Uncovering the Literate Lives of Black Female Adolescents

Dissertation

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By

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Abstract

Given that the lives and literacies of Black female youth remain under-researched (Evans-Winters, 2005; Hill-Collins, 2009), the purpose of this dissertation is to highlight the ways in which Black female adolescents conceive of self and society. Although the interests and identities of Black females have been brought to the fore by a number of writers and researchers, more attention is often placed on Black women and not on Black girls. Therefore, this dissertation, which draws on qualitative data collected during a two-year period, focuses on: 1) Black female adolescents’ understandings of themselves and the world around them, 2) how their use of autoethnography—a common methodological approach to researching the self—helps to shape these understandings, and 3) the implications of using autoethnography for deeper investigations into the lives and literacies of Black female adolescents.

In this study, theories in Black feminism, critical pedagogy, and research in adolescent literacy are employed to further address Black female adolescents’ conceptions of self and society. Qualitative data were collected and analyzed through the use of note-taking in a research journal, video-taped recordings of weekly meetings, video-taped interviews with participants, writings by participants (e.g., their autoethnographic work), and literacy artifacts that were utilized and/or produced within weekly meetings. Findings reveal the girls’ understandings that society places lesser value on young Black woman- and/or Black girlhood, the girls’ resistance to
commonplace notions of young Black woman- and/or Black girlhood, the girls’ desire to engage in both traumatic and triumphant story-telling, and shared understandings of self and society. Therefore, this dissertation study has greater implications for: 1) extending conversations on what counts as (qualitative) research and how research can be carried out by and with Black female adolescents specifically and youth, generally, 2) engaging in research that highlights the lives and literacies of Black female adolescents, and 3) addressing the socio-emotional needs and academic interests of Black female adolescents in schools.

*Keywords*: Black girls, adolescents, literacies, lives, autoethnography
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followed me to the ends of the earth. When I didn’t believe in myself, you believed in me, and for this and more, I will always love you.
Vita

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Chapter 1:

From Humble Beginnings . . .

An Introduction

Today was the first day and I think it went really well. Elzora, Amora, Kayla, Elaine, Leslie, Shey, and Elena. I prayed for at least 7 or 8 and God came thru as always. I enjoyed doing the line activity and the sing-along worked well. Next week we said we’d break the tie in terms of who won the group singing competition (or those each group could sing and remember). I think we should start off w/ that.

Prior to the meeting Shey shared w/ me that she had gotten into a fight w/ another girl at her group home. She had a busted blood vessel in her eye and scratches on her face. This happened right before school and she went to school anyway; it was also her first day back from suspension. She was quiet in the group today and I’m wondering if some of the comments the girls were making made her not feel as eager to express that side I’ve seen or at least what she gives off as though she’s proud that she cussed out the principal, teacher, and security guard last week. I wonder if being in this group will help her to channel her emotions, although I do understand that there are probably things that have happened to her that make her want to act out on these emotions.

When we were discussing Karrine Steffans—a widely known Black video model and celebrity groupie—several of the girls were quick to suggest that it
didn’t matter what her background was—she didn’t have to blame everything on
her childhood. I had shared that on TV One she mentioned being verbally and/or
physically abused by her mother. Many of them said, “So,” like it didn’t matter.
This was before I could also mention what it might do to the female psyche if not
properly treated. So going into this study, I’m wondering what is it going to take
to increase the level of understanding and compassion for the human condition?
Not only that, how can we get them to move past one-sided thinking? Maybe it
isn’t possible. But, this is something I would like to work towards. Some of the
other topics they have brought up were about stereotypes of Black women.
Wanting to please men. Being strong. Another topic was how White women may
secretly be envious of what we have. “That’s why they try to put us down” >
comment by Elaine. She then elaborated on this by discussing people like Kim
Kardashian who tan, get the full lips, big behind. So on and so forth.

I’m also having reservations “researching” the group. Why can’t I just be
w/ them? Researching seems to take out the fun aspect and the good intent behind
it, although, I do know what comes out of it will/might do something for them as
well as for others. Me as well. (post-session journal reflection, 10/05/10)

My post-journal reflection here includes my innermost thoughts and feelings from
the very first day of my exploration into the literate lives of Black female adolescents.
Undoubtedly, I experienced a swell of emotions on that first day—from fear, doubt, and
disbelief to joy, eagerness, and optimism. Not knowing where this journey might take
me, I was satisfied in believing that the girls would sufficiently guide me. Interestingly
enough, Elaine came up with our agreed-upon name—African Ascension—the following
week and given the importance of naming in African/American-American culture (Dillard, 2006; Sium, 2011), this proved a perfect fit. The name “African Ascension” would mark our ascent (moving up) and advancement (moving forward)—that we were, indeed, on a journey to someplace together. Likewise, I hoped to benefit equally from our time together and not simply as a Black\textsuperscript{1} and female researcher, but moreso as a caring, responsive, and engaged human being.

My quest into the literate lives of Black female youth began more than three years ago after I had spent several months observing in a White female high school teacher’s English Language Arts classroom. During this time, I began to notice common patterns amongst all of her Black female students, each of whom appeared to be silent, withdrawn, and nearly invisible (in the one class I observed). Over the course of a particular unit on the Holocaust, many of her students expressed mild to extreme interest in the material with the exception of her Black female students who actively avoided the texts and one another. Moreover, the teacher was no less active in avoiding them as well (e.g., not encouraging the girls to participate and/or permitting them to sleep in class). By the quarter’s end, there was no denying that the seeming invisibility of these five young women had struck a chord with me. I wondered who listened to them or cared enough to learn more about them. I wondered, too, about my own experiences as a high school English teacher and how often I had done the same. In what ways had I as a Black female been responsible for silencing the voices and overlooking the faces of other (young) Black females in my own classroom? Was this a fairly common phenomenon? And if so, what could be done about it? Rather than simply pondering over such questions, I then

\textsuperscript{1} In this dissertation, I use the term “Black” and “African American” interchangeably, however, I use the term “Black” most often to represent the range of ethnicities, cultures, and nationalities that make up the African diaspora of which each of my participants are a part.
decided to direct my attention toward examining the lives and literacies of Black female adolescents.

As such, the central goals of my research are to consider how Black female adolescents conceive of self and society and how particular reading, writing, and speaking acts (or those that highlight their experiences as young Black females) help to shape their conceptions. My interest in working with this population as well as in exploring this topic lies in the fact that the research on Black female youth, in general, is relatively sparse, and particularly so in the area of adolescent literacy. Additionally, several scholars note that if and when the lives and literacies of Black females are examined, they are frequently misrepresented as well (Collins, 2009; Evans-Winters, 2005; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Fordham, 1993; Morris, 2007).

For two years, I had the pleasure of meeting with a group of young women\(^2\) for an hour and thirty minutes each week to read, write, and speak about their realities—including their relationships, school experiences, future goals, and identities—as young Black women and to engage them in critical understandings of self, Other, and society. When we met there was laughter. There was crying. There was chatting. And there was seriousness. But, most importantly, there was a show(er)ing of love. In these weekly sessions, we spent time analyzing texts that ranged from poetry to song lyrics to fiction and non-fiction literature to film to ads and music videos. Our writing activities mainly consisted of autobiographical pieces, free-writes, reader response, poetics, and journal exchanges that involved the girls and me writing and responding to one another in the pages of their notebook. Further, we opened each session with announcements of

\(^2\) I also use the terms “adolescents,” “girls,” “youth,” and “young women” interchangeably to represent my participants’ varied ages, experiences, and level of maturity. When I refer to myself or other adult females associated with my study, I use the term “woman.”
upcoming events and/or of anything significant that had happened in our lives. Because I facilitated each of our activities (meaning that I often selected what we read or the prompts we responded to), my goal was to ensure that all of our topics were driven by what came out of our weekly sessions and/or what the girls explicitly told me interested them.

Yet in considering the larger significance of my research—its impact on me, other researchers, teachers, and above all, the participants themselves—I felt it necessary to look more deeply into autoethnography, a frequently used methodological approach to examining the self. Though I, too, have been young, Black, and female, there are limits to how or what I can know about living with one or no parents, attending suburban schools and private schools (or even any at all) as well as experiencing physical, sexual, and/or emotional trauma. Because my participants have lived these realities they are able to share with me what it is like for them to be young, Black and female in the 21st Century and it is for these reasons that I invited the girls to engage in autoethnography. It is a form of narrative inquiry that constitutes theory and (self) therapy, description and (self) analysis, concern and (self) critique (Camangian, 2010; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography is a reflexive process that also encourages thinking around larger issues of self and as it relates to the positioning of self within society. Consequently, my research explores the following questions: How do Black female adolescents conceive of self and society? How does autoethnography help to shape their conceptions? What are the larger educational and political implications of using autoethnography to examine Black female adolescents’ lives and literacies?
In designing our projects, we (i.e., the girls and me) selected our own topics, collected literacy artifacts related to these topics, and created culminating digital products to share with family and friends. Since we spent most of our time reading, writing, and speaking about our own lives, our use of autoethnography demonstrates how we can account for the similarities and differences within each of our experiences while we also begin to recognize our own locations as young Black women. Most importantly, we can collectively reflect and respond to the self and others differently as we strive to become better, more conscious human beings.

One of the major studies that has influenced my thinking thus far is Camangian’s (2010) “Starting with self: Teaching autoethnography to foster critically caring literacies.” In this article, Camangian shares his strategies for fostering compassion, connection, and critical self-awareness in the classroom as he also explores why autoethnography can be an effective approach to teaching and learning with urban youth of color. Additionally, Camangian finds that his students better understood themselves and others around them through reading, writing, and vocalizing their experiences: “Sharing autoethnographies has the potential to humanize Black and Brown students’ understanding of one another by healing the various perceived differences they experience within their social contexts” (pp. 179-180). In these ways, Camangian’s students are afforded opportunities to become centered (i.e., their voices, identities, experiences) in the classroom rather than Othered (i.e., marginalized, ignored; Dillard, 2006, Du Bois, 1994).

Though Camangian (2010) acknowledges that autoethnography can often look like self-aggrandizement, he also understands it as a critical first step in encouraging
urban youth of color to look within and outside the self and to establish emotional
connections with others. Likewise, Collins (2009) understands that for Black women (and
I would add Black girls), self-awareness is also achieved through their connections with
others: “The issue of the journey from internalized oppression to the ‘free mind’ of a self-
defined, womanist consciousness has been a prominent theme in the works of U.S. Black
women writers . . . . Far from being a narcissistic or trivial concern, this placement of self
at the center of analysis is critical for understanding a host of other relationships” (p.
123). This understanding of relationships and desire to seek connection with others was
something I also witnessed in working with my own participants. Elena, a high school
senior and an active participant in the initial year of my study, states, “I don’t normally
do things like this [participating in African Ascension], so I thought it would be
something nice to do after school. Also, a great way to meet other people, and get a better
understanding of other people’s experiences and backgrounds.” Others like Nikayla, a
home-schooled student, expresses these sentiments: “Well since I’ve been in the program
I then learned how to be myself and not trying (sic) to impress other people. I’ve
learned how to show my girly side instead of holding everything in.” Thus, in our journey
toward becoming caring, connected, healthy, and humanized selves, I would be remiss if
I did not also encourage the young women I work with to use autoethnography as a tool
for getting there.
Looking Backwards and Forwards, Inward and Outward

Figure 1. Cluster map

The Awakening

The voice of one Blackgirlwoman
Among many.
Becoming.
In mind
In flesh
In spirit
The wife, mother, soul collaborator,
Friend, mentor, teen advocate,
Sister, daughter, child of God,
Loving
Living
Lifting
All.
Believing
Bettering
Becoming
Me.

Figure 2. Poem I constructed from cluster map

I wrote this poem (see Figure 2) after creating the cluster map featured in Figure 1. Without realizing it, this poem represented my initial foray into autoethnography. It was an unconscious act, yet somehow I understood that in order to write about myself I
had to know where I stood in relation to others. For me, this poem is truly about my process of becoming not simply an academic, but a more fully engaged and empathetic human being. My poem reflects the process of renaming myself as I strive to be more conscious of my thoughts, speech, and actions. A Blackgirlwoman is what I would like to call myself. She is one who still harbors her innocence, and at the same time, is unafraid to admit her guilt. A Blackgirlwoman cherishes and channels the spirit of both her inner girl and outer womanhood. A Blackgirlwoman also recognizes she is always and foremost a triple threat—as a raced, classed, and gendered being. Hence, the term Blackgirlwoman is not one I use here lightly for to do so would mean distancing myself from the research and the relationships I have built and will continue to build.

Here the old adage—“When you know better, you do better”—is also called to mind. Through autoethnography, I can look backward and forward, inward and outward to reflect on and respond to the Self and others differently. Who do I aim to be? As a wife? Mother? Daughter? Friend? Educator? Citizen? How will my transformation positively impact my life, the lives of others, and society at large? In other words, how can I take what I have learned to become a better human being? Dyson (2007) argues that our consciousness can be dramatically transformed through “our personal research” (p. 45). Metaphorically speaking, he states: “My perception of this Landscape of Transformation is that we reach a stage when we begin to see things differently to that which we first thought, or perceived. Our prior perspective is turned upside down. Within this landscape we potentially live differently because we have seen another way of looking at the world and the ‘others’ within the world in which we live” (p. 45). This is what I have come to experience in my work with Black girls and for the last few years, it
has been both a humbling and humanizing (Dyson, 2007; see also Paris, 2010; Kinloch & San Pedro, 2013) experience. Moreover, writing about the Self helped me to come to know my Self.

For months now, I have continued to ask: Who am I? Who am I in relation to others? Whose story do I tell? Theirs? My own? Is it rarely about me and always about them? And can our work ever be both selfish and selfless? Fortunately, there are other researchers who have been just as troubled by the role of Self in research and have used autoethnography as a means of addressing such questions. It is through autoethnography that Dyson (2007) can better articulate his role as both “subject” and “object” (p. 39) of his research, locating himself within and outside of the social context. I, too, see myself as an integral part of my study. In the beginning I had naively assumed my role would be that of participant observer, yet I later found myself to be fully enmeshed in all that was happening around me; also, it helped that each of my participants had expressed their satisfaction with my handling of the activities and with our sessions overall. Hence, representing my data through autoethnography (rather than strictly through expository means) has been useful in that it has prompted me to question as well as to articulate my role and positionality within my research and in relationship to my participants.

**Looking in and looking out.** My research interests were borne out of a need to also see where I fit in as a budding Black female academic. As I come to this research, I think about how some of the negative responses to and/or perceptions of Black female youth (as loose, loud, or aggressive) are also attributed to me as a Black female doctoral student who can and does exist inside and outside of the academy. To (co-)exist in this White-, female-dominated environment everyday is a struggle, particularly as I go from
being one of many African Americans, to one of few. It is also a struggle to know that the language I speak is not the one I can use, and to believe that everyone who hears my voice may not always be listening to my words. Additionally, it is a struggle to sense that my intelligence is being questioned, to think less is expected of me than my White peers, and to feel as if I do not belong in the academy. Thus, how do I position myself within this environment and how am I positioned by others? Part of this constant reflection also drives my desire to work with these young women who are continuously positioning and repositioning themselves within and against society. It is this latter point that leads me to consider the ways our stories are similar and different as I inquire: How does being Black and how does being female connect us all?

**Looking forward and looking back.** As I come to reflect upon myself as an academic, I must also reflect on myself as a young woman, coming of age in the 1990s—a young woman wanting to know love, give love, and be loved. Although my mother was always present, she spoke little and she listened even less. My current project, however, has been a part of filling this void—giving back what I rarely ever received: listening more, talking less, not criticizing, not judging, and not shunning. I seek to simply be present with and because of the females in my dissertation study. Being present has allowed me to learn much about myself and others: who I am as a Black woman; how I conceive of self and others; and, how endless reading, writing, and speaking practices function in my own life. Indeed, maintaining such critical awareness is key to my survival inside and outside the academy.

It is through autoethnography that I can make meanings and connections to the world outside of myself and take steps toward change in the ways I listen and respond to
others. Autoethnography is a form of inquiry that allows one to re-search the Self as one researches others; thus, if humanizing is a central goal of our research, autoethnography is a good place to begin.

When I Was 17 . . . : An Autoethnographic Account

The following is a snapshot of events in my life at the age of 17. In this autoethnography, I draw from the MTV series, “When I Was 17,” which features celebrity accounts of what their lives were like at 17. In past shows, topics have included school life, dating, fashion, music/TV/movie tastes, family, funny pranks, and more. I adopted this approach to continually remind myself of the purpose of this study—to further understandings of the lives and literacies of Black female adolescents. Given that the majority of my participants were high-schoolers, it seemed fitting for me to revisit this particular time in my life. In doing so, I am reminded of the trials and triumphs of my youth; who I was then is not all that I am now and the same is true for my participants. Thus, it is important that I also take an objective approach to what I have discovered in my findings (e.g., Nikayla and Jordan’s maturation over the course of the study, Chyvae’s expression of vulnerability).

Though the girls’ autoethnographies remain the highlight of my dissertation, it is necessary for me to include my own. It is important that I be just as critical of my own experience as I am of the girls and exhibit the same level of vulnerability as the girls do themselves. Carefully reflecting on my past allows me to empathize with the near and not-so-near parallels to my own experience. Reflecting upon these experiences helps me to remember the essence of Black girlhood, that even in this 33-year old grown woman

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3 In the following section I borrow from creative writing professor and consultant, Gabriele Rico’s, two-minute autobiographies technique—a process that entails writing a series of vignettes for 2-5 minutes without pausing.
body I am still a Black girl. And lastly, these recollections work to position me in this process as more than just a researcher, but as a flawed human being.

When I Was 17 . . .

When I was 17, it was the year 1997. Life was real good. Matter of fact, it was better than good. I was a junior in high school and a college student by night. I was a straight-A Honors student, a member of the National Honors Society, president of several school-affiliated clubs, and on track to become the high school valedictorian. And I was in love, as only a 17-year old girl would be.

When I was 17, I was what one might call a “fringe kid.” By that I mean, I was never beholden to any one particular social group; instead, I hung out on the periphery or on the boundaries of various cliques. I hung out with several of the popular girls both Black and White, girls in sophomore classes, super geeks, jocks, and others who didn’t fit easily into any of those groups. This way I stayed out of numerous fights and confrontations and remained friends (or possibly even associates) with everyone. My best friend at school was male—another fringe kid, you might say, so we kept each other “in the know.” We gossiped a lot and gave each other advice on our relationships and I occasionally let him cheat off me on Chemistry tests, too. Our relationship always remained strictly platonic and was mostly relegated to the 7-hour school day. My ride-or-die BFFs, however, attended schools in other parts of town. We were the three musketeers in every way—we dressed in similar outfits, we listened to the same music and swooned over the same artists, we danced the same, we spent holidays together, we vacationed together, and on weekends, we stayed glued to one another’s side. Yet we also maintained our own identities. Renee was Puerto-Rican while Tasha and I were African American. Renee had long, curly red hair, while Tasha and I had over-processed, chin-length black and brown hair. Renee and I stood at 5’9 and 5’8 respectively, while Tasha stood just above 5 feet. Renee and Tasha were both really sugary and sweet and I, in many ways, was just the opposite. I was quick-tempered and they were mild-mannered. They dated jocks and preps and I liked pseudo-thugs (i.e., guys that were well-known, unafraid to back down from a fight, and moderately experienced in the field of street
pharmacy). They both were also virgins, while I was not. But, none of this changed how much love we had for one another for this was a true sistahood.

When I was 17, I had a rule—NEVER GET INVOLVED WITH ANYONE AT MY HIGH SCHOOL. “I don’t date, others can’t hate” was my motto. Sure, I had a few crushes, but that’s as far as my feelings got. I believe this was why I stayed out of the fray and within the good graces of other females at my school. Only once did I break this rule. It was the summer before my junior year when I began dating TJ and by the start of the school year, I had moved on. By then, most of my peers either didn’t know or didn’t care enough to remember our short-lived romance.

When I was 17, R&B reigned supreme in my car. I drove a silver ’96 Honda Civic to and from school and each day I rotated the tracks on my 6-CD changer. Listening to anything by R. Kelly (the King of R&B at that time), SWV, Lauryn Hill, Babyface, Jodeci, Toni Braxton, Rome, Keith Sweat, Next, Mariah Carey, Dru Hill, 702, Aaliyah, Ginuwine, Usher, and many more soothed my soul. I watched BET and MTV religiously and browsed the shelves of popular music chains in order to keep up with the latest R&B records. But, I was also a bit of a rap fan. Biggie had just gotten killed and I, like millions of others, went out to purchase his much-hyped posthumous CD. I also supported artists like Lil’ Kim, Foxy, Master P, the late Tupac, and Nas. On paydays, I didn’t rush to the shoe or clothing store like most of my peers; rather I enjoyed spending most of my hard-earned $4.75 an hour on advancing the careers of these artists.

When I was 17, I read Black literature exclusively. Because my mother was an avid reader, I picked up every book she put down and though we never engaged in any formal book-talks, our book trading became my rite of passage. I had traded in the fiction of my youth (e.g., Sweet Valley High, Baby-sitter’s Club, R. L. Stine’s Fear Street Series and Christopher Pike thrillers) for the more adult-themed writing of the New Black Renaissance. Think: Terry McMillan, Rosalyn McMillan, E. Lynn Harris, Bebe Moore Campbell, Omar Tyree, Eric Jerome Dickey, Walter Mosley, Connie Briscoe, April Sinclair, Pearl Cleage, Iyanla Vanzant, Virginia DeBerry and Donna Grant, and Diane
McKinney Whetstone. Unlike the assigned readings in my American Literature class, I could now envision myself in what I read. I rarely visited the library, but when I did I was always on the look out for black or brown faces on the front cover. Pickings were usually slim, however, I occasionally got lucky. Like the first time I encountered *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, only I was too young to appreciate the literary genius of Ms. Hurston. Upon reading the first few pages, I thought to myself, “Who talks like this?” “Furthermore, who would dare write like this?” “This book is garbage.” Needless to say, I never finished the book and I was left to wallow in my own ignorance until my junior year of college.

When I was 17, I’d often sneak into the dollar movies to watch two (or sometimes three) for the price of one. That year, I watched *Air Force One, Con-Air, The Game, Conspiracy Theory, Eve’s Bayou, Murder at 1600, Kiss the Girls, Soul Food, I Know What You Did Last Summer, Scream 2, Liar, Liar, Romy and Michelle’s High School Reunion, Money Talks, Booty Call, and Nothing to Lose* all on the big screen. The most popular release of that year (and the highest-grossing film ever at the time), however, was the one film I didn’t see: *Titanic*. I was far more attracted to the falling-out, falling-in kind of love that I witnessed in *Love Jones*, and although, the masses might have crowned Leo as the newest male heartthrob, for me, it was all about Larenz. I can recall going to see *Rosewood* that year as well. I was out on my first date with a White guy and it was to be my last. Less than thirty minutes into the movie, we sat motionless as we watched innocent Black folk being lynched, maimed, and run out of town. A deep-seated anger arose within me and I could feel myself inching farther and farther away from him. I couldn’t quite look at him the same after that and I’m sure he felt the same about me. It was just too bad neither one of us could foresee what we were getting ourselves into.

When I was 17, I was in love with Mister. Only Mister was taken. So ours became an on-again, off-again love affair or a “creep” to put it more bluntly. Although, I continued to date other people in our off-seasons, Mister was forever on my mind. He was charming, personable, comical, and confident. Yet he was often dishonest. He and his high school sweetheart attended another school across town and both were set to
graduate that year. They were considered THE golden couple—together since freshman year with few break-ups in between—however, I knew different. I listened when he called to complain about the lack of love and affection she gave to him. I trusted when he told me he loved her, but was ready to leave. And for good this time. I believed when he said he loved me, too, and that we’d be together. If I could just hold off until after prom or perhaps right after graduation would be better. But, it would be the middle of June before I saw Mister again only to receive this devastating news: He had gotten her pregnant on Prom night, the baby was due in February, and they were going to try and make it work. For the sake of the kid and all. I was sitting in the passenger’s side of a car in front of Mister’s house and I remember telling my friend to just drive cause there was no way I was letting him see me cry.

When I was 17, my soul was on empty. I had not yet learned to let go and let God. I had been away from the church for more than two years and now it was time to make my way back. I was in search of the answers to life’s most difficult questions and God seemed the only one able to respond.

When I was 17, I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. All I knew was that I was good at school; I got the right grades, enrolled in the right courses, and networked with the right people. Still, there was no particular field that attracted me and time was running out. Eventually, I ran across a piece about financial analysts and their average salary of $80,000+ per year and it was settled. I conjured up images of Robin Givens in Boomerang—turning heads in stylish black pantsuits, spinning round and round in a high, leather-backed chair. So naturally I thought, “That could be me.” I proudly declared Finance my major and accepted entrance into the University of Cincinnati’s Carl H. Lindner College of Business for the fall.

When I was 17, Mom and I were like strangers. She was a provider, but not a confidante. A lecturer, but not a teacher. A caretaker, but not a caregiver. I was smart-mouthed and spoiled; she was unaffectionate and indifferent. There was little connection between us—plain and simple. Each day, my routine went something like this: come
home, watch TV, do homework, eat dinner, go upstairs, talk on phone, watch TV, talk on phone, read novel, fall asleep. Her routine, on the other hand, was a little bit different: come home, take nap, eat dinner, read newspaper, do crosswords, watch Wheel of Fortune, watch Jeopardy, read novel, watch evening news, go to bed. My mother never knew how to reach or engage me; nor did she ever try. We avoided the essential topics of love, loss, hurt, betrayal, trust, honesty, compatibility and commitment; our conversations seemed almost superficial. So I struggled to learn many of life’s lessons on my own—in spite of and not because of her.

When I was 17, I was unconscious. Everything centered on me, myself, and I. No one pushed me to think about the world outside of my window. A world filled with other people. Other places. Other things. And what more could I have known about myself, my beliefs, my family, my community, my relationships, my history, my nation, and my world, if no one ever bothered to ask?

_A Note to My Seventeen-Year Old Self_

_Dear Erica at 17:_

_You were good enough. Still, I don’t believe you knew your true worth—that you were never defined by your grade point average, how many awards you received, how many clubs you belonged to, how many people you knew. But, how could you have known if no one was there to teach you?_

_I can imagine you could have been anything in the world that you wanted to be, but being a good student is what you knew best. If someone had just asked you, sat you down to talk about your future years ago, how different things might have been? You would have known you had more options. You would have known you were certainly good enough._

_I applaud you for choosing good people to hang around—I mean genuinely nice girls that would have been willing to give you the shirt off of their backs if necessary. But, you know deep down, you didn’t always treat them right. There were times you wanted to be_
left alone and they reluctantly complied. I guess they were hip to your only-child mood swings and selfishness and didn’t pay you no mind. So if you were feeling a little ashamed, that’s good; it was a lesson learned. Just know that they loved you and recognized that you were good enough for them.

I see that it pained you to experience the breakdown in communication with your Mom. In her eyes, you felt you were never good enough. I realize that you were seeking validation, but you didn’t have the words to tell her so. You wanted her to recognize the beauty of you and not just the imperfections. You wanted her to say “I’m proud of you” or “I love you” on the regular and not just assume that you knew it. Deep down you knew you both were too much alike and yet you feared that you might one day do the same to your own child.

And what more could you have known about dating? The media had you fooled. You searched for love in many of the wrong places, readily believing that a thug really needed and could show you love. You experienced love the hard way; you gave but did not get back the same in return. Understand that this moment was really a blessing in disguise. Sure, you were in pain. You were thinking to yourself: “What does she have that I don’t?” You replayed these events again and again and still came up with nothing. But, that was how everything was supposed to happen. Humans have the ability to make decisions and he made his. You thought there was something in you that was lacking, but I’m here to tell you that you were never not good enough.

Your eyes were watching God. I could tell that much. You say you felt empty and that you needed HIM to fill you up. For HIM, you would always be good enough. You began attending church regularly and reading your Bible through and through, but what difference had it made? You felt different, but had your actions changed? Were you treating others the way you would like to be treated? Were you about loving unconditionally? Were you really being “good” enough?
At 17, could anyone blame you for not knowing what life was really all about? You were unconscious because no one had attempted to wake you up. Just believe that in the next sixteen years, you will see, hear, and understand more than you can ever imagine. You will change throughout all of this. You will experience more pain, but receive many more blessings. You will have people come in and out of your life—some to do you harm, but most to show you love. You will meet a certain someone that you will want to spend your life with; this time you will know the feeling of utter bliss. Indeed, my dearest Erica, life for you is really just beginning. So no worries about the past; your future will be good enough.

Loving you now and forever more,

Erica at 33

In my autoethnography, literacy, achievement, love, loss, disillusion, and communion are prominent themes throughout. Yet my autoethnography also reveals the dualities within my seventeen year-old Black girl Self such as: being free/fitting in, good girl/bad girl, intelligence/ignorance, and keeping it together/falling apart. While I “was never beholden to any one particular social group,” I still longed to hang out with the “jocks” and the “popular girls both Black and White.” I was a “straight-A Honors student” by day, yet I also “crept” by night. I liked reading, writing, and arithmetic, but I also liked “pseudo-thugs,” Tupac, Nas, and Biggie. I “got the right grades, enrolled in the right courses, and networked with the right people,” yet I knew nothing about “the world outside of my window.” While I “struggled to learn many of life’s lessons on my own,” I was still in “search of the answers to life’s most difficult questions and God seemed the only one able to respond.”
My autoethnography reveals the complex, the contradictory, the common, and also the distinct incidents\(^4\) in the life of a seventeen year-old Black girl. It is the story of a Blackgirl becoming woman told from the perspective of a Blackgirl becoming woman. That is what makes exploring the ways in which I understand my Self and my world significant. Indeed, that is what makes exploring the life and literacies of any Black girl significant. That is what makes being able to name our Selves for ourselves critical. To do otherwise renders Black female adolescents mute, unknowledgeable, and in worse cases, invisible.

In the chapters that follow I introduce the Black girls of African Ascension, including my three focal participants, Nikayla, Jordan, and Chyvae, whose autoethnographies also demonstrate the need for further exploration into the lives and literacies of Black female adolescents.

In Chapter 2, I discuss the historical significance of race, space, and literacy in the lives of Black females. I then build off of this discussion in order to examine how literacy has figured into the lives of Black female adolescents. I present the major studies that highlight the literate lives of Black female adolescents, including research that has challenged commonplace notions of young Black woman- and/or Black girlhood in addition to studies that have revealed what Black female adolescents’ literacies can look like in all-Black and/or all-female settings (or what I refer to as “out-of-bound” spaces). I conclude by offering my own definition of Black female adolescent literacies, which I use to further substantiate its significance to research and praxis.

In Chapter 3, I identify critical pedagogy as my theoretical framework. I begin by highlighting its core principles and practices in addition to its origins and outgrowths, critiques and limitations. I end by discussing the possibilities for using what I refer to as an affective critical pedagogy to further examine the literacies of Black female adolescents. I argue that such an approach recognizes that the naming of pain is equally important to the naming of power, both of which are necessary for educating Black female youth. In subsequent chapters, I return to these ideas as I explore the ways in which power, pain, and progress converge in the individual and collective experiences of my Black female youth participants.

