgivable: she sleeps with white men.

**Sexual Objectification**

YA literature is available that treats sexuality in ways very similar to the ones mentioned above. Making meaning of sexuality is important during adolescence because it is at that time that young people begin to develop sexual understanding and form sexual identities. As literature within the Black women’s literary tradition suggests, black women have functioned as the sexual objects of men since slavery (Frazier, 1971; Staples, 1971; Tolman, 1996). This continues on certain levels today and it affects women and young girls. Just as black women have been labeled sexually deviant,
adolescent black girls also carry this burden. Here, sexual deviance refers to sexual activity that is classified as abnormal. In a society that suggests sex is an act participated in by married adults, particularly heterosexuals, teens having sex is considered to be abnormal behavior.

According to Christian (1985), “The depiction of physical appearance is not a trivial matter, for it has been used as a societal weapon to restrict woman, reducing her to a physical object whose appearance is her primary value, as well as being an indicator as to whether she is literally the right or wrong kind of person” [italics in original] (p.190-91). This is certainly true for Joyce the protagonist in Blue Tights. People believe she participates in womanish acts (i.e., sexual intercourse) because of her body’s shapeliness (Williams-Garcia, 1988). Joyce’s body calls attention to her and encourages men and women to believe she is promiscuous. As a result, Joyce might be considered deviant on two accounts: 1) because she is a teenager participating in sex related acts and 2) because she is believed to engage frequently in sexual activity. For example, when Sam attempts to have sex with Joyce, he says, “This won’t hurt a bit. You did this before. I know” [italics are mine] (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.13). However, quite the opposite is true: “But [Joyce] hadn’t [had sex before]. Not even close. The girl they called the Easy A had not even held a boy’s hand. Not even a slow dance” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.13).

Another example of Joyce’s suggested sexual deviance involves school rumors: “Big butt [Joyce] was the girl that everyone said they had” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.25). When Joyce is twelve, even Aunt Em suggests that she has done something to get attention from men. As a result, Aunt Em forces Joyce to “pray to be a nice girl” though Joyce has done nothing to suggest that she is anything but “a nice girl” (Williams-Garcia,
In essence, Joyce’s physical appearance, including her race, contributes to how she is perceived as sexually deviant. Additionally, Joyce’s social class, indicated by the tight, frayed clothing she wears, does not suggest poverty to men; instead it suggests availability.

Because men view Joyce as sexually deviant or licentious, they believe they are justified in their attempt to abuse and exploit her (Roberts, 1997). Joyce, realizing she does not have money for the latest fashions, is often desperate for money and constantly thinking of ways to obtain it. As a result, she attempts to use her body as a means to get money, contributing to her imposed sexually deviant image. Yet, Joyce has no intentions of actually performing sexual acts with thirty-eight-year old Sam, even though she realizes “she might have to let him touch her,” she is simply desperate to acquire money (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.5). This same hint of desperation leads Joyce to consider selling her blood to a blood bank. On her way to the blood bank she has the following exchange with a man:

“Uh, what’s your name, baby doll.”

“Don’t worry ‘bout my name.”

“Yo, like I just got to have some of that,” he said, walking all behind her like a dog wagging his tail for some scraps.

“Get offa me! Leave me the hell alone!”

“Hey. You think you white or something? You too good to tell me your name? Well look-a-here. You ain’t really what’s happening no ways, queen….You
ain’t really all that fine” [Italics in original]


The man objectifies and verbally abuses Joyce as several other men do throughout the novel.

As Joyce walks down the street, some boys and men blow kisses while others yell out obscenities to her. For example, on the way to a dance audition one man says: “Say baby, I love the way you move that thang” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.47). While trying to apply for a job at a department store, the security guard says, “You can work for me,” as he “scope[s] her up and down” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.37). Even the boys at Joyce’s school objectify her. Boys, eager to express themselves sexually, touch her buttocks or assume she will do sexual favors for them, even as they say offensive things about her. Joyce manages to delay sexual onset despite the men and boys who attempt to victimize her. She realizes she has the power to control her own sexuality.

**Teen Sex**

Research shows some discrepancies concerning the age that young people actually begin to engage in sexual intercourse. While some suggest that the average age of sexual onset for adolescents is between 12 and 13-years-old, (Vera, Reese, Paikoff & Jarrett, 1996) others maintain that most teens begin having sex at sixteen (Roberts, 1997). Nevertheless, “[a]pproximately 70 percent of unmarried teenage girls,” according to Roberts (1997), “have had sexual intercourse by the age of nineteen” (Roberts, 1997, p.117). Race and social class seem to impact adolescent sexual experimentation, as black girls from families with low socioeconomic status are more likely to be sexually active and become pregnant than white middle-class girls (Lanctot & Smith, 2001). However, it
is important to point out that while urban youth—young people of color and poor whites—are having sexual intercourse during adolescence, there is still a substantial number of urban adolescents who are not, and there are some who are but are not getting pregnant (Vera, et al., 1996; Murry, 1996). It is also important to note that researchers indicate “that the majority of adolescent girls, be they urban or suburban, white, black, or Hispanic (or other racial or ethnic groups rarely mentioned), become sexually active” (Tolman, 1996, p.257).

Numerous issues contribute to adolescent sexual onset; however, there are a few specific factors—insufficient parental guidance, sexual curiosity and/or ignorance, and perceived lack of emotional attachment—implicated in several of the novels studied here that affect the lives of each of the girls who engage in sex related activities. According to Murry (1996), a few studies have shown that there is a correlation between adolescents with strong religious views and adolescent sexual behavior. Some studies show that frequent church attendance decreases the likelihood of adolescents becoming sexually active while other studies indicate that religious adolescents, because of ambivalence concerning their sexuality, may become sexually active and pregnant because they fail to use contraceptives (Murry, 1996).

*Like Sisters on the Homefront* depicts how religious principles might shape a young person’s perception of sexuality. Cookie’s religious views make it difficult for her to talk about sex or consider it a natural, acceptable act. At age sixteen, Cookie still finds French kissing disgusting, and she plans to abstain from sex until she is married. This changes, however, when Cookie becomes attracted to Stacey Alexander and begins to develop interest in sex. After Cookie’s first date with Stacey, Gayle asks Cookie if she
had sex with him. Cookie replies, “We didn’t do it [have sex]….But,…something’s bound to happen” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.122). Because of her religion, Cookie feels she is “fighting a war inside”; sexual desire and religious principles are in battle (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.124). As a result, she confides in her mother who tells her to “Take it slow….Be in control of [her] life….sex will weigh a young body down or stop it cold…. ”(Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.129) Cookie agrees with her mother; yet, she admits, “but when I’m with Stacey I don’t hear any of that” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.129). Toward the end of the novel, Cookie plans to visit Stacey and possibly have sex with him; however, her plans are thwarted by Gayle’s attempt to save Cookie from repeating some of the mistakes she has made.

Although Cookie’s religious beliefs contribute to her decision to abstain from sex, her relationship with her parents also affects her ability to stay true to this commitment. Lanctot & Smith (2001) argue that "…having weak parental attachment and little parental support predict early initiation into sexual intercourse" (p.353). The other girls —Gayle and Rebecca— who actually have sexual intercourse live in single parent homes and are affected in some way by other social changes (Murry, 1996). For example, because of poverty, Gayle’s mother often has to work rather than be at home with her, so that most of Gayle’s "activities take place outside direct parental…supervision" (Murry, 1996, p.277). In a similar manner, Rebecca’s mother, because of illness, cannot always properly supervise her or her siblings. In fact, Rebecca often has to assume adult responsibilities such as taking care of her brothers and sisters because her mother cannot.

Since slavery, black mothers have been labeled naturally promiscuous and have often been accused of passing on sexual lasciviousness to their daughters. The mothers in
the books studied here, however, debunk this misconception as they are depicted as
asexual (Roberts, 1997). Perhaps this is yet another attempt by the authors to dispel
stereotypes that surround black female sexuality as seen in a number of works within the
black women’s literary tradition.

Only two mothers, in *Heaven* and *Toning the Sweep*, across the literature have
husbands, though there are no or few scenes in the novels that reveal any details about the
relationships. The mother in *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This* is absent. Minnie, Ruth
Bell, Catherine and Clair, all mothers (or othermothers) with daughters who either are
sexually active or engaged in sex-related activities, do not have husbands, boy friends or
lovers. Most of the mothers/othermothers do not have direct conversations with their
daughters about sexual intercourse, heterosexual and/or homosexual relationships or
pregnancy either. This lack of communication between mothers and daughters
contributes to the daughter’s decision to become sexually active at an early age. It also
prevents daughters from feeling comfortable talking to mothers about sex related matters.
For example, it is suggested that Rebecca might have gotten an abortion as Gayle did,
had she not been too afraid to tell her mother she was pregnant. (Rebecca manages to
conceal her pregnancy for over five months.) Once the pregnancy is discovered, Clair
advises her daughter to put the baby up for adoption in an effort to help Rebecca hold on
to the possibility of a promising future.

Daughters who do not engage in sexual intercourse seem to have more open
communication with their mothers. Cookie seeks the advice of her mother and eventually
follows it while Afeni listens carefully as her mother tries to answer her questions about
sex, sexuality, love and teen pregnancy. Catherine tells Afeni: “I think sometimes girls
are looking for love when they get pregnant. They need love or maybe they want something real to love. And at the time a baby seems to be the perfect thing” (Woodson, 1991, p.39).

Research suggests that perceived absence of love in adolescents’ lives and low self-esteem contributes to adolescents engaging in sexual activity (Vera et al., 1996). Adolescents may not really be promiscuous: instead, they may have an emotional and affectionate interpretation of sexual intercourse, which causes them to turn to sex to fill an emotional void in their lives. Oftentimes, adult men, preying on girls’ desire of romantic love, coerce teen girls into premarital sex and father their illegitimate children (Roberts, 1997). Both Gayle and Rebecca become pregnant by young men who are several years older than they are, while Joyce comes close to having sex with a man twice her age and tries to force herself on a boy slightly older. When Cookie learns that Emanuel’s father is an adult with a wife and child, she exclaims: “Cousin Gayle, you’re only fourteen. I thought some boy did this to you” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 30). However, Gayle refuses to consider the possibility that Jose took advantage of her age and inexperience with men.

Alienated by peers and her inability to fully fit in with the girls in her neighborhood, Joyce seeks out other modes of acceptance. First, she turns to thirty-eight-year old Sam who takes advantage of her low self-esteem and poverty as he pretends to be interested in more than the opportunity to have sex with her. Yet, to Joyce “Sam was the best friend she had ever had. Someone to talk to” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p. 7). Even when Sam tries to give Joyce hope concerning her future in dance, he reveals the low value he places on her—and by extension—black female bodies in general. Sam
suggests, “In a year or two you could be a dancing girl at Big Joe’s Paradise Lounge” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p. 11). Because of Joyce’s race, class and gender she is expected to be a provocative stripper rather than a graceful ballerina. Joyce’s next search for companionship and love involves J’had. For Joyce, J’had represents her opportunity to receive love from someone of the opposite sex, and when this does not work out, she prays for a baby to love. But finally, Joyce is forced to accept her life as it is and value the love she can give to herself.

Rebecca also mistakes sex for love though later she recognizes the ambivalence associated with notions of love and teen sexual encounters. According to Rebecca, while engaged in having sex, teens are often too frightened to actually enjoy and fully participate in the sexual act. Yet, they long for the intimacy and affection connected with intercourse. For instance, Rebecca tells Afeni “how she loved the closeness, [associated with sexual intercourse] loved being loved by [Danny]” (Woodson, 1991, p. 2). Fine (1993) describes the ambivalence Rebecca refers to this way: “The adolescent woman …assumes a dual consciousness—at once taken with the excitement of actual/anticipated sexuality and consumed with anxiety and worry” (p. 81). Additionally, several times throughout the novel, Rebecca emphasizes the importance she feels from being loved by family and friends. This reveals the impact love, real or imagined, has on her and most girls her age.

In contrast, Gayle claims she does not value romantic love or the pretense of it. Instead, she would rather have a guy who is forward and honest about what he expects from her sexually. While Gayle does not appear to mistake sex for love as the other girls do, she does enjoy Jose’s company, particularly the conversations they have. Gayle
admits, “…I’m a sucker for talk” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.68) which suggests she has few people who spend quality time with her. She also enjoys receiving gifts from men, as the gifts make her feel special and valued. Like the other girls, Gayle also craves tenderness and longs to feel good, even if it is only short term.

**Sexual Desire, Empowerment & Consequences**

For quite some time, some form of sexual education course has been included in schools across the country. In those courses, sometimes fused with health class, information concerning physical development, physical maturation, sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, etc. is dispersed. While information is shared with students pertaining to sex, very few discussions center on issues of sexual desire and sexual orientation, though these topics are equally important when considering adolescent sexual identity formation (Fine, 1993; Friend, 1993). The sexual desires of teenage girls is recognized in *Blue Tights*, *The Dear One* and *Like Sisters on the Homefront*. These novels consider how constructing meaning about sex is a part of the lived experiences of young girls (Fine, 1993). Due to gender and race, black girls’ sexual subjectivity is generally ignored (Fine, 1993). The silence surrounding these issues is detrimental to healthy sexual identity development. A discourse of empowerment and desire is beneficial to young girls growing up in a society that often denies access to safe sexual expression (Fine, 1993).

Though Gayle is presented as firm in and extremely open about her sexuality, what Gayle actually knows about sex seems to rest on misconception, ignorance, immaturity and despair. While trying to convince Cookie to have sex, Gayle says: "You know, Cook, you wastin' away. Don't even know what you missing” (Williams-Garcia,
Gayle continues, “The more you wait, the more you’ll dry up. It'll really hurt then. I'm telling you, cuz. Do it now while you're young and juicy” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 68). Perhaps Gayle’s age and inadequate education leads her to believe the myths stated above. To Troy she writes:

I member the last time we did it. It so good. Too bad your Mama come home an I had to leve out the window. That was funny….
P.S. Mama took me for the aborshun…. We can make another baby win I get home (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.62).

Gayle’s insistence upon getting pregnant again at fourteen-years-old, her first child is only seven months old, is fueled by her interest in “hooking Troy” which is a result of a combination of things: despair due to low levels of ambition and opportunity and misconception (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.6).

While Cookie appears to be sexually repressed, Gayle seems to be sexually obsessed. Sex seems to be on Gayle’s mind constantly. At times Gayle walks a fine line between exerting sexual freedom via intense interest and curiosity in sex and exhibiting stereotypical black perversity. At any rate, Gayle refuses to take on “sexual guilt” (Macpherson, 1997, p. 284) despite the messages society projects concerning the inappropriateness of teenagers, especially girls, being sexually active and enjoying it. Gayle views men in sexual terms; for example, she repeatedly refers to Cookie’s boyfriend Stacey as “Stiff Wood,” to men’s penises as “rods,” and she frequently admits, without shame, that she has sexual urges or “get[s] hot in the box” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.67).
Sexual desire is not taboo to Joyce either. Joyce’s curiosity about sex and her quest for love lead to sexual desire. Though Joyce realizes Sam—father of four children who are older than Joyce—is not the man she would like to share her first sexual experience with, being with him makes her aware of her growing curiosity about sex. At one point, while Sam fondles her, Joyce’s curiosity turns to desire, a desire to know more about sexual fulfillment. However, she cannot convince herself to have sex with him. As a result, the following conversation takes place,

“Take me home.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Now take me the hell home or else”

(Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.13).

Joyce realizes that she controls if and when she should act on her own sexual desire. After she meets J’had, she begins to think the time is right to engage in sexual intercourse. J’had tries to treat Joyce with respect as he attempts to uphold Muslim principles, yet his ideas about women are sexist. J’had’s cousin, Tamu, explains J’had’s beliefs to Joyce: “Being a woman makes you automatically inferior. Women should make children and not be seen….” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.64) It is clear that Joyce does not find J’had’s “religious sexism” (Kutenplon & Olmstead, 1996, p.314) appealing, as she uses every opportunity available to her to challenge and ridicule his world view:

“So Allah lets you drum, but I can’t dance.”

“Men don’t fall to the same temptations as a woman.”

“Forget it. Forget you.”

“... As salaam alaikum.”
“Sayonara, Charlie Brown.” [italics in original]

(Williams-Garcia, 1988, p. 80).

Despite the tension between Joyce and J’had concerning religious ideology and what it means to be a black man versus a black woman, Joyce develops feelings for him, and tries to seduce him in her attempt to satisfy her sexual curiosity, her sexual desire, and her quest for love. Though Joyce’s relationship with J’had does not include sex, her limited experiences with him make her more aware of her growing sexual desire.

Fine (1993) found that when female sexual desire or pleasure was mentioned in schools, girls were reminded of “‘consequences’—emotional, physical, moral, reproductive, and/or financial” (p.79). A major consequence for engaging in sexual intercourse is pregnancy.

In the 1980s teenage pregnancy was declared an epidemic (Murry, 1996, p.273). Social scientists have indicated that the rate at which black adolescents become pregnant is higher than their white counterparts, yet they have failed to mention that during the nineties pregnancy rates amongst blacks decreased at a faster rate than amongst whites (Tolman, 1996). Tolman (1996) argues that urban girls, poor and of color, are more often than any other teenage group characterized as immoral, sexually promiscuous, and pregnant. Moreover, Murry (1996) claims that girls across racial lines who were least likely to become pregnant enjoyed middle to high social class.

It is probably no accident that the two girls in the six novels studied here who become pregnant have low socioeconomic status. Additionally, the books that do not focus on adolescent "sexual risk taking" (Vera, et. al., 1996) include protagonists who are firmly rooted in middle class families. For example, sexuality is not an issue in *Toning*...
the Sweep or Heaven, and in I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This Marie, the middle-class protagonist, is not affected by sexual deviance, her poor, white friend, Lena, is.