In Chapter 4, I defend the use of autoethnography as methodology and its relevance to the lives of Black female adolescents. I highlight its definitions, benefits, and limitations. Furthermore, I discuss how autoethnography was used within the context of my study—that is, the setting, participants, data collection, and analysis.

In Chapter 5, I introduce readers to my three focal participants—Nikayla, Jordan, and Chyvae. I begin by providing a brief description of each of the girls and follow-up with my analysis of their autoethnographies (i.e., both the process and product). Because the girls constructed their autoethnographies through the use of such digital tools as Pinterest and Prezi, I also highlight my use of Riessman’s (2008) narrative analysis approach, which involves both thematic and visual interpretation.

In Chapter 6, I revisit my research questions (i.e., How do Black female adolescents conceive of self and society? How does autoethnography help to shape their conceptions? What are the larger educational and political implications of using autoethnography to examine Black female adolescents’ lives and literacies?) and discuss
the implications of my work for furthering our understandings of the literate lives of Black female adolescents. In this discussion, I explore the themes that emerged from each of the girls’ autoethnographies. I include the limitations of my research study and I provide recommendations for future research and praxis. In addition, I highlight the significance of the study to the girls themselves and to my Self as a researcher and as a Blackgirlwoman.
Chapter 2:

Explorations in Black Female Adolescent Literacies

Introduction

Shey: Well, that’s the thing. Everything I say I think is important. That’s why I say everything that comes to my head. I just say it. Instead, of writing it down, I just say it like “Ah yea, you know.”

Me: And that’s good. That’s good. Because that’s a part of what this space is about. You know, for you all to think that everything you feel, say, who you are, is important. (conversation during weekly session, 02/07/12)

On this day, I had asked the girls to engage in a drama technique I referred to as “mamalogues” where we each took on the persona of our mother. I explained the purpose of this activity was for us to explore our relationships with our mothers given that Shey and several of the other girls had recently expressed interest in exploring this topic for their autoethnographies. Because it was equally important for the girls to consider the relationship from their mother’s perspective, I also asked that they be mindful of what their mothers might have to say or how they might think about them as their daughters.

In our debriefing, Shey raised concern over how much she and her mother acted alike. Shey had inherited her mother’s gift of gab, yet she feared that her talking “[drove] people away.” Shey lived in a group home with other young women and often expressed difficulty in trusting other females, including her own mother. Because Shey often literally fought to be seen and heard, I found her comments to be especially revealing. In this exchange, Shey resists the notion that her words do not matter, that it “is important”
for her to “say everything that comes to [her] head.” That she, in fact, deserves to be heard. Indeed, this is why such a space\(^5\)—created for, by, and with Black girls—becomes necessary in the first place.

Nevertheless, in the opening pages of *Black feminist thought*, Collins (2009) poses this very simple, yet poignant question: “Why are African-American women and our ideas not known or believed in?” (p. 5). For Collins, it has been Black female intellectuals’ chief aim to not only address this question, but to ensure that this wrong has been righted. Yet the same holds true for Black girls as Evans-Winters’ (2009) ethnographic exploration of Black female adolescent literacy and identity indicates: “In social science and educational research, African American female adolescents’ experiences, in particular, have been left out, whitened out (subsumed under White girls’ experiences), blacked out (generalized within the Black male experience) or simply pathologized” (p. 9). For these reasons, I intend to bring greater awareness to Black female adolescents’ conceptions of self and society in my own work and to explore how various acts of reading, writing, and speaking help to foster these understandings. The goals of this chapter are to outline the major issues, concepts, teaching, and research approaches and findings in studies of Black female adolescent literacies. In this chapter I also aim to define what Black female adolescent literacies are and could entail.

**Readin’, Writin’, and Risin’ Up: Historicizing Black Female Resistance**

Ideas presented in this chapter arise from a long-standing tradition of Black feminist thought and activism, a legacy of collectivity and resistance (Collins, 2009; Guy-
Shefthall, 1995). Speaking before an audience of mostly White female abolitionists and women’s rights activists, it was Sojourner Truth (1851/1995), for instance, who first asked, “Ar’n’t I a Woman?”:

I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And a’n’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear de lash just as well! And a’n’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilern, and seen mos’ all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And a’n’t I a woman? (p. 36)

Here, Truth speaks to the complexities of being both Black and female (e.g., being forced to fulfill the traditional roles of a man and a woman) while questioning the notion of Black women not being womanly enough. She concludes by affirming the centrality of all women—as protector and giver of life—and thus offers this call to action to men and other women: “If de fust woman God ever mad was strong enough to turn de world upside down all alone, dese woman togedder (and she glanced her eye over the platform) ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now dey is asking to do it, de men better let ‘em” (p. 36). Years later, Anna Julia Cooper (1892/1995) published a number of prolific essays in *A Voice from the South*, which highlighted the ways in which Black women were often thrust to the sidelines by Black men and White women. In “The Status of Woman in America,” Cooper writes, “The colored woman of to-day occupies, one may say, a unique position in this country . . . She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or unacknowledged factor in both” (p. 45). Like Truth, Cooper also appeals to the semblance amongst all
women and, therefore, urges women, and especially Black women, to claim their rightful place “at the gateway of this new era of American civilization” (p. 49).

While the new century inevitably brought more opportunities for Black female leadership and employment, the vast majority experienced more poverty, discrimination, exploitation, and abuse. Black women thus found themselves embroiled in the same battles as before. Famed poet-scholar-feminist Audre Lorde (1984/1995), for example, characterizes the plight of the Black woman in this way:

. . . black women and our children know the fabric of our lives is stitched with violence and with hatred, that there is no rest. We do not deal with it only on the picket lines, or in dark midnight alleys, or in the places where we dare to verbalize our resistance. For us, increasingly, violence weaves through the daily tissues of our living—in the supermarket, in the classroom, in the elevator, in the clinic and the schoolyard, from the plumber, the baker, the saleswoman, the bus driver, the bank teller, the waitress who does not serve us. (p. 288)

Similarly, Collins (2009) finds “approximately one-third of Black women and men who find employment work in jobs characterized by low wages, job instability, and poor working conditions” (p. 69). She describes this group as “the new working poor” whose work “resembles duties long associated with domestic service,” including “contemporary cooking, cleaning, nursing, and child care” (p. 69).

Historical conceptions of Black womanhood further compound Black women’s day-to-day lives. Though women, in general, are characterized as catty, sneaky, gossipy, and moody, these characterizations become far weightier for Black women when it comes to how we are viewed on- and off- screen. It is the way our necks roll, eyes cross,
fingers point, voices raise, and tongues lash. Sometimes. Yet these and other stereotypical markers (e.g., Black females as sex-crazed) have their roots in institutionalized racism, sexism, and economic exploitation both within the U.S. and abroad (Collins, 2009). It is because Black womanhood has often been characterized and constrained by such markers—or what Collins refers to as “controlling images” (p. 76, see also the mammy, welfare queen, and hot momma)—that even these have acquired such labels as “Sapphire” (Bell-Scott, 1982), “the matriarch” (Collins, 2009), and most recently “the angry Black woman” (Penrice, 2011). Bell-Scott (1982) describes Sapphire as an “age-old image of Black women” (p. 85) where “[t]he caricature of the dominating, emasculating Black woman is one which historically has saturated both the popular and scholarly literature” (p. 85). Likewise, the Black matriarch is often deemed “unfeminine and too strong” (Collins, 2009, p. 84). Though other groups of women have had to contend with a wholly different set of markers (e.g., promotion of purity and fragility amongst White women, p. 79), Collins believes none have been as potent or as disparaging as those associated with Black females from slavery on up to the present day. Collins further asserts: “Because the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black womanhood. They do so by exploiting already existing symbols, or creating new ones” (76).

Fortunately, Black women’s resistance toward oppression has never ceased reaching across various locales (e.g., the United States, Africa, and the Caribbean), mediums (e.g., music, literature, art, rhetoric) and genres (e.g., blues, rap, jazz, R&B, fiction, non-fiction, urban fiction, poetry). And it is due to these efforts that Black girls
like Shey can and do “say everything that comes to [their] head.” It is because of those (i.e., Truth, Cooper) who came and fought before her that Shey can believe “everything” she says “is important.” Indeed, Shey is important. And much like her 19th C. forebearers, Shey’s thinking is inextricably tied to the tradition of collectivity amongst other Black females and resistance toward hegemonic representations of young Black woman- and/or girl-hood.

It is unfortunate, however, that such resistance has not always been possible for younger Black females, and particularly so as the subjects (and also objects) of academic research. As proof, Evans-Winters & Esposito (2010) note: “Traditional research in education on Black girls typically concerns itself with early pregnancy and sexuality, school dropout, drug use and abuse, and aggression” (p. 14) while several studies involving school responses to Black girls’ ‘defeminized’ behaviors point to this assertion as well (Fordham, 1993; Morris, 2007). Given the overemphasis on these generalized views of Black females, there remains a heavy focus on what they do rather than how they think and as a result, many young Black females’ literate activities and achievements go unrecognized and often unrealized. Hence, one of my chief concerns has been in drawing further attention toward the ways in which literacy figures into the lives of Black female adolescents. Therefore, in this chapter I address this concern by first exploring the historical and sociopolitical significance of the African American female literate tradition. I follow with a discussion of: 1) research that speaks to the perceived deviance amongst Black female youth, 2) studies that emphasize Black female adolescents’ literacies as a means of reconceptualizing young Black womanhood, and lastly 3) studies that highlight Black female adolescents’ literacies in out-of-bound spaces (or in those
individually and collectively constructed spaces of their own). To conclude, I address what implications these studies have for transforming our notions (i.e., teachers and researchers) of Black female adolescent thought and behavior and how these studies inform my own understandings of what Black female adolescent literacies can look like.

**Race, Space, and Literacy in the Lives of Black Females**

In *Black feminist thought*, Collins (2009) situates U.S. Black womanhood within a “legacy of struggle” (p. 30) that Black women have used to perform their intellectual work—both in the ways they think and, subsequently, respond to their experiences. These ways of performing are what constitute Black feminist thought. Although Black females are by no means a monolithic group, Collins believes Black women’s sociohistorical experiences—relating to the overlapping systems of institutionalized race, class, and gender oppressions in general—have led to a “unique standpoint” (Collins, 1995, pp. 339) or way of seeing and understanding of the world that is quite different from the worldview of Black men and/or other women (hooks, 2000). Consequently, these experiences have also led a number of Black women to use such sense-making as a means of counteracting multiple forms of oppression which, in effect, becomes the necessary force driving Black feminist thought. In fact, Collins argues: “... the overarching [emphasis added] purpose of U. S. Black feminist thought is also to resist oppression, both its practices and the ideas that justify it. If intersecting oppressions did not exist, Black feminist thought and similar oppositional knowledges would be unnecessary” (p. 25). Similarly, hooks (2000) finds:

Black women with no institutionalized ‘other’ that we may discriminate against, exploit, or oppress often have a lived experience that directly challenges the
prevailing classist, sexist, racist social structure and its concomitant ideology. This lived experience may shape our consciousness in such a way that our worldview differs from those who have a degree of privilege (however relative within the existing system). It is essential for continued feminist struggle that black women recognize the special vantage point our marginality gives us and use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony. I am suggesting that we have a central role to play in the making of feminist theory and a contribution to offer that is unique and valuable. (pp. 16-17)

The import of Black feminist thought in the lives of Black women, then, cannot be overstated. At its core, Black feminist thinking functions as Black women’s life support—for the young and the old, the rich and the poor, the street-wise and the scholarly. Indeed, this thinking can apply to any and perhaps every Black woman. Therefore, Collins (2009) stresses the need for actively locating theory amidst the day-to-day living of “ordinary [Black] women” (p. 21), including those “ordinary” young Black women like Shey.

Richardson (2003), too, speaks to a distinctly African American female way of knowing and behaving as well as to “the development of skills [and] vernacular expressive arts and crafts that help females to advance and protect themselves and their loved ones in society” (p. 77). She refers to such ways of knowing and behaving as “African American female literacies” (p. 77), which include such practices as storytelling, signifying, dancing, singing and quilting, among others. Like Collins (2009), Richardson believes these literacies develop in response to African American females’
unique standing—as Black, as female, and often as poorer individuals—in society. Richardson references the works of Sojourner Truth, Harriet Jacobs, and Zora Neale Hurston as evidence of the kinds of language and literacy practices Black females routinely employ to exact agency within our own lives and to fight against oppression. Hence, Richardson’s definition necessarily entails a much broader notion of the term ‘literacy’ that highlights the multifaceted nature of Black women’s readings of themselves and the(ir) world.

Other examples of the multifaceted nature of Black women’s literacies can be found in Royster’s (2000) *Traces of a stream*, a comprehensive exploration into the literate lives of late 19th and early 20th C. African American women, including Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, and Ida B. Wells among others. Here Royster not only recognizes these Black women’s distinct ways of knowing and behaving, but also their ways with words by centering them firmly within and outside of the predominate White and male essayist tradition. Through analysis of these women’s literate behaviors, Royster ultimately seeks to reveal these human minds at work. These Black women, many of whom were former slaves, were actively engaged in reading, writing, and speaking acts that were purposefully linked to social activism. With a decidedly antiracist and antisexist agenda, then, these women did not simply function as readers, writers, and rhetors, but as doers of the word, too (see also Fisher, 2009).

To illuminate these women’s strategic use of the essay genre (i.e., their rhetorical competence), Royster identifies three elements undergirding her analysis, the first of which entails a close examination of the sociohistorical context in which these women lived. The second involves their formation of ethos—that is, their “formation of a sense
of self in society” (p. 58)—in order to understand who these women were and what they stood for. And lastly, her analysis highlights the ways in which these Black women’s use of the essay signified rhetorical activism. Hence, Royster sees all three of these elements—context of production, ethos formation, and rhetorical action—working in tandem to provide a “kaleidoscopic view” (p. 63) of 19th C. Black women’s ways with words and, indeed, their understandings of the Black female Self within 19th C. society. Royster finds:

. . . African American women writers use the power of language to resist simplification, stereotyping, and other disempowering effects. They use language to resist value systems that would render their knowledge and experiences irrelevant and immaterial, or that would erase the specificity of their material conditions. They use language to convey eloquently their understanding of how such erasures make it possible for African American women to be seen and acknowledged, to speak with power and authority, to have historical presence, to act with consequence. They use language to envision a world as crafted by their own minds and hearts. (pp. 72-73)

Though these Black women dared to speak and write publicly—often in the presence of openly hostile environments and much to the threat and safety of their own lives—their individual and collective need for privacy remained strong. In the comfort and seclusion of Black women’s clubs, community organizations, literary societies, and sororities, the elite and highly educated found greater assurance in their voices being heard and in their humanity being acknowledged. Yet it was in the safety and seclusion of the kitchen, front porch, and church pew (Nunley, 2004/2011) that the poor and
uneducated Black woman could go to find the same. Collins (2009) notes that these sites, which I refer to as out-of-bound spaces (see also “safe spaces,” in Collins, 2009, p. 111), functioned more out of necessity than simply desire. For where else could Black women go to share their innermost thoughts and desires? Indeed, where else could they go to maintain a healthy Black female consciousness?

These underground sanctuaries, nevertheless, proved to be critical to the sanity and survival of both Black men and women. Such sites were historically named “hush harbors” (Nunley, 2004/2011) or “spatialities where Black folks go to affirm, negotiate, and reproduce culture, epistemology, and resistance and to find sacred and secular grace” (Nunley, 2004, p. 229). It was in the hush harbor that the intersections of language, literacy, and spatiality were most significant; it was where many of us first learned to read and write and it was there where many of us first claimed our right to free speech. Nunley (2011) asserts:

I borrow the term hush harbor from enslaved African and African Americans. They used the term and others such as hush arbor and bush arbor to refer to geographies such as the slave quarters, woods, and praise houses where Black folks could speak frankly in Black spaces in front of Black audiences. In these hush harbor spaces, Black rhetors and speakers were free to engage in and deploy otherwise heavily monitored practices, knowledges, and rhetorics disallowed in the public sphere under the disciplining gaze of Whites and Whiteness . . . Hush harbors were necessary to the maintenance, circulation, and affirmation of African American knowledge; refuges that warded off Black social death. (pp. 23-24)

Thus, it was often within such confines that Black women collectively marshaled against
gender-, race-, and class-based exploitation. And it was there in the presence of other non-White, non-male bodies that the seeds of activism, engagement, togetherness, and love were sown. In these spaces, African American female languages and literacies were enlivened and made known.

To that end, the Black hair salon is, perhaps, the finest example of what a contemporary African American female hush harbor or out-of-bound space looks and feels like (Majors, Ansari, & Kim, 2009; Nunley, 2004/2011). It is where many Black women go to read, write, relax, nap, laugh, cry, hug, advise, empathize, compliment, connect, chit-chat, trashtalk, network, share, shop, barter, borrow, and above all, “get their hair did.” These are spaces where Black women gather to affirm one another’s being and to see visions of themselves in one another as “they form prime locations for resisting objectification as the [emphasis added] Other” (Collins, 2009, p. 111). In Black hair salons, Black is beautiful.

In “Beyond hip-hop: A cultural context view of literacy,” Majors, Kim, and Ansari (2009) also emphasize the role of the Black hair salon in preserving African American discourse and language. Majors, Kim, and Ansari advance the notion of “Shoptalk” whereby “members of that community provide to one another access to culturally shared and situated knowledges and practices . . . [and] have opportunity to learn—to question, challenge, and reconstruct knowledge—as well as transmit their understanding of the world through such verbal strategies as participation, collaboration, and negotiation” (p. 348). For them, the notion of Shoptalk provides a deeper lens into African-American “community-based discourse” (p. 344) and the ways in which “problem-solving and problem-posing” (p. 349) performances often occur within this
community context. Majors, Kim, and Ansari find these investigations useful for considering the ways in which African American students can be taught and the ways in which they may (best) learn. African American students then are seen as active producers of meaning as opposed to active consumers of materials (that is, in reference to the article title, “Beyond hip hop”). Additionally, the authors articulate the need to restructure the classroom as safe space for non-mainstream literacies and languages to live, flourish, and thrive.

I find each of these analyses of space, race, and literacy useful for thinking further about the lives and literacies of young Black women. For instance, what constitutes Black female adolescent literacies and why are such literacies not readily apparent or made known? How do young Black females see and understand the(ir) world? And how do they resist oppression? In what ways can teachers, researchers, and other educators draw upon these literacies to best address the social, emotional, and/or academic needs of their Black female students? Also, how does the notion of out-of-bound or “safe” space figure into the lives of Black female adolescents? How do they conceive of out-of-bound spaces and what kinds of out-of-bound spaces exist for them? Furthermore, how do we as educators create such spaces for and with these youth? Undoubtedly, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have made it much easier for Black girls to negotiate space and speech in a variety of ways, while the boundaries between public and private are left tenuous at best. Yet for the alternative, hidden, suppressed, unacknowledged, and/or marginalized literacies of young Black females, the security of the hush harbor or safe space is there. Oftentimes, these are the only spaces in which the reading, writing, speaking, performing, and envisioning of young Black females is

Lost in Translation: Black Females Adolescents’ Lives and Literacies

In Fordham’s (1993) oft-cited study of Black female youth in a Washington D.C. high school, she explores the ways in which gender passing (i.e., remaining silent, doing as told) becomes the route to getting ahead while those who choose a different path (i.e., to use humor, to be vocal, to improvise) are not “taken [as] seriously” (pp. 14-15). Fordham finds that in most instances, both the Black school officials and the Black students maintain strict adherence to cultural norms that call for men to lead and women to follow. Rita, a participant in Fordham’s study, however, behaves quite the opposite. Described as “bold and sassy, creative, complex, and indeflatable,” (p. 15), Rita strives to be present in all of her surroundings; she likes to joke and sometimes go the unconventional route on assignments, even without the teacher’s approval. Yet Rita’s adherence to nonconformity puts her at risk in terms of achieving academic success and fostering positive relationships with teachers as well as with her higher-achieving peers, which lead Fordham to conclude that achieving voice and visibility can be detrimental to Black girls’ overall academic success. Moreover, Fordham argues that characterizing and constraining young Black womanhood (from one extreme to the other) in such a way has
real implications for how they might later choose to position themselves within (or increasingly outside of) the Black community.

In another more recent study of teachers’ responses to Black females, Morris (2007) discovers that the word most often used to describe Black female students is “loud” (p. 505). Morris reasons that because schools are notorious for reinforcing existing social inequalities, teacher perceptions can often work to shape and even stunt students’ personal and academic growth, an issue he finds to be the case at a predominately Black and Latino middle school. Not only are most of the Black female students in his study pegged as “loudies” (p. 510), but special programs (e.g., The Proper Ladies club, etiquette club) are even instituted to promote more tolerable forms of behavior from these young women. While many of the girls reject such impositions, Morris also witnesses many instances of the girls’ willingness to engage in forms of gender passing that include restricted dress and/or speech. Unlike the Black girls featured in Fordham’s (1993) study, those girls in Morris’ study who are more likely to comply with traditional gendered norms also appear less engaged in school. Nevertheless, what each of these studies reveals is a perceived set of deficiencies (e.g., unladylike, abrasive, defiant) associated with young Black women.

Other studies involving Black female youth have placed heavy emphasis on sexuality. For instance, Townsend et al. (2010) sample 270 middle-school aged Black urban females to determine what kind of relationship might exist between their self-image and sexual conduct. Given the self-absorbed, hypersexualized portrayal of Black females in music videos (or what these authors referred to as the “Modern Jezebel,” p. 274), they use the Modern Jezebel Scale to measure the girls’ identification with these
and other stereotypes (e.g., “gold diggers, divas, and baby mamas,” p. 274) in addition to
the effects of colorism (or the preoccupation with skin tone) on sexual risk. Townsend et
al. ultimately discover the Black females who identify most with the Modern Jezebel
image and who are most impacted by colorism are also those most inclined to promote or
engage in sexual activity. Conversely, those who exhibit a positive self-image and more
effort in school are less inclined to defend or engage in sexual activity.

Likewise Gordon’s (2008) study seeks to examine the impact of sexual
objectification in Black sitcoms and music videos on Black female adolescents’ attitudes
toward appearance. Drawing from previous reports of higher TV consumption and
thereby greater exposure to negative media portrayals of women amongst young Black
females (and in comparison to their White counterparts), Gordon determines further
conclusions might be drawn from the presence of specific kinds of Black female
characters (more objectified vs. less objectified female actresses) in these sitcoms and
videos and their influence on Black female youth. From a sample of 176 Black female
suburban high school students’ responses to questionnaires, Gordon finds they identify
with the more objectified female entertainers in music videos and with the less objectified
female actresses on television sitcoms (e.g., The Cosby Show, The Fresh Prince of Bel
Air, One on One) regarding beauty, appearance, and sexual appeal. Further, Gordon finds
that because many of her respondents place such heavy emphasis on beauty and
appearance, they also use these media portrayals as a measure of their own self-worth.

Not surprisingly, the voices of Black female youth are in every way absent from
Townsend et al.’s and Gordon’s studies. Though each is necessary for deepening our
understanding of young Black females, they both still point to the continued emphasis on
young Black females’ unladylike behaviors and their less than critical rendering of it. Furthermore, the limited role of Black female youth in these studies reflects how research is often done on or to them, rather than by or with them. Gaining greater awareness of how Black female adolescents understand themselves and the(ir) world around them becomes especially important. In Collins’ (2009) view, it has been Black females’ insistence upon self-definition that has given them their greatest sense of agency. This commitment to the preservation of self is also one of the hallmarks of Black feminist thought. In her aptly titled chapter, “The power [emphasis added] of self-definition,” Collins states, “For U.S. Black women, constructed knowledge of self emerges from the struggle to replace controlling images with self-defined knowledge deemed personally important, usually knowledge essential to Black women’s survival” (pp. 110-111). For Collins, then, the creation of this Black female “Other” (p. 110) has all but necessitated Black women’s and girl’s construction of counter-definitions and imagery, safe havens and secret hideaways, and most importantly, their will to survive. Consequently, each of the following studies offer a number of possibilities for engaging Black female youth in oppositional readings of Black female identity and for co-designing spaces to address their needs and interests on topics ranging from love, school, and beauty to pain, hardship, and healing.

**Black Female Adolescents: Readin’, Writin’, and Flippin’ Scripts**

In “My ill literacy narrative: Growing up black, po, and a girl, in the hood,” Richardson (2009) includes snapshots of her past life—as a poor, young Black girl coming of age in inner-city Cleveland—in order to suggest that U.S. Black girl/womanhood neither be examined nor critiqued without first steering our gaze upon
the raced, classed, and gendered society in which young Black women and girls are a part. Richardson reveals how the Black female body is oftentimes subject to unwelcome attention—her body itself a script to be acted out and upon by others. This, unfortunately, is what Richardson discovers when at the age of 12 she is raped by Rat, one of the older boys in her neighborhood who reads her body, then, as ripe for his taking. Reflecting back on that tragic moment in her life, Richardson believes her body had already been “marked for violation” (p. 763), a stain etched from birth. To that end, she argues: “The Black female body is ascribed in society as a body without knowledge, a body to be commodified, a body that will serve at the pleasure, ultimately of the system of white male patriarchy” (p. 763). Even with Rat’s denial of their baby and her subsequent abortion, Richardson is left with no control over what takes place both inside and outside of her body. She notes: “To a degree greater than that of many Anglo American males and females, we [Black females] are socialised to realise ourselves as racial and sexual objects and as the embodiment of ‘not good enough’” (p.755). It is an idea that Hughes-Decatur (2011) describes as “bodily-not-enoughness” or “the idea of not being enough of something in one’s body, as a way-of-being, due to the seemingly implicit and indeed explicit bodily practices we learn, those which teach us—discipline us—to keep our bodies under strict surveillance so we can locate areas of imperfection, both physically and lived, and improve them” (p. 73). Hughes-Decatur refers to these practices as “embodied literacies” or the “read[ing of] the body as a visual text—. . . as normal or deficient—as enough or not enough” (p. 73). This reading, too, becomes an internal struggle when Black females are frequently forced to read other female bodies against
their own (Hughes-Decatur, 2011). Which begs the question: How do young Black
women seek to alter the ways such scripts are read and written?

According to Richardson (2003/2007), young Black females regularly exploit
various forms of literacy and language practices she identifies as “African American
female literacies” where simply struggling to just be who we are—Black, female, and
most importantly, human—has made it necessary for us to read and respond to the world
in ways that are arguably different from men and other women. Other practices she
names “Hiphop literacies,” which are the “ways in which people who are socialized into
hiphop discourses manipulate as well as read language, gestures, images, material
possessions, and people, to position themselves against or within discourse in order to
advance and protect themselves” (Richardson, 2007, p. 792). Taken together, they each
serve as key reference points in helping to understand how young Black females learn to
maneuver within and against the rugged terrain of hip hop and through a larger
racist/classist world that has already predetermined who they are and/or should be.

Through the analysis of hip hop videos, Richardson (2007) finds her female
college participants particularly adept at reading and responding to the on-screen
portrayal of Black women. Instead of typecasting the video models as objectified and
weak, they most often associate the model’s posturing with profit, power, and agency. In
other words, these young women are flippin’ the (a)script(ions) (Richardson, 2009;
Sutherland, 2005) on those markers typically associated with Black women. Yet for
Richardson, their ability to discriminate between highly complicated notions of Black
womanhood—from the hypersexualized hooodrat to the “she got her own money” boss
bitch—is not enough; being able to identify the structural forces shaping these ideologies
and how such ideologies negatively impact the lives of Black women is also necessary. According to Richardson (2007): “Youth are aware of the dominating forces but do not [always] possess the level of critical tools necessary to escape internal victim blaming for their predicament . . .” (p. 806). She continues:

Studies of discourse, power, and knowledge demonstrate that through official institutions such as schools and the media elites disseminate certain scripts, which create inequality, and value people differently based on white patriarchal market values. These perceptions are continuously reinforced making the reproduction of unequal society seem natural, when in fact unjust social relations are constructed and continuously reinscribed and re-enacted daily through various social practices which are detrimental to the development of just and equal community. (pp. 806-807)

Richardson thus suggests further action be taken:

Their astute readings of the world are based on their racial, sexual, and gender identities. However, our youth get mixed messages from most of society’s media about their racial, sexual, and gender identities. Our critical pedagogies must guide them beyond challenging to changing [emphasis added] of systems that tolerate inequality, sexism, and racism. (p. 807)

Brown (2011) draws similar conclusions in her study of how Black adolescent females are positioned within the Black male “crisis,” (i.e., the heightened attention to rising dropout, suspension, and incarceration rates amongst African American males). In “Descendants of ‘Ruth:’ Black girls coping through the ‘Black male crisis,’” Brown examines how teacher and student responses to the Black male crisis can negatively
impact the socialization processes of young Black females like her research participant, Nicole. As the lone female in her African American history class, Nicole’s attempts to assert and insert herself within class discussions are frequently thwarted. Nicole’s teacher, Ms. Smith, responds in kind by establishing differing expectations for Nicole and her male peers. Yet by characterizing herself as “argumentative” (p. 609), Nicole reveals her desire to continually speak up and “talk back” (p. 606) despite being ignored and outnumbered. For Brown such forms of resistance serve as “counter-scripts” (p. 610) to the broad characterizations of Black females as aggressive and ill-tempered. Nonetheless, Brown also recognizes that the lines between Black female empowerment and oppression are oftentimes blurry as such is the case for Nicole.

In the hopes of further revising these scripts and in moving beyond the crisis narrative itself, Brown proposes the following: “I alternatively suggest, ‘loud black girls,’ are those girls whose voices and identities are often defined by the attention to ‘the crisis’ as a male one. They seek to be seen and heard and often use the bravado characterized by black maleness to get a response” (p. 616). Because much of the “crisis” talk rests upon deficit perspectives, such narratives become reified within classrooms and Black girls like Nicole are often left to establish a place for themselves. While cautious about pitting Black boys against Black girls, Brown argues instead for further consideration in how and why both groups become marginalized in schools and in the broader society itself. Additionally, she states: “And for those descendants of ‘Ruth,’ those ‘loud black girls,’ we must continue to consider and respond to why they speak so loudly. We must question not only the volume of their speech but also the substance of their concerns. How do we
regard these girls who have been dismissed or trained to be resilient through silence?” (p. 617).