A number of the girls in the Vera, et. al. (1996) study viewed teen pregnancy, as most do within the larger society, as a negative consequence of engaging in sexual intercourse. This idea is also implied in the novels discussed here. Gayle first appears as a minor character in Blue Tights who is struggling to care for her infant son. Gayle, as in Like Sisters on the Homefront, is juxtaposed against teenage girls who manage to escape the consequence of sexual experimentation. In Blue Tights, it is Joyce against Gayle. Gayle’s life is presented as if teen motherhood is a liability that hinders her from being anything more than a teen mom with no options, no chance for a better life. Though Gayle wants to be adventurous and develop her talents too, teenage motherhood holds her back. For example, Gayle cannot be an African dancer like Joyce or a track star like Lynda because her life must now revolve around Emmanuel. The baby both holds Gayle back and “keeps her down” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p. 133). Opposite Gayle is Joyce, who seems free of responsibility and destined to enjoy a future filled with unlimited possibilities. What both girls have in common is their belief that purposely getting pregnant will secure love from both the baby and the baby’s father. Although Joyce and J’had only kiss, Joyce begins to imagine she is pregnant. This reveals Joyce’s ignorance about sexual intercourse and male/female interaction. Joyce thinks, “If I’m pregnant he’ll come back to me and we’ll be together” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p. 107). After Joyce talks to Gayle, however, Joyce is thankful that she did not get pregnant and will not have to live a deprived life the way it seems Gayle will.
Once again in *Like Sisters on the Homefront*, Gayle is positioned as disadvantaged while Joyce has the opportunity and freedom that enables her to go to Africa to study dance. Conversely, Gayle gets pregnant again, has an abortion and is forced to go live with relatives in Georgia. In this novel, Cookie provides the greatest contrast to Gayle. Cookie talks about Gayle’s life as if it is over as a result of Emanuel’s birth. Cookie tries to encourage Gayle to consider what her life might be like if she did not have a child. What Cookie does not realize is that Gayle, partly because of her race, class, and gender, feels her life would lack opportunity even if she were not a mother. Gayle explains: “If I didn’t have Jose I wouldn’t be thinking ‘bout no college or sailing ‘cross the seven seas” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p.126). However, the novel’s end suggests that Gayle is interested in trying to alter her own destination.

In *The Dear One*, Rebecca chooses to give her baby up for adoption because she feels she and her boyfriend are too young to be parents, her family does not have the resources needed to take proper care of a baby, and her chances of making a better life for herself in the future would be jeopardized. For Rebecca, Afeni’s life appears to include all of the comforts she can only dream of. The poor white girl Afeni and Rebecca see while walking shares Rebecca’s sentiment. Afeni’s race and class anger her; yet, the girl connects with Rebecca, almost smiling at her, allowing Rebecca’s class, and pregnant condition, to transcend her race. The poor white girl tries to console Rebecca telling her giving birth “… ain’t so bad” (Woodson, 1991, p.111). This scene also seems to suggest that girls who get pregnant are punished and forced to live a life of poverty. Hence, if Rebecca decides to keep her baby, she can only aspire to have a life similar to the poor
girl’s life. Both Gayle and Rebecca lack “life options” and “entitlement” (Fine, 1993, p.96-97) partly because their families are poor and they live surrounded by poverty.

The novels analyzed here do not depict teen moms who feel empowered despite motherhood. However, Fine’s (1993) study provides an example of a teen mother who contradicts the notion that teen mothers and their children are destined to have bleak futures:

If I didn’t get pregnant I would have continued on a downward path, going nowhere. They say teenage pregnancy is bad for you, but it was good for me. I know I can’t mess around now, I got to worry about what’s good for Tiffany and for me (qtd. in Fine, 1993, p. 84).

Despite this, girls who become pregnant at a young age rarely feel empowered, and they are often stigmatized and labeled a burden to society largely because teen sexuality is associated with fear and immorality (Fine, 1993). Teen mothers, similar to adult unwed mothers, are seen as immoral and perverse because they do not conform to “white and middle-class morality” (R. Austin, 1997, p. 291). Living in poverty stricken, urban areas, most of the girls in Rebecca’s neighborhood, where teen pregnancy is said to be indigenous, become pregnant, have abortions, or give babies up for adoption. People either feel sorry for pregnant girls or they try to make them feel ashamed and/or guilty.

Complete strangers cast judgmental eyes on young pregnant girls. As Gayle sits in the plane holding her baby, she easily reads the conviction of the passengers around her. Pregnant at fifteen, Rebecca, like Gayle, is often met with stares and whispers because people believe her pregnancy confirms her immorality and depravity. Moreover, Rebecca’s principal forces her to stop attending school because she is “in a little trouble”
Rebecca’s mother, Clair, also contributes to this mentality. Clair, under the guise of needing help, monetary and otherwise, from women-friends forces Rebecca to live with Afeni and her mother until after the baby is adopted. However, Clair also wants Rebecca to give birth in a secluded environment in an attempt to conceal her pregnancy. It is not clear whom Clair wishes to hide the pregnancy from, as some people in the community and school are already aware of Rebecca’s pregnancy. Rebecca argues: “…My stupid mother thinks it’s the nineteen hundreds and people shouldn’t know I’m knocked up. Well, I am, so everybody better face the facts” (Woodson, 1991, p.65).

The topic of safe sex does come up in both Like Sisters on the Homefront and The Dear One. Gayle claims she used a condom while having sex with Jose and Troy; yet, because she also admits that she tried to use her second pregnancy as an opportunity for “hooking Troy,” the information Gayle gives is not reliable. Conversely, when Afeni asks Rebecca if she used condoms while having sex, Rebecca tells Afeni she and Danny intended to use condoms, but finally decided to continue to “take chances” instead (Woodson, 1991, p.107).

Each of the girls, despite the progressive, and I would argue feminist, views expressed in the novels, seem to devalue girls. For example, each of the girls who are or wish they were pregnant, want to give birth to boys. Though Rebecca actually gives birth to a girl, throughout most of her pregnancy she imagines the baby is a boy. Similarly, Gayle and Joyce are explicit concerning their feelings about giving birth to girls. Gayle tells Joyce that her baby’s father’s wife is disappointed because “she only had a girl for him,” and Gayle suspects that her own mother values her son, not her daughter [italics are
mine] (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.131). Joyce fantasizes about having a son with J’had because “(Girls are too much trouble)” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, 107). There is the suggestion that women and girls have been inundated with ideas that lead them to devalue themselves.

**Homosexuality**

Though the six novels analyzed here do not all have homosexual characters, it is important to note that the majority of the novels are woman-centered and largely devoid of men. Thus, a number of the books contain “women’s communities that are not sexually [though not necessarily homosexual] and economically dependent on men” (Christian, 1985, p.199). Lorde (1990) defines homophobia as “a terror surrounding feelings of love for members of the same sex and thereby a hatred of those feelings in others,” and she defines heterosexism as “a belief in the inherent superiority of one form of loving over all others and thereby the right to dominance” (p.321). Similarly, Friend (1993) argues that “homophobia is the fear and hatred of homosexuality in one’s self and in others and emerges as a result of heterosexism” (p.211).

Homosexuality is portrayed stereotypically in *Blue Tights*. Very little is said about Clarke, a minor character in the novel; however, the fact that he is a dancer alludes to yet another stereotype—gay male dancer or artist. Clarke dances the lead opposite Joyce in the *Kwanzaa Suite*. His personality—loud and bossy—is also characteristic of a stereotypical depiction of male homosexuality. Clarke’s language use is also stereotypical. For example, to a young male dancer Clarke yells, “Look, Miss Thang! Get into it [a revealing costume] and dance like a man!” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p. 119). Later, Clarke tells Joyce, “…I’m not going to let you injure me because you don’t know
how to lift. *I need my back*” [Italics are original] (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.97).

Typically, as in this example, the focus on homosexuality is about sexual behavior (Friend, 1993). Homosexuals are often depicted as hypersexual. Additionally, the reference intends to suggest, and I would argue ridicule, homosexuality. This seems evident when Joyce thinks, “*Well dig this fruit cup. ‘I need my back.’*” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p. 97). (Italics are original)

Further, Joyce thinks Clarke is jealous of her ability to dance better than he does. In this last example, Joyce makes a generalization about homosexuals. She surmises, “You know how those homos carry on” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p.97). It is not clear why a homosexual character is included in the novel, unless Clarke is there to provide a target for ridicule on the basis of sexuality.