In her work with high-school aged Black females, Sutherland (2005) finds that particular identity markers—“loud,” “ghetto,” “sexually active,” and “attitude”—are often and only associated with young Black women. Sutherland argues, “Because these ascriptions of identity define Black women as a group, they can serve as boundaries on what individuals are able to be” (p. 367) and conversely, not be. In her observations of these Black girls’ literacy and identity development, she notes that they are, indeed, “actors with complex [emphasis added] identities” (p. 391) that move beyond these boundaries. In fact, their reading and discussion of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* acts as a guide in helping them deconstruct these markers and, in turn, construct some of their own. Problematizing certain aspects of the text—from Pecola’s (the main character’s) utter self-hatred to other characters’ labeling of her—also elevates their understanding of themselves and the(ir) world around them:

[Glenisha] used both a theme from the text and a retelling of a previous conversation to represent herself as a Black woman aware of skin shade discrimination, but who does not herself believe that dark skin is ugly. Participants continued to discuss whether they thought the model in reference was attractive or not and the degree to which that judgment had to do with skin shade. In this setting, they agreed that one aspect of being a Black woman should be the shared belief that skin hue does not define beauty. (Sutherland, 2005, p. 382)

As these girls speak, others listen, and therefore, literacy for these girls becomes empowering. In addition, Sutherland (2005) asserts: “Participants’ acts of using narrative
to make sense of the text may be seen as a challenge to other, more privileged ways of knowing” (p. 393). Hence, by recognizing and encouraging these young women’s personal connections to (rather than simply an analysis of) the text proves that their ideas and experiences are being taken seriously.

Nevertheless, many Black females, daring to be heard, have literally taken to the streets to do so. As revivalists of what has become the street lit(erature)/fiction (a.k.a ghetto lit., urban lit., gangsta lit., hip-hop lit.) movement (emerging in the 1960s and 70s with the writings of “Iceberg Slim” and Donald Goines), a number of Black females have had to necessarily adopt a DIY (i.e., do-it-yourself) mentality in order to become authors and publishers of their own work. This drive, then, is what led to the widespread appeal of street fiction amongst Black girls, boys, women, and men alike. Still, this recognition has not come without its share of detractors who find the writing too graphic, too vulgar, and too poorly edited to be read, especially by school-aged children (Hill et. al, 2008; Marshall et al., 2009). Many Black women and teens, however, are attracted to this genre for some of those same reasons, including its fast-paced structure, familiar settings, subject matter (sex, drugs, violence, crime, etc.), language (i.e. use of Black English, slang, pop/hip-hop references), and running themes of young Black female and male protagonists who are skilled in their abilities to overcome the various obstacles in their lives (Gibson, 2010; Hill et. al, 2008; Marshall et al., 2009).

Marshall et al. (2009), however, seek to unpack the tensions between critics and supporters of urban street fiction through textual analyses of Deja King’s Bitch and T. Styles’ Black and Ugly and subsequently, make a case for how such literature can be used in the English Language Arts classroom. Although one can argue that these authors are
quick to fall back on many of the same stereotypes that Black women are forced to confront daily, Marshall et al. argue that these tales from the ‘hood do, in fact, reveal rather complex facets of (young) Black womanhood. Like Sutherland (2005), Marshall et al. recognize these fictional characters as “actors with complex identities.” More specifically, the characters in these novels are forced to deal with such weighty topics as colorism and misogyny. While no specific examples of Black girls’ reading or responding to these texts are included, the authors do remind us that a pedagogical focus on urban street fiction can serve as one way to write young Black females into the discussions around literacy and education. Additionally, this kind of storytelling can help to fuel added discussion around prevailing notions of growing up young, Black, and female and the ways in which such notions might be challenged. Because many Black girls may be seeing or experiencing misogyny or colorism in their own lives, Gibson (2010) believes such texts act as necessary gateways into these and other controversial and/or uneasy topics. Not only that, Gibson contends, “Adolescent African American females are searching for representations of themselves, irrespective of the positive or negative attributes of [urban fiction] characters” (p. 568). Similarly, Richardson (2009) argues: “This type of writing is valuable for what it can show us about ascribed boundaries for Black women [and men] . . . The themes of this genre of writing centre on the lives of young men and women in urban centres and their experiences in thug life or street life and appeals to younger readers for its authenticity . . .” (p. 757).

Winn’s (2010/2011a/2011b) work with incarcerated female youth participants in the Girl Time program provides another example of how street/urban-inspired storytelling can be used to both confirm and critique what Black females see, hear, and
think about themselves. In “Down for the ride but not for the die,” Winn (2011a) explores the ways in which playwriting and performance are used to develop and extend the critical literacies of incarcerated Black female youth participants in the Girl Time program. More specifically, this play (of the same name), co-authored by student artists Sanaa and Kaylen, reveals the complexities surrounding a young Black woman’s choice to lead and subsequently leave her precarious lifestyle. For Winn, their work helps to challenge public assumptions about young Black womanhood and call attention to the role of the media in narrowly scripting the lives of young Black women both on-screen and off (see also Boylorn, 2008). Playwriting and performing enables these and other student artists to create characters that transcend their experiences in ways that they presently cannot and to embody characters that offer a range of perspectives on these fictional accounts, and in some cases, real-life circumstances. Winn finds that by engaging in such activities, student artists like Sanaa and Kaylen are able to adopt critical stances on themselves and the world around them.

In *Girl Time: Literacy, justice, and the school-to-prison pipeline*, Winn (2011b) draws on previous work to offer a more comprehensive look into how race, class, and gender operate within and impinge upon the lives of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Black female youth in addition to the mechanisms used to counteract those forces. In this piece, race, class, and gender are foregrounded as ways to examine the disproportionate number of young Black females mired in the juvenile justice system. Winn notes, “A consistent finding in the studies of girls of the school-to-prison pipeline is that African American girls are subject to arrests, charges, and incarceration more than any other group” (p. 116). Yet this finding is also complicated by socioeconomic factors:
“African American girls do not commit more crimes than other girls. However, they typically do not have resources for an attorney other than a public defender, and they will more than likely serve all their time, as few are able to meet bail requirements” (Winn, 2011b, p. 120). Girl Time, then, offers many of the girls a rare opportunity to speak back to the injustices they have experienced in their lives.

Drawing on Chimamanda Adichie’s notion of “a single story” (or the idea of adopting a one-dimensional view of someone or something), Winn (2011b) reveals how playwriting and performance can be used to dismantle such simplistic readings. Through these methods, the girls’ (or student artists’) bodies function as sites of resistance to speak and embody truths of their own realities and imaginations. As noted earlier, this resistance developed in response to a long history of policing the Black female body (Richardson, 2009; Winn, 2010). Given that these acts of resistance are situated within the African American female legacy of struggle and progress, the girls’ work becomes a contemporary articulation of that same struggle (Winn 2010) to rename and reclaim the Black female body. For example, Winn underscores the significance of this legacy in the following description: “Pass the clap is always followed by the name game. Just as the eye contact in many ways says, ‘I am here and I am present,’ saying and showing one’s name during the name game invites girls to further vocalize their presence in the circle and the world [emphasis added] . . . the name game in many ways is the crowning jewel for the prewriting process” (2011b, p. 22). Additionally, Winn casts light on the work of the adult facilitators or “teaching artists” who spend much of their time refashioning their methodologies to meet both the individual and collective needs of student artists. Each teaching artist is also willing to draw upon one another’s strengths in order to move the
program and its participants forward. Their combined efforts thus serve as a model for how the student artists come to interact with one another.

Winn’s study (2010/2011a/2011b) attests to what active student engagement can look like, particularly for those working with youth in underrepresented communities. Furthermore, her work encourages teachers and teacher researchers to recognize their students’ multiple ways of knowing and also challenges them with the direct task of helping youth to become multi-literate. Given the fact that many of the student artists are or have been incarcerated, Winn makes a strong argument for what can happen if educators fail to do so (e.g., increased drop-out rates and/or recurring brushes with the law). Not having access to or an awareness of other forms of discourse can be especially damaging for those experiencing racial, economic, and gender inequities in their daily lives. And though they acknowledge the slippery nature of freedom on the outside and confinement on the inside, many of the girls still oscillate between both worlds. Therefore, it becomes imperative for educators (or any adult) to provide youth with ample opportunities to envision what else is possible (Winn, 2010; Winn, 2011a; Winn, 2010b).

Above all, each of these accounts (Brown, 2011; Marshall et al., 2009; Richardson, 2003/2007; Sutherland, 2005; Winn, 2010; Winn, 2011a; Winn, 2010b) offers a “reading [of] the world from the bottom up” (Richardson, 2009, 764) or a privileging of perspectives from young Black women. Each work in concert to reveal the ways in which Black girls can and do ascribe meaning to their own lives. Furthermore, these studies help to deepen our understanding of Black girls’ ways of knowing and behaving—in essence, their ways of being—and to also highlight the advantages to fully
exploiting these ways of knowing and behaving both inside and outside classroom walls. Increasingly, Black girls are finding ways to do so on their own and in spaces of their own choosing. The following section draws attention to the voices, identities, and interests of Black girls in these spaces. It is also necessary to consider what literacy can look like in these all-Black and/or all-female settings, or in what I call out-of-bound spaces, of which I explore in some detail below and then in subsequent chapters.

**Black Female Adolescents: Exploring Literacy in Out-of-Bound Spaces**

In a year-long study of urban high school female youth, Wissman (2007/2009/2011) explores the intersectionality of youth agency, literacy, and gender in an elective writing course entitled “Sistahs.” Wissman finds that although these young women (most of whom are African American) recognize the hampering effects of gender role constructions and expectations, the formal educational spaces to challenge these ideals do not readily exist; Wissman’s class, however, becomes such a space. Through an analysis of student writing and photography, interview transcripts, and researcher field notes, Wissman learns that the girls are actively working to construct a space that supports their way(s) of both seeing and being in the world. There, they are able to confront limiting gender roles and expectations through photography and poetry as they redefine prevailing notions of beauty, strength, and intellect as well as various misconceptions of young urban minority women. At other times, issues in social justice become the central focus of the girls’ writing. Although Wissman acts as the instructor, her students also play a significant role in the shaping of the course. As proof, Wissman (2007) offers this account:
Instead of their voices filling the room with greetings, questions about the writing we would do that day, or stories of funny incidents from their morning classes, they seemed withdrawn and upset . . . I then abandoned my agenda for the day and invited the students to discuss with me and one another their reactions to the day’s events and their thoughts about the potential war [in Iraq]. (p. 344)

Because the course is also designed to explore classic and contemporary African American female artistry, its content includes the work of the girls themselves. Given their poetic craftsmanship and ability to inspire others, students like Maya and Jasmyn quickly earn a reputation amongst peers (Wissman, 2007/2011). By bringing a historicized view to the course content, Wissman helps her students to recognize their work as part of a broader African American female literate tradition (in much the same way as the Girl Time participants in Winn’s study) and to further mark themselves as literate beings. As their literary foremothers (e.g. Maya Angelou, Ruth Forman, June Jordan, Paule Marshall, Sonia Sanchez), these authors give the girls permission to write their past, present, and future selves into being; in essence, to “make a way” (Wissman, 2007, p. 347). The act of telling their life stories (or of writing their autobiographies), then, stimulates further desire for creativity, connection, and change both inside and outside of this educational space.

In the end, Wissman underlines the importance of supporting urban female adolescents’ ideas and interests within school spaces as she also urges readers to move beyond the in-school/out-of-school dichotomy (see Hull & Schultz, 2001) when it comes to what counts as literacy instruction. The research itself actively works against societal efforts to silence, ignore, and avoid the voices of young women, and young minority
and/or poor women, in particular. While the course supports each of the girls’ literate identity development, it also exposes their marginalized status as it relates to their urban, female, and Black/Latina identities within the school and, ultimately, in society at large. Additionally, Wissman (2011) is forthcoming about other limitations of the course including her departure from standard curricular objectives involving mandated assessments and her students receiving no direct instruction (see Delpit, 1995) in literary or linguistic analysis. Moreover, Wissman acknowledges the limitations of working with Black and Latina youth as a White female teacher and researcher, which further complicates the notion of what it means to teach and learn in an “othered” or alternative space.

In “4 colored girls who considered social networking when suicide wasn’t enuf,” Kirkland (2010) examines how young Black females like Maya navigate the digital landscape to construct real and imagined selves and to address the role that educators can play in further developing youth digital literacies and identities (or iDentities). Like Wissman (2011), Kirkland (2010) understands the conflicting nature of exploring Black female adolescents’ iDentities through the eyes of an “outsider,” thus, he revisits his mother’s past in order to gain access. Kirkland finds that in spite of his mother’s dealings in the sex trade, she uses her notebook as a space to continually write herself anew:

Smeared in random but purposeful directions were a series of thoughts, numbers, and hard to read markings that resembled both poetry and prose. There were also doodles of cantankerous scenes, images of naked women and slobbering men, notes on her suicidal thoughts and prayers to God for forgiveness. In her purse, in that well-used notebook, my mother had constructed a multimodal, handwritten
world that, while it made little sense to me then, has helped me to understand the powerful and humanizing event of literacy in the lives of some young Black women. (p. 72)

Kirkland observes that Maya uses digital spaces to reinvent herself in similar fashion as her blog and MySpace page function as spaces to write against competing ideas and images of young Black women. He deems such acts as “metaphysical transcendence” (p. 82) due to Maya’s ability to publicly write beyond wholesale versions of young Black womanhood. Furthermore, within the digital sphere, others can witness how Maya writes herself and other young Black women anew in strength, honor, and love.

However, Kirkland recognizes the extent to which these spaces function as sites of struggle. As digital texts (e.g., blogs, MySpace pages), such stories have staying power and can therefore be retold, repackaged, and in some cases resold by others. Listening to Maya and a group of Black male teenagers describe their online experiences help Kirkland to understand the profit and pain in such storytelling. For these reasons he proposes a therapeutic pedagogy that “seeks to empower the individual to knowledge of self and other and our surroundings by introducing the substances of those things from where they are best found [as] Black females are writing and rewriting the substance of themselves in digital dialect in the formless fibers of cyberspace” (p. 86) and to encourage those who are not young, Black, or female to participate in this renewal of awareness and change.

Clearly, these digital outlets become necessary when Black women lack the physical space and support for empowerment. Indeed, when Kynard (2010) and a group of college-age Black women find themselves in need of both space and support, they
elect to form their own digital (i.e., the space) posse (i.e, the support) or what she calls a “cyber sista-cipher” (p. 34). She likens these digital spaces to “hush harbor[s]” (Kynard, 2010, p. 34) or the secret meeting-places of slaves replete “with plotting, scheming, and planning that no one else in the institution seemed to imagine was happening” (p. 34).

Therefore, as members of this digital sistahood, these women are able to engage in frank discussions about their places in the university and in the world at large. Not only that, this space affords them opportunities to reconstruct what has been said to them and about them. Kynard believes: “This work might be the most distinct from what happens at the institution where we met because the goal of these exchanges was not to perform individualized, feel-good sessions but to take on the communal task of warding off the possibility of (more) internalized racism” (p. 37). This cipher, then, also serves the purpose of allowing these Black women an opportunity to gather together to affirm their beings.

Kynard’s first female posse experience came decades before in the form of the Candy Girls (taken from the popular 1980s song by R&B group, New Edition). In school spaces where she and her middle-school friends are largely ignored, Kynard recounts the ways in which they deliberately seek to move themselves from the margin to the center in their style of dress, hair, gesturing, posturing, and/or language such that these discursive acts function as counternarratives to what White middle-class teachers and students expect them to be. Flashforward several decades later to Kynard, the college professor, and one finds that the struggle continues. In other words, Kynard cannot ignore that in many ways she and her (cyber) sistas are waging a silent battle amongst themselves that do little to dynamically change and/or challenge the status quo. Pointing the finger back
at herself instead, Kynard surmises that she (and researchers like her) should be taking action.

For Collins (2009), underground sites created by Kynard and her students, for example, constitute “safe space[s]” (p. 111) where Black women can simply exist, without apology or question. Within these contexts Black women can see and be seen and hear and be heard. Traditionally, the Black church and other Black organizations have served as physical representations of safe spaces, yet Black women’s friendships with other Black women, Black mothers’ relationships with their Black daughters, and Black women’s day-to-day conversations also provided security (Collins, 2009; hooks, 1993; Moss, 2011). The same is true of Black women’s creative expression (e.g., music, art, and literature) which is often emblematic of the deep intricacies and intimacies that exist between and amongst Black women (Collins, 2009). Collins believes “[f]or African-American women the listener most able to pierce the invisibility created by Black women’s objectification is another Black women. This process of trusting one another can seem dangerous because only Black women know what it means to be Black women. But if we will not listen to one another, who will?” (p. 114).

The youth and adult women in Ruth Nicole Brown’s (2009) Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths (or SOLHOT) after-school program understand Collins’ query as theirs is another example of the kind of relationships that can emerge when critical and affirming dialogue (hooks, 1993) is at the center. It is a space in which Black women and girls can simply be without apology or question. In SOLHOT, Black girlhood is not only celebrated by both women and girls, but treated as part of a lifelong experience. In defining Black girlhood, Brown recognizes it “as the representations, memories, and
lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful, Black, and female. Black girlhood is not dependent, then, on age, physical maturity, or any essential category of identity” (p. 1). As members of SOLHOT, then, Black women and girls use reading, writing, singing, rapping, dancing, and acting to connect to one another and their histories. These activities are also used to construct broader narratives of Black female literacies and identities. Therefore the personal is always political. Brown’s main argument is that rather than programming, Black girls need power; in other words, Black girls do not need to be given something that they do not already possess and they do not need to be empowered as much as they need to be (re)affirmed.

To engage in this work, Brown (2009) and the other adult women whom she affectionately calls “homegirls” employ a hip-hop feminist pedagogy that recognizes the global reach of hip-hop and the possibilities for teaching and learning with contemporary Black female youth. Furthermore, hip-hop feminist pedagogy is used as a method to resist and transform popular belief about Black women and girls. Brown explains:

Hip-hop feminist pedagogy makes it completely fair to say that some part of our daily reality, particularly as Black and brown girls and women of color, is like navigating a popular mainstream video . . . If all the world (or part of it) is a video shoot . . . let’s talk about it with each other and learn something from the way in which we intentionally choose to play and/or not play. Let’s create the videos (world) we want to see . . . In the context of hip-hop feminist pedagogy, we know that if we become the decision makers and own the space on our behalf, we could decide, and do, to turn the celebration into something that loves Black women and girls as complex and whole human beings! (p. 139)
Ultimately, Brown and the other homegirls create a space for young Black women to speak openly about their experiences without the threat of being silenced or Othered. It is for these reasons that further consideration should be given to how such spaces create opportunities for Black girls to talk and for Black women to listen (see also Womack, 2013).

As Wissman (2007/2009/2011), Kirkland (2010), Kynard (2010), and Brown’s (2009) research indicate, these all-Black and/or all-female spaces are not just spaces out-of-bound, but opportunities for young Black women to live, learn, love, and laugh together openly and honestly and oftentimes, they function out of necessity rather than desire. Collins (2009) believes they serve a greater purpose than simply pleasure as these spaces do, indeed, function as sites of resistance that also give Black women (and girls) opportunities to combat the daily assaults (e.g., racism, poverty, sexual abuse, exploitation, and more) on (young) Black womanhood. Collins further argues that some topics that may be off limits to those who are not Black and/or female as these are spaces created for us by us:

One reason that safe spaces are so threatening to those who feel excluded, and so routinely castigated by them, is that safe spaces are free of surveillance by more powerful groups. Such spaces simultaneously remove Black women from surveillance and foster the conditions for Black women’s independent self-definitions. When institutionalized, these self-definitions become foundational to politicized Black feminist standpoints. Thus, much more is at stake here than the simple expression of voice. (pp. 121-122)
Yet each of these writers speaks to the fragile nature of these spaces as well. Wissman’s “Sistah” space, for instance, is shut down after one year. Kirkland recognizes the extent to which the internet has become an online marketplace for the trading of young Black female bodies like Maya’s. The women in Kynard’s research have little place else to meet, but online and in secret. For these reasons, Collins urges us (and those who ally with us) to remain vigilant in “exploring the various ways that individual Black women [and I would add Black girls] are personally empowered and disempowered, even within allegedly safe spaces” (p. 132).

From the Margin to the Center: Defining Black Female Adolescent Literacies

What each of these texts (R. N. Brown, 2009; A. Brown, 2011; Kirkland, 2010; Kynard, 2010; Marshall et al., 2009; Richardson, 2003/2007; Sutherland, 2005; Winn 2010/2011a/2011b; Wissman, 2007/2009/2011) brings to the fore is the idea that Black female adolescents are actively working to read and write themselves into being and that they can and do actively work to move themselves from the margin to the center (hooks, 2000). If nothing else, these studies affirm the resourcefulness of young Black females, for even when no one else thinks they are somebodies, they think the world of each other and even when no one else may be listening, they do hear one another. However, these authors do not shy away from the belief that others must take Black female adolescents seriously as well. Part of that effort will need to be led by teachers and researchers who have rethought and revised their pedagogies as these relate to the (mis)representations of young Black women. Although these authors are also quick to point out that their research does not and cannot speak for all young Black females (as many of us do not experience the same type of assaults on our being), I think it goes without saying that
many young Black females have told and will continue to tell variations of the same story. And for many of them, their stories are all they have, all they own. While there are those who may believe one stereotype does fit all (e.g., young Black females as hyperaggressive, hypersexual, or just megaloud), Black girls’ stories will continue to prove that they are more than one-dimensional human beings.

For these reasons, and for the purposes of this dissertation, I employ the phrase, “Black female adolescent literacies,” to denote specific acts in which Black girls read, write, speak, move, and create in order to affirm themselves, the(ir) world, and the multidimensionality of young Black womanhood and/or Black girlhood. Furthermore, these are acts in which Black girls have adopted a dual-lensed approach to examining themselves and the(ir) world around them. I identify this approach as dual-resistant in that it describes the counterhegemonic and co-optive methods Black girls use in order to (re)define who they are or wish to become. By counterhegemonic, I am referring to a self-defined standpoint that is in contrast to the predominant view of young Black women (see Brown, 2011, Sutherland, 2005, Winn, 2011a/2011b; Wissman, 2007/2009/2011). By co-optive, I mean the ways in which Black girls reappropriate language, images, and symbols (e.g., bitch used as a terms of power or endearment; bitch becomes bytch) in order to meet their own needs (see Marshall et al.; Richardson, 2007; Richardson, 2009). Likewise, it is important to consider how and why such literacy acts are most visible and accessible within out-of-bound spaces (Brown, 2009; Kirkland, 2010; Kynard, 2010; Wissman, 2007/2009/2011) as it is most often in such spaces that Black girls (both individually and collectively) seek to disrupt the quintessential narrative of Black girlhood.
Because I have a personal investment in the subject of Black female adolescent literacies (as I am also Black and female and have shared many of the same experiences as the young Black females with whom I have worked), I hope to make a worthwhile contribution to this sorely needed area of research, particularly in examining how young black females think and not only how they (are perceived to) act. Although there are a plethora of other writers and researchers whose life’s work is dedicated to centering the interests and identities of Black females, I still find more attention being given to Black women rather than to Black girls. According to Evans-Winters (2005):

> There are several reasons why Black female adolescents are absent from the literature. Compared to Black males, Black females have fewer behavior problems. African American girls’ behaviors are least likely to affect others . . . Another factor is that White women have dominated the women’s movement, which means their research is conducted on themselves or White adolescents. Last, researchers tend to assume that White females and Black females have similar socialization processes. (p. 9)

The continued portrayal of Black girls as “Other” fuels discourses of tragedy over triumph, lewdness over literacy, and failure over promise (Frazier et al., 2011). Thankfully, Black girls have shown and will continue to show what else is possible (e.g., as thinkers, writers, performers, survivors). Their resiliency (see Evans-Winters, 2005; Frazier et al., 2011, Paul, 2003) proves they are a force with which to be reckoned. I, for one, am proud to be a part of this movement and to have Black girls leading my/our way. For those of us teaching and learning with Black female adolescents, Brown (2009) makes clear that our task is quite simple: “At the risk of romanticizing Black girls, I think
we should listen more. Period. They keep telling us. Know That!” (p. 6). This dissertation, then serves as one attempt by which to listen to the stories of and by Black female adolescents.

In the following chapter, I discuss my theoretical framing of critical pedagogy and its relationship to the lives and literacies of Black female adolescents. Further, I discuss why the naming of both power and pain is essential to the academic and socioemotional development of Black female adolescents.
Chapter 3:

From Power to Pain to Progress:

In Search of a Critical Pedagogy for Black Female Adolescents

Introduction

*This like video actually kind of scares me . . . like is this how the world views Black women?*

—Elena, 18

The above comment was in response to a popular Youtube video entitled, “Marriage Negotiations,” and several other video clips that had gone viral, each featuring distorted images of Black women as short-tempered and difficult to get along with. Elena’s question struck a serious nerve as it highlighted the depths of these hegemonic readings of Black women and their broad dissemination across the globe. During this particular session, we discussed how both males and females become socialized to think and/or behave in certain ways concerning our relationships with one another. As we viewed this particular clip (and others), we collected significant words and phrases that we later used to create found poems in regard to our (and society’s) perceptions of male-female relationships. Furthermore, we considered representations (and the impact) of race and gender within these relationships. Gaining greater awareness of how Black female adolescents like Elena understood themselves and the(ir) world around them then became especially important. Fortunately, we had the space and the time to define for ourselves what it meant to be Black and to be female each week—to trouble these images, replace
them, and reinvent new ones. As such, it was also important that I critically examine my own role in helping to facilitate this process.

Evans-Winters (2005) recognizes, “With the current level of social and economic disenfranchisement of African American girls and women in our society, there should be no teacher of urban girls who is at ease, undisturbed. As raced, classed, and gendered bodies, Black girls are at war in their own homes, schools, neighborhood, and nations. Black girls, low income and working class, especially, need teachers who are going to fight alongside them in this cultural battlefield” (p. 154). I, too, am fully aware of the attack on not just urban Black girls, but all Black girls (and Black women). To be sure, there is too much attention given to young Black females’ perceived lewdness and loudness (Collins, 2009; Fordham, 1993; Morris, 2007) and too little given to who they are and what they believe. Hence, I was also forced to consider the extent to which I critically engaged each of the young women with whom I worked; the ways in which I honored their voices and also hampered them; and ponder the possibilities of what could happen when the thoughts and experiences of Black girls (and women) were taken seriously.

Given her research on Black female adolescents and resiliency in urban classrooms, Evans-Winters (2005) finds critical pedagogy to be a useful tool for helping teachers and their Black female students to conquer the “cultural battlefield” as well. As a theoretical and practical approach for educating Black girls, Evans-Winters believes context-specific instruction, self-reflexivity, self-determination, aesthetics, humor, and justice to be necessary components. Thus, as I continued to locate the girls and myself in this research, I found critical pedagogy to be a useful means by which we (my
participants and I) could engage one another as we sought to challenge oppression. Because critical pedagogy is also about questioning, leveraging, and critiquing power, I saw this approach as essential to working with these young women. As a critical pedagogue, my role was not only to facilitate our discussions, but to also help develop our understandings of the roots of power and to consider why we stand where we stand as Black women and girls. Also, I could better understand my responsibilities to the researched (Dillard, 2006; Dillard & Okpalaoka, 2011) and my own role in shaping the context of our relationships—that is, how I related to them and how they related to me and each another; I was neither a passive onlooker nor a participant observer, but rather I aimed to be a listener, advocate, consoled, friend, teacher, and believer. At times these roles shifted, at other times they multiplied and oftentimes the girls themselves helped me to readjust these roles. For instance, there were times when I needed to assist Amora or Chyvae with their homework or stay after our sessions to help Shey think through her relationship issues. Still, there were other times when I acted as a mentor for participants like Nikayla who frequently shared how much she looked up to me and TT and that with the exception of her mother, we were “the only positive people” in her life.

The girls often took on these same roles as they sought to teach, comfort, and connect with one another. There were times, for example, when Nikayla expressed concern over CJ’s destructive eating habits and times when Chyvae spoke against June’s use of the word, “retarded.” Still, there were other times where Shey needed the space to discuss issues of race and racism within public schools and others where Elzora wished to share the realities of growing up with a mom in prison. Undoubtedly, the girls had an interest in naming power, yet they were also concerned with naming pain (hooks, 1993).
They sought to resist (oppression) as they aimed to recover (hooks, 1993), and to embody hope (Freire & Araujo Freire, 2004) in order to move toward healing (hooks, 1993/2000). For these reasons, it becomes necessary to consider how critical pedagogy can be linked to an affective (or emotive) paradigm that recognizes pain, healing, and progress as necessary elements of the teaching and learning process. Hence, what might an affective critical pedagogical approach look like? Moreover, why do such pedagogical approaches matter, and particularly for Black female youth? In this chapter, I explore the key definitions, principles, and practices associated with critical pedagogy in addition to its historical roots and subsequent outgrowths. To conclude, I return to the idea of naming pain and making progress as part of an affective critical pedagogical approach to working with these young women.

Critical Pedagogy: An Overview

The term ‘critical pedagogy’ first appeared in Giroux’s 1983 publication of *Theory and resistance in education*. He along with many others were responding in kind to the failure of American society to live up to its democratic ideals (e.g., “liberty and justice for all”) and promises of providing quality education to all its youth (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2003). According to Darder, Baltodano & Torres (2003),

Critical pedagogy loosely evolved out of a yearning to give some shape and coherence to the theoretical landscape of radical principles, beliefs, and practices that contributed to an emancipatory ideal of democratic schooling in the United States during the twentieth century. In many ways it constituted a significant attempt to bring an array of divergent views and perspectives to the table, in order to invigorate the capacity of radical educators to engage critically with the impact
of capitalism and gendered, racialized relations upon the lives of students from historically disenfranchised populations. (p. 2)

Those engaged in critical pedagogy, then, understand the need for locating themselves and their students in particular sociohistorical contexts and that these acts are invariably political in that classrooms become spaces to call into question the status quo (Giroux & McLaren, 1989; Kincheloe, 2004; McLaren, 2003; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007). As Kincheloe (2004) remarks: “Any time teachers develop a pedagogy, they are concurrently constructing a political vision. The two acts are inseparable” (p. 9). Hence, McLaren (2003) defines critical pedagogy as “a politics of understanding and action, an act of knowing that attempts to situate everyday life in a larger geo-political context, with the goal of fostering regional collective self-responsibility, large-scale ecumene, and international worker solidarity” (p. 7). Although most scholars agree there are no set principles or practices that constitute critical pedagogy (e.g., Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2003; Freire, 2000; Kincheloe, 2004; McLaren, 2003; Shor, 1987), there are quite a number of common threads. In the next two sections, I discuss some of these common threads.

Core principles. The following are ideas that have evolved and become central to the critical pedagogy tradition. They include:

1) Working in the interests of those considered least powerful including the racially and economically subordinated, those experiencing bias due to gender, age, or mental/physical capability, and of course, inside of the classroom itself. Freire’s (2000) work (more of which will be discussed later) with Brazilian
peasants bears much of these interests out as is documented in Pedagogy of the oppressed and in his later works.

2) **Debunking myths while seeking out truths.** In other words, critical pedagogues attempt to disrupt the truth in order to uncover multiple truths, truths that can only be arrived at through dialogue (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2003; Freire, 2000; McLaren, 2003). As McLaren (2003) succinctly puts it: “Truth is not relative . . . but is relational” (p. 210). Dialogue then becomes a requirement for strengthening our understandings of and responsibilities to one another.

3) **Moving toward critical consciousness.** Conscientization or “critical consciousness” is defined by Freire (2000) as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 35). McLaren (2003), too, believes this kind of consciousness or knowledge is only purposeful when used for the good of others: “Knowledge is relevant only when it begins with the experiences students bring with them from the surrounding culture; it is critical only when these experiences are shown to sometimes be problematic (i.e., racist, sexist); and it is transformative only when students begin to use the knowledge to help empower others, including individuals in the surrounding community” (p. 218). Kinloch (2010) illustrates the value of moving toward critical consciousness and of fostering a classroom-community connection through her work with two young Black male researchers—Phillip and Khaleeq—in Harlem. Intrigued by their critical observations of the various spatial and racial transformations occurring in Harlem, Kinloch elects to use their critiques as springboards into a youth
participatory community action research project that engages multiple perspectives concerning the gentrification of Harlem. Working together, they each come to see Harlem with a new set of eyes. And, by inviting Phillip and Khaleeq to do this kind of work, Kinloch aids them in becoming more aware of themselves as social change agents and active citizens within their community.

4) **Offering critique of the status quo.** For scholars in this field, concerted efforts are made to work against hegemony in order to move toward libertarian practices and ideologies (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2003) that include the teachers’ initiation of critical, open dialogue and the students’ freedom to think and speak for themselves (Freire, 2000). To this point, McLaren (2003) clarifies, “Not all prevailing values are oppressive. Critical educators, too, would like to secure hegemony for their own ideas. The challenge for teachers is to recognize and attempt to transform those undemocratic and oppressive features of hegemonic control that often structure everyday classroom existence in ways not readily apparent” (p. 204). Because hegemony is not achieved through force, but by the failure to call into question the rules, behaviors, and practices of our everyday, McLaren remains optimistic in our ability to undo such thinking and behaving: “The point to remember is that if we have been made, then we can be ‘unmade’ and ‘made over’” (p. 217).

5) **Recognizing individuals as affected by, but also acting upon the(ir) world.** In this way, individuals are also understood as having agency or an ability to determine what happens in their daily lives (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2003). McLaren (2003) indicates, “Critical theorists begin with the premise that *men and
women are essentially unfree and inhabit a world rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege. The critical educator endorses theories that are, first and foremost, dialectical; that is theories which recognize the problems of society as more than simply isolated events of individuals of deficiencies in the social structure. Rather, these problems form part of the interactive context between individual and society” (p. 193). It is through this dialectical understanding of the individual acting and being acted upon that he/she can best be understood.

6) **Emphasizing the interplay and necessity of both theory and practice** (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2003; Kincheloe, 2004). Kinloch (2012) captures this interplay in describing her work with pre-service English teachers and their preoccupation with teaching the content as she also pushes for them to explore how issues of justice and power can become part of the classroom discourse: “[The students] appeared fascinated by [the] potential power to motivate students and teachers to have conversations on equity and equality, power and justice. However, the pre-service teachers seemed to be more interested in how such conversations on establishing ‘a common ground’ and on equity and equality could translate into written assignments that are not confined within a five-paragraph structure. I explained that everything does not have to translate neatly into written products or mini-lessons, that the processes for engaging in honest discussions on (in)equity, (in)equality, and racism, for example, are significant in and of themselves” (p. 23).
7) **Recognizing the roots and aims of resistance** (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2003; McLaren, 2003). McLaren (2003) argues: “Students resist the ‘dead time of school, where interpersonal relationships are reduced to the imperatives of market ideology. Resistance in other words, is a rejection of their reformulation as docile objects . . . Accordingly, students’ very bodies become sites of struggle, and resistance a way of gaining power, celebrating pleasure, and fighting oppression in the lived historicity of the moment” (p. 216). He notes that popular culture functions as a site of struggle for many young people and one in which they more readily gain power, celebrate pleasure, and fight oppression. Through his work with inner-city high school students, Morrell (2007/2008) recognizes the ways in which popular culture can be used to challenge prevailing assumptions of urban youth. He engages his twelfth graders in a number of academically rigorous and socially conscious writing activities while also incorporating film and hip hop music as part of their literary analysis. Ultimately he discovers that his students rise to the occasion when assigned tasks they deemed both “socially valuable” (p. 116) and viable as many of them are also encouraged to interrogate the spaces around them be it their schools, communities, and the world beyond.

**Core Practices.** Regarding its methods, Kincheloe (2004) states, “Teaching a critical pedagogy involves more than learning a few pedagogical techniques and the knowledge required by the curriculum, the standards, or the textbook. Critical teachers must understand not only a wide body of subject matter but also the political nature of the school” (p. 2). Bartolome (2003), also wary of holding fast to other peoples’ practices, finds: “. . . the solution to the current underachievement of students from subordinated
cultures is often reduced to finding the ‘right’ teaching methods, strategies, or prepackaged curricula that will work with students who do not respond to so-called ‘regular’ or ‘normal’ instruction” (p. 408). To move beyond the so-called “methods fetish” (Bartolome, 2003), she and Kincheloe (along with other critical pedagogues) recommend that teachers adopt a clear understanding of the way power operates both inside and outside of the classroom as they also seek to understand the racial, economic, gendered, and linguistic (etc.) realities of themselves and their students in order to also bring about change within and outside of the classroom. Below I list some of the more common critical pedagogical approaches that a teacher may adopt which include:

1) **Decentering the role of the teacher in order to emphasize the role of the student.** With critical pedagogy, the role of teacher and learner are no longer fixed, but ever-changing. Furthermore, Shor (1987) adds: “Liberatory teachers are not doing things for the students or to the students, but rather are launching a process with them” (p. 113). In a similar vein, Kinloch (2005) works with her urban middle schoolers to create an environment where literacy and democracy (or “literocracy,” p. 98) might meet. This process she names “Democratic Engagement” or the “classroom exchanges in which students express their feelings and ideas through oral and written mediums” (98). In order to foster a truly democratic environment, Kinloch writes alongside students and regularly shares her work with them. Following her lead, they then begin to open their minds, mouths, and muscle (through physical movement) to the possibilities of what poetry has to offer as evidenced by one student, Marquis, who begins
writing poetry in both his native (Spanish) and acquired (English) tongues as new-found expressions of pride in his bilingual background.

2) **Fostering student agency and reflexivity** (McLaren, 2003) and **establishing students’ lived experiences as the basis of the curriculum** (Freire, 2000; Shor, 1987). Kinloch (2012), for example, shares how she and her students work collaboratively to reshape course assignments to reflect the students’ needs, interests, and identities and these include: spoken word poetry, multi-genre research papers on popular rap/hip artists, lyrical compositions alongside musical performances, student-authored documentaries, and more. In this way, Kinloch demonstrates the importance of involving students in the development of their own learning goals (e.g., New York State Grade Specific Performance indicators which include information gathering and understanding, literary expression and response, see pp. 113-114) and in the creation of assignments that fuel their motivation and engagement.

3) **Engaging students in meaningful dialogue and listening in order to understand and learn from them** (Freire, 2000; Meier, 2002; Schultz, 2003; Shor, 1987). For Freire, meaningful dialogue occurs with love at the center as he proclaims: “If I do not love the world—if I do not love life—if I do not love people—I cannot enter into dialogue” (p. 90). Along with dialogue comes deep listening.

4) **Creating a learning atmosphere that helps students to develop and/or maintain positive self-image and to foster solidarity instead of alienation** (Shor, 1987). According to Shor (1987), alienation serves as the biggest threat to
effective classroom teaching and learning and is cause for poor self-image. To combat such feelings, Shor works to bring students from object to subject position on the initial day of class, asking them to share their backgrounds aloud and on paper. In this way, his class begins working their way toward community.

5) **Welcoming tension and expressing a willingness to work through it.** As Bell et al. (2003) indicate: “In the social justice classroom we intentionally create tension to disrupt complacent and unexamined attitudes about social life. These very conditions can cause students to dislike or feel hostile toward us at various points in the course. Confronting oppression invariably involves a range of feelings from anxiety, confusion, anger, and sadness, to exhilaration and joy. We need to remind ourselves that as much as we crave approval from our students, a sense of well-being and long-term learning are not necessarily synonymous. A better indication of our effectiveness might be whether students leave with more questions than they came in with, wanting to know more and questioning core assumptions in their own socialization” (p. 472).

6) **Uncovering “the hidden curriculum”** (McLaren, 2003, p. 211; see also, Apple, 1971; Ladson-Billings, 2003). For McLaren (2003) the hidden curriculum “represents the introduction to a particular form of life; it serves in part to prepare students for dominant or subordinate positions in the existing society” (pp. 211-212). In fact, the hidden curriculum is most evident in the social reproduction process of schooling that leads to “working-class students becom[ing] working-class adults; middle-class students becom[ing] middle-class adults” (p. 215). Too often silence has become the remedy, yet Fine believes this
approach does little to diminish what the adults and children know to be true. Students can also see what lies behind the quality of their education—what having one might get you or not. Fine believes, “Silencing more intimately shapes low-income, public schools than relatively privileged ones. In such contexts there is more to hide and control, and indeed a greater discrepancy between pronounced ideologies and lived experiences. . . . Silencing permeates classroom life so primitively as to render irrelevant the lived experiences, passions, concerns, communities, and biographies of low-income, minority students” (pp. 154-155). Additionally, Fine observes how committed the teachers and administrators in her study are to the act of “not naming” (p. 157) such discrepancies. She finds that their authority—or the very power they wish to hold on to—is compromised by their active engagement in not naming. Rather than silencing, Fine thus recommends that both teachers and students embrace the act of voicing.

**Critical Pedagogy: Origins and Outgrowths**

Brazilian-bred, educator-scholar-activist Paulo Freire is widely regarded as the foremost contributor to the field of critical pedagogy. First published in 1970, Freire’s *Pedagogy of the oppressed* set the stage for the development and direction of the critical pedagogy movement and ultimately became his most prolific work to date. While working within several of the most poverty-stricken areas of Brazil, Freire (2009) finds the best means of educating the poor is through a reconciliatory approach where both teacher and student(s) function as producers and dispensers of knowledge. Moreover, this approach is not about empowering the poor, but rather in uncovering how they seek to empower themselves and others. Freire cites the “banking” (p. 72) method as one of the
most oppressive and predominant forms of educating the poor; it is a one-sided exchange of students ‘drawing’ knowledge ‘out of’ teachers as teachers ‘deposit’ knowledge ‘into’ students, of teachers talking and students listening which Freire himself deplores: “A careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship at any level, inside or outside the school, reveals its fundamentally narrative character. This relationship involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students) . . . Education is suffering from narration sickness” (p. 71). Freire thus calls for teachers to “abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of men in their relations with the world. ‘Problem-posing’ education . . . embodies communication” (p. 79). For Freire, such pedagogies require genuine acts of faith, hope, humility, and above all, love.

Pre-Freirean thought. Before Freire, there was education reform leader John Dewey advocating on the behalf of pupil and educator in the early half of the 20th C.; and even as the sociopolitical landscape of America began shifting—from the (legalized) abolishment of slavery to the rise of the Jim Crow, from an agrarian to an industrialized society, and so on—Dewey continued to vocalize his dismay over the state of public education (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2003; Simpson & Stack, 2010) arguing that, “[t]he undemocratic suppression of the individuality of the teacher goes naturally with the improper restriction of the intelligence of the mind of the child” (as cited in Simpson & Stack, 2010, p. 148). Dewey claimed knowledge rested within an individual’s everyday experience (a concept that Freire builds off of in his theory of problem-posing education); therefore, he summoned teachers to draw upon their students’ experiential knowledge as
a basis for learning (Hickman and Alexander, 1998; Simpson & Stack, 2010). In *My Pedagogic Creed*, for example, Dewey writes:

> I believe that education . . . is a process of living and not a preparation for future living.

> I believe that the school must represent present life—life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighborhood, or on the playground.

> I believe that education which does not occur through forms of life, forms that are worth living for their own sake, is always a poor substitute for the genuine reality and tends to cramp and to deaden. (as cited in Simpson & Stack, 2010, p. 26)

For these reasons, Dewey’s work has been regarded as part of the genesis for the development of critical thought and pedagogy.

Freire grounded much of his work in the philosophical tenets of the Frankfurt School whose members included Max Horkeimer, Theodor Adorno, Jurgen Habermas, and others. Established in 1923, the Frankfurt School functioned as a Marxist-oriented think tank for those interested in mediating the relationship between theory and practice (Giroux, 2003), and class structure and oppression in particular. Nevertheless, over the course of the next several decades until its dissolution in the mid-1960s, the School experienced marked shifts in ideology stemming from the Nazi invasion and its aftermath. Unlike early Marxist theory, the Frankfurt School philosophies encompassed an analysis of self in conjunction with that of the larger society. As developers of a broader critical social theory, its members also began forwarding the idea of critiquing
critique and of placing elements of power as well as powerlessness into their proper (sociohistorical) context (Giroux, 2003).

It is Freire’s work, however, that marks the next visible shift in the development of critical social theory as his scholarship addresses issues of pedagogy and schooling. In the next section, I discuss Freire’s impact on a number of other scholars in addition to the impact “Othered” social theorists (i.e., women, persons of color) have had on the field of critical pedagogy.

**Post-Freirean, contemporary, and ‘othered’ critical thought.** Given the overwhelming response to Freire’s *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, the field of critical pedagogy inevitably took flight. Brazilian scholar and Freirean contemporary, Augusto Boal, for instance, uses Freire’s title as inspiration for his dramatic theory/method and book of the same name entitled, *Theatre of the oppressed*. Similar to Freire, Boal highlights the importance of audience (e.g., student) participation regarding the development and direction of the on-stage performance through a technique he names “the spect-actor’ (in contrast to spectator) theater approach” (Darder, Baltonado, & Torres, 2003, p. 8). Others like Shor, Macedo, and McLaren work right alongside him. Prior to Shor (1980/1987) publishing his co-authored piece, *A pedagogy for liberation*, with Freire, he draws upon Freirean principles to explore the vocational side of schooling in his own *Critical teaching and everyday life*. In it, Shor condemns the dehumanizing aspects of vocational work that often impede the aims of critical teaching:

> The variety of anti-critical forces in American life include vocational culture in school and on the job, several forms of false consciousness . . . the absence of democratic experience, the demands of private life, and the aesthetics and social
relations of school in general and the community colleges in particular. (Shor, 1987, p. 49)

From his days as a community college instructor, Shor observes the ease with which many of his students become complicit in their own oppression and thereby develop this sense of “false consciousness” (or lack of awareness). Therefore, he insists the work of ‘undoing’ oppressive thinking should occur alongside the work of ‘doing’ critical thinking and through a journey that he and his students would take together. By using real-world examples (e.g., the study of hamburgers and marriage contracts) as a basis for learning, Shor and his students are able to engage in more liberatory forms of education (e.g., establishing students’ lived experiences as the basis of the curriculum; engaging students in meaningful dialogue) and thus meet each other half-way. As a result of this work, Shor contends:

Philosophy needs to shape itself around reality because theory best serves liberatory culture when it is ‘grounded theory,’ that is, reflection emerging from concrete practice. When we think critically about our action, then we act critically on our thinking. Teaching is the most important social practice of intellectuals, so reflection on pedagogy can do a lot in extraordinarily redesigning the ordinary work of a teacher. (p. 123)

Like Shor, Giroux has carried out the Freirean tradition in his work. Dissatisfied with the current discourse on education (e.g. the silencing around issues of race, racism, gender, in/equity, and more), Giroux (1989b) sought a radical view of education that would speak more directly to the politics of schooling and the interplay of power, domination, and oppression within classrooms in particular. As the central authority
(rather than authoritarian) figures in the classroom, Giroux believes, “teachers are the bearers of critical knowledge, rules, and values through which they consciously articulate and problematize their relationship to each other, to students, to subject matter, and to the wider community” (p. 138). Furthermore, he asks that “educators . . . define themselves not simply as intellectuals, but in a more committed fashion as transformative intellectuals” (p. 138). Giroux thus deems “a pedagogy of and for difference” (p. 141) an appropriate response to meeting these goals. It is both a moral and political approach to teaching that Giroux describes in this way:

. . . a pedagogy of difference needs to address the important question of how representations and practices of difference are actively learned, internalized, challenged, or transformed. For it is only through such an understanding that teachers can develop a pedagogy for difference, one which is characterized by ‘an ongoing effort to create new spaces of discourse, to rewrite cultural narratives and to define the terms of another perspective—a view from ‘elsewhere.’” (p. 142)

Further, if carried out with students in such a manner, the likelihood of questioning, leveraging, and critiquing power also increases.

Also contributing to this discussion are the voices of two contemporary female scholars, Maxine Greene and bell hooks, whose works have necessarily stimulated further discussion (and direction) within the field of critical pedagogy. Greene’s work (1988, 1995) often explores issues of democracy, aesthetics, and creativity in education while much of hooks’ deals with notions of spirit, transformation, freedom, and engaged pedagogy. In Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts, and social change, Greene (1995), for example, likens the art and science of teaching to an
imaginative act that offers teachers the opportunity to see beyond their own beliefs and experiences in order to see from the perspective of their students:

One of the reasons I have come to concentrate on imagination as a means through which we can assemble a coherent world is that imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible. It is what enables us to cross the empty spaces between ourselves and those we teachers have called ‘other’ over the years. If those others are willing to give us clues, we can look in some manner through strangers’ eyes and hear through their ears. That is because, of all our cognitive capacities, imagination is the one that permits us to give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions. (p. 3)

In Greene’s view, imagination, hope, and possibility are best achieved through arts-based pedagogies that evoke image and memory; more specifically, Greene recognizes literature as the en route to (re)imagination or to seeing outside of oneself. Reflecting on the words of Maya Angelou, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, and others, Greene confesses to “seeing [for the first time] through many women’s diverse eyes” (p. 94). Furthermore, Greene says, “I wanted to see through as many eyes and from as many angles as possible, and for a long time, I believe I deliberately sought visions that might enable me to look from the other side of the looking glass . . . ” (p. 94).

hooks (1994), however, believes her ability to (re)imagine is rooted in her own Southern rural working-class upbringing. In the opening pages of *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*, for instance, hooks writes: “In the apartheid South, black girls from working-class backgrounds had three career choices. We could marry.
We could work as maids. We could become school teachers” (p. 2). Fortunately, for hooks, the classroom opens up other possibilities and eventually becomes her way out of domestic servitude. hooks’ own experiences, then, serve as the impetus for the central aims and claims of her particular critical pedagogical approach.

Drawing upon the teachings of Freire, and Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, hooks (1994) fashions her own “mind-body-spirit” (p. 14) approach for in her view one cannot be fully educated and, thus free, without attending to all of these elements. hooks frames her theory of education as the practice of freedom in terms of transcending boundaries in our idea(l)s and in our relationships with others (be they student/professor, woman/man, Black/White, or other). Ultimately, hooks recognizes teaching as a movement—as a transfer of ideas or an exchange and as a transformation within individuals or a change. Like Freire and other critical pedagogues, hooks seeks to challenge the view of the classroom as an undemocratic learning space where teacher talk reigns supreme in addition to the perception of the classroom as an unexciting place to be.

Still, no less significant are the contributions of other scholars (female, of color, etc.) whose work achieved similar goals. Branding individuals like Harriet Jacobs, Carter G. Woodson and W. E. B. DuBois under the heading of “‘Othered’ critical traditions” (p. 57), Morrell (2008) argues:

Though the term ‘critical’ certainly emerges from and is indebted to the Western philosophical tradition, I want to acknowledge a separate, distinct, and sometimes parallel tradition that informs my theorizing of this term. These traditions I designate as ‘Othered’ critical traditions . . . That description perfectly fits these
scholars who, because, of race, class, color, or ideology, are akin to, but not a central part of, the mainstream tradition of critical thought. (p. 57)

Nevertheless, DuBois (1994) identifies the roots of racist, sexist, and classist oppression and the means to eradicate them well over a half-century the emergence of this mainstream tradition (i.e., before Freire). In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois writes:

To be a poor man is hard, but to be a *poor race* [emphasis added] in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships. [The Negro] felt the weight of his ignorance—not simply of letters, but of life, of business, of the humanities . . . The red stain of bastardy, which two centuries of systematic legal defilement of Negro women had stamped upon his race, meant not only the loss of ancient African chastity, but also the hereditary weight of mass corruption from white adulterers, threatening almost the obliteration of the Negro home.

A people thus handicapped ought not to be asked to race with the world, but rather allowed to give all its time and thought to its own social problems. (p. 9)

Du Bois finds “the Negro” better suited to address her/his own problems through her/his own experiences (which is another concept Freire builds off of in his theory of problem-posing education). By the same token, DuBois’ oft-cited notion of “double consciousness” (i.e., the ability to recognize oneself through his/her own eyes, yet also through the eyes of another) has also been used to help theorize issues of race, power, privilege, and resistance, all of which accompany the central tenets of critical pedagogy (Kincheloe, 2004, Morrell, 2008).
In 1933, Woodson penned the acclaimed social treatise, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, which is yet another example of pre-Freirean critical African American scholarship. Like Du Bois, Woodson also espouses new methods for imparting knowledge to ‘the Negro’ that include “approaching people through their environment in order to deal with conditions as they are rather than as you would like to see them or imagine that they are” (p. xvii). The teacher, in other words, must consider his or her students’ context, before dealing with the content. Woodson further stresses that Negroes be educated in a manner unlike their oppressor, believing the following:

Those who take the position to the contrary have the idea that education is merely a process of imparting information. One who can give out these things or devise an easy plan for so doing, then, is an educator. In a sense this is true, but it accounts for most of the troubles of the Negro. Real education means to inspire people to live more abundantly, to learn to begin with life as they find it and make it better, but the instruction so far given Negroes in colleges and universities [and grade schools] has worked to the contrary. (pp. 28-29)

A “real education” for Negroes thus meant the development of their critical consciousness and self-sufficiency. Woodson’s work then becomes significant given the racist climate of his era; rather than propose a deficit perspective on teaching, learning, and the Negro, Woodson chooses instead to promote a pedagogical approach that emphasizes Negro empowerment and achievement. In these ways, Woodson’s work, sets the stage for later scholarship on race, class, work, and education.
Decades later, Black feminists likewise turned to critical theory to address some of their most pressing concerns with regard to race, class, and gender inequity. Collins (2009), for instance, states:

For African-American women, critical social theory encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing U.S. Black women as a collectivity. The need for such thought arises because African-American women as a group remain oppressed within a U.S. context characterized by injustice. This neither means that all African-American women within that group are oppressed in the same way, nor that some U.S. Black women do not suppress others. Black feminist thought’s identity as a ‘critical’ social theory lies in its commitment to justice, both for U.S Black women as a collectivity and for that of other similarly oppressed groups. (p. 12)

Collins suggests that as “outsider[s]-within” (p. 13), Black women have been positioned to theorize differently about the world. Collins further substantiates her claims through the subjugated voices of Black women themselves, rather than highly recognizable White male scholars in the field. The fact that these and others’ (e.g., minority) voices are not nearly as recognized within the canon also speaks directly to its limitations.

**Critical Pedagogy: Critiques, Limitations, and Possibilities**

In *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy*, McLaren (2003) discusses the relationship amongst culture, politics, economics, and schooling in order to argue for a critical pedagogy that examines these relationships within the context of democracy and power. To critical educators, McLaren offers these specific directives:
Teachers . . . should examine knowledge both for the way it misrepresents or marginalizes particular views of the world and for the way it provides a deeper understanding of how the student’s world is actually constructed. Knowledge acquired in classrooms should help students participate in vital issues that affect their experience on a daily level . . .

As with those critical scholars who came before him (e.g., Dewey, Du Bois, Woodson, Freire), McLaren also stresses the importance of teachers inviting students to examine the(ir) world. McLaren argues further that the role of schools should be to create free-thinking citizens of the world:

School knowledge should have a more emancipatory goal than churning out workers (human capital) and helping schools become the citadel of corporate ideology. School knowledge should help create the conditions productive for student self-determination in the larger society . . . (p. 211)

Yet as McLaren and others have continued to champion critical pedagogy’s larger aims and benefits, there are also those who have questioned its actual effects (Ellsworth, 1989; Greene, 2003). In other words, what can a critical pedagogy actually do or afford, and particularly for Black girls?

Although a strong proponent of critical pedagogy, Greene (2003) expresses her uncertainties in what critical pedagogy has to offer: “As young people find it increasingly difficult to project a long-range future, intergenerational continuity becomes problematic. So does the confidence in education as a way of keeping the culture alive, or of initiating newcomers into learning communities, or of providing the means for pursuing a
satisfying life” (p. 109). McLaren (2003) acknowledges, too, that not every student might be ready or willing to participate:

Critical pedagogy does not guarantee that resistance will not take place. But it does provide teachers with the foundations for understanding resistance, so that whatever pedagogy is developed can be sensitive to sociocultural conditions that construct resistance, lessening the chance that students will be blamed as the sole, originating source of resistance. No emancipatory pedagogy will ever be built out of theories of behavior which views students as lazy, deviant, lacking in ambition, or genetically inferior. (p. 218)

However, feminist scholar, Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) is perhaps one of critical pedagogy’s most outspoken critics. In “Why doesn’t this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy,” Ellsworth seeks to disrupt commonly held views of what critical pedagogy entails and represents. She learns soon after teaching a college course on campus race relations that there are events happening in her classroom that fall outside of the realm of what might ordinarily be considered critical pedagogy. Ellsworth maintains, “on the basis of [her] interpretation of C&I 607, that key assumptions, goals, and pedagogical practices fundamental to the literature on critical pedagogy—namely, ‘empowerment,’ ‘student voice,’ ‘dialogue,’ and even the term ‘critical’—are repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination” (p. 298).

For starters, Ellsworth believes the term “critical” holds little meaning for those hoping to practice it as it merely functions as a “code word” (p. 300). She also feels its approach draws from “rationalist assumptions” (p. 303) that leaves the knowledges of women, people of color, and other minorities unaccounted for. Additionally, she
challenges notions of the teacher becoming “more like the student by redefining [her/himself] as learner of the student’s reality and knowledge” (p. 306) which she discovers through her own experiences of not knowing or understanding racism “better” (p. 308) than her students. Thus, she recognizes these knowledges (both hers and her students’) as only partial and in need of both questioning and critique.

Ellsworth further asserts, “Critical pedagogues speak of student voices as ‘sharing’ their experiences and understandings of oppression with other students and with the teacher . . . Rather, the speech of oppositional groups is a ‘talking back,’ a ‘defiant speech’ that is constructed within communities of resistance and is a condition of survival” (p. 310). As she finds notions of voicing, silencing, and safe space to be highly problematic, Ellsworth recommends (minority) students be given the freedom to speak up or remain silent in the ways they know best and for their (White) peers and teacher to commit to listening. Ultimately, she determines these actions critical to her own process of unlearning teacher privilege and to her students’ move toward coalition-building.

In their introduction to Critical pedagogy, the state, and cultural struggle, Giroux and McLaren (1989a) make clear, however, that critical pedagogy provides a “language [of both] ‘critique and [emphasis added] possibility’” (p. xxvi) and that it “is never finished, that it is always in a state of tension because it is supportive of a cultural politics that defines itself through a project of hope and possibility” (xxxv). Critical pedagogy, then, is not about a fixed set of rules and practices, but rather an understanding of what can be made possible in any given context. According to Darder (2003), Freire, too, understood this quite well as “he had an incredible capacity to reconstruct and begin always anew. For Freire, there was no question that he, others, and the world were always
in a state of becoming, of transforming, and reinventing ourselves as part of our human historical process . . . In the tradition of Marx, he believed that we both make and are made by our world. And as such, all human beings are the makers of history” (p. 505). Freire’s desire to “begin always anew” is also evidenced by the evolution of his writing as he routinely faced criticism for avoiding the subject of race/ism and for neglecting women (Lather, 1998) and/or feminist issues in his analyses (Darder, 2003). Fortunately, Freire later revised his positions.

The idea of ‘beginning anew’ is fitting for thinking more about the lives and literacies of Black girls, in thinking more about the ways in which Black girls interpret themselves and the(ir) world. This idea is also relevant to the matter of adopting pedagogies that more readily suit the needs and interests of young Black women. Therefore, I turn to the concluding section to discuss critical pedagogy and its relationship to my work with Black female adolescents.

Beginning Anew with Critical Pedagogy and Black Female Adolescents

Earlier I noted McLaren’s (2003) definition of critical pedagogy entailed “a politics of understanding and action, an act of knowing that attempts to situate everyday life in a larger geo-political context, with the goal of fostering regional collective self-responsibility, large-scale ecumene, and international worker solidarity” (p. 7). When thinking about ‘beginning anew’ how do the lived experiences of young Black females then correspond with this definition? Also, how does this definition account for their triumphs? Their struggles?

Evans-Winters’ (2005) work with Black girls suggests: “African American urban girls are in need of a critical pedagogy that examines how individual and institutional
racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism complicate their daily existence, a pedagogy that extends beyond multicultural education to take into consideration the context in which students live, play, and work” (p. 155). Nonetheless, when Elena asks, “... is this how the world views Black women?,” I am left to wonder how this approach might also account for the pain that Black girls like Elena experience in their efforts to counter and subsequently transcend these assaults (e.g., racism, poverty, sexual abuse, exploitation). Like Evans-Winters, my work is also grounded in a critical pedagogical Black feminist approach, yet in order to engage a critical pedagogy that addresses the lived realities of Black female adolescents I find that an affective (or emotive) component must also be present. As such, I understand affective critical pedagogy as an approach to teaching and learning that promotes critical consciousness along with therapeutic kinds of dialogue; it is an approach that considers the naming of pain (hooks, 1993) as significant as the naming of power. Likewise, it is an approach to teaching and learning that is concerned with making progress.

Nevertheless, there are some who understand such teaching differently. In the introduction to Pedagogy of the oppressed, for example, Macedo (2000) is critical of “the transformation of dialogical teaching into a method invoking conversation that provides participants with a group-therapy space for stating their grievances” (p. 18). Yet for Black girls who are rarely summoned to state their grievances at all, I find this approach an ideal place to begin—‘to begin anew’ in how we educate and engage young Black women. ‘To begin anew’ means to center Black female adolescents—both their heads and their hearts—in our research. ‘To begin anew’ also means to invite Black female adolescents to speak on their own lives in our work. And Black female adolescents’
engagement in autoethnography aims to do just that. It is a methodology that affords
Black female adolescents opportunities to speak on their power, pain, and progress. It is
also a methodology where Black female adolescents can be ‘made,’ ‘unmade, and ‘made
over’ (McLaren 2003).