_The Dear One_ offers a more progressive depiction of homosexuality, and it challenges heterosexism and homophobia. Perhaps it is free of the ridicule seen in _Blue Tights_ because it is written by an insider, as the author is lesbian. A couple for eight years, Marion and Bernadette, provide a more realistic depiction of a lesbian relationship, yet they are fully aware that heterosexist views affect their daily lives. Hence, Bernadette attends a support group for gay and lesbian teachers, and Clair refuses to allow Rebecca to stay with Marion and Bernadette because they do not “live the right kind of life” (Woodson, 1991, p.26). Marion’s explanation of Bernadette’s involvement in a support group reveals her understanding of the interlocking oppressions of heterosexism and homophobia at work in society: “They talk about how hard it is to teach in such a straight environment” (Woodson, 1991, p.23). Even Marion’s close friend, Catherine, admits she did not eagerly embrace Marion’s lesbianism initially because of her own homophobia.
Catherine explains, “I didn’t know anything about lesbians and I was scared of them” (Woodson, 1991, p.30). However, *The Dear One* does not focus entirely on the oppression lesbians are faced with. Instead, Marion and Bernadette’s relationship is depicted as loving, romantic and natural.

Catherine’s ability to overcome her fear of lesbianism puts her in a better position to teach Afeni to accept alternative lifestyles. After Afeni concludes, “everything is about sex” including Marion’s relationship with Bernadette, Catherine argues “their relationship is about love” (Woodson, 1991, p.41). Further, Catherine reveals the growth of her perception of homosexuality by talking openly about the possibility of her own daughter being a lesbian. At one point, Afeni asks her mom if she would still love her if she were gay, came home pregnant, or both (Woodson, 1991). Catherine responds: “Of course, Feni” (Woodson, 1991, p.41).

When Rebecca comes to live with Catherine and Afeni, it is obvious that she has internalized negative social views concerning lesbianism. This is another source of conflict between Afeni and Rebecca. Afeni and Marion try to educate Rebecca about sexual orientation, and by the end of the novel, when Afeni accuses Rebecca of not liking Marion initially, Rebecca replies, “I didn’t know her….How you gonna judge someone you don’t know?” (Woodson, 1991, p. 113). The implication here is that people can alter their views of homosexuality and that homosexuals should be judged based on the content of their character, not their sexual orientation.

The YA novels included in this study corroborate B. Smith’s (1990) claim: “Black feminist writing provides an incisive critical perspective on sexual political issues that affect black women…. ” (p.216) Yet, writers for young adult audiences obviously
treat the sexuality theme in ways that are different from writers of literature intended for adults. For example, the YA novels seek to point out the perils and consequences of engaging in sexual activity at an early age—pregnancy, bleak future, limited social life, etc.—in a didactic manner while adult novels generally do not. A reading of *Blue Tights* and *Like Sisters on the Homefront* suggests that an individual should not look to sex or to an individual of the opposite sex to find self-worth and importance, as those things come from inside oneself and from knowing oneself. Additionally, a YA novel like *The Dear One* aims to generate tolerance and acceptance of alternative lifestyles; hence, Rebecca comes to accept Bernadette and Marion’s lesbian relationship.

This chapter reveals that select YA literature and African American literature in the black women’s literary tradition are concerned with issues related to black women’s sexuality. Each of the sex-related issues explored in the texts I analyze above can be used as sites for self-analysis and thoughtful critique in the classroom. (This will be discussed fully in chapter 5.) Confronting sex-related issues vicariously through literature might possibly change students’ perceptions of homosexuality, teen mothers and individuals who act on their sexual desires.
CHAPTER 5
SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS & FINAL THOUGHTS

Introduction

This study is very much about curriculum change. It is about moving beyond “integration efforts” (Higginbotham, 1995) or what Banks and Banks (1989) call the additive approach. This study is about continuing in the pursuit of making literature about those groups of people who have traditionally been excluded or mishandled in our nation’s schools visible. Though T. Harris (1998) asserts that “…adding works by African Americans and other people of color to our curricula is merely the dress rehearsal for what cultural diversity is all about,” this study suggests that cultural diversity is about transformation and social change (p. 211). For this reason, I purposely chose to conduct a study that I hoped would serve as an example of reading multiculturally or from the perspective of the group depicted in the literature. The group I chose are black women, women who have traditionally been marginalized and oppressed as a result of their race, gender, and for some, class. This research is important and useful for several reasons.

First, it contributes to the dialogue about how to maximize the potential and power of African American YA literature so that the novels are not simply read, but interpreted critically by readers whose lives might be altered as a result of a thorough understanding of themes, issues, and underlining messages embedded within the literature. Second, this study suggests a nontraditional approach to reading (and teaching) literature written about African American women and girls. It provides an example of a
way to read literature utilizing a theoretical perspective grounded in the cultural group, black women, depicted in the literature.

Third, it offers educators another opportunity to bridge home and school culture. Ford, et al. (2000) maintain that “When they attend school, children bring knowledge of the world that is unique to their cultural background, including their concepts of family, morality, rules, gender roles, and beliefs about culture” (p.236). Focusing on issues explored within the literature that are familiar to African American students gives students an opportunity to use prior knowledge to exercise skills in interpreting and critiquing literary works. Finally, this study supports scholars’, such as Banks and Banks, 1989; Bishop, 1992; Willis, 1997; H. Johnson, 2000, etc., assertion that teaching from a multicultural perspective means teaching students to think critically about themselves and the world in which they live. In this chapter, I provide a summary of the study, the implications for teacher educators and classroom teachers, and suggestions for furthering this research.

This study examined the intertextual relationship between select YA African American women’s literature and literature within the broader African American women’s literary tradition. Given that many secondary teachers are committed to teaching works by and about African American women, particularly those written for an adult audience, it is necessary that scholars discuss the connection that exists between African American women’s literature written for adults and literature classified as YA literature. One of the goals of this study was to contribute to this discussion.

Literary analysis indicated that key tenets of black feminism, as defined by the researcher, were found in each of the six novels, and there were indeed thematic
connections between the YA novels studied and literature within the African American’s women’s tradition. (See Appendix C) Three themes, in particular, are shared: family, African American expressive culture and sexuality.

YA and adult novels both describe the complexity of family, from how it is defined to how each member functions within the unit. An especially significant aspect of family is the relationship between a mother and her children, particularly her daughters. Throughout the history of African American literature, the role of the mother has been explored. Initially black women writers were careful not to create images of black women that reified stereotypes. Borab (1998) reminds us that “…the depiction of mothers who failed to live up to their responsibilities…” was missing from the literature and mothers generally “…were not allowed to escape oppression by abandoning their children or even by going insane” (p. 86). Borab (1998) maintains that it was the black women writers of the sixties and seventies who went against the grain, choosing not to create “…long-suffering, self-sacrificing, ever-patient, church-going black [women] who offer…hope and emotional strength to others” (p.86). Johnson, Williams-Garcia, and Woodson contribute to this tradition. In Woodson’s I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This, for example, Marie’s mother, Diane, does the unthinkable: she leaves her husband and her daughter in search of a life that will make her happy. It is indicated that the impetus of Marie’s mother’s decision to abandon her is a result of her slightly manic depressive state. Thus, Diane is allowed to do both: become mentally ill and abandon her family. Interestingly, women like Sula and Janie show no indication of longing to become mothers at all (Coon, 1998). In fact, when Eva suggests to Sula that she should consider becoming a
mother, Sula retorts, “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (Morrison, 1973, p. 92).

Expressive culture: beauty, hair, and language use are also major concerns for young people. Borab (1998), along with her high school students, used literature by African American women—*Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple*—to explore the power of beauty in American society. The students analyzed advertisements found in popular magazines and concluded that the whiter/lighter a woman is “the more power and opportunity she has” (Borab, 1998, p.90). Students began to look closely at their own beliefs about beauty, as Borab (1998) encouraged them to analyze their consumer practices. Some students actually began to change their views about beauty. For example, one student admits that she is guilty of judging the physical appearances of others, yet by the end of the unit she reaches an epiphany: “…but I realize how judgmental this is, how I’m putting other women down….” (Borab, 1998, p.91) Borab (1998) states that there were other students who began to alter their thinking as they “realize[d] how subtle [beauty] is as a form of oppression” (p.90).

Sexuality is also examined as the novels feature girls who are pregnant and/or are already teen moms, sexually active or struggling to obtain sexual empowerment. Fine (1990) found that while a wealth of information is shared with students pertaining to sex, very few discussions center on issues of sexual desire and sexual orientation. However, these topics are important when considering adolescent sexual identity formation (Fine, 1990; Friend, 1990). Moreover, Fine argues, “The naming of desire, pleasure, or sexual entitlement, particularly for females, barely exists in the formal agenda of public
schooling on sexuality” (79). The silence surrounding these issues is detrimental to healthy sexual identity development.