In the next chapter, I make a case for the use of autoethnography to explore the
lives and literacies of Black female adolescents. In addition, I discuss the context of my
study including the setting, participants, and methods for data collection and analysis. In
subsequent chapters, I discuss the implications of using affective critical pedagogy with
Black female youth as I also examine the ways in which power, pain, and progress
converge in the individual and collective experiences of Black female adolescents.
Chapter 4:

Autoethnography as Methodology: Its Definition, Validity and Role in the Lives of Black Female Adolescents

Introduction

To begin our first session of the 2011-2012 school year (or Year 2 of my study), I handed each of the girls a brief survey\(^6\) that would allow me to gather preliminary data concerning the girls’ conceptions of self and society. Included in this survey were such questions as: What initially peaked your interest in joining this group? What knowledge do you hope to gain (or what kinds of topics do you wish to talk about)? What knowledge do you hope to give or pass on? What aspects of your life do you think might be interesting to talk/write about (or what aspects of your life might you like to research or look deeper into)? And, what does it mean to grow up young, Black, and female in the 21\(^{st}\) C.?

In addition to the above-mentioned survey questions, I relied on the below prompt and the subsequent responses I received from the girls to generate conversation around the term “autoethnography”:

*Autoethnography is a term that we hope you will become much more familiar with in the coming weeks/months. Given that auto- means “self,” ethno-*  

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\(^6\) Surveys were also given to those who joined the group later in the year.
means “culture,” and graph- means “to write,” what are your initial thoughts on what the term “autoethnography” means?

Writing about yourself and your culture. Your behaviors and interests and stuff—Jordan, 15

To write about your ethnicity—June, 15

Who am I?—Chyvae, 15

It can mean how people/you feel about yourself in your culture—Shey, 17

I think it means to write a self-story—CJ, 14

To me it means to write about your history and where your family came from—Venetia, 21

I think it means to kind of do a biography about yourself/to tell a story about yourself in a different way than writing—Shaelanae, 14

I think it meant a group of people with common interest in something that are able to express theirself [sic]—Amora, 18

I begin with these statements because they represent the beginning of our journey into autoethnography. These statements also provide me with insight into the girls’ initial understandings of autoethnographic methodology. Over time, our methodologies became our own (both the processes and the products that we developed in response to our own needs and interests) as they further underscored the significance of Black female adolescents’ lives and literacies.

In this chapter, I defend autoethnography as a viable and relevant methodological approach by discussing: 1) its general definitions and features, 2) its benefits and limitations, and 3) its relevance to the lives of Black adult and adolescent female writers.

I then discuss my research setting and participants as well as my methods for collecting and analyzing data. Lastly, I provide a rationale for the girls’ use of autoethnographic
methodologies and the impact such methodologies can have on their literate and social lives.

It’s Just Me, Myself, and I . . . ???: Authenticating Autoethnography as Qualitative Research

In “The narrative construction of reality,” Bruner (1991) explains humans’ relationship to storytelling: “. . . we organize our experience and our memory of human happening through narrative—stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on” (p. 4). Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) agree, too, that storytelling is what we humans do and that narrative inquiry has in fact existed since our arrival upon earth. Yet it has only been since the 1960s that narrative inquiry emerged as a serious field of study, due in part to the mounting consensus among social scientists (e.g., anthropologists, psychologists) that objectivist stances of human behavior were not revealing enough (Pinnegar & Gaynes, 2007). Additionally, researchers began to draw further attention to their relationship with the researched and how both parties affected and were affected by the research process as a whole (Pinnegar & Gaynes, 2007).

Recognizing it as an interdisciplinary approach, Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) define narrative inquiry as “. . . the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experiences as a source of important knowledge and understanding . . . Narrative inquirers study an individual’s experience in the world and, through the study, seek ways of enriching and transforming that experience for themselves and others” (p. 42). Further, Pinnegar and Gaynes (2007) recognize narrative inquiry as “both [the] method and phenomena of study” (p. 5) and that for these reasons, “it can be connected and placed under the label of qualitative research methodology” (p. 5). Consequently, as narrative
inquiry grew in favor it naturally took on a life of its own, with autoethnography emerging as one of many offshoots.

In defining autoethnography, Dyson (2007) puts it this way: “Autoethnographies are this. They are one person’s view of reality constructed around and through other people” (p. 40). Spry (2001) conceives of it as a performance that features “well-crafted” and “emotionally engaging writing” along with a “provocative weave of story and theory” (p. 713). In working with inner-city youth in South Los Angeles, Camangian (2010) sees autoethnography as having even greater implications: “[Autoethnographies] that lack critical reflection have the potential to be more about amusement than analysis, telling without understanding, summarizing instead of meaning making . . . [It] is a method of learning about and understanding lived experience in order to benefit self, society, community, and culture. To do otherwise is an exercise in self-centeredness” (pp. 183-184). Given this seeming lack of continuity in defining and/or conceptualizing the purposes of autoethnography across the field, Ellis and Bochner (2000) note,

Autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethnos), and on self (auto). Different exemplars of autoethnography fall at different places along the continuum of each of these three axes. Researchers disagree on the boundaries of each category and on the precise definitions of the

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7 It is important to note that autoethnography derives from both narrative inquiry and ethnography—two distinct, yet interrelated approaches to qualitative research (Glesne, 2006; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). Though researchers using either approach aim to “understand and interpret how the various participants in a social setting construct the world around them” (Glesne, 2006), ethnographers tend to engage “first-hand” (Hammersley, 2006) in a systematic study of an individual, group, or institution over lengthy periods of time (Hammersley, 2006; Heath & Street, 2008), while those engaged in narrative inquiry typically concern themselves with the act of storytelling in addition to the story itself (Pinnegar & Gaynes, 2007).
types of autoethnography. Indeed, many writers move back and forth among terms and meanings even in the same articles. (p. 740)

Despite this ongoing war of words over the term “autoethnography”—what it is (e.g., personal narrative? autobiography? performance?) and how it counts as (qualitative) research (Buzard, 2003; Ellis & Bochner, 2000), real-life partners Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner each made it their life’s work to defend it. Together (and individually) they have published a number of books, articles, and chapters in order to give further credence to this form of research, making them two of the leading proponents of this method. In “Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject,” Ellis and Bochner address critics head-on, providing a detailed account of the form and function of autoethnography.

Their chapter opens with a fictionalized account of a phone conversation between them as Bochner (2000) reveals his uneasiness over defending this technique once more. His hope is that their writing will not only be read, but also felt. As the two opt to move back and forth between short story writing and traditional academic prose, the autoethnographic method is represented as both show and tell. Thus, they divide their chapter into multiple sections that highlight the history, definition, process, and benefits of autoethnography and that also incorporate the voices of real and imagined characters throughout.

Although, autoethnographic methodology dates all the way back to 1970s anthropological fieldwork, Ellis and Bochner (2000) note that it has taken on several life forms since. Quite often, the term has become synonymous with other labels such as personal narrative, auto-observation, and personal ethnography, however, Ellis and
Bochner find “autoethnography” to be the most widely used term amongst researchers and therefore define it as such:

[A]n autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. (p. 739)

Additionally, Ellis and Bochner (2000) emphasize that autoethnographic work be well-written and well-researched. The role of the reader weighs heavily for s/he must gain something from the researcher’s experiences as well. In recognizing the entwinement of researcher, reader, and text, Ellis and Bochner (see also Stout, 2011) find the act of giving the reader (e.g., truthfulness, verisimilitude) as much as one is getting (e.g., healing, self-awareness) essential. Like other qualitative researchers, autoethnographers are expected to adopt a number of strategies for data collection and also re-present their data in a variety of ways which include, but are not limited to: poetry, dialogue, short story, and personal narrative. Unlike these many forms of artistic expression, however, autoethnography encompasses both theory and therapy, description and analysis, concern and critique (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Insofar as expressive forms of research as a whole, Stout (2011) believes “the arts-informed researcher and writer must be warned against venting, idiosyncratic catharsis, and overwrought presentations” (p. 26). Tierney (2002), too, cautions against “focusing on a cathartic I-centric agency of self” (p. 385) without “a central concern for
agency, praxis, and the Other” (p. 385) while Chase (2008) advises narrative inquirers to reconsider the centrality of self in Westernized versions of storytelling so that other ways of telling and/or representing stories might be recognized. By and large, Stout, Tierney, and Chase are wary of those researchers simply out for or just doing for Self (i.e., “venting, idiosyncratic catharsis, and overwrought presentations”) while lacking greater concern for the relationships one has with the readers/participants themselves. In this regard, I am mindful of the partnerships I am attempting to forge across the printed page where particular questions are brought to bear such as: “How might the reader interpret this? What do I want him/her to understand? And, what is my responsibility to him/her?”

Undoubtedly, re-presenting data through autoethnography intensifies the levels of uncertainty as this form of writing invites multiple understandings, and, thus supports multiple, complex, and sometimes intersecting interpretations. Together, then, researcher and reader/participant struggle to figure out what these partnerships mean for them. Why these partnerships matter.

Buzard (2003; see also Delamont, 2009) and others, however, remain thoroughly unconvinced. In “Auto-ethnographic authority,” for instance, Buzard dismisses autoethnography as a fad and, at worst, an “embarrassment” (p. 62). For him, autoethnography ultimately fails as a valid methodological approach as it: 1) promotes essentialism, 2) requires no fact-checking, and 3) simply causes confusion. That is to say, autoethnography is highly suspect: “. . . we need to know more about why we should trust this particular insider’s angle of vision on his own culture. We need to look at the rhetoric by means of which autoethnographers indicate their fitness for their task, and even at the degree to which they take for granted their right to perform that task” (p. 71). According
to Buzard, traditional ethnographic approaches (dating all the way back to the early twentieth century) foster critical understanding of the unfamiliar and the unknown while autoethnography functions as quite the opposite. In other words, Buzard believes autoethnography lacks analytic reasoning: “At its most loosely defined, autoethnography is reckoned simply ‘a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context’—a definition so ecumenical as to court analytical uselessness, since many a ‘standard’ autobiography does at least that much” (p. 73).

Buzard (2003) proceeds to cite instances where indigenous populations were found ill-equipped to study their own culture, blinded by the familiar, unable to step outside of themselves to critique their own culture. Thus, in order for autoethnography to be done effectively, the researcher’s blinders needed to be removed and in Buzard’s view, no one had effectively engaged in autoethnographic examinations more skillfully than the late great Harlem Renaissance Era anthropologist-turned-novelist Zora Neale Hurston. Buzard notes that under the direction of Franz Boas, Hurston was able to achieve the necessary distance between herself and her hometown of Eatonville, FL in order to “see” the community, its culture, and its residents anew. As such, Hurston became an “outsider-within” (Collins, 2009). Yet for Buzard, Hurston’s work remains an anomaly.

Perhaps it is because autoethnography had become fastened between this rock and hard place that Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) choose to revisit the debate a little more than a decade later. As criticisms abound from the social sciences (i.e., for being too emotive) and the literary worlds (i.e., for being too theoretical) alike, these authors maintain that autoethnography serves a larger purpose: “Autoethnography . . . expands
and opens up a wider lens on the world, eschewing rigid definitions of what constitutes meaningful and useful research; this approach also helps us understand how the kinds of people we claim, or are perceived to be, influence interpretations of what we study, how we study it, and what we say about our topic” (History section, para. 4). It is also through autoethnography that science and art, thought and emotion, gain common ground (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

Reminding readers of its academic validity, Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) opt for traditional academic prose to defend the purpose and practice of autoethnography. They maintain:

*Autoethnographers must not only use their methodological tools and research literature to analyze experience* [emphasis added], but also must consider ways others may experience similar epiphanies; they must use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders. To accomplish this might require comparing and contrasting personal experience against existing research, interviewing cultural members and/or examining relevant cultural artifacts.

(Process section, para. 5)

They also draw clearer distinctions between ethnography and autoethnography using these major sub-headings—history, process, product, potentials, and critiques—to quiet the response from critics. In traditional ethnography the researcher functions as a participant observer within a culture by producing detailed accounts of all that takes place; in autoethnography, the researcher already functions as a full participant within the culture s/he writes about. Autoethnographers are after the details as well as the *feelings*
their work evokes in themselves and in their audience (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). However, there are other ethical issues to consider like those family members, friends, or colleagues who might be implicated in one’s work:

Autoethnographers . . . consider ‘relational concerns’ as a crucial dimension of inquiry that must be kept uppermost in their minds throughout the research and writing process. On many occasions, this obligates autoethnographers to show their work to others implicated in or by their texts, allowing these others to respond, and/or acknowledging how these others feel about what is being written about them and allowing them to talk back to how they have been represented in the text. (Relational ethics section, para. 4)

While recognizing reliability, generalizability, and validity are also key components of autoethnographic research, Ellis, Adams, and Bochner end their article with this final statement: “Autoethnographers view research and writing as socially-just acts; rather than a preoccupation with accuracy, the goal is to produce analytical, accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better” (Critiques section, para. 5).

**Black Women Writers: Acting in Self-Defense**

If anyone has understood the purpose of writing for social transformation, it has been Black artists, writers, and intellectuals. In *Black literate lives*, for instance, Fisher (2009) notes that for African Americans, literacy alone has never been enough—that the “true” power of Black literacy practices has always been present in reading, writing, and speaking acts that are distinctively tied to social action. In other words, African Americans have not simply functioned as readers, writers, and rhetors, but as “doers” (Fisher, 2009, p. 12), too. Similarly, in her study of late 19th C./early 20th C. African
American women’s rhetoric, Royster (2000) finds their reading, writing, and speaking acts strategically linked to activist work. Royster believes, “African American women transform the world they perceive into the worlds that they desire through the use of language” (p. 70) and in this sense, autoethnography becomes yet another means for Black women and girls to further understand and transform themselves and the(ir) world.

According to Bell-Scott (1994), Black women’s engagement with alternative forms of writing, speaking, and/or knowing is nothing new. To this point, she writes:

There is a verifiable tradition of Black women who have made contemporaneous notes of their lives, though these writings almost never reach a national audience. The paucity of published journals and diaries is linked to our historical marginalization, a reality that often prevents us from acquiring the tools that make writing possible. Despite the absence of formal schooling and limited material resources, many have ‘written’ their lives in quilts and other handiwork. (p. 17)

Throughout her sizeable collection of Black women’s and girl’s writings, Bell-Scott showcases their ability to mark (as Black women) as well as shift (as human beings) boundaries. In her view: “Personal writing is/has always been a dangerous activity, because it allows us the freedom to define everything on our terms” (pp. 17-18). Thus, these inquiries into self (whether they be written, oral, or visual) are less about self-indulgence than they are about validation. More often than not, the blank page acts as Black women’s source of validation—a space to reconstruct and refine themselves for themselves. Hence, many Black female scholars like Ferdinand (2009) and Boylorn (2008) have come to appreciate autoethnographic writing for this very reason. It is personal writing of this kind that also serves as a reaffirmation of Black feminist thinking
in function and in form as it reflects alternative, yet significant ways of knowing by woman of color.

Through a blend of prose, poetry, and personal narrative, Ferdinand (2009) uses autoethnography as a tool to explore her feelings of homelessness in America and abroad. For Ferdinand this feeling of displacement derives from her subordinate status as a Black woman living in America, a realization that hits home only after she struggles to complete an overseas customs application. In that moment she asks: “What was meant by nationality? I mean, I knew the definition of it, but what was I to put? In the U.S., I’d only been allowed to write Black/African descent. Now, suddenly, I was supposed to write American. How could this term refer to me?” (para. 3). From there, Ferdinand proceeds to pledge her grievances (rather than allegiances) against the place she used to call home. Yet she finds on her visit to Burkina Faso, the supposed homeland of Africa, her feelings of displacement are no different: “I had very mixed feelings about being in Burkina Faso, even about being in Africa. I didn’t know this place, even though I dreamed of being here. Everything was different” (What is auto-ethnography section, para. 4). Her story ultimately reveals what it is like for a Black woman to live out of place in multiple settings—living everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

As a Black female communications scholar, Ferdinand (2009) believes autoethnography to be an essential means of moving the field forward and helping others like her to vocalize their experiences as she says: “I could have also easily engaged in an ethnography. But, ethnography wouldn’t have allowed me to have such an intimate understanding of my own life and the ways in which it relates to other African American women” (Why use auto-ethnography section, para. 4). Ferdinand recognizes that in
authoring her story in this way, she is also putting forth a Black women’s way of knowing and feeling and that that in and of itself is powerful.

Boylorn (2008), too, recognizes the power of autoethnography as she opts for a multi-genred approach to examining the role of Black women in America, and more specifically through the lens of reality TV. It is through autoethnography that she also becomes more attuned to self as critic and consumer of this form of entertainment. Unlike Ferdinand (2009), Boylorn leans heavily upon theory—Black feminist (Collins, 2009) and critical media literacy—to challenge narrow representations of Black women on reality TV. Similar to Collins’ (2009) notions of controlling imagery, Boylorn finds reality programming to be rife with the stereotyping of Black women. On one extreme is the big bad and bossy Black woman and on the other is the carnal, curvy, and sex-crazed Black girl and it was not at all uncommon for the two to be joined together. Therefore it is imperative that Black women develop what she refers to as an “oppositional gaze” (p. 414). “The oppositional gaze, in contrast to the autoethnographic gaze, is critical, interrogational, oppositional, consciously aware, seeking to document, and concerned with issues of race and racism” (p. 414). The use of autoethnography, then, means more than just feeling; it is foremost about doing as a kind of social activism. Although she notes that the media is largely responsible for not showing the full range of who Black women are and can be, she is also guilty by association:

I am wondering how I can possibly be annoyed and entertained in the same moment. I had promised myself (lied to myself) and said that I was not going to watch another reality television show that typecast Black women into negative and limiting roles, yet here I am sitting in front of the television watching, in
some moments laughing, in other moments silently shaking my head and pursing
my lips. I can’t take my eyes off of the TV. It is like a train wreck—I know I
should not be watching. (pp. 418-419)

Yet Boylorn believes these images to be even more threatening for those who lack a
critical understanding of the media and its (mis)representations of Black women. And
because the Black female viewer can often act as her own worst enemy, it will be up to
her to reinvent Black women’s roles on (and off) the screen (Boylorn, 2009). In
Boylorn’s eyes, autoethnography serves as a good place to begin.

The notion of reinventing oneself emerges in the autoethnographic work of
Camangian’s (2010) Black female high school student, Kristian, who uses
autoethnography, for example, as a means of locating where her issues with trust in the
opposite sex derive—ultimately realizing that this issue stems from the broken
relationship she has with her father. Based on Kristian’s oral (and written) retelling of
events, Camangian reasons:

Kristian’s relationship with her father guided her decision-making with her first
boyfriend. Being sympathetic to what her father went through as a man influenced
the ways Kristian prioritized her boyfriend’s feelings before her own. Even more,
Kristian sought to fill the void of her father’s absence through a young man she
believed could offer her the love she lost when her parents separated. (p. 190)

Though one could argue that by sharing Kristian’s story (that of a naïve young Black
female who ‘gives it up’ much too soon), Camangian is also reifying the same
stereotypes that he is attempting to work against, her story, in essence, reveals the ways
in which autoethnography can be used to encourage Black (female) youth to critically reflect upon their lives.

This kind of critical self-reflection on the behalf of Black female youth is also apparent in Rebecca Carroll’s (1997) *Sugar in the raw: Voices of young black girls in America*. Though Carroll’s work is not necessarily representative of adolescent literacy research or autoethnography, it comes quite close as being the first (and or only) work that has ever featured narratives exclusively by and about young Black females. Here she engages in an experimental form of research that uses these narratives as sources of data for uncovering the lives of fifteen African American female youth from all across the United States. Unlike the young Black female in Camangian’s work, these young Black women offer their musings on a whole host of subjects beyond the bedroom that include: educational success and inequity, career aspirations, relationships with family and friends, identity, body image, bullying, and other forms of psychic trauma resulting from race, class, and/or gender bias. The girls, ranging in age from eleven to twenty and from poorer and more privileged backgrounds, also speak to and seek to defy stereotypes that often characterize Black females as both sexually charged and overly sassy. For many of them, transformation of self and society is also key.

Fourteen-year-old Jo-Laine and fourteen year-old Latisha, for instance, express a strong sense of pride in their appearance, capabilities, spiritual beliefs, and race and/or culture. Jo-Laine declares:

I think the whole purpose of education should be about making a place for kids to ask questions and look at things real closely. Some teachers at my school disagree. I am very strong-minded. If you try to tell me that I didn’t go to A and I
did go to A, I’m gonna let you know. I don’t scream or whatever and I never presume that everybody’s going to feel the same way I do, but I’m gonna let you know. My mother taught me that. (pp. 40-41)

Here Jo-Laine offers a different perspective on what it means to be both vocal and visible, an image that does not include loudness, aggressiveness, or sassiness. Rather Jo-Laine wishes to be acknowledged for who she is and what she believes. What is also significant are the values, and perhaps coping mechanisms being passed down from mother to daughter—ways of dealing with(in) the world as a young Black female.

However, Latisha offers her own sage advice to readers: “If I could tell young black girls in America anything, I’d tell them to be hopeful and to know that there are always options . . . Even if we can’t hug or touch God, He’s there for all of us. I would also tell them to take responsibility for their lives and to seek out people who will be supportive . . . The most important thing, though, is to try and stay grounded, even when the world is spinnin’ around you” (p. 51). And there are other narratives included in Carroll’s (1997) text like that of Nadine, a fifteen-year-old Haitian American who chooses to deliver a message to the broader society: “Whether or not America wants to deal with me, I exist” (p. 125).

Ultimately, Carroll’s (1997) work provides readers with a fuller sense of how some Black girls think, speak, feel, learn, and also exhibit care and concern for others while also pointing to what is possible for teaching and learning with young Black females. Her work (along with others) also has implications for my own research in that I can better understand the ways in which my Black female youth research participants
characterize themselves and others, and how our autoethnographic research contributes to these (re-)characterizations.

In the remainder of this chapter, I rely on my understanding of autoethnographic methodology and on the scholarship on Black girls and women to describe the study’s context and participants and to specify the methodological approaches that guide the dissertation.

**Back to the Future: Exploring Autoethnography as Methodology for Black Female Adolescents**

**Context of study: Place, purpose, and participants.** This study began during the 2010-2011 academic year and continued throughout the 2011-2012 academic year in a reserved section of a library, which I refer to as The Lincolntown Library, that is part of a network of libraries located within a large metropolitan city, which I refer to as Capville, in the Midwest. There are approximately 787,033 residents living in Capville, 51.2% of whom are female and 48.8% of whom are male. The city’s racial demographics are as follows: 61.5% White, 28% African American, 5.6% Hispanic/Latino, 4.1% Asian, 1.2% Other, and 0.3% American Indian. Capville is also home to many Fortune 500 companies, science and technology organizations, insurance and retail businesses, and colleges and universities, including one of the largest land-grant research institutions in the nation.

The Lincolntown Library itself is located within a predominately Black neighborhood where the median household income is approximately $19,973 and the residents mainly consist of low to middle income urban singles (e.g., renters) and lower-

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8 Information on city demographics provided by infoplease.com
income single (and mostly female) parents.\textsuperscript{9} Surrounding this area are other sites that include an adult resource center, independent day school, local YMCA, and a large urban high school, which are all within walking distance of the library.

I initially gained access to this site through Mr. J, one of the library administrators whom I met in a graduate-level course involving the collection of literacy narratives during the winter of 2010. In this course, students were required to work in teams to conduct a series of literacy narrative interviews with various Black citizens of Capville and Mr. J served as a community liaison for the collection of these literacy narratives at The Lincolntown Library. Though my team had not conducted interviews with any of the patrons of The Lincolntown Library, I considered this location to be ideal for the kind of work I wanted to do with Black girls. Hence, this location was chosen on the basis of its (neighborhood) demographics, my association with Mr. J, and the location’s close proximity to the high school. In addition to these factors were the library’s literacy initiatives (e.g., weekly teen programming and summer reading programs) and mission/purpose (e.g. “To inspire reading, share resources, and connect people\textsuperscript{10}”) as several aligned with my own research objectives. In this location, I had the opportunity to recruit girls from all walks of life—those attending urban, suburban, and private high schools as well as those being home-schooled; girls living with both parents, a single parent, or in a group home without either parent; and girls who were doing extremely well in school as well as others who were routinely suspended.

\textsuperscript{9} Information on neighborhood demographics provided by zillow.com.

\textsuperscript{10} Information about the library’s mission/purpose provided by the library network web-site.
Participants were therefore selected on the basis of three major criteria: 1) if they identified as Black and female, 2) if they were between 14-21\textsuperscript{11} years of age, and 3) if they were willing to participate (and with parental consent if necessary). During each school year (2010-2011; 2011-2012), I met with participants for 90 minutes once a week for a total of 50 sessions and to date, I have worked with a total of 21 girls, three of whom participated for both years (see Tables 1 and 2).

TT [pseudonym], a Black female doctoral student and colleague, was also added as co-researcher to my project for both years. Though TT had no K-12 teaching experience, I felt she would offer a fresh perspective on exploring the lives and literacies of young Black women given her interest in youth and community activism. To date, I have primarily sought her assistance with creating the applications and fliers, running off copies, and/or purchasing snacks. We also chatted on numerous occasions about the facilitation/development of the sessions, the girls’ interactions with one another, and/or the socioemotional wellness of the girls’ themselves. In an interview, TT classified her role in our weekly sessions as “the backseat driver,” which might have been due to the fact that the direction of the project was largely driven by my own research interests. However, I would also classify her role (along with my own) as that of ‘muse,’ a metaphor Sullivan (1996) uses in order to redefine the role of adult women in mentoring relationships with female adolescents. She finds ‘muse’ a more apt label as it positions women in the role of caring, responsive listeners rather than just teachers, models, or mother figures.

\textsuperscript{11} In the first year, I recruited girls between the ages of 14-18. The following year I capped the age requirement at twenty-one in order to accommodate those who might have graduated and wished to still participate.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants (all are pseudonyms)</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>No. of Sessions Attended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amora</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elzora</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaine</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shey</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elena</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gigi</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikayla</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarah</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laila</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teenie</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Chart includes participants from Year 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants (all are pseudonyms)</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>No. of Sessions Attended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nikayla</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amora</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chyvae</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaelanae</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venetia</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shey</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CJ</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chelsea</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikkie</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Chart includes participants from Year 2
In the first year (2010-2011), I facilitated each of our weekly activities—meaning I often selected what we read or the prompts we responded to—and these included:
1) analyzing fiction and non-fiction literature, media ads and music videos, 2) writing autobiographical pieces, poetry, and reader responses, and 3) interrogating representations of race, class, and gender as a way to center the girls’ experiences. Later in the year, I introduced the girls to the concept of autoethnography by discussing how it is traditionally defined, by reading and discussing excerpts from the Camangian (2010) article and by placing them in pairs to conduct interviews with each other. I also asked the girls to bring in family photographs that would evoke specific memories, reactions, and/or details in our writing. Shortly thereafter, we began developing and researching our own topics to share with family and friends (via PowerPoint and Windows Movie Maker) during our last session of the year.

Throughout the second year (2011-2012), we engaged in similar activities, however, the girls’ autoethnographic research topics served as the impetus for what occurred in most of our meetings. During this time, the girls and I engaged in autoethnographic research where we each designed self-selected and self-reflective projects in order to strengthen our understandings of Black female adolescents’ conceptions of self and society. In designing our projects, we selected our own topics, collected literacy artifacts related to our topics, and created culminating digital products (using such digital tools as Prezi and Pinterest) to share with family and friends.

**Collection of data.** To best address my research questions (i.e., *How do Black female adolescents conceive of self and society? How does autoethnography help to shape their conceptions? What are the larger educational and political implications of*
using autoethnography to examine Black female adolescents’ lives and literacies?), I focus on data I collected in Year 2 (2011-2012) to further explore the girls’ use of autoethnographic methodologies and the impact such methodologies had on their literate (or sense of self and in relation to the larger society) and social (or how they understood and interacted with others) lives. To address these questions, I also looked at data primarily from the standpoint of these three young women: 1) Chyvae, a fifteen year-old high school sophomore who attended a magnet alternative high school across town, 2) Jordan, a fifteen year-old high school sophomore who attended a predominately White suburban high school and who later transferred to a more racially diverse STEM school, and 3) Nikayla, an eighteen year-old high school dropout. Chyvae, Jordan, and Nikayla were each chosen as focal participants because of their higher rate of attendance, range in personality, and particular use of autoethnography (more will be discussed in later chapters).

In Year 2, I used multiple data collection strategies including: note-taking in a research journal, video-taped recordings of meetings, video-taped interviews with participants, writings by the participants (i.e., their autoethnographic work) and other literacy artifacts that were utilized and/or produced (e.g., readings and collaborative work) within our weekly meetings. I held a minimum of two 30-minute interviews with each participant (one during the school year and a follow-up during the 2012-2013 academic year) that shed light on their lived experiences, how they engaged in various literacy practices (i.e., reading, writing, and speaking acts) and how these practices framed their perceptions of themselves and the(ir) world around them. Unlike most autoethnographic studies, these youth had the opportunity to engage in a self-selected
study alongside the researcher; therefore, I asked questions related to autoethnography including their understandings of it, the knowledge gained from it, and their thoughts on the entire process (from choosing a topic to collecting artifacts to creating a culminating digital product, etc.). Additionally, in the follow-up interviews, I posed such questions as: How would you describe the past year? What goals did you set in the last year and how successful were you in meeting these goals? What goals will you set for yourself for the upcoming year? What did you get out of being a part of my research study? What did you learn from doing your autoethnography? Why did you choose to focus on ________? Also, what more did you learn about yourself?

During our meetings, we were typically seated around a large table facing one another with the digital camcorder positioned behind and/or beside us in order to capture what was taking place in each of our discussions. Because I facilitated most of our reading, writing, and speaking activities, I wrote down everything I could recall in my journal immediately following each meeting. I recorded what happened that day, my (preliminary) analysis of what happened, and what to consider in the coming week(s) based upon what took place during that particular meeting. Nevertheless, the overarching goal of each session was to be mindful of what the girls said they were interested in and to use that information to further our discussion of Black female adolescents’ understandings of self and society.

Analysis of data. Findings related to the girls’ conceptions of self and society were analyzed as presented in their autoethnographic work, in video-taped recordings of our meetings, in participant interviews, and in notes from my research journal. To analyze my data, I used a narrative analysis approach that Riessman (2008) identifies as
“a family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form” (p. 11). With this approach, emphasis is placed on ‘what,’ ‘how,’ and ‘why’ a story is being told in a particular way.

For this study, I used two types of narrative methodology that involve thematic and visual interpretation (see Figure 5). According to Riessman (2008), thematic narrative analysis is the most common form of narrative analysis where individuals’ stories are kept “‘intact’ by theorizing from the case rather than from component themes (categories) across cases” (p. 53). Furthermore, one’s analysis of data is generally based upon pre-existing theory. Hence, with this approach, I was prompted to ask such questions as: What kinds of stories do these autoethnographies tell? About Black girls’ sense of self? About their place in society? About young Black woman- and/or Black girlhood, in general? In what ways do their autoethnographies speak to (and/or resist) my notion of Black female adolescent literacies? And what in what ways do the girls name pain and power as well as make progress?

The girls constructed their autoethnographies using such digital tools as Pinterest (which functions as an online pinboard) and Prezi (which is a browser-based presentation software application). Because each of these digital tools allow users to display and/or upload text, photographs, images, videos, and more, I felt a visual narrative analysis approach would also be necessary. Researchers using this approach rely on “[v]isual representations of experience—in photographs, performance art, and other media—[to] enable others to see as a participant sees and to feel” (p. 142). With this approach, I asked such questions as: How were these images produced and/or put together? What story(ies) does this particular image tell? And how does this particular image speak to the
counterhegemonic and/or co-optive methods Black girls take to defining who they are or wish to become?

I began my analysis by examining each participant’s autoethnography (both the process and the product) as a whole—I reread each of the girl’s autoethnographies multiple times and created thematic categories in light of prior theory (i.e., critical pedagogy, Black female adolescent literacies, Black feminist theory). I then drew possible conclusions that could best address my research questions. Data culled from participant interviews, video-taped recordings of meetings (including literacy artifacts utilized/produced during the meetings), and my researcher journal were also coded and triangulated to consider how participants’ understood self and society as shaped through their use of autoethnography. In these ways, the methods of collection and analysis can make explicit—through data categorization and synthesis—ideas about Black female adolescents literacies and the implications autoethnography can have on how researchers/teachers can effectively work with Black females adolescents.
Table 3. Chart adapted from Riessman’s (2008) summary table of thematic and visual narrative analysis approaches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of Narrative</th>
<th>Kinds of Data</th>
<th>Focus of Analysis</th>
<th>Sites of Visual Inquiry</th>
<th>Attention to Contexts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retelling of a particular event/experience/moment in participant’s life</td>
<td>Interview excerpts, autoethnographic work (as represented in written accounts, photographs, images, artwork, phrases and/or quotes, video clips), research journal</td>
<td>Participants’ conception of self and society</td>
<td>Production; image</td>
<td>Local and societal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Looking Ahead**

I found that as we each sought to unpack our own individual experiences through autoethnography, we were at the same time engaged in a *collective* processing of those same experiences. Pinnegar and Gaynes (2007) acknowledge the complicated nature of “power (Who owns a story? Who can tell it? Who can change it?), authority (Whose version of a story is convincing? What happens when narratives compete?), and community (What do stories do among us?)” (p. 30) if and when narrative comes into play. Yet Moss (2003) believes these tensions to be vital to the ways in which narrative (or in this case, the sermon) functions within African American communities, and within the Black church in particular. Moss notes that because the pastor and the congregants are each vested in the development and outcome of the sermon, a “community text” (Moss, 2003, p. 137) is thereby established. Hence, the Biblical ‘story’ within the sermon
functions as a co-constructed narrative between both parties whereby the role of speaker and writer alternate between them “in order for the text to exist” (p. 138) and be affirmed. I also found the same to be true of the girls in my study for we, in many ways, authored one another’s stories as we endeavored to speak and write our own. Similarly, the roles between us often shifted and/or coincided in order for us to speak and write our/selves into existence.

Because I witnessed the girls’ desire to orally and visually (rather than just verbally) process their ideas, I chose to engage them in autoethnography through various means including: read-arounds, collages, painting, drama, internet forums, social media, as well as invitations to facilitate. As such, we invoked empathy as we asked questions of one another and of ourselves that may have never been asked. We told stories to one another and to ourselves that may have never been told. Autoethnography, then, became not just a process unto the/itSelf, but a meaningful process for and processing of the individual within the collective. Further, autoethnography became not just about self-reflexivity, but also about collective consciousness-raising. Our autoethnographic process and product(s) became worth something more because each one of us remained vested in the other.

Although Black females have historically sought individual and collective empowerment through social activism, Collins (2009) believes Black females’ ability to seek empowerment through the inner recesses of one’s consciousness is no less important:

But change can also occur in the private, personal space of an individual woman’s consciousness. Equally fundamental, this type of change is also personally
empowering. Any individual Black woman who is forced to remain ‘motionless on the outside,’ can develop the ‘inside’ of a changed consciousness as a sphere of freedom. Becoming personally empowered through self-knowledge, even within conditions that severely limit one’s ability to act, is essential. (p. 129)

As we continued to read, write, and speak about our own lives, it was my hope that we could each use autoethnography to achieve personal freedom and to think more about personal transformation and how these transformations might positively impact our lives, the lives of others, and society at large. In other words, how could we now take what we had learned to become better human beings? Furthermore, it led me to consider what could happen when autoethnography was taken out of the heart and head of the researcher and placed in those of the participants, especially for those who were young and Black and female? How much more powerful, then, could our stories, our scholarship, and our society become?

In Chapter 5, I demonstrate what does happen when autoethnography is taken up by three Black female adolescents—Nikayla, Jordan, and Chyvae. In this chapter, I discuss my initial impressions of each of them and present my analysis of their autoethnographic research. In addition, I highlight each of the girls’ autoethnographic processes and products to further establish autoethnography as a relevant and viable methodology.
Chapter 5:
Uncovering the Literate Lives of Three Black Female Adolescents

Introduction

On the day of our initial meeting in October of 2010, I asked the girls: “What words come to mind when you think about what it means to grow up young, Black and female?” Together, we generated a list of words based on what others might have to say about us, and more importantly, what we have to say about ourselves (see Figure 3). The girls easily identified new names for old stereotypes or controlling images of the kind Collins (2009) speaks about. Rather than jezebel, it was now rat or hood rat. Or instead of the sassy-mouthed Sapphire, the girls used terms like loud or ghetto to describe commonly held views of Black women and girls.

Figure 3. Venn diagram
Next, I invited the girls to use these words as a basis to write down what it meant to grow up young, Black, and female in the 21st Century. In these reflections, I witnessed how strength, power, and love were running themes throughout each girl’s journal, all of which ran counter to societal stereotypes. For example, seventeen year-old Shey writes about feeling “challenge[d]” and being “role models,” while other girls, including seventeen year-old Amora, eighteen year-old Elena, and eighteen year-old Leslie write about “empowerment,” having “a voice” and “overcoming” the odds. The following reflections provide more insight into how the girls (including TT and I) define what it means to be young, female, and Black:

*My opinion of being a young black female today is we mostly feel challenge . . . We worry about our life ahead. People may think of us as gold diggers, young mother, warfare, poor, struggling, and ghetto, and uobnocious . . . It’s wrong! We are role models, hard-working women with intelligent and confident with powerful words . . . We are strong leaders!* –Shey, 17

*So to be cagorized as a young black female, gives us opportunities in many ways. I choose empowerment, because no MATTER where any YBF comes from, there is many positive things she can do . . . all stated, makes a YBF in something strong like a rock and sweet as an apple. Which gives empowerment, breaking through the negativity* –Amora, 17

*To me what it means to be a young black female today is setting an example for others to follow, and making a voice for yourself in a world that can be hateful and racist*—Elena, 18

*To be a young Black female today there are many things you have to be. One of those things would be strong . . . We also have to stay positive and different. We have to be stay positive b/c of the numerous negative things said about us. And different b/c standing out is always best*—Kayla, 18

*What it means to be a young Black female, is to overcome all odds, pursue through every struggle. Being a young Black female means more than hair, clothes, money, and sex. But it’s about knowing what’s going around in your surroundings and overcoming them*—Leslie, 18

*Growing up Young Black and female in the 21st century is . . . About being constantly conflicted—I must play lady in the streets, intellectual in the academy,
freak in the sheets . . . I am constantly in conflict trying to balance myself in this world that does not have enough boxes to put me in. I am young, gifted, and black—but these things do not always work in my favor as a young black female. I am in danger. I am at risk. I am strong, yet vulnerable—TT, 26

You have to go farther and strive harder to go above and beyond. You have to stand out an be different. You must not be another statistic! . . . You have to be confident about who you are and don’t let men make you feel any different. You have to be proud of your curvy shape but the again don’t dress like a disgrace. You have to speak your mind but know that it’s a time and a place—Elzora, 17

I think today what it means is that young Black women have more opportunities now more than ever. I think on TV we’re either portrayed as either wanting to get a man or not having one. But, overall we’re getting our education while many of our male peers are not . . . But, while we’re getting ours, we are also finding it increasingly harder to find someone to share our lives with . . .
—Mrs. Womack, 30

I can speak for myself umm . . . To me it means being a young powerful lady. I have all of the opportunities in the world . . . Being black makes me feel good . . . My skin my hair my heritage everything about me is beautiful and my Black makes me who I am—Elaine, 16

I include these responses here in order to reemphasize one of the chief aims of my research—to uncover the ways in which Black female adolescents conceive of self and society. Furthermore, these responses each point to our ability and desire to name our/selves for our/selves. For two years, I continued to ask: Why is such naming important? How can this naming be more critical? In the end, who benefits? And how? During these two years, I facilitated dialogue around issues of race/ism, colorism (or the belief that skin color determines or does not determine one’s beauty or character or lack thereof; see also Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992) school, literacy, friendship, intimacy, media (mis)representations, and, among other topics, misogyny. It was my hope that dialogue around these topics would help us to critically address the aforementioned
questions. Yet it was through autoethnography that we\textsuperscript{12} (me and my study participants generally and my focal participants more specifically) addressed the most pressing concerns of our own lives: I, for instance, used autoethnography to retrace the various trials and triumphs of my youth and to mark my later journey toward self-acceptance; Nikayla used autoethnography to name significant aspects of her life’s journey; Jordan used autoethnography to name her feelings toward her hair; and Chyvae, used autoethnography to name the meaning of her mother’s absence in her life. As we sought to challenge public imagination, it was important that we enter public (digital) spaces like Prezi and Pinterest. In these spaces we utilized text, graphics, and video to disrupt public ideologies of young Black women and girls. Thus, our use of autoethnography both resulted in our own critical self-awareness and in the construction of a much broader narrative of what it means to be young, female, and Black.

In this chapter, I present findings that are based upon the autoethnographic work of Nikayla, Jordan, and Chyvae during the 2011-2012 school year. I first introduce the girls one-by-one—including my initial impressions and what I ultimately learned about them over time. Next, I engage in a multi-layered analysis of each girl’s autoethnography that includes generation of themes, analysis of images, and interpretation of the girls’ autoethnographies as a whole (see Riessman, 2008). I also draw on my theoretical (re)framing (i.e., affective critical pedagogy—naming pain and power, making progress) and my notion of Black female adolescent literacies to further my analysis. Additionally, I discuss how each of them developed topics and gathered artifacts throughout the year. In doing so, I illustrate the significance of both the autoethnographic process and product.

\textsuperscript{12}I note here (as I do in Chapter One) the importance of engaging in these activities with the girls in order to better understand my Self and where I stood in relation to them.
Uncovering Nikayla: An Autoethnographic Breakdown

When Nikayla and I first met in September of 2010, I had just begun hard and heavy recruitment in the library, sitting alone at the same small table for two hours, 3-4 days out of the week. Sprawled in front of me were applications, fliers, consent forms, and books that I believed Black girls like Nikayla might find appealing such as: Hill Harper’s *Letters to a Young Sister*, Rebecca Carroll’s *Sugar in the Raw*, Cupcake Brown’s *A Piece of Cake: A Memoir*, Nikki Grimes’ *Bronx Masquerade*, and Betsy Franco’s *Things I Have to Tell You: Poems and Writings by Teenage Girls*. Upon recruiting anyone, I would first inquire if she were between the ages of 14-18 (or 14-21 years of age in Year 2) years old and if she replied, “Yes,” I would immediately launch into my spiel, detailing what my research was about (e.g., how young Black females see themselves and the world around them) and how she might benefit as a participant (e.g., improved literacy and/or social skills). I can remember Nikayla seeming only slightly interested, thus I was pleasantly surprised when she arrived the following week with her consent forms in hand. I then reminded her that our initial meeting would be held during the first week of October 2010 and that I looked forward to seeing her soon.

Fortunately, Nikayla showed up a week later, and during that particular group session, she revealed more about herself than she would perhaps the entire year. With her voice barely above a whisper, Nikayla shared that she and her family had recently moved to Capville, Ohio from Chicago, Illinois, and that because she had been expelled from a nearby high school, she was now being home-schooled. And, most significantly, Nikayla revealed that she had been a recent victim of sexual abuse. Although we were technically strangers, I imagined Nikayla felt some sort of connection to the group and/or sense of
comfort in being within an out-of-bound (i.e., all-Black and all-female) space. Perhaps Nikayla also took solace in the fact that she was there to speak and we were there to listen. Nonetheless, Nikayla remained somewhat of an enigma for the remainder of the year—she spoke very little in our meetings and remained rather mum during her initial interview (e.g., a year later she revealed that she had not attended school regularly since the age of 14).

Thus, it was largely through Nikayla’s writing that I began to gauge her understandings of self and the world around her. Although Nikayla was initially hesitant to share her writing with me, she eventually learned to trust me. In one of our written exchanges (between she and I), for example, Nikayla shares how much she enjoys performing for others:

\begin{quote}
Nikayla Monroe
my break was great i chilled with my family and friends and threw a lil party and dance all threw the night then me and my brother rapped for my family I love rapping i have three notebooks full of raps i love music and i love doing shows and danceing but now i’m just trying to get a group together. (Nikayla, journal, Winter 2010)
\end{quote}

I then respond by gently nudging her to share her talents with the rest of us. In my response, I begin by thanking her for writing her ideas down in her journal, for trusting me enough to share it with me, and I indicate that the journal should be “a place where you can be free and let your guard down.” Then I assert the following:

\begin{quote}
First off, keep writing and growing as a writer. I think or should I say I know you have great potential. I think I already told you my favorite [poem] out of these is ‘Me, Myself, and I.’ Hopefully, we can grow to all want to read our work aloud for one another. Maybe next quarter, as we’re still in the process of getting to know one another. I’m hoping that you will choose to do so as I’m sure you’ll get positive feedback from the group . . .
\end{quote}
My intention is for Nikayla to not only feel comfortable in sharing her poetry, but also in receiving affirmation from other Black females (hooks, 1993). My response to Nikayla then continues with me encouraging her to include a brief biography for our next journal exchange:

_I know that we have talked and I have learned a great deal about you during our sessions, our interview, and also through your poetry. From these, I see that you have dealt with many hardships in your life that you are actively trying to move past. But, what else is there to Nikayla? If you don’t mind, write a brief bio as I can learn more about you, maybe some things that we haven’t discussed. Like, for instance, I didn’t know you rapped for your family (can you do this for us, too?!). So just tell me more! I look forward to hearing back from you!_ (Erica Womack, 01/11/11)

That “brief bio” unfortunately never came, that is, until the last month of our meet-ups (for the 2010-2011 academic year) when Nikayla finally began to open up.

Two months prior, I had decided to introduce the girls to autoethnography (albeit a pilot project) through a series of activities that included: reading excerpts from Camangian’s (2010) “Starting with self: Teaching autoethnography to foster critically caring literacies,” using our own family photos to evoke sensory details, conducting interviews with one another, developing our individual topics, and discussing how our topics linked “the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Because I also wanted the girls to engage in alternative approaches to writing, I proposed that they film their autoethnographies. Despite the fact that many of the girls’ attendance began to dwindle during this time, Nikayla remained eager to see her research project through to the end of the year. Just when I was ready to give up on the idea of filming, Nikayla wisely suggested that we proceed as planned.

It was now May 2010 and I wondered whether Nikayla had been waiting for the right moment to share further details of her life, especially since her audience consisted
of only Amora, TT, and me. On this particular day, we decided to drive to a nearby park to film and with TT behind the camera, Nikayla revealed her most intimate feelings about her body and its impact on her relationships with others:

Nikayla: . . . moreso than White women really don’t have to do. They don’t really have responsibility.

TT: So what kind of responsibility?

Nikayla: Just everything. Got to deal wit the name-calling and—. Because I matured faster, faster than what I supposed to. And I always got that I was a fast little girl. And I was (inaudible) cause my breasts was bigger (laughs) then ah, then the normal ten-year old and so I was always called the little fast little girl. Didn’t nobody parents want they kids hanging out wit me cause I matured quicker than they did. So they thought I was having sex and stuff and no. My mama! Y’all must—I’m like they must not look at my mom. (TT laughs). And that’s basically what—to me what black females have to go through now is the name-calling and people talking about us. And stuff like that. (Nikayla, park interview, May 2011)

Unlike before, Nikayla finally chooses to open up about her past in this exchange. What Nikayla demonstrates here is a keen awareness (i.e., double consciousness, Du Bois, 1994) of how her Self has been constructed as Other. According to Nikayla, White females “don’t really have responsibility” because Black females have heavier burdens to bear (e.g., with “name-calling and people talking about us”). Nikayla recognizes that her Black female adolescent body had become a script for others to read as deviant or abnormal (e.g., “cause my breasts was bigger . . . then the normal ten year-old,” “Didn’t
nobody parents want they kids hanging out wit me cause I matured quicker . . . ,” “ . . . thought I was having sex . . .”; see Richardson, 2009), which is why Nikayla later sought to alter this script through the construction of her autoethnography (see later discussion of Nikayla’s autoethnography). For Nikayla, it became important that “people talk[ed] about us” in a different way.

For several weeks thereafter, TT and I helped Nikayla and the other girls to develop autoethnographic products through the use of WindowsMovieMaker and PowerPoint, and at our very last session for the year, Nikayla, GiGi, and Shey bravely stood to share their autoethnographies with family and friends. From that moment forward, I believe Nikayla understood the power of researching the Self as this process helped her to confront the challenges she faced as a young Black women and to do so through various mediums (e.g., face-to-face dialogue with other females, writing in a journal, filming in the park, Windows MovieMaker, and much more). However, most importantly, this kind of research provided others insight into a Black female adolescent’s experience from a Black female adolescent’s point of view.

Months later, when I asked Nikayla to reconfigure her autoethnography into a cluster map (see Figure 4 modeled after my own cluster map in Chapter One), I could tell she was set on re-sculpting her image—leaving her past behind to begin anew (Darder, 2003):
In observing Nikayla’s construction of her cluster map, I find the themes of journey and perception are most visible (themes that also appear in Nikayla’s culminating autoethnographic project for the year). In this configuration, I sense Nikayla’s desire to explore her literal journey from one environment to the next (i.e., Chicago to Capville) as well as her figurative journey from others’ perceptions (i.e., mature, “fast”) to her own (e.g., classy, smart, strong). In the center of the map, Nikayla writes, “My image,” and surrounds this phrase with where and what she believes helped to shape who she is—Chicago, Capville, travel, and a misunderstood image. Nikayla’s desire to confront others’ misconceptions of her is evident in the words she uses to surround the phrase “Misunderstood Image” and they include: funny, outgoing, classy, smart, strong, sexy, and independent. By choosing to make her private images of Self public (i.e., by creating and sharing her map), Nikayla is further able to “cope with and, transcend the confines of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality” (Collins, 2009, p. 108) in her own life (e.g., maturing faster, name-calling, being called “the little fast little girl,” drama, fighting, hood).
Hence, once we began meeting again in the fall of 2011, I noticed something quite different about Nikayla. No longer shy or timid, Nikayla seemed much more self-assured and out-spoken around the other girls, many of whom were several years younger. Nikayla often took on the role of sage, eager to pass on her own knowledge and experience which included “giving [the other girls] advice on smoking, relationships, getting out of the streets . . . like school and work” (Nikayla, initial interview, December 2011). Because Nikayla wished for others to learn from her mistakes (e.g., smoking marijuana and fighting other females), she later volunteered to facilitate a few of our group sessions. For one particular session, Nikayla crafted her own writing prompts and invited us to consider the following: “How would you rate yourself and why?” (on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest) and “What type of guy fits you?” Though Nikayla had designed these questions with specific participants in mind, I concluded that these questions were also derived from her own personal struggles with confidence and esteem. Nikayla rated herself a 5½ or 6 (and admitted she would have rated herself lower in the past) whereas most of the other girls rated themselves a 7 or 8. I appreciated Nikayla’s honesty and thoughtfulness, however, as these were the kinds of emotional and analytical responses that became part of her autoethnographic process.

Given that I was also interested in the girls producing a final product, we worked toward that goal in the last few months of the year. By this time, I had engaged the girls in various kinds of multimodal activities throughout the year including read-arounds, gallery walks, collages, painting, drama, and more. As an extension of these kinds of multimodal experiences, I introduced the girls to Pinterest¹³ and suggested that they

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¹³ Pinterest is a form of social media that functions as an online pinboard/bulletin board. Pinterest allows users to upload or “pin” text, photographs, images, videos, etc. to individually-
consider using this social media format for their end-of-the-year presentations. As the girls began to design their Pinterest boards (i.e., autoethnographies), I walked around with my camcorder to observe and discuss their processes. During these times, I witnessed Nikayla using her cell phone to take pictures of her work (e.g., collage, painting) and then uploading her photographs to her Pinterest board. I also observed her searching for images (e.g., inspirational quotes, messages) to re-pin from other users’ boards. I witnessed her share pictures and information on Wikipedia with Jordan, another participant, of the places she lived in Chicago (e.g., the infamous Ida B. Wells Housing Project, although this image never made its way to Nikayla’s finished product). Nikayla also made suggestions to another participant, Venetia, about the kinds of images that might fit the theme of her board (e.g., inclusion of a shattered mirror to represent Venetia’s former thoughts about her future as teenage mother). It was in these moments that I witnessed how much Nikayla had grown (i.e., from a shy girl to a more confident young woman) in the past year and I was quite proud. Indeed, Nikayla’s autoethnography (see below) serves as a testament to her continued growth and transformation.

and/or group-designed pinboards. Users can interact with one another by posting comments below any pinned item. Users can also choose to follow and/or re-pin items from other boards, which are often grouped by such themes as cooking, fashion, favorite books, hairstyles, and more. I also spoke with the girls about ethical matters concerning the use of a public forum to design their autoethnographies. None of the girls expressed any concern using Pinterest, except for June and Jordan who preferred the use of Prezi more. Nikayla was also open to using Pinterest as long as she did not have to share her boards with certain family members (as is common with Facebook posts).
“my journey (finding myself)”: An Autoethnographic Account

Near the top of her Pinterest board, Nikayla provides the following introduction:

*What the society would say about Nikayla well let’s see the society would say Nikayla sneaky under handed a hoe she not going to be nothing she’s not in school she always around males she’s a bad person to be around she think she better then everybody . . . I even got people in my family and people close to my family that says that but they don’t be around me they don’t know the life I live I have a cousin she young so I understand the things she would say about me so I just let it go . . .*

Nikayla begins here by naming how others (society, her family) have chosen to define her—that is, as “sneaky,” “under handed” “a hoe,” “always around males,” “a bad person,” and “think she better then (sic) everybody.” Yet in observing Nikayla’s construction of her Pinterest board (see Figure 5), it is interesting to note that she posts this commentary after pinning all of her items, which seems to be her deliberate attempt to create a self-defined standpoint that is in contrast to how society and those closest to her might have characterized her (e.g., as deviant, deceitful, hypersexual, uneducated). Furthermore, her title, “my journey (finding myself),” and pins speak to more positive concepts/images of motivation, confidence, uplift, guidance, progress, esteem, determination, optimism, and empowerment.

Included in Nikayla’s autoethnography are quotes/messages of inspiration (several of which she re-pinned from other Pinterest boards), a YouTube video featuring Jessie J’s “Nobody’s Perfect,” an image of water, and also images that represent the kinds of work Nikayla produced in our sessions during that year (e.g., collage, painting).
Figure 5. Nikayla’s autoethnography (Pinterest board)

Nikayla’s choice to pin much of her own work points to a desire to name her worth (see Figures 9, 11, & 12), to showcase her accomplishments in a public space (e.g. painting, collage), and to offer an opposing view of Black female adolescents (see Figures 8, 9, 11, & 12). As she reflects on her past missteps/mistakes, she is also naming for herself what those missteps mean and how she has moved past them rather than having society pathologize her past, present, and future. Nikayla’s choice to re-pin other items (e.g., inspirational quotes, messages, image of water) also demonstrates her
engagement with other users and her ability to read texts critically in order to establish the proper theme, mood, and point of view for her autoethnography. Re-pinning also serves as her way of citing other people’s work.

In reviewing Nikayla’s board, one of the first images that appears is an image of water lapping along the beach (see Figure 6). With this photo, notions of “freedom,” “beauty,” and “purity” come to mind. This image, too, represents Nikayla’s childhood innocence as she writes:

the reason i wanted to Re pin this picture . . . Because it reminds me of when i was in living in Chicago and me and my mom & sister used to go to the lake front and play in the water or my sister would try to teach me how to swim but i was scared

Figure 6. Water image
This image is then juxtaposed with an image of rape (see Figure 7), which Nikayla uses to represent her loss of innocence, self-confidence, and dignity. Below Nikayla uses words and phrases such as “troubled,” “lost in conversation,” “lost & confused,” “took my confidence,” and “letting other people bring me down” to characterize this traumatic experience. Yet Nikayla also uses this experience as an opportunity to offer advice to others as one young female user writes, “and you never forget,” to which Nikayla replies: “no you don’t but you just got to keep moving forward.”
Through my analysis of her autoethnography (or Pinterest board), I also find that Nikayla chooses to pin items from her collage that boost her esteem and confidence (see Figures 8 & 9). Though she includes several images that feature quotes, she seems to direct her focus toward what the images suggest to her and not on the quotes themselves. For instance, the embodiment of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. himself (rather than his actual quote) symbolizes the hopes and dreams Nikayla has for herself: “Martin Luther King if you have low self-esteem or anything listen to his speech and you will have a better understanding.” Likewise, Nikayla wishes to offer her own advice to readers rather than simply have them rely on the message expressed in the quotes when she writes: “thinking about what to do next always have a next plan if the other one don’t work out for you . . . find your gift your magic.” Though Nikayla’s board serves as a testimonial for readers, I also interpret these words of wisdom as the kind of encouragement she must give to herself. In other words, Nikayla uses her own advice to elevate her conception of self.

Figure 8. Images from collage
In other places, Nikayla presents a “beautiful, strong independent” self who is “looking away from my pass (sic) and seeing straight into my future” (see below). Nikayla recognizes she has had her share of academic and personal struggles (e.g., being negatively judged and raped, not graduating from high school), yet throughout her autoethnography she maintains optimism. Having such a positive outlook on life is also characteristic of (young) Black women’s resiliency in the face of oppression (see Collins, 2009; Evans-Winter, 2005; Frazier et al., 2011). As Frazier et al. (2011) note:

When [Black] girls are encouraged . . . it empowers them to successfully meet life’s challenges with a sense of self-determination, confidence to handle what comes before them, hope in the future and a feeling of well-being. *This is what makes our girls resilient. They develop an inner power to bounce back regardless of what happens* [emphasis added].” (p. 5)

Figure 9. Image from collage
For these reasons, Nikayla is able to name her pain and move forward in her journey toward finding self. In the left-hand image below (see Figure 10) for example, Nikayla not only expresses a great deal of honesty, but also a deep level of critical self-awareness about her past:

![Figure 10. Images from collage](image)

Still, Nikayla’s autoethnography is chiefly about forward movement and progression (see Figure 11) as evidenced in her ability to keep her eye toward the future (e.g., “making progress . . . me in the future on the road to success jumping into the world of fame”) and reach for the stars (e.g., “starship . . . moving on to better things”).
One of Nikayla’s last pins (see Figure 12) is that of a picture that reads, “A Beautiful Inspiration” to which Nikayla responds with, “finding myself.” It appears that Nikayla has found that her life’s journey is an inspiration and that she is, indeed, an inspiration to others. It appears that Nikayla has also learned to “just let it go” (in reference to her introduction). Nikayla therefore ends her autoethnography with a photo of Grammy- and Oscar-winning Chicago native, Jennifer Hudson, who for, Nikayla, represents everything she hopes to attain—fearlessness, freedom, and fame.
Nikayla’s autoethnography therefore reveals her process of becoming—becoming more self-loving (e.g., “finding myself”), more confident (e.g., “my black is beautiful strong independent women looking away from my pass & seeing stright (sic) to my future”), and more knowing (e.g., “i used to hide my pain by getting in & out relationship & having sex”). Nikayla’s autoethnography demonstrates her belief in her capacity to continually resist how others choose to characterize her (e.g., sneaky, under handed, a hoe, “not going to be nothing”). Yet more importantly, Nikayla’s autoethnography demonstrates her belief in her capacity to “begin always anew” (Darder, 2003) in how she characterizes her Self (e.g., black, beautiful, strong, confident).

hooks (2001) believes, “When we are positive we not only accept and affirm ourselves, we are able to affirm and accept others” (p. 57). Thus, as Nikayla began to accept and affirm more of her Self, she also began to accept and affirm other females. One of the girls Nikayla bonded with and offered advice to, in particular, was fifteen year-old, Jordan. Despite their three-year age gap, Nikayla identified with Jordan’s immaturity, lack of esteem, and teenage rebellion (which she told to me in several one-on-one conversations and in the presence of TT). In the next section, I introduce Jordan and discuss her attempts to work through these issues in her autoethnography (i.e., both the process and product).
Uncovering Jordan: An Autoethnographic Breakdown

From the beginning, TT had warned me the twins might be a handful! Because TT had worked with June and Jordan the previous summer (of 2011) in a two-week residential summer research program designed for high school students and observed their critical awareness of Black women’s portrayal in the media, TT had hoped the two might benefit from participating in my research study as well. During the summer, TT had learned both girls were having difficulty in school (e.g., poor grades, motivation) and at home (e.g., listening to parents) and sensed that June led while Jordan followed. Therefore, she believed our space might provide them opportunities to share their individual and collective pain. However, I soon found it difficult speaking and/or writing about one of the sisters without speaking and/or writing about the other as evidenced by my first journal entry of the 2011-2012 academic year:

What was troubling to me, however, was the dynamic that the twins brought or maybe not the dynamic but the potential imbalance that they might bring to the group and June, in particular. I can recall that when I explained the body map15 (or how one can approach it) to the group with one of the questions being, “How would your enemies describe you?” Sydney immediately said, “Oh, they would say I’m a bitch!” . . . Her sister, Jordan, wanted or at least thought about choosing the name “Olga” for a pseudonym for the research project, but when I tried to encourage her to choose something else, she settled on “Bertha” or “Birtha” as she spelled it. The last thing I noticed was how June held up TT’s

15 For this activity, I asked the girls to lie down on the floor to trace their bodies on a large sheet of butcher paper. I then instructed the girls to write down words and/or symbols (images) that represent their identities or words/or symbols that their “enemies” or those closest to them might use to describe them.
marker high above TT’s head as though she was playing with or taunting her because she was shorter. I simply thought this was quite a bold move for a young person in the way she was acting toward another adult . . .