**Implications of This Study**

Several implications for both teacher educators and classroom teachers can be gleaned from this study. This study urges teacher educators and classroom teachers to don a black feminist lens, or in other words, utilize literature to address issues related to race, class and gender in the classroom. All students and teachers regardless of race or gender can learn to apply a black feminist lens when reading texts. Thanks to the multicultural education movement, and other social movements, the number of books about people of color available to students and teachers has increased. As a result of this effort, African American literature has increasingly become a part of the school curriculum. The presence of African American literature in school and classroom libraries offers students opportunities to learn about the contributions and experiences of African Americans in this country. As Glenn (1995) states, for some, this type of “vicarious contact” with other cultural groups via literature “might be the only interaction some children have with” diverse groups of people (p. 273). If this is the case, teachers will probably want to provide students with books about a variety of black experiences, which could possibly help students understand that cultural groups are not monolithic. For instance, while books that focus on oppression and the disenfranchisement of people of color are important to include in the classroom, students might also benefit from being exposed to books that foreground the experiences of people of color who are financially secure and prominent members of their communities. Further, though teachers have recognized that it is important to include works by authors of different ethnicities in order
to provide positive images for people of color, Chiu (1997) suggests that the inclusion of multicultural literature often stops with literature by whites and African Americans. It is important to note that students will benefit from the inclusion of literature by all ethnic and racial groups.

Whether the teacher defines herself as (or share the philosophy of) a culturally relevant pedagogy, a black feminist, or a multiculturalist, there are certain dispositions that are shared across these theoretical approaches to teaching. For example, each of the theories suggests that “cultural competence and sociopolitical critique” are essential to a student’s education (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Exposure to African American literature, coupled with opportunities to discuss and share responses to it with teachers and peers, might allow students to think critically about social issues related to race, class, gender and sexual oppression. Thus, students might begin to understand that there are a number of “social structures and practices [that] help reproduce inequities” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 210). More importantly, students might begin to move towards acting against social injustices. In addition to reading African American women’s literature, an analysis and critique of the literature might enhance and enrich readers’ responses. Further, specific implications for teacher educators and classroom teachers are provided in the following discussion.

**Implications for Teacher Educators**

The demographics of the student population in schools demands that teacher educators prepare prospective teachers to meet the needs of students who may be different from them in a number of ways. Most teacher education departments around the country stress their commitment to multicultural education and to preparing teachers to
teach in a diverse society; however, a careful look at these programs leaves one to wonder if this is merely lip service. It seems that if teacher education programs are committed to multicultural education, prospective teachers are being prepared to 1) be inclusive when teaching literature and 2) teach multicultural literature in a way that is meaningful and critical. This cannot be done unless teacher educators themselves model this type of teaching. From my limited observations, I do not believe that there are a significant number of educators in any teacher education program in this country that has committed to multicultural education in this way. This makes it difficult to move prospective teachers from inclusion efforts to the transformative and social action approaches. Dialogue around issues about equity and diversity must begin in teacher education programs and one course on multicultural education taught by a graduate student, in some cases, is insufficient. Prospective and practicing teachers need opportunities to examine their feelings and perspectives of different cultural groups as well as their own (Hinton-Johnson & Renzi, 2002). Teacher education programs are a good place to start to become multicultural (Hidalgo, 1993; Ford & Dillard, 1996; Hinton-Johnson & Renzi, 2002).

If one of the purposes of multicultural education is to encourage transformation and social change, not only must literature be read from the cultural perspective of the group depicted in it, but it must also be taught in ways that acknowledge the point of view of the cultural group represented in the texts. Teaching literature from a black feminist perspective requires a focus on how characters overcome multiply oppressive forces such as racism, classism, sexism; thus, this pedagogical approach can help to reinforce the purposes of the multicultural education movement (Higginbotham, 1995;
Joseph, 1995). This ideology coincides with black feminists’ struggle to liberate oppressed people. Joseph (1995) argues that students “must learn about the black experience in America as experienced by blacks, and not as interpreted from a perspective based on European ideological constructs and values” (p.467). Examining African American literature from a black feminist perspective helps one to abandon the notion that middle-class white experience is the norm. This theoretical perspective challenges this notion, encouraging readers to acknowledge and understand how experiences within the black community often differ from what has been considered the norm. For example, family and ideas about mothering have been defined more broadly within the black community than they have within mainstream society.

**Implications for Classroom Teachers**

This study offers an in-depth look at African YA literature. As a result, there are several arguments embedded in this study that classroom teachers need to be aware of. First, literature is a powerful tool that can be used to teach individuals about themselves and others. Bauer (1994) explains the power of literature this way: “The power of fiction is that it gives us, as readers, the opportunity to move inside another human being, to look out through that person’s eyes, hear with her ears, think with his thoughts, feel with her feelings” (p.x). Classroom teachers need to be cognizant of this power and recognize the need to make sure that the literature they teach is inclusive of various cultural groups regardless of the make up of their students. By this I mean that teachers of all students, even in predominately white classroom settings, should teach literature that is representative of a number of cultural groups. This will probably mean that teachers will need to survey the literature they have in their classroom and school libraries to
determine whether or not they contain multicultural literature. If they do not, I would hope that teachers would take the necessary steps (i.e., serving on committees responsible for purchasing books, using some of their personal money they normally spend on books for their students on multicultural titles as well, etc.) to make sure multicultural literature is available to students.

Additionally, this study argues that African American YA literature should be used for whole group studies in addition to being available to students in classroom and school libraries. The role of African American YA literature is pivotal not only for African American students, but for all students. Beyond including African American YA, this study suggests that teachers and students, including males and students and teachers of all races, cultures, ethnicities, etc., should read the literature from a black feminist perspective or lens. Here, lens is used as a metaphor to describe what happens when “someone [students and teacher] becomes able to see through the eyes of another [black women and girls] and comes to understand their experiences via the metaphorical ‘lens’ that one may consciously or unconsciously put on” (Greenbaum, 1999, p.96). Thus, one manages to “appreciate, understand, or see life through the lenses of the other gender,” and this study argues culture (Greenbaum, 1999, p.96). As Greenbaum explains, taking on the point of view of someone who has different views from your own “is not the same thing as becoming another person” (p. 96). In other words, one does not have to be black and/or female to read or teach literature from a black feminist perspective. The use of a black feminist lens makes it possible for students and teachers to understand African American culture and “to engage in a new dimension of literary experience” (Greenbaum, 1999, p.96). This approach to reading, teaching and studying literature
could help students become more conscious of the African American presence in literature and in society in general.

Further, the study suggests that there is important information that teachers who commit to teaching African American YA literature must know. In other words, regardless of the race of the instructor, the teacher who teaches African American YA literature must have knowledge of African American literary history and African American culture in general before she can do so in a way that might be transformative. The following questions might be considered when teachers and students attempt to analyze African American women’s literature:

1. How do black women and girls negotiate and define family and motherhood?
2. How does the protagonist search for an understanding of family and cultural history?
3. How do the characters resist race, class and gender oppression?
4. How do black girls and women express a philosophy of liberation, by assisting and encouraging themselves and others in efforts to prevail over multiple oppressions (racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, etc.)?
5. How do black girls and women define and value themselves?
6. How do black girls and women name and describe their experiences?
7. How do black girls and women ascribe political value to physical and verbal expression?
8. How do black girls manage to do well in an educational system that was not created for them?

9. What type of work are black women engaged in? Do they work outside the home? Where do they work? Do they provide services for others (i.e., housekeeper, cook, caregiver, etc.)?

10. How do women define poverty? What sentiments are expressed concerning welfare? What types of attitudes are held about welfare recipients? How do people become welfare recipients? What events in the lives of black women and girls occur that cause them to participate in public assistance programs? What separates readers who are not on welfare from characters who are, and what might readers’ lives be like if they suffered similar misfortunes?

11. How do black women and girls perceive religious belief systems?

12. How do black women and girls make sense of color prejudice within the black community?

13. How do black women and girls examine their strength. How do they exert themselves as strong individuals?

14. Do black women and girls rely on women-friends? Do they find empowerment in sisterhood? What about other relationships, with men, for example?

Further, this study provides information about the cultural significance of a variety of topics explored in African American YA literature. The study also suggests texts teachers can turn to to find out more about the issues explored in the study. With the help of a strong teacher education program and a student who is committed to learning and sharpening her craft, it can be done. This study indicates that a teacher would need to read multicultural YA novels and stories as well as book reviews, critical writings and author interviews widely. Additionally, a teacher might familiarize herself with awards for authors and illustrators of color such as the Coretta Scott King Award and the Pura Belpre Award. A media specialist, computer websites and professional journals might also provide a wealth of information.

While it is true that students need to be exposed to literature about and by people of various cultural backgrounds, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, etc., it is just as important for students to learn to think critically about literature, examining and interpreting it from various perspectives. As Goldberg (1998) asserts, “…without thoughtfulness and concentration and complex analyses, I am afraid that ‘multicultural education’ is doomed to reinforce the walls that keep ‘us’ in those limited and limiting spaces marked You and Me, They and We, and never the twain shall meet” (p.157). This study has demonstrated that select YA literature cannot only endure critical analysis, but it can also be read and explored from a culturally relevant theoretical lens. Teachers ought to don this lens when teaching works by people of color.

When considering titles by blacks to teach in secondary classrooms, teachers have relied heavily upon literature generally intended for adults (i.e., Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker’s
The Color Purple, Paule Marshall’s Brown Girl, Brownstones, Octavia Butler’s Kindred, etc.). As Coon (1998) boasts, Beloved is taught “right alongside Hamlet” in some of our nation’s schools (p.33). In my informal conversations with teachers about the books they teach by African American women, the above titles were most often mentioned. A survey of nearly any high school English text book will also reveal that only a few African American women authors are included and most often these are writers who write primarily for adults. Additionally, the texts included in the anthologies are most often from longer works written for an adult audience.

Moreover, after reviewing several articles from various scholarly journals and books about teachers’ experiences with teaching literature by African American women, a similar conclusion was drawn: the authors wrote/write titles intended for adults (i.e., Lorene Cary, Anne Moody, Harriet Ann Jacobs, Frances E.W. Harper, Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, etc.). For example, Borab (1998) made a conscious effort to include literature by women, particularly African American women, in her classes with juniors and seniors. Interestingly, she chose literature such as Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God and Alice Walker’s The Color Purple. YA literature was not considered.

A look at summer reading lists provided similar information. To be precise, Williams (2002) found that of the most frequently listed titles by African Americans on fifty-seven reading lists for Connecticut high schools only one was by a black woman, Maya Angelou. Of the top ten black authors featured on the same lists, three of the authors were black women: “Toni Morrison (7 titles, 35 listings), Maya Angelou (8 titles, 26 listings), and Alice Walker (3 titles, 12 listings)” (Williams, 2002, p.419). Young
adult novels were included on the lists; however, of the top young adult novelists that appear on the lists only one was a black author, Walter Dean Myers (Williams, 2002). Williams (2002) also found that summer reading lists for young people created by teachers include a larger number of “canonized” works than multicultural works. Oftentimes, books that might be more accessible (as well as more interesting) to young people, for example, African American YA literature, are not considered for whole classroom study or independent summer reading. Williams (2002) argues, and I agree, that some young people lack motivation to read because of the “dull and difficult required reading” (p.416). While Beloved is an excellent novel, as Morrison was awarded the Pulitzer Prize to prove it, fifteen and sixteen-year-olds may disagree. However, I am not suggesting that titles by black women written for adults should be abandoned. Quite the opposite is true. I am proposing that African American YA literature would make a fine companion to a number of texts written for adults by African American women.

For many scholars, multicultural education is about introducing students to the experiences of nonwhite people in this country and throughout the world (Higginbotham, 1995). Students are encouraged to acknowledge that a number of cultural groups exist and have made important contributions to the world. It is also important to note that within cultural groups there are many different types of experiences represented. There are books available that provide multiple perspectives of a particular moment in history. This must be considered when we choose literature to share with our students. Books that depict diverse experiences within a cultural group help students learn to avoid making generalizations about groups of people. Classroom teachers will likely do students a disservice if they only expose them to one book about a particular cultural group as if that
book alone will sum up the essence of the cultural group depicted in it. Similarly, confining the study of a particular cultural group to a specific week or month does little to educate our students. Multicultural texts should be taught across the school year and the curriculum. A teacher who is teaching a unit on civil rights would include the perspectives of African American freedom fighters as well as those efforts made by Latinas and Latinos. Literary biographies about Cesar Chavez, the efforts made by Vilma Martinez would be included along with those about Martin Luther King, Jr., John Kennedy and Malcolm X. Why is it that when we teach about the turbulent sixties we do not mention the other racial groups that lived in this country at that time? In a literature class, if a teacher chooses to teach *Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse to discuss the depression and the Dust Bowl, why not teach *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Munoz Ryan as well?

**Recommendations for Further Research**

This study has confirmed that select young adult African American literature share some intertextual themes with African American women’s literature written for adults. Additionally, it has shown that the young adult African American literature in this study contains some of the tenets of black feminist theory and can certainly withstand critical interpretation. Conducting classroom and/or community-based and theoretical research can expand the current study. Reading and discussing the sample YA novels in this study with both boys and girls would be a valuable classroom or community-based study. It would be worthwhile to determine if students focused on some of the issues the researcher found to be significant. It would also be important to note the students’ responses to the novels. Another classroom study would require the researcher to
document the responses of young readers as they read African American YA and adult novels that share intertextual themes. It would be useful to note the issues that are of importance to young people and whether or not the issues relate to their own personal experiences. Another important study would be similar to the national study conducted by Applebee (1993). Discovering the titles and authors of novels written by women and people of color used in our nation’s classrooms would be a useful way to determine if the number of books have increased since Applebee’s study was conducted. Along these same lines, a study that focuses on analyzing how multicultural literature is taught in grades 9-12 would be significant. Mere inclusion of multicultural literature works may not do much to transform students’ ideas about society. Thus, it is equally important to know how teachers choose to teach them.

Theoretical studies could also extend this investigation. For example, expanding the number of sample novels used in this study might help determine the number of YA novels that actually focus on themes that have been traditionally found in African American literature. Finally, analyzing African American YA novels by males to determine if they contain themes similar to those in novels penned by African American women might prove to be significant. Books by African American males might concern themselves with issues that are also important to black feminists. It would be interesting to learn if there are issues that are equally important to both males and females.

**Final Thoughts**

Multicultural literature is an important tool to use in the classroom. Research suggests that literature can be used as a means to pass on societal values while simultaneously reaffirming one's own self-worth (Bishop, 1992b). However, as the
implications for teachers and suggestions for further study indicate, there is still a great deal of work that must be done so that the potential of multicultural literature is maximized. This study has contributed to this discourse by making the following points: 1) African American YA literature should be viewed within the larger context of African American women’s literature and African American literature in general; 2) African American YA literature is worthy of critical attention; 3) African American YA literature should be taught in whole class settings; and 4) African American YA literature shares an intertextual relationship with African American women’s literature written for adults, and therefore can be paired in the classroom. These points might prove helpful to those teachers who wish to use African American literature to expand the power of literature by encouraging students to think critically, employ self-analysis and become socially responsible young adults.
APPENDIX A

Definition of Terms

**African American Literature:** African American literature is literature written by and about African Americans.

**African American Literary Tradition:** Literature by and about African Americans that share similar themes, tropes, etc. that have evolved over a long period of time.

**Black Feminist Literary Criticism:** A process of inquiry by which scholars and critics read, analyze and theorize about literary works by black women writers as well as general works or “texts” by all authors even those who do not identify themselves as either black or female.

**Black Feminist Perspective/Lens:** An approach to reading; it does not require that the reader be black or female, neither does it require that black women be examined within the text. Reading from a black feminist perspective requires a focus on race, class, and gender, and sexual oppression.

**Young Adult Literature:** Non-“classical” or non-“canonized” literature that features protagonists from ages twelve to eighteen.
APPENDIX B

Research Procedures and Methodology

Introduction

Using a black feminist perspective, this study traces the intertextual relationship between select young adult African American women’s literature and African American women’s literature written for adults that exists within the African American literary tradition. This study is particularly concerned with how African American YA literature can withstand critical scrutiny and be used for thoughtful literary study. It also seeks to illustrate how African American YA literature might be read utilizing a culturally relevant theoretical lens. When considering the literary texts chosen for this study, black feminist literary criticism seemed to be an appropriate critical perspective to choose.

The use of traditional methodological and epistemological approaches to this type of study would be inadequate, for traditional methods of inquiry are largely informed by European world views (Christian, 1994; Scheurich & Young, 1996; Joseph, 1995; Dillard, 2000). Repeatedly, epistemologies derived from the “sociocultural histories of people of color” are devalued and dismissed as illegitimate (Scheurich & Young, 1996, p.9). This is especially true for black feminist theory, which continues to struggle to maintain recognition and validation (Christian, 1994; McDowell, 1994; Scheurich & Young, 1996).

African American scholars use theory in ways that are often different from mainstream researchers (Christian, 1994). Since traditional theory is “reductively
defined” (McDowell, 1994, p.569), and in spite of the fact that black feminist theory is often unacknowledged as “theory”, it still seems to me that one of the most productive and informative ways to approach literary works by African Americans, particularly women, is through the use of black feminist literary theory.

**Research Method**

According to Hall (1994), “Content analysis is a research technique used for making systematic inferences from the content of messages” (p.56). This type of analysis is often used to analyze literature written for young people (Liu, 1993; Hall, 1994, Carmichael, 2000). Content analysis relies on “codes of interest” (Ryan & Bernard, 2000) implicated in the researcher’s code book as well as uncategorized ideas that may be present in the text. These codes or categories assist the researcher with organizing data by grouping emerging themes and patterns together (Silverman, 2000). As a result, content analysis was used to determine the intertextual connection between select African American women’s YA literature and literature within the African American women’s literary tradition.