Because this was our first encounter, I knew nothing of June and Jordan’s life stories, and I found myself, unwittingly, focused on their behavior instead. In the rest of my reflection, however, I (re-)focus my attention on what I hope to learn from and about June and Jordan in the future:

*I am hoping that my initial vibes are just that and that I do not continue to think negatively about them. Perhaps they have just built up these walls because of where they live/go to school. For instance, I noticed on June’s survey that she said something about wanting to talk about her experiences as one of a few Black girls at her school or attending a predominately White school. Again I think that perhaps she has learned to act a certain way or “be a bitch” as she put it in order to get along in her environments she’s used to and that she simply does not know how to “be” anything other even when she is around those who look like her.

Even still, I will continue to watch/pay attention.

(post-session journal reflection, 10/04/11)

The following week, Jordan was the first volunteer to share her body map (see Figure 13). She began with the following disclaimer: “Some of [the words] are really big, but that has nothing to do with it . . . So I mean like this big [word] ‘ugly’ [written in the middle of her body map] wasn’t meant to be that big. It just turned out to be that big.” Jordan continued by stating, “But, yeah, people [emphasis added] say I’m . . .” as she then proceeded to describe herself as: pretty, a sassy bitch, fake, people tend to call me,
‘June,’ my sister a lot, nice, loud-mouthed, hostile, intelligent, easy-going, crazy, beautiful, impulsive, loud, obnoxious, angry, feisty, lazy, stubborn, big-headed.” The other descriptions Jordan did not read aloud included: nappy, cool, talkative, and fat. And though Jordan told us she felt none of these descriptions were negative, I wondered how many of these labels she had internalized (e.g., fake, bitch, nappy, fat, angry, loud, lazy).

I later found that Jordan and her sister deeply resented growing up in predominately White neighborhoods and that both were initially interested in examining this experience as part of their autoethnographies. Jordan specifically wished to explore her experiences as a Black girl attending predominately White schools. During one particular group session, I had asked the girls to develop a list of twenty questions related to their research topics and to share these aloud in a read-around.¹⁶ Rather than focus on

¹⁶ For this activity, I instructed the girls to take turns reading aloud one question from their list (without stopping) until each one of them reached the end. Further, I requested that they complete the read-around before asking about and/or responding to one another’s questions.
“I-centric” questions (as do most of the other girls), Jordan chooses to draft questions that help her to further explore the mindset of her White peers. In doing so, Jordan attempts to connect the personal (e.g., her experiences growing up in majority-White neighborhoods) to the cultural (e.g. her view of “White people” as Other; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Jordan’s list, for example, includes the following:

- Why do White people wear shorts in the winter? I don’t understand.
- Why are they so fascinated by my hair?
- Why don’t White guys date Black girls, but only hook up with them?
- Why do White people adopt Black kids?
- Why do White people think it’s okay to say, “Nigga?”
- Why do they irritate me?
- Why do White boys hook up and talk to me in private, but deny it in public?
- Why are White people obsessed with the [uses fingers to signal parentheses] “ghetto booty?”

When Jordan asks: “Why do White people wear shorts in the winter?” or “Why do White people think it’s okay to say, ‘Nigga?,’” she is perceiving her White peers (or “White people”) as Other or (their thoughts and behaviors) as different from her(s) as a young Black woman. Yet embedded within these questions is the idea that she has been “Othered,” particularly when she asks: “Why are they [her White peers] so fascinated by my hair?,’’ “Why do White boys hook up and talk to me in private, but deny it in public?,” and “Why are White people obsessed with the ‘ghetto booty?’” Jordan’s questions also reveal her encounters with everyday racism (e.g., White peers’ public denial/fascination with the Black female body, use of offensive language) and her desire
to resist such thought and behavior (e.g., by questioning the use of “Nigga” or “ghetto booty”; see Collins, 2009).

That same day, I interviewed Jordan about her literacy/schooling experiences and she goes on to describe her first year of high school as such:

. . . [L]ast year was my freshman year and I didn’t do so well, like I was really trying to find myself that year. And I was trying to figure out who I was around a bunch of white people and stuff. And then like last year it was mainly because of that and then this year at school it’s like I just do things like smoking, drinking, stuff like that.

Jordan then continues by describing most of her middle school experiences as a time of “isolation” when she “wouldn’t talk to anybody White.” However, Jordan says she later became “more social” because “it was a mixture of people from different schools” by the end of her seventh grade year:

Sixth grade was like my worse year. Seventh grade I went into isolation and only hung out with the black kids. It was only me and two other girls at a table at lunch, and we would just associate with ourselves so much that we wouldn’t talk to anybody else. Outside of school I would only hang out with my friends, India and Imani—wouldn’t talk to anybody white.

. . . [T]he end of 7th grade and all through 8th grade, I was more social and talked to a lot of people, like all sorts of people freshmen year, cause it was a mixture of people from different schools. (Jordan, initial interview, January 2012)
It was apparent that Jordan (and June) had a deep understanding of the world in which she lived (i.e., how she responded to others and how others responded to her), yet she (and her sister) seemed unaware of how to express her pain in healthy ways.

I sensed that she and June were each struggling to find their identities as young Black women in majority-White environments. Yet I also sensed their struggles were part of the reason why they seemed unaffected by their engagement in what some might consider “risky” behavior (see Frazier et al., 2011). Every week, Jordan and her sister shared tales of experimenting with drugs and alcohol, sneaking out of their bedroom windows, or hanging out on campus with the college crowd. And every week, at least one of them ended up on punishment.

The girls, too, were not shy about expressing their disdain for their parents, despite the fact that their father drove nearly half an hour to bring them to the library each week. Also, their mother seemed to be at a loss on how to handle them as she often called or texted me for updates. Not wanting to break June and Jordan’s trust, however, I chose not to divulge too much about what they wrote or talked about in our meetings; instead, I chose to focus on if they seemed to be doing well (e.g., engaged in our group activities and/or conversations), if I observed a change in their demeanor (e.g., appeared sad, upset, or listless), or if they were causing disruptions (e.g., checking Facebook on their laptops, leaving in and out of the room, engaging in sidebar conversations).

Because I experienced my own frustration with the twins, I frequently stayed after to express my feelings to TT. Likewise, Amora, Nikayla, and Shey (each of whom participated both years) voiced their concerns regarding June and Jordan’s “immaturity” and behavior. Though Amora and Nikayla were willing to offer the twins advice (e.g.,
regarding relationships, “how they feel about themselves,” “the definition between respect and disrespect”) Shey wondered whether I might ask the twins to leave. For these reasons, I worried about the negative energy June and Jordan brought to our group. I expected each of the girls to participate in our activities and discussion, but everyone’s engagement was not always there if the twins were present. Too often I felt as though my plans were being derailed and I became not only researcher, but disciplinarian as well. I continued asking myself why it appeared to be so difficult for us to develop a relationship.

Nevertheless, I kept reminding myself that June and Jordan came to the sessions for a reason—not for me, TT, or even the session topics, but rather to satisfy their own needs as young Black women to be in the company of other young Black women and to be in a space where their thoughts and opinions mattered. In our out-of-bound space, they did not have to worry about fitting in, talkin’ or actin’ White, being ‘authentically’ Black, or having the right look; here, they could just be.

Soon enough, I began observing changes in Jordan’s demeanor. Upon returning from winter break (i.e. in December of 2011), Jordan revealed that she had transferred to a new school with a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) focus and a more racially and economically diverse student population than her previous one. Before long, Jordan’s grades and relationships with her parents began to improve. In our group sessions, Jordan smiled a lot more and contributed to our discussions more readily. At the same time, Jordan also began to embrace her own individuality. She was no longer just “June’s sister,” “the twins,” or “one of the twins”; Jordan was now simply Jordan.
Perhaps this shift in attitude also led to her change in topic since Jordan found she was no longer interested in exploring her experiences in predominately White schools shortly before the girls began finalizing their work for our end-of-the-year presentations (i.e., during the last week of May 2012). For several months, Jordan had been unable to settle on a topic, however, that all changed the day she, Ms. A (one of the after-school library homework helpers), and I began to discuss our feelings about our (Black) hair. Our conversation began after I had overheard Jordan describe Venetia’s four month-old daughter’s hair:

Jordan: Aww. Nyah has such good hair.

Me: No such thing. All hair is good hair. All Black hair is good hair.

Ms. A: That’s right!

Me: All of it is good. Just say Nyah has curly hair.

Jordan: My hair’s not good hair.

Me: Find the right stylist.

Ms. A: That’s what you think.

Me: I think I told you guys I haven’t had a perm in like two years.

Ms. A: And I been trying to do it for like five years. It’s hard. And I been trying to tell people. The sad thing is that we don’t know how to treat our hair in its natural state. We think we got to go somewhere else, but we were born with it. We should know how to care for our hair ourselves.

Me: Right. I agree.

Jordan: I don’t know how to care for my hair.
Me: Look that can be your topic—HAIR! (Conversation during weekly session, 05/08/12)

For Jordan, our conversation became a meaningful process for and processing of “the individual within the collective” (see discussion in Chapter Four) that enabled her to better understand her hair (e.g., how to speak about and care for her hair) through the experiences of other Black females (i.e., me and Ms. A). Our conversation was, too, an example of our collective processing (see discussion in Chapter Four) of our (e.g., me and Ms. A’s) positive experiences and attitudes toward our hair (e.g., “I haven’t had a perm in like two years,” “And I been trying to do it for like five years”) as we also attempted to counter and transform (e.g., “All Black hair is good hair,” “We should know how to care for our hair ourselves”) Jordan’s (individual) feelings toward her own hair (e.g., My hair’s not good hair”).

hooks (1993) captures these sentiments well in Sisters of the yam: Black women and self-recovery, a book written expressly for and about African American women. It is after witnessing the physical, spiritual, and mental anguish of many of her Black female students and colleagues that hooks establishes “Sisters of the Yam,” a Black women’s support group, to collectively work through their struggles. Through this experience, hooks finds dialogue to be the best remedy: “It is important that black people talk to one another, that we talk with friends and allies, for the telling of our stories enables us to name [emphasis added] our pain, our suffering, and to seek healing” (pp. 16-17). Though Jordan’s emotional wounds cut real deep (as evidenced all the way back to the presentation of her body map), she fortunately agreed to choose her hair as the subject of her autoethnography and to begin the healing process.
In the final week before our end-of-the-year presentations, Jordan kicked into high gear drafting questions and answers (see Figure 14) to help guide her project that include: “What feelings have I had about hair?” and “What have people said to me about my hair?” To which Jordan responds: “1) hair has made me feel, pretty, ugly, irritated, mad, annoyed, frustrated. I have felt pretty because of my hair. After I got it done when it feel silky, soft, look long and I felt ugly with it.’ ‘2) people done asked if they could touch my hair. how it be done. why it grew so much longer in a day. how it look the way it look.’”

Figure 14. Jordan’s Q&A

Here Jordan continues to work through the autoethnographic process by drafting questions that help her to explore self (e.g., “What feelings have I had about hair?”) and society (e.g., “What have people said to me about my hair?”). In doing so, Jordan gains clearer understanding of why she has come to have such feelings about her hair (e.g., “hair has made me feel, pretty, ugly, irritated, mad, annoyed, frustrated,” “and I felt ugly
with it”), which is also evidenced by her final product. Rather than use Pinterest, Jordan chose to showcase her autoethnography on Prezi\textsuperscript{17} and a week later, Jordan presented the following (see below) to our audience.

\textbf{“Me & My Hair”: An Autoethnographic Account}\textsuperscript{18}

Jordan begins by introducing the title of her autoethnography as: “Me & My Hair.” From the beginning, Jordan wishes to make clear that “[she] is not her hair,”\textsuperscript{19} but that her hair is merely an extension (e.g., & \textit{emphasis added} My Hair) of herself. Nevertheless, Jordan’s ongoing struggle to create this distinction is evident throughout her visual (i.e., Prezi; see Figures 16 & 21) and oral interpretation of her work. Specific themes that emerge throughout Jordan’s Prezi (and oral presentation) include: confidence, marginalization, pain, frustration, esteem, self-awareness, self-acceptance, and double-consciousness. Jordan’s autoethnography is told in linear fashion, and features several images of hair (including personal photographs) followed by brief descriptive passages and/or commentary and a final movie clip from Youtube.

\textsuperscript{17} Prezi is a browser-based presentation software application that allows users to present text, videos, and images in animated fashion.
\textsuperscript{18} Because Jordan does not provide much written detail in her Prezi, I also include her oral comments from her end-of-the-year presentation as part of my analysis. I find that during her presentation, Jordan elaborates even further with regard to her thoughts and feelings about her hair.
\textsuperscript{19} This lyric is in reference to neo-soul singer India Arie’s, “I Am Not My Hair” off of her 2006 album, \textit{Testimony: Vol. 1, Life and Relationship}. 

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In true autoethnographic style, Jordan begins here (see Figure 15) with self:

Figure 15. Jordan wearing hair weave

It is a photograph of a seemingly happy Jordan with long, straight black and blond hair. To the audience, Jordan announces: “This is just a picture of the weave I had earlier this year.”

Jordan’s next slide (see Figure 16), however, reveals her inner struggles with her hair:

Like many other young black females, hair has been a sensitive subject for me

Figure 16. Text from Prezi
She further elaborates: “...I’ve had really bad problems with my hair. I’ve gotten it relaxed. I’ve gotten braids. It’s fallen out. It gets really dry sometimes. It’s just—being around a bunch of White people it’s hard to accept my hair for the way it is.” In this instance, I see Jordan’s naming of power and pain (see discussion of affective critical pedagogy in Chapter Three). On the one hand, Jordan believes her hair has been cause for both her physical (e.g., falling out, dryness) and mental (e.g., accepting hair “for the way it is”) pain. On the other hand, Jordan relates one of the root causes of her pain to “being around a bunch of White people.” Jordan recognizes the (false) binary between Black hair (i.e., as bad, short, kinky, and/or nappy) and White hair (i.e, as beautiful, long, straight, and/or wavy), which thus makes it “hard[er]” for her “to accept [her] hair for the way it is.” Yet Jordan also recognizes her hair “issues” are symptomatic of a greater problem tied to White supremacist ideology (which functions as an ideology of power; see also hooks, 1993; Collins, 2009) that classifies Black females as “Other” and often dupes Black women and girls into believing they are not good enough. Collins (2009) writes:

... African American women experience the pain of never being able to live up to prevailing standards of beauty—standards used by White men, White women, Black men, and most painfully, one another. Regardless of any individual women’s subjective reality, this is the system of ideas that she encounters. Because controlling images are hegemonic and taken for granted, they become virtually impossible to escape. (p. 98)

Jordan therefore understands that she is “like many other young black females” (or one of many) who identify their hair, in particular, as a source of contention. hooks (1993), too,
echoes this sentiment as she finds, “The first body issue that affects black female identity, even moreso than color is hair texture” (p. 85).

Jordan continues by stating: “. . . in the Black community, we all know” (see Figure 17):

![Prezi](image)

**Good hair is wavy, long, and thick**

Figure 17. Text from Prezi

Jordan therefore marks such thinking as conflict within self and society. This thinking, then, is not only inscribed institutionally (within the larger society), but communally (amongst African Americans) as well for she, along with “the Black community,” (and as a member of the Black community) has defined “good hair” in such a way.
Next, Jordan transitions to a photograph of her cousin whose hair she identifies as “good” hair:

![Figure 18. Photograph of Jordan’s cousin with her natural hair](image)

Right away, Jordan sets up a dichotomy between what “good” hair is (see Figure 18) and what it is not (see Figure 15 and Figure 19 below). Though Jordan shares the opening photograph of herself with similarly styled long, straight hair, she believes that her cousin’s hair is naturally “wavy, long, and thick,” and that her own hair is not. Jordan thus defines “bad” hair as “short and nappy.” As Jordan transitions to the next slide, she says: “I found a picture off Google Images of what we traditionally think of as nappy hair”: 

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In the black community there are two kinds of hair: Good Hair and Bad Hair

In other words, there is Black (i.e., bad) hair and then there is non-Black (i.e., good) hair.
Jordan next reveals:

From a young age I have endured negative comments about my hair

As proof, Jordan shares those negative comments with the audience: “. . . like why does [my hair] stand up? Um, people have said, ‘I only like blond girls’ to me. Um, they just would ask me about my hair and stuff and touch it and it always got on my nerves.” It is because of these experiences that Jordan has become overly conscious of her hair. Furthermore, it is the kind of *double consciousness*—or ability to see her hair through her own eyes and also the eyes of another as “Other”—that Du Bois (1994) speaks of:

> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is sort of a seventh [daughter], born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world—a world which yields [her] no true self-consciousness, but only lets [her] see [her]self through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always
looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the
tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (p. 5)

Jordan therefore recognizes that when her peers ask, “why does [my hair] stand up?,” or
say, “I only like blond girls,” they are also characterizing her hair as peculiar and/or
inferior to White feminine beauty, which also leads Jordan to identify her hair as a “bad
problem” that is difficult for her “to accept for the way it is.”

Jordan then continues her presentation by asking: “How has my experience with
black hair affected me?” To which, she responds:

Uh, my experience with my hair—it’s made me feel—well, when I get it done I
usually feel pretty good about myself cause everyone likes getting their hair done.
Um, I’ve also felt like really ugly with my hair. Like why was I stuck with the
hair that I got? And I just felt like I’ve ruined my hair by putting chemicals in it.
It’s just affected me and affected my confidence and stuff.

Here Jordan’s ability to see double (i.e., seeing her hair through her eyes and through the
eyes of her White peers, in particular) also causes her to place negative value on self and
because Jordan has read her Self against a White feminine ideal (i.e., “blond,” and/or
“wavy, long, and thick”), she associates her own hair with ugliness, punishment (e.g.,
“Like why was I stuck with the hair that I got?”), and ruin. Such feelings, in turn, have
caused Jordan to experience a lack in confidence.
Which leads Jordan to ask:

how do i feel about my hair now

In the exchange below, Jordan responds to her question (i.e., Figure 22) by revealing the deep-seated effects of internalized racism (hooks, 1993; Lorde, 1984):

Jordan: Well, I’m not really sure how I feel about it now. There are days when I get frustrated with it and it just irritates me. Like sometimes I wish I was White so I had like the better hair or I wish I was like mixed or had Indian hair or something.

Chyvae: . . . Do you see this hair? . . . This is what you call hard to work with.

Jordan: Yes. That is why I did this project because I felt a lot of people would be able to relate to it.

Here Jordan confesses to a real battle within (e.g., being Black and wishing she was White). More specifically, Jordan’s hair struggle keeps her at odds with her Black female adolescent identity and, therefore, frequently dissatisfied with the skin she is in.

As noted in Jordan’s previous statements (e.g., Like many other young black females, hair has been a sensitive subject for me” or “. . . in the Black community, we all
know”), such experiences (e.g., experiencing frustration, wishing for “better” hair) engender what can only best be described as a collective pain. It is a pain that illuminates why so many other young Black females like Chyvæ do agree, too, that their hair is “hard to work with” and why Jordan chooses to make her hair the subject of her autoethnography, for she recognizes that “a lot of people would be able to relate to it.” hooks (1993) agrees, too, that these conversations (around Black hair) are essential in helping Black women (and girls like Jordan) undo such harmful thinking (e.g., characterizing Black hair as bad, ugly, problematic).

Jordan ends with a video clip from the Chris Rock-inspired (2009) film documentary, *Good Hair*, to signal the far-reaching effects of the good vs. bad hair dichotomy. Though humorous at times, the clip also highlights the serious undertone of contempt for Black hair across the globe. In this particular clip, Rock stands along a busy Los Angeles, CA, intersection in an unsuccessful attempt to sell Black hair. Rock then walks into several hair product stores (that cater to a Black and mostly female population) only to experience similar reactions. In every instance, the Black and Asian store clerks dismiss Rock’s bag of Black hair. The clip’s highlight, however, is in regard to an exchange amongst Rock, a Black female store clerk, and her Asian male co-worker:

Black female clerk: The [Black] hair is no good.

Rock: But it’s Black hair!

Black female clerk: I know.

Rock: For Black people!

Black female clerk: But, Black people don’t wear that no more.

Rock: So my nappy hair is not worth anything?
Black female clerk and Asian male clerk together: No.

Asian male clerk: They don’t want to look like, you know . . . Africa, like this
[holds hands out against his head to mimic an Afro hairstyle]. They want to look the style. Right now you look at all the magazines . . . They want sexy looking.

Black female clerk: Nobody walks around with nappy hair no more.

According to the Black female and Asian male clerks, Black hair is not only unprofitable (e.g., “my nappy hair is not worth anything?,” “look at all the magazines . . .”), but undesirable (e.g. “no good,” “like . . . Africa,” not “sexy looking”) as well, ideas which are a part of a larger hegemonic reading of Black women (as deviant, abnormal, or inferior) around the world. Black hair, Black women, and Black people (e.g., the Asian male clerk’s mention of customers not wanting to look like “Africa”) thus function as an objectified “Other” (Collins, 2009) that young Black females like Jordan find rather difficult to counter.

Addressing the audience, Jordan also concludes, “the main thing about that video is that no one wants Black hair.” Shortly thereafter, Jordan announces that she does intend to “go natural” (or rid her hair of chemicals) and to use wigs, weave, and/or braids to protect the areas where hair has fallen out. Because Jordan chose to embark on this self-journey, there is hope, then, that her pain might lead to her healing (e.g., loving all parts of her self) and ultimately her transformation (e.g., wearing her hair in its natural state). hooks (1993) finds that,

. . . [M]ost black folks know the kind of changes that must take place if we are to
collectively unlearn racist body self-hatred, yet we often do not practice what we know. This is the challenge facing us . . . We must live in our bodies in such a way that we daily indicate that \textit{black is beautiful} [emphasis added]. We must talk about blackness differently. And we cannot do any of this constructive action without first loving blackness. (p. 96)

For Jordan, the decision to “go natural” serves as a testament to her progress (in her way of thinking and of being) and ultimately proves Jordan is up for the challenge—to believe and to show that her black (hair) is, indeed, beautiful.

Jordan’s autoethnography thus reveals her critical self-awareness of her lifelong struggle with self-acceptance and of the role society has played in shaping her perceptions of who she can (e.g., ugly) and cannot be (e.g., pretty), which is why Collins (2009) believes African-derived notions of beauty to be essential to Black women’s (and Black girls’) individual and collective healing:

\textit{From African-influenced perspectives, women’s beauty is not based solely on physical criteria because mind, spirit, and body are not conceptualized as separate spheres. Instead, all are central in aesthetic assessments of individuals and their creations . . . With such criteria, no individual is inherently beautiful because beauty is not a state of being. Instead beauty is a state of \textit{becoming} [emphasis added].} (pp. 184)

Like Nikayla, Jordan also has the ability to be made, unmade, and made over (McLaren, 2003) in order to embrace who she is (i.e., a beautiful Black girl) and who she will become (i.e., a beautiful Black woman).
As Jordan concludes her presentation, members of the audience begin to discuss this topic further, including fifteen-year old, Chyvae, who declares the White-controlled media the greatest threat to Black females’ self esteem: “I think that—honestly, I’m not gonna lie. I think a lot of Caucasian people do that to us. I mean going back to slavery and all that kinda stuff. Caucasian people are still in power so as long as they’re in power our beauty is not beautiful.” Comments like these led Jordan’s mother to turn to Chyvae and say: “You’re wise beyond your years.” Unlike Jordan’s mother, we had all been privy to Chyvae’s keen awareness of power and its role in shaping our perceptions of self and of others throughout the year. It was this kind of critical understanding of self and society that was also present in Chyvae’s autoethnography (i.e., both her process and product). In the following section, I introduce Chyvae and share my analysis of her work.
**Uncovering Chyvae: An Autoethnographic Breakdown**

Like Nikayla, I first met Chyvae while recruiting research participants in the library in the fall of 2011. As I finished describing my research as an exploration into the lives and literacies of Black female adolescents, Chyvae looked me straight in the eye and said, “Well, I’m White.” I studied Chyvae’s facial features—her lighter skin, hazel eyes, thick hair, wide nose—and still thought to myself, “There’s no way.” After witnessing the utter look of confusion upon my face, Chyvae smiled and said, “Sike. I’m just playin.’” It was then that I knew Chyvae would be a welcome addition to our group. And, when she showed up the following week with her consent forms in hand, I breathed in a sigh of relief.

From the start, Chyvae was an open book—pretending to be no one other than who she was. I loved the fact that she had a sense of humor, yet it was not long before I discovered her keen awareness of self as well. Unlike some of the other girls, Chyvae seemed comfortable in her own skin and willing to expose both her assets and flaws to the rest of us. Her willingness to open up became evident the day she shared aloud her body map:

People say—Okay, I put for brain [pointing at the head on her body map] they say, ‘It’s empty.’ I’m loco. I don’t think. I’m stupid. I’m crazy. I’m an idiot. I’m insane, slow, and evil, but nice. My eyes—everyone says they’re pretty. My nose—adorable freckles and nosy. My mouth—they say I talk a lot. Need to say how I feel. They say I can sing. They say I can’t sing. They say I have a smart mouth. They say I’m sarcastic and I’m silly. Well, some of the stuff I can say that I say, too, but, you know—
Here Chyvae begins by sharing how others have constructed (e.g., her use of “They say”) these dual dimensions of her Self (e.g., evil/but nice, They say I can sing/They say I can’t sing, smart-mouth/silly). In doing so, Chyvae speaks to an expanded, rather than one-sided view (e.g., as loose, lewd, and aggressive) of young Black woman- and Black girlhood. And as Chyvae continues to share, she also makes known how she has constructed her Self:

Then my heart, the nice side. Everyone says I’m sympathetic. Well, I think I’m sympathetic. And then some people say I’m too nice. And I’m say I’m too nice. And the mean side—some people think I’m cold-hearted and some people say I’m evil. And then right here [pointing at her body map] some people say I’m short and fat. Right here they say, I’m ugly. Some people say I’m beautiful, I say I’m beautiful. Some people say I’m pretty, I say I’m pretty. Some people say I’m sexy. I think I’m sexy. I’m hyper-active. Issues. Angry. Corny. I . . . pervertive [sic] mind. I laugh. I can make something that is so plain and simple into something that’s, you know [laughs]. And then you know [pointing back at her body map] the phat in a good way. And some people say I’m random. I think I’m random. Gladys a.k.a ‘the woman that gave birth to me’ says I’m disrespectful. And I’m bow-legged. I’m a Leo. And some people say I’m a—you know that word [pointing at the altered spelling of ‘bytch’]. (conversation during weekly session, 10/10/11)

Throughout her presentation, Chyvae demonstrates her understanding of how she reads herself (“I say . . . ”) and how her Self is read by others (“They say. . .”). More importantly, her presentation highlights her (and others’) conception and affirmation of
her Black female Self (e.g., “I say I’m beautiful,” “I say I’m pretty,” “I think I’m sexy,” “I laugh,” “I think I’m random”), which Collins (2009) says “question[s] not only what has been said about African American women [and girls] but the credibility and the intentions of those possessing the power to define” (p. 126). Collins further asserts that when Black women [and girls] define ourselves, we clearly reject the assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to interpret our reality are entitled to do so. Regardless of the actual content of Black women’s [and Black girls’] self-definitions, the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women’s [and Black girls’] power as human subjects. (p. 126)

It was Chyvae’s insistence upon defining her Self for herself in this moment that provided me with further insight into how Black girls think and not simply how they (are perceived to) act. Such insistence (upon broader definitions of young Black woman- and Black girlhood) and resistance (to more narrowly defined conceptions) were also evident in our subsequent discussion.

As we finished sharing our body maps, I asked Chyvae and the rest of the girls to generate a list of words to describe what it means to grow up young, female, and Black just as we had done the previous year (i.e., 2010-2011). During this discussion, we bemoaned some of the more troublesome descriptions/labels attached to being young, Black, and female including terms like: ratchet, insane, big butts and boobs, big nose, nappy hair, and chicken, collard greens, watermelon, kool-aid, and hot sauce. At the same time, we also confessed our willingness to sometimes claim biracial identities as a way of coping with “the Black jokes” and that is when conversation turned to Chyvae’s racial
identity and “her really light eyes.” Chyvae claimed that her mother was in fact biracial and referred to her a second time as “that woman who gave birth to me,” which inevitably prompted further questions from the other girls:

Jordan: You seem to have some strong hostility against her. Want to talk about it?

Chyvae: If y’all want to hear about it, then sure.

Several girls at once: I do. I’m nosy. I want to know.

Chyvae: I don’t like her because she’s not on drugs and she’s not dead, but yet she doesn’t want to take care of her children. So therefore she’s in the right state of mind. Nothing is wrong with her. But she don’t wanna take care of her child—her children. Her five kids that she made with one man.

Amora: That’s the same thing wit my aunt. That’s how she is. She got five kids.

They were all together. They were married. She just told him she couldn’t do it nomore, so she left.

Me: Yeah, I was gonna say . . . is it something like dealing with more psychological, mental stuff or— . . .

Chyvae: . . . She can handle it. I know she can . . I mean, there’s nothing wrong with her.

June: Wait. So does she not live with you?

Chyvae: She doesn’t live with us. She doesn’t come see us. She doesn’t do nothin’. . . She stays right around the corner from us. She know where we at . . .

CJ: Do you live wit your grandparents?

Chyvae: I live with my grandma, but yet again, my dad takes care of us. Like he
comes over. He makes sure everything’s alright. He goes and gets food and everything. (conversation during weekly session, 10/10/11)

Unbeknownst to us at the time, Chyvae was laying the groundwork for what would become the eventual subject of her autoethnography—her mother’s absence and the pain it brought upon her and her family. This conversation also demonstrated her willingness to expose her pain in the presence of other Black females, which hooks (1993) deems critical to the individual and collective healing of self(ves). As such, we were able to collectively process Chyvae’s individual experiences with mothering and conversely, abandonment.