**Research Methodology**

This study rests heavily on the work of black feminists such as Mary Helen Washington, Barbara Smith, Deborah McDowell and Valerie Smith. These scholars, among others, have contributed to, and in some cases, largely defined what is often thought of as black feminist literary criticism. For instance, Mary Helen Washington’s work illustrates her preoccupation with establishing an African American female literary tradition while focusing on common themes and intertextuality within the works of black women. Washington (1990) maintains, “[W]riters speak to other writers. They change,
challenge, revise, and borrow from other writers so that the literary tradition might well look like a grid in one of those airline magazines that shows the vast and intricate interweaving patterns of coast-to-coast flight schedules” (p.7). Some of the common themes Washington noted were the restricted artist, the female political activist, and the sexually violated black woman. V. Smith (1998) commends Washington’s interpretive efforts and notes that Washington’s essays “perform the theoretical work of reconceiving influence, genre, the role of the editor, and the relationship of text to context” (p. XVIII). Washington’s anthologies are important contributions to black feminist criticism. However, where Washington saw black feminist criticism as an effort to piece together those “‘broken and sporadic’ continuities that constitute black women’s literary tradition,” others argued that this approach to literary works was too limiting (Awkward, 1989, p.2).

Though B. Smith’s (1994) groundbreaking essay, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” was also met with criticism, it continues to be an important piece for obvious reasons. For example, B. Smith skillfully develops a framework for the analysis of texts authored by black women. Like Washington, B. Smith (1994) argues that “black women writers constitute an identifiable literary tradition” and their works contain “innumerable commonalities” (p.416). Most importantly, B. Smith (1994) argues that black feminist critics, those who are biologically black and female, should “write out of [their] own identity and not try to graft the ideas or methodology of white male literary thought…” (p.417) McDowell (1994) also expresses one of the objectives of this study when she argues that black feminist criticism should analyze works both contextually and textually, and the critic should “be knowledgeable of African American history and culture while
simultaneously carefully analyzing the text” (p.434). This does not mean that the critic must be black. I echo V. Smith (1998) who so aptly states, “black feminism is not a biologically grounded positionality” (p.xv). Though the works in this study were written by and about black women, I would contend that works that are not concerned with “black women’s cultural production” could also be read from a black feminist perspective (V. Smith, 1998, p. xv).

**Book Selection**

Selecting young adult novels by contemporary African American women was a significant part of the design of this study. I used the Coretta Scott King Award Winners and Honor Books list and a list of contemporary writers that appeared on a syllabus prepared by Rudine Sims Bishop for an African American children’s literature course to identify contemporary African American women writers. Writers who appeared on both lists were considered for this study. Once the writers were chosen, I compiled a list of books that met the following criteria for text selection in this study: 1) The novel contained a black female protagonist between the ages of twelve and eighteen and 2) The novel was written for a young adult audience. Two novels that met the above criteria by each author were selected.

**Instrument**

One key premise in this study is that African American YA literature is an important part of the African American literary tradition, as it shares many themes and purposes—including black feminist efforts. In order to analyze the data, coding categories were used. Some of the categories found on the character and book analysis

---

6 This does not mean that the writers themselves are black feminist; however, the literature may contain feminist themes.
forms were adapted from Hall (1994) while others emerged from the data. Hall’s (1994) study was concerned with the images of African American males in picture books published between 1971 and 1990. Hall’s (1994) character analysis instrument contained the following 10 categories: character’s name/title, status of character, race, sex, age, socioeconomic level, family status, physical characteristics, occupations, and behaviors. Hall’s (1994) book analysis instrument included the following 4 categories: characters, setting, occupations, and theme. The categories on the tenets of black feminism form were generated from research in the areas of black feminist literary criticism and black feminist theory. The categories found on the language analysis form were influenced by Smitherman (1977, 2000). All categories were chosen because they were important to the study.

Coding Categories

The six books in this study were read and analyzed utilizing four coding instruments: 1) Book Analysis Form, 2) Character Analysis Form, 3) Tenets of Black Feminism Form, and 4) Language Analysis Form. A coding sheet adopted from Hall (1994) is included to indicate number codes. The analysis forms and coding sheet are in Appendix C. Each book was reread in order to fill out each analysis form.

Book Analysis Form

The book analysis form was used to analyze each book.

Characters: Only main characters, characters that contributed to the action of the story and or interacted with the protagonist regularly, were considered. The sex and race of the characters was noted.
Setting: The setting, or location where majority of the story’s action takes place, was concluded and reported.

Issues: Issues refer to the theme or topic presented in the book. Issues were derived from Hall (1994) and my own personal knowledge of subjects that concern teenage young girls. The categories include family, friends, school, race/racism, sexuality, religion, abuse, coming-of-age, single parenting, adoption and sexism.

Character Analysis Form:

Along with the coding sheet and character analysis form, main characters of each book were analyzed. The number codes from the code sheet were used though there was room allowed for topics not included on the code sheet to emerge.

Character name: The names of characters were written on the form.

Family: The dynamics of a character’s family was determined based on the details the character gave about his or her family. Family was described as two married parents, single parent, divorced parents, deceased parent(s), abandoned parent(s), extended family (i.e., aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents) and adopted family.

Physical Trait: Skin color was coded and determined by descriptions of characters given in the book. Specific passages reveal how characters’ skin color is described.

Sex: Passages in the book were used to determine if characters were male or female.

Age: Age was determined by dialogue and narration included in the book. Ages listed on code sheet are (1) 4-12yrs, (2) 13-18yrs, (3) 19-30yrs, (4) 31-up.

Race: Descriptive passages in the book were used to determine race of characters.

Occupation: Hall’s (1994) instrument was used to code the occupations of working characters. There are four occupation categories: (1) Professional: doctor, lawyer,
teacher, etc.; (2) Occupational: plumber, mechanic, etc.; (3) Laborer: factory worker, cab driver, domestic, etc.; (4) Other.

**Socio-economic Level (SE):** The Socio-economic level of characters was discerned based on Hall’s (1994) coding system. Three categories were used: (1) Poor: meager homes, food, cars, clothes; (2) Middle class: comfortable homes, food, cars, clothes; (3) Wealthy: luxurious homes, cars, clothes, foods.

**Character Status:** The type of character was determined as it relates to how the character might be classified as either main, significant to the plot, or minor, not crucial to the plot.

**Tenets of Black Feminism Form**

After the book was analyzed using the Book Analysis Form and the Character Analysis Form, the book was examined utilizing the Tenets of Black Feminism Form. The tenets of black feminism used in this study are also some of the features of the African American literary tradition. These tenets or features are what separate black women writers from their male counterparts. Descriptive passages and quotes were used to determine if tenets of black feminism were included in the book. The purpose of this form was to discover feminist themes and issues included in YA novels about black girls. This form was of particular importance because it was used to assist in the critique of each novel from a black feminist perspective. When critiquing each novel from a black feminist perspective, the following questions were asked:

1. Does the protagonist have agency, act as subjects, and/or find strength in her own voice?
2. Does the novel place issues related to black women and girls at the center?
Though additional themes and issues arose as the books were analyzed, the following categories were coded:

**Redefining/Revising/Reversing & Resisting:** African American women writers have traditionally redefined, revised, and reversed degrading and stereotypical images that have historically been attributed to them (Collins, 2000). They have redefined beauty standards, motherhood, womanhood, art, and themselves. They have revised ideas about education, epistemology, and who has the right to be artists. Further, Busia (1988) writes, “Any viable criticism of [Black women’s] works must take this into account: As black women we have recognized the need to rewrite or to reclaim our own herstories, and to define ourselves” (p.1).

**Subjectivity & Voice:** Black feminist writers often create characters that realize their own voice and define themselves as subjects rather than objects. Morrison warrants, “…[I]t is no longer acceptable merely to imagine us and imagine for us. We have always been imagining ourselves….We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience… (Morrison, 1994, p. 375).

**Intersectionality of Race, Class, and Gender:** Black women’s literature and black feminist criticism often articulate the multiple oppression of race, class, and gender that operates in the lives of black women. According to Bethel (1982), “Black feminist literary criticism offers a framework for identifying the common socio-aesthetic problems of authors who attempt to fashion a literature of cultural identity in the midst of racial/sexual oppression” (p.178).

**The Importance of Relationships:** Relationships formed within the community and amongst family members, particularly between mothers and daughters, are also of
particular interest to black women writers. Bethel (1982) reminds us that “Black women have a long tradition of bonding together in a community that has been a source of survival information, and psychic and emotional support” (p.179).

**Political Intent/Social Action:** Literary works by African American women often include characters with profound political voices in the community. The protagonist of Paule Marshall’s (1990) “Reena”, for example, dedicates most of her life to political causes. While young, Reena joins a “houseplan” with aims of getting “those girls up off their complacent rumps and do something about social issues…” Other characters in black women’s fiction engage in the civil rights movement, organize within their communities for various political reasons and speak out fervently against social injustices of every kind. In some ways, the characters lead political lives similar to those led by black women writers. A number of black women writers argue that art is, in fact, political. For instance, Morrison (1984) explains, “…If anything I do, in the way of writing novels or whatever I write, isn’t about the village or the community or about you, then it isn’t about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private exercise of my imagination…which is to say yes, the work must be political….”

**Sexuality:** Traditionally, black women have felt compelled to debunk myths concerning their assumed hyper sexuality; yet, they seldom wrote openly about sex. It seems that Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* marks the period in which black women writers began to be more open about sexuality, revealing their own thoughts about how sexuality becomes politicized.

**Confirming Africa’s Influence:** Black women writers often create literature that indicates a connection to African folk culture, folklore, and the oral tradition. Busia
(1988) refers to this as “the revalidation of ‘Africa’ by the incorporation of elements of the folk culture, oral tradition in particular, into written texts” (p.3). Further, Busia (1988) acknowledges, “In this united endeavor to reinterpret our lives in our writings, black women…incorporate into their written works some aspect of those…arts and folk traditions which have informed their lives” (p. 14).

**Language Analysis Form**

The last form used to analyze the books was the Language Analysis Form. The purpose of this form was to determine the extent to which different types of language use are presented in the novels. Descriptive passages and quotes were used to determine if Black English Vernacular (BEV), Mainstream American English (MAE), nonstandard English or some other language was used in the novels. Additionally, the form was used to determine if certain components of the African American Verbal Tradition (AAVT) such as storytelling, signifying, proverbs or spitting game (i.e., love rapping) were included in the books. Additional themes and issues arose as the books were analyzed; however, the following categories were coded based on Geneva Smitherman’s research on BEV presented in *Talkin and Testifyin* (1977) and *Talk That Talk* (2000):

**Storytelling:** According to Richardson (2002), “Storytelling remains one of the most powerful language and literacy practices that Black women use to convey their special knowledge” (p. 687). Storytelling is a rich part of the African American oral tradition.

**Signifying:** Smitherman maintains that signifying is the “verbal art of ceremonial combativeness in which one person puts down, talks about, ‘signifies on’ someone or on something someone has said” (Smitherman, 2000, p. 255). Signifying has been a part of the documented African American literary tradition since the 1500s (Gates, 1988).
**Proverbs:** Proverbs, or “short, succinct statements which have the sound of wisdom and power” are an important part of the African American oral tradition because they are a reflection of the connection between African America and West African societies (Smitherman, 1977, p. 95).

**Spitting Game**\(^7\): Spitting game refers to communication typically between a man and an unfamiliar woman; however, women also engage in this type of discourse with men. This is a popular form of communication in contemporary settings and it has been a part of the AAVT for quite some time.

**Codeswitching:** Researchers indicate that most African Americans regardless of social class and/or educational level use BEV outside the workplace or other settings where people (most often whites) the speaker is not familiar with are present (Smitherman, 2000; Richardson, 2002). A number of African Americans choose to codeswitch, a process by which speakers vary language use according to audience.

**Themes Within the African American Women’s Literary Tradition**

After the analysis forms were completed and the data was analyzed to determine thematic patterns, each novel was reread in an effort to identify themes in the YA novels that are also characteristic of novels within the African American women’s literary tradition. Though themes within the African American women’s literary tradition often overlap with those within the African American literary tradition (which includes men and women writers), scholars tend to agree that there are particular themes that women employ (Washington, 1990; Gates & McKay, 1997).\(^8\) The themes were derived from

\(^7\) This is an updated name for what Smitherman (2000) refers to as love rap, a discourse men and women use when speaking to individuals they are interested in pursuing.

\(^8\) A number of themes traditionally found in African American women’s literature are now being employed by African American male writers (i.e., homosexuality and the importance of relationships).
close readings of Washington, 1990; Gates & McKay, 1997; Evans, 1984 and Wall, 1989. These themes also share a relationship with the tenets found in black feminism. A number of the themes below are also included on the tenets of black feminism analysis form. (Appendix C) Works within the African American women’s literary tradition often include an emphasis on one or more of the following themes and issues:

1. motherhood
2. mother-daughter relationships
3. women-friends
4. female sexuality, lesbianism, rape, molestation
5. women’s work
6. community
7. race, class and gender oppression
8. class differences
9. socialization of children
10. multiple definitions of blackness

Using the list of themes above, I discussed text(s) within the African American women’s literary tradition that connect intertextually with a particular YA novel in the study. (See Appendix D) While I fully discuss how a particular theme is expressed in the YA novels, I only briefly discuss the thematic connection found in the adult novel. For example, when I discuss mother-daughter relationships within the YA novels, I provide several examples of the complexity of the mother-daughter relationships within each of
the six novels; however, I use only one or two examples from adult novels to illustrate the thematic connection between the two types of novels.

**Trustworthiness**

To me, objectivity is neither necessary nor possible within this study (Christian, 1994). As a black woman, it goes without saying that my positionality, experiences, and epistemology will influence my discussion of literary works by black women (Christian, 1994). Though my world view has been influenced by my culture, I also, as a teacher and researcher, view inquiry as my responsibility (Dillard, 2000), and I have approached this research academically. However, I must also acknowledge that I took the reading and interpreting of African American literature personally, particularly since this literature has been both “life-sustaining” and “life-saving” for me (Christian, 1994, p. 508).

feminism analysis forms were used. These different types of data, code sheets, quoted dialogue and illustrative passages all help to ensure trustworthiness.
**Appendix C**

**Code Sheet**

**Categories:**

**Character Status**
- 1-Main
- 2-Secondary
- 3-Minor
- 4-Background

**Physical Traits**
- Skin color
  - 1-Brown
  - 2-white
  - 3-other

**Race**
- 1-African American
- 2-White
- 3-Other

**Occupations**
- 1-Professional: doctor, lawyer, teacher, etc.
- 2-Occupational: plumber, mechanic, etc.
- 3-Laborer: factory worker, cab driver, domestic, etc.
- 4-Other

**Sex**
- 1-M
- 2-F

**Age**
- 1---4-12yrs
- 2---13-18yrs
- 3---19-30yrs
- 4---31-up

**SE: Socio-Economic Level**
- 1-Poor: meager homes, food, cars, clothes
- 2-Middle class: comfortable homes, food, cars, clothes
- 3-Wealthy: luxurious homes, cars, clothes, foods

**Family Status**
- 1-Two parents, married
- 2-One parent
- 3-Divorced parents
- 4-Deceased Parent
- 5-Abandoned Parent
- 6-Extended Family
- 7-Adopted

**Language Use**
- 1-BEV (Black Eng. Vernacular)
- 2-MAE (Mainstream American Eng.)
- 3-Codeswitch
- 4-Nonstandard English
- 5-Storytelling
- 6-Spitting game
- 7-Proverbs
- 8-Signifying
- 9-Other
Tenets of Black Feminism

1- Redefining/Revising/Reversing & Resisting (stereotypes, beauty standards, motherhood, family, womanhood, art, education, epistemology)

2- Subjectivity & Voice (self-discovery, self-actualization, protagonist tells her own story, self-identity, agency)

3- Intersectionality of race, class & gender (raises issues concerning the multiple oppression of race, class, and gender)

4- Importance of Relationships & Family (friends, men, mother-daughter, community, family)

5- Sexuality (homosexuality, sexual intercourse, sexual politics)

6- Political Action/Awareness (social action, politics, historical events going on in society)

7- Confirming Africa's Influence (folk culture, oral tradition)
Character Analysis Form

Book_____________________   Author_________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Physical Trait</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>*Occ</th>
<th>•SE</th>
<th>♦Stat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Occupation
•Socio-economic Level
♦Character Status
Character Analysis Form Part 2
Revealing Passages:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Page #</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Book Analysis Form

Title

Author

Setting: Home___  City___  Rural___  School___  Other__________

Main Characters:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>___________________</td>
<td>___________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___________________</td>
<td>___________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___________________</td>
<td>___________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___________________</td>
<td>___________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___________________</td>
<td>___________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___________________</td>
<td>___________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___________________</td>
<td>___________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___________________</td>
<td>___________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Issues:

Family___  Friends___  School___  Race___  Sexuality___  Religion___  Abuse___  Coming-of-age___  Single parenting___  Adoption___  Other__________

Notes: _____________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

156
## Tenets of Black Feminism Form

**Book:** ______________________  **Author:** ____________________

### Revealing Passages:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tenet of BFC</th>
<th>Page #</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Language Analysis Form  A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book Title</th>
<th>MAE*</th>
<th>BEV**</th>
<th>Nonstandard English</th>
<th>Codeswitch</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Mainstream American English  
**Black English Vernacular
Language Analysis Form  B

Book________________________   Author_________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AAVT*</th>
<th>Page#</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*African American Verbal Tradition
LIST OF REFERENCES


Bethel, L. (1982). “This infinity of conscious pain”: Zora Neale Hurston and the black female literary tradition. In G.T. Hull, P.B. Scott, & B. Smith (Eds.), *All the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave: Black women's studies* (pp.176-188). New York: The Feminist Press.


Rooks, N.M. (2001). Wearing your race wrong: Hair, drama, and a politics of representation for African American women at play on a battlefield. In M. Bennett & V.D. Dickerson (Eds.), Recovering the black female body: Self
representations by African American women (pp. 279-295). New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.


Young Adult Literature