For several weeks thereafter, Chyvae continued to share her life story as her knack for storytelling was not at all lost on the group. Though much of her accounts were drawn from her own personal experience, many of Chyvae’s most vivid stories were drawn from her imagination as well. For example, in her initial interview Chyvae recounts the story of a mother who hires a cab driver/sexual predator to kidnap her pregnant teen daughter for an upcoming book she planned to write:

... [T]he mother didn’t want that baby to be born, so she told the cab driver to take her somewhere and leave her there, like strap her down leave her, take care of her. But she didn’t know what she was getting herself into... and he would go down there, and slap, abuse, and molest her... When the boyfriend found her, she was dead. He took his child and the cab driver was arrested. And so did the mom... (Chyvae, initial interview, December 2011)

Given that Chyvae also possessed the gift of gab, I would sometimes encourage her to record rather than share her thoughts aloud as in the case below:
Today’s Upsetting Situation

Today this girl ask me if I still liked girls. Like omg wtf wow like did she really just ask me that. I told her straight up “I never in my life liked girls.” She gonna tell me I’m lying. Woah this trick just crossed the line. She lucky I’m not like the rest of these immature girls out here or she would’ve got slapped . . . The situation stuck in my head all day. I really hope that whore don’t go around spreading rumors. I was never lesbian or bisexual. I only have, is, and will like boys and men when I’m older. Never have I told anyone I like girls. That’s not me. No offense to anyone who is. I have no problem with people who are bisexual or lesbian. I’m upset because she for one ask me that in front of all her friends . . . I wish I wasn’t so nice and just slapped that rat. (Chyvae, journal exchange, 10/25/11)

Because I wanted Chyvae to know I valued her experiences, I responded back to her a week later:

Wow. I see why you were so fired up to talk last week. I’m glad you wrote all of this down. Perhaps, it got you to calm down. At least I hope. Are you sure this girl wasn’t trying to test you in some way, to see what your reaction might be? I have never experienced anything like that before, so I wouldn’t know exactly what to tell you. I guess kids are bolder these days . . . I think by not really reacting to her she may just leave you alone, but hopefully it doesn’t turn into anything like harassment because I would hate for you to have to go through that. On another note, I am so happy that you decided to join us. I see that you have a lot of keen insights on life and I think it is really important for the others to hear your perspective on how to relate to people of Islamic faith among other things. Keep sharing! We’re listening! Write me back when you can. (journal exchange, 11/01/11)

In my response, I also praised Chyvae’s awareness of and appreciation for diversity. Several weeks before, I had asked the girls to: “Define the terms race, racism, and racial” and “Describe a racial incident that you’ve been a part of or witnessed in the last week (or more). What happened? Also, think of maybe something you may have heard or read in the media.” On one occasion, Chyvae spoke about the mounting racial tensions in her old neighborhood between her African American and African neighbors. Chyvae stated that her African American friends typically referred to their African peers
as “Somalian (sic)” or claimed “they stink,” yet in spite of the friction, Chyvae chose to cultivate friendships with them. In the end, Chyvae believed her actions elicited a positive outcome: “Now [my friend and I] have the whole entire neighborhood calling them Muslims basically. And like basically we—I don’t care what no one say, we brought basically some of the African Americans with the Bantus and [other] Muslims.”

Chyvae’s respect for differences was due in part to her school’s racially diverse student population. Chyvae understood the importance of relating to all types of people and of using language so as not to offend others. I witnessed Chyvae’s stern reaction to June and Jordan’s use of the words “dumb” and “retarded” when she stated: “Y’all are mean . . . Y’all should be a little more nicer. Y’all can use other words like ‘mentally challenged’ . . . you know. Everyone is dumb in something.” Perhaps these statements also came as a result of Chyvae being bullied herself. In her initial interview, for instance, Chyvae reveals how much teasing impacted her schooling experience:

Chyvae: [In] elementary I got picked on at the first school I went to, which was Central. I went there from kindergarten to third grade. And I used to get picked on a lot there. I kind of used that as motivation now . . . And when I went to Central people used to always make me out to be gay.

Me: Kids think about that in third grade?

Chyvae: In third grade, yeah. I didn’t even like boys yet. And for people to say I liked girls irritated me. And that was the main thing people picked on me about was liking girls. And one time they told a girl to kiss me. And she tried to kiss me and I pushed her and started fighting her and I got kicked off the bus.
Me: . . . In regards to the situation with the girl that recently came up to you as well as in the past—do you think it was because you were a tomboy or always running around with the guys on the playground? Is that why they might have assumed, “Oh that’s why she doesn’t like guys?”

Chyvae: It all started with me having mustard on my jacket, so it looked like dookie. And people saying that on the bus and them trying to hand me popsicles telling me to eat it. I guess they were trying to say I was dirty or I don’t even know for sure, but I’m not that type of person and people really didn’t know the real me because of the rumors. And then I thought about it and it had a big effect. And then I went to middle school and it wore off. (Chyvae, initial interview, December 2011)

Similar to Nikayla, Chyvae continually sought to challenge how others viewed (e.g., dirty) and labeled (e.g. gay) her. Yet Chyvae believed each of these experiences helped her to grow into the person she is today (e.g., “I kind of used that as motivation now”) and to develop such insight and awareness of self and of life, in general, for during this same interview Chyvae expressed interest in exploring “why is my side of the family so angry all the time” being that “nobody wants to be happy.” Nevertheless, following winter break, Chyvae returned to that which caused her the most distress—her relationship (or lack thereof) with her mother.

Months later, when I observed Chyvae at work on her autoethnography, I was impressed by her diligence in configuring text and images that would capture the essence of their relationship. Week by week, I watched as Chyvae combed through her Facebook account for photographs, actions I initially characterized as off-task behavior. However,
by talking with Chyvae, I re-interpreted these actions as her (alternative) method of doing research. The following, then, is what Chyvae produced.

“Do I really Need My Mother”: An Autoethnographic Account

In her title, Chyvae asks, “Do I really Need My Mother [?].” To address this question, she incorporates images that convey mother-daughter relationships, an image of a woman sitting beside a half-empty glass of alcohol, a Youtube video that features the lyrics from Karina’s “16 @ War,” and family photographs from her Facebook account (see Figure 23). Particular themes that emerge throughout Chyvae’s board include: support, survival, bonding, separation, resentment, (other)mothering, fathering, vulnerability, (un)happiness, triumph, and poverty.

Near the top of her Pinterest board (see Figure 23), Chyvae begins with the following introduction:

*It’s not that black girls are better off without their mother, it’s just black teens should hold off on having children. In the end, they will get fed up and just leave. Giving up on the man they had their first child with. Everything can seem as good and as fresh as pie, but the devil always gets what he wants in this situation. Someone has to leave. Rather (sic) it be mother or father. Teen pregnancy and love is not safe. Especially for low class black women.*

Chyvae begins here by drawing connections between her personal experiences (e.g., growing up without her mother) and the larger sociocultural context of race, poverty, and motherhood (e.g. teen pregnancy and its impact on poor Black females). Collins (2009) believes the intersecting nature of Black women’s oppression (e.g., race, class, gender) contributes to why motherhood can be particularly constraining for some. According to Collins:

*Black motherhood is a fundamentally contradictory institution. African-American communities value motherhood but Black mothers’ ability to cope with*
intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation should not be confused with transcending the injustices characterizing these oppressions. (p. 211)

Collins further suggests, “Coping with unwanted pregnancies and being able to care for one’s children is oppressive” (p. 211). And in some cases, as Chyvae points out, a (Black) mother may “get fed up and just leave.”
Unlike Nikayla and Jordan, Chyvae uses her images to develop an argument about Black girls growing up without their Black mothers. More specifically, Chyvae finds, “It’s not that black girls are better off without their mother, it’s just black teens should hold off on having children.” She further argues, “Teen pregnancy and love is not safe. Especially for low class black women [emphasis added].”

To drive home this point, Chyvae opens with Karina’s “16 @ War,” (see Figure 23) a song featuring lyrics that read: “Ain’t no daddy’s where I’m from/It’s just mad mothers/And eyes that still seem/They can’t look past color/Why am I disrespected by/Someone I should call brother?/And why girls feel unpretty/And constantly hate each other?” Though the lyrics go on to describe the wavering emotions of a teenaged girl lost in love, Chyvae attributes the song to her “[l]ife as a low class citizen teen” and the harsh realities she faces because of it (e.g., living in poverty, growing up without her mother). Such is the case in Figure 24 as Chyvae highlights her mother’s material desires vs. her and her sibling’s basic needs.
Figure 24. Photograph of Chyvae’s mother

Chyvae’s awareness of her socioeconomic status is also akin to her recognition of her second-class treatment (and/or status) in her own home. In Figure 25, Chyvae expresses the pain she experienced as a result of her mother’s favoritism toward another family member: “[My mother] chose Germaia over me. It was so-post [sic] to be me going everywhere with her. Not her niece. I was always alone in Georgia. I only had my aunt to talk to. Even that got hard.”
In other places, Chyvae emphasizes the role of her father. In Figure 26, for example, Chyvae writes: “This is her [emphasis added] family. [My siblings and I] met the mayor and only my father came to support us.” For Chyvae, this photo represents not only a personal accomplishment, but it also provides a social commentary on what Black family life is and can be. More specifically, this image adds an alternative element to the larger narrative of Black males and their absence from the family and/or home. As hooks (2004) notes:

While the number of black males who abandon children is increasing daily, it is equally true that among men who parent effectively black males are well represented. Studies of parenting show that poor and working-class men who may hold the sexist belief that parenting is female work often do more parenting. This has been the case for black males. (p. 113)
As such, Chyvae’s connection to her father is also evident in Figure 27. In these photographs, Chyvae reflects on the emotions her father feels and associates these feelings with her mother’s absence. In Figure 27, Chyvae recognizes the act of her father cutting off his dreadlocks (i.e., his hair) as a metaphor for his separating from or “cutting off” Chyvae’s mother. Thus, in Figure 27, Chyvae asks, “Who wouldn’t be upset that their children’s mother is absent in their life?” Chyvae also recognizes the awkward position her father is left in in “raising two girls without their mother.” Because he is left with taking on this role of othermothering (Collins, 2009), Chyvae finds “[t]he talks aren’t as easy.” Though the notion of othermothering is often associated with women in the role of grandmother, aunt, cousin, sister, or non-blood relative (e.g., teacher, church
member), Chyvae’s father, too, assists in the “sharing [of] mothering responsibilities” (Collins, 2009, p. 192).

Figure 27. Photographs of Chyvae’s father

Additionally, I interpret Chyvae’s roles (see Figure 28) as daughter, sister, student, mentor, supporter, and guide as a form of othermothering as well. Like her father, Chyvae is also faced with the burden of negotiating these multiple roles on her own when she writes:

My sister was once innocent and much easier to talk to. Now that my mother is gone I have to be there for her and show her the light. It is not easy playing sister and mother. I hate trying to talk her out of trouble and criticizing her when I should be supporting her and helping her. This is not my job. It is my mother’s.

In this passage, Chyvae highlights the ways in which the role of (other)mothering has been thrust upon her (e.g., “Now that my mother is gone I have to be there for her and show her the light”). Yet Chyvae also expresses her resentment for being forced to take on this role (e.g., “I hate trying to talk her out of trouble and criticizing her . . .”).
In these ways, Chyvae underscores the impact of her mother’s absence on her family as a whole. Likewise, Chyvae’s analysis of these photographs also speaks to the centrality of the (Black) mother to the (Black) family as caretakers, nurturers, teachers, models, and above all, survivors (Collins, 2009), which is why Chyvae’s mother’s absence is so much more difficult for Chyvae to bear (e.g, “It is not easy playing sister and mother,” “This is not my job. It is my mother’s”).
Near the bottom half of the board, Chyvae also reflects on the emotions her mother displays in these photographs (see Figure 29):

Figure 29. Photographs of Chyvae’s mother

Chyvae questions these seeming contradictions (i.e., her mother’s emotions vs. her mother’s actions) in the photographs because of who she believes her mother is (e.g., “a monster”) and what she believes her mother does (e.g., “cares less about her children as long as she is HAPPY” and “doesn’t have her children”). Rather the images below (see Figure 30) paint a more honest depiction of what a mother-daughter relationship can look like, and, thereby of what Chyvae believes her relationship is (or is not) like with her own mother. The mother and daughter in the top image express happy emotions because they have a “bond.” By contrast, the mother and daughter in the bottom image are less cheerful because they “are unhappy” and less likely to share a bond. For Chyvae, there is no contradiction; there are no in-betweens. Further, these images feature that of a mother and a daughter, none of which Chyvae can claim; in the above images (see Figure 29), Chyvae is nowhere to be found.
Similarly, in Figure 31, Chyvae’s mother sits alone in the photograph. Chyvae’s description below the photograph reads: “The last real bond between us. I was the one who took the picture.” Nevertheless, this image (i.e., Chyvae’s absence) is also representative of the bond the two no longer share and possibly never had.
Figure 32 features the image of a woman shrouded in smoke, sitting beside a half-empty glass of alcohol with a caption that reads:

Figure 32. Image of “drug-addicted” mother

Though Chyvae likens this image to that of a drug-addicted mother, this depiction is not a worst-case scenario for Chyvae claims she “would rather her be on drugs and not be there for [her], than to be just fine . . . [emphasis added].” Rather an addiction would better explain her mother’s absence.

According to Chyvae, a “real” mother provides guidance and “do[es] anything in her power to make her children see the light . . .” Hence, Chyvae likens her experiences of pain and neglect to the setting (e.g., the color of blue, the smoke-filled haze) and mood (e.g., gloom, sadness) of the pic. Because Chyvae’s mother has not helped Chyvae and
her siblings to see and/or experience “the light,” they are forced to see the “dark” and to experience a “nightmare [that] isn’t over” instead. Chyvae must then relive the pain each day.

Notwithstanding the motherly role Chyvae adopts for her siblings, I find such images (i.e., Figure 28) display Chyvae’s vulnerability as an individual who is 1) young, 2) Black, and 3) female and in need of her mother who can “be there for her [emphasis added] and show her [emphasis added] the light” (see Figure 32). Throughout her autoethnography Chyvae reiterates her desire for support and guidance. For these reasons, Chyvae includes another photograph of her and the mayor (pictured again in Figure 33) who, along with her father, is another source of inspiration. Chyvae’s choice to include this image also speaks to the idea of othermothering (Collins, 2009) amongst men in addition to her pride in her accomplishments and ability to progress in spite of her circumstances.

Figure 33. Photograph of Chyvae with the mayor of Capville
With this final image (see Figure 34), Chyvae ends where she begins—pictured in a photograph with just her siblings. Below this image, Chyvae writes: “The last time we had fun. This took place in Georgia at a park. I was happy thought she would always be there.” Accordingly, her mother’s absence in this photograph (as it is in Figures 26 & 33) is duly noted. Nevertheless, I find the image of a family laughing and playing together much more palpable. More importantly, it is the image of a family that has survived.

Figure 34. Photograph of Chyvae with siblings
Chyvae’s autoethnography therefore highlights her critical understanding of the ways in which race, class, and gender oppressions intersect. Regarding her mother, Chyvae understands that “Teen pregnancy and love is not safe. Especially for low class black women” or rather being poor, Black, and female makes being (Black) teen and pregnant more difficult. Furthermore, Chyvae understands that these predicaments (e.g., poverty, age, pregnancy) can lead some Black women (like her mother) to “get fed up and just leave.” Yet Chyvae recognizes that without her mother, Chyvae’s life as “a low class citizen teen” is burdensome (e.g., playing the dual role of sister and mother for her siblings) and complicated (e.g., lacking the motherly guidance and support for herself). Chyvae’s autoethnography thus underscores the complexities of not only Black mother(woman)hood, but Black girlhood as well.

In the following and final chapter of my dissertation, I return to my original research questions, highlighting the themes that emerged from the girls’ autoethnographies. Additionally, I discuss implications for future research and praxis concerning the lives and literacies of Black female adolescents.
Chapter 6:  

. . . To Reflective Endings: Getting to the Root of It All  

A Re-introduction  

Figure 35. Photograph of Chyvae getting her hair braided  

It was October of 2011 and our second week together. We had just finished generating our list of words to describe what it means to grow up young, female, and Black (see Chapter 5 for details) when I next asked the girls to offer a summary statement of what it meant to be young, female, and Black, overall. Yet I also could not ignore what was happening right before me—amidst a chorus of voices rising together and falling apart sat Chelsea and Jordan each taking turns to braid Chyvae’s hair (see Figure 35). In that moment, I witnessed laughter. I witnessed chatter. I witnessed giving. And I
witnessed taking. But above all, I witnessed a genuine act of love. It was an act of love that can only best be expressed through mutuality, communion, and lovingkindness (hooks, 2001).

It was the act of braiding hair that helped me to think further about its significance to what we would do for the rest of the year—that is, read, write, and speak about their realities as young Black women. The act of braiding hair then signified our entwinement and attachment to one another, and “that we were, indeed, on a journey to someplace together [emphasis added].” Furthermore, it signified us getting to the “root” of understanding who we were as Black female adolescents and adults. Thus, to describe what it means to be young, female, and Black, Chyvae has this to say: “Overall, being Black, we are misunderstood by other people, but in our heart we know we’re strong, beautiful and all that.” Not long after, however, Chyvae rewords her statement and asserts: “Overall, growing up young, female, and Black . . . there are a lot of stereotypes that affect us, but we love ourselves. We’re strong. And we’re beautiful.”

I begin here with Figure 35 and Chyvae’s statement in order to re-emphasize the importance of understanding Black female adolescents’ lives and literacies from the perspective of Black female adolescents. In one breath, Chyvae manages to capture the full extent of my dissertation project, which is to demonstrate how Black female adolescents conceive of self and society. Likewise, Figure 35 itself evokes images of tenderness, relaxation, reciprocity, and cohesion, images that run counter to the more popular conceptions of Black female adolescents as aggressive, loud, and/or loose (see also Chapter 2).

20 Here I use the term “root” to describe the basis for our understanding and also to symbolize the “root” of one’s hair.

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Therefore, in this chapter, I return to my original research questions, which include: *How do Black female adolescents conceive of self and society? How does autoethnography help to shape their conceptions? And finally, what are the larger educational and political implications of using autoethnography to examine Black female adolescents’ lives and literacies?* As part of my discussion, I address each question separately and include each of the major themes that emerged from my analysis of the girls’ autoethnographies. I also address how my findings correlate with my theoretical framing, review of literature, and methodology. Further, I discuss the implications and limitations of my research as well as the significance of my work to the focal participants (e.g., Nikayla, Jordan, and Chyvae) and to myself as a teacher/researcher. Lastly, I offer recommendations for future research involving Black female adolescents, urban and/or Black adolescents, and adolescents, in general.

**Discussion**

**RQ #1: How do Black female adolescents conceive of self and society?**

- *With an understanding that society places lesser value on young Black woman- and/or Black girlhood*
- *Through resistance to seeing themselves as depraved, deviant, or also victimized.*

In each of the girls’ autoethnographic accounts, I observe a critical self-awareness akin to Du Bois’ (1994) notion of double consciousness and Freire’s (2000) notion of conscientization or “critical consciousness.” Nikayla, Jordan, and Chyvae each recognize their Black female identities through their own eyes and through the eyes of others (i.e., double consciousness). Nikayla, for example, is conscious of the fact that society may
view her as “a sneaky underhanded hoe” who is “not in school” and thus, “not going to be nothing.” Yet Nikayla’s autoethnography highlights her own conception of a “beautiful, strong independent” self who is “looking away from [her] pass (sic) and seeing straight into [her] future.” Additionally, each of the girls is able to locate her struggles with confidence, abandonment, and body image within the larger nexus of race, class, and gender oppression (i.e., critical consciousness). Chyvae associates her mother’s abandonment with the hardships that derive from teen pregnancy, and thus warns, “Teen pregnancy and love is not safe. Especially for low class Black women.” Further, Jordan recognizes that her “bad problems with [her] hair” derive from societal perceptions of beauty (e.g., straight, long, and blond hair) that sometimes cause her to “wish [she] was White so [she] had like the better hair.” Through these critical lenses, Nikayla, Jordan, and Chyvae each articulate the ways in which society places lesser value on young Black woman- and/or Black girlhood and also the ways in which each of them use autoethnography as a tool to resist such perceptions.

As such, the girls’ autoethnographies each represent counternarratives or “method[s] of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). Solorzano & Yosso also recognize these narratives as “tool[s] for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (p. 32). Put differently, Nikayla, Jordan, and Chyvae’s conceptions of themselves run counter to the general conceptions of young Black females as depraved, deviant, and also victimized.

In Chapter 2, I utilize the phrase, “Black female adolescent literacies,” to highlight Black female adolescents’ understanding of themselves and the world around
them. I define such understandings as “specific acts in which Black girls read, write, speak, move, and create in order to affirm themselves, the(ir) world, and the multidimensionality of young Black womanhood and/or Black girlhood.” Additionally, I note that these acts describe the counterhegemonic (or self-defined standpoint that is in contrast to the predominate view of young Black women) and co-optive (or reappropriated language, images, and symbols used to meet one’s individual needs) strategies Black female adolescents use “in order to (re)define who they are or wish to become.” Nikayla and Chyvae, in particular, characterize themselves as survivors or as young Black females beating the odds. Rather than label herself as victim or “hoe,” Nikayla believes she has “to keep moving forward” as a survivor of sexual abuse and as someone who “used to hide [her] pain by getting in & out relationship & having sex.” Chyvae’s othermothering responsibilities (e.g., for her siblings) and personal accomplishments (e.g., meeting the mayor, speaking engagements) demonstrate how she has prevailed against the odds (e.g., poverty, mother’s absence). Jordan, on the other hand, chooses to redefine her image by “going natural” while openly challenging the status quo (i.e., White beauty ideals).

Moreover, Nikayla, Jordan, and Chyvae’s expression of vulnerability serves as a counterhegemonic strategy used to dispel myths about what it means to be a strong Black woman (i.e., a survivor, independent, assertive, or in control). Based upon their ethnographic study of Black female identity formation amongst late adolescent African American women, Shorter-Gooden and Washington (1996) determine strength as meaning “tough, determined, and able to deal with the adversity one meets because of being Black, as well as . . . having a strong sense of self that is not overrun by others” (p.
Yet Chyvae confesses her struggles with playing the dual role of sister and mother:

“I hate trying to talk her [sister] out of trouble and criticizing her when i should be supporting her and helping her.” Further, she says, “This is not my job. It is my mother’s.” Jordan likewise confesses her struggles with self-love as a young Black female growing up in a predominately White environment: “I’ve also felt like really ugly with my hair. Like why was I stuck with the hair that I got?”

Though strong Black womanhood (sometimes read as: strongblackwoman) is often treated as a positive trait (see Collins, 2009), Wyatt (2008) recognizes this role is sometimes burdensome. Drawing upon Collins’ Black female identity work, Wyatt explores the concept of the strong Black woman in a series of texts that highlight its psychical and political effects and finds:

It is the feelings engendered by living the role that supply a corrective to the seemingly positive image of the Strong Black Woman: If the stress of living up to this ideal leads to physical and emotional breakdown, it is—tangibly—a damaging stereotype that calls for resistance and repair. (p. 62)

Morgan (1999) then believes “one of the most loving things sistas can do for themselves is to erase this tired obligation of super-strength” (as cited in Wyatt, 2008, p. 63). She says, “[i]nstead, let’s claim our God/dess-given right to imperfections and vulnerability. As black women it’s time to grant ourselves our humanity” (as cited in Wyatt, 2008, p. 63).

Strategies like these (i.e., self-definition, revealing vulnerabilities) denote the counterhegemonic methods Black female adolescents like Nikayla, Jordan, and Chyvae employ to affirm themselves, their worlds, and the multidimensionality of young Black
womanhood, yet there are times when Black female adolescents also use co-optive methods to affirm who they are. Chyvae, for instance, chooses to identify herself as a “low class citizen teen” in spite of growing up in a (in American) culture where materialism and greed run rampant. In an era of reality TV programming and mass media marketing (e.g., magazines, commercials, books, billboards, and more), there is a strong desire “to emulate the rich” (hooks, 2001, p. 120) and the order of the day is to “fake it ‘til you make it” (e.g., live beyond one’s means or purchase items that reflect a wealthier lifestyle). Poverty, on the other hand, is either masked or ignored. Yet Chyvae, chooses to reappropriate her “low class” status into an image of survival, support, bonding, and triumph.

What I do not include in my definition of Black female adolescent literacies, however, are the instances when Black female adolescents do internalize self-deprecating views of themselves. Such is the case in Chapter 5 where I note Jordan’s struggle with internalized racism: “There are days when I get frustrated with [my hair] and it just irritates me. Like sometimes I wish I was White so I had like the better hair or I wish I was like mixed or had Indian hair or something.” In statements like these, Jordan neither creates a self-defined standpoint that is in contrast to the predominate view of young Black women nor reappropriates language or an image to suit her own needs; instead, Jordan shares her desire to be someone other than who she is—a young Black woman. I recognize that Black female adolescents like Jordan do not always conceive of self or society in affirming or empowering ways, which proves why our (i.e., those within and outside of the Black community) acknowledgement and appreciation of their lives and literacies is so critically important.
RQ #2: How does autoethnography help to shape their conceptions?

- Encourages the telling of traumatic (painful) and triumphant (progressive) stories
- Provides opportunities to seek and share advice
- Facilitates shared understandings (or a collective processing) of self and society
- Provides space to use photographs, quotes, videos, and other graphics to reframe public perceptions of Black female adolescents

In each of the girls’ accounts, I find an engagement with autoethnographic research that validates pain and also progress. In Chapter 3, I refer to this desire to name pain and make progress as part of an affective critical pedagogical approach that fosters “critical consciousness along with therapeutic kinds of dialogue.” It is an approach “that considers the naming of pain as significant as the naming of power” and is likewise “concerned with making progress” (see Chapter 2 for further discussion).

hooks’ (1993) captures these sentiments (i.e., significance of naming pain and moving toward healing) well in *Sisters of the yam: Black women and self-recovery*, a book written expressly for and about African American women. It is after witnessing the physical, spiritual, and mental anguish of many of her Black female students and colleagues that hooks establishes “Sisters of the Yam,” a Black women’s support group, to collectively work through their struggles:

... I have seen that we cannot fully create effective movements for social change if individuals struggling for that change are not also self-actualized or working towards that end. When wounded individuals come together in groups to make
change our collective struggle is often undermined by all that has not been dealt with emotionally [emphasis added]. (pp. 4-5)

Many critical pedagogues stress that the relationship between teacher and student be reconciled, yet here hooks makes clear that Black females must first reconcile with themselves. An affective critical pedagogy for Black female adolescents, then, would mean acknowledging and empathizing with their emotional struggles. It would also mean understanding that their naming of pain is as necessary as their naming of power, that their recovery is as significant as their resistance.

Though Nikayla, Jordan, and Chyvae are concerned with naming how larger systems of power (e.g., sexual assault, poverty, racial hegemony) operate in their daily lives, they are, too, interested in naming their pain. I also find that by expressing their vulnerabilities, Nikayla, Jordan, and Chyvae are at the same time expressing their pain. Nikayla confesses to engaging in behaviors that would help to disguise her pain (i.e., “hurt drama pain lonely not being loved . . . I used to hide my pain by getting in & out relationship (sic) & having sex”). Chyvae likens her pain to a “nightmare” that “isn’t over.” And Jordan repeatedly expresses her pain through her ongoing struggles with her hair (i.e., “hair has been a sensitive subject for me,” “I’ve had really bad problems with my hair,” or “I’ve also felt like really ugly with my hair”).

Yet what is also evident throughout their autoethnographies is their desire to progress or to “mov[e] on to better things” (Nikayla, Pinterest board, 2012). In spite of her mother’s absence, Chyvae is still able to take pride in her own accomplishments. Describing one of her speaking engagements, Chyvae writes: “This is one big event that i completed without my mother. I spoke about my life and how the YMCA affected me @
a Legacy dinner. I did an excellent [sic] job and I’m proud of myself.” Jordan expresses her desire to progress at the end of her presentation when she declares her plans to wear her hair naturally (or chemically free). The theme of progress is also apparent throughout the descriptive and visual components of Nikayla’s autoethnography. To articulate her progress, Nikayla says: “making progress . . . me in the future on the road to success jumping into the world of fame” as she uses the image of a female diving into a pool to further illustrate her meaning. In other places, Nikayla uses her painting to represent a starship and thus her belief in “moving on to better things.” Additionally, the theme of progress is witnessed in her exchange with a female follower of her work:

Nikayla’s written description: when i got raped i didn’t know what to do i was lost and confused.

Female follower: and you never forget

Nikayla: no you don’t but you just got to keep moving forward.

Here Nikayla expresses her movement forward following an extremely traumatic experience as she also uses this autoethnographic platform (i.e., Pinterest board) to offer advice to someone else.

In thinking further about how autoethnography helps to shape the girls’ conceptions of self and society, I consider both their autoethnographic product and process. I find that their autoethnographic processes (i.e., research activities) facilitate shared understandings of self and society that I refer to as “collective processing” (see Chapter 4) in that their autoethnographies engender more than just self-reflexivity, but also collective consciousness-raising. In Chapter 5, I mention Chyvae’s desire to explore the effects of her mother’s absence early on in the year and as she begins to share her
story, I note how other participants share their understandings of similar experiences. Amora, for instance, says: “That’s the same thing wit my aunt. That’s how she is. She got five kids. They were all together. They were married. She just told him she couldn’t do it nomore, so she left.” Hearing Amora’s story thus contributes to our collective understanding of the complex nature of motherhood and mothering and consequently, my questions regarding Chyvae’s mother’s mental health as reason for abandoning her children. In Chapter 5, I also mention how Nikayla’s struggles with confidence and self-esteem impel her to develop writing prompts for the other girls that tackle those same issues (e.g., “How would you rate yourself and why?,” “What type of guy fits you?”). In this way, Nikayla became interested in understanding her experience (or herself) through the other girls (the collective; see also Dyson, 2007).

The notion of collective processing, however, is most evident in Jordan’s autoethnographic journey. In Chapter 5, I note how Jordan, Ms. A, and me collectively process our experiences and understanding of Black hair (also the misconception of “good hair”) and, thus how this conversation influences Jordan to explore the topic of hair for her autoethnography. I also observe the collective processing of Jordan’s hair experience when Chyvae commiserates with her own hair woes (e.g., “Do you see this hair? . . . This is what you call hard to work with.”). Furthermore, Jordan admits her reasons for exploring her topic is “because [she] felt a lot of people would be able to relate to it.” Similar to Nikayla, Jordan is interested in understanding her hair struggles within a larger collective of Black women and girls who have internalized negative beliefs about their hair (see also hooks, 1993) and who have also found ways to resist these previously held notions (e.g., by wearing their hair naturally).
Finally, when I consider how autoethnography helps to shape Black girls’ conceptions of self and society, I find that their use of visual imagery (e.g., photographs, quotes, and videos) helps to counter public perceptions of young Black women. Yet it is also worth noting that Nikayla and Chyvae, in particular, choose to use a public space (i.e., Pinterest) in order to reframe such perceptions. In doing so, the girls are able to (re)image their Black female identities and experiences on their own terms and challenge others to do so as well. Throughout Nikayla’s autoethnography, she uses inspirational messages and personal artwork (e.g., painting, collage) that speak to uplift, perseverance, motivation, confidence and success (e.g., “MAKE YOUR OWN PATH,” “… my life is more important to me and should be important to you too,” “find your gift your magic”) and against apathy, aggression, lewdness, and failure (see also Evans-Winters, 2005; Frazier et al., 2011). Chyvae, however, uses personal photographs to re-present commonplace images of Black fatherhood (see Figure 27), the Black family (see Figures 26 & 34), and also Black female relationships (see Figure 30). Chyvae includes Figure 26 (which features herself, her siblings, her father, and the mayor of Capville) and a caption that reads: “We met the mayor and only my father came to support us,” in order to challenge the larger narrative of Black males and their absence from the home and family (hooks, 2004). In other photographs (see Figure 28), Chyvae expresses the great love she has for her siblings, which also challenges notions of dysfunctionality and division within the Black family (Collins, 2009; hooks, 2004). Lastly, Chyvae, includes Figure 30 (see top image) to show that bonding between Black mothers and Black daughters does, indeed, exist. Consequently, these kinds of autoethnographic approaches (e.g., use of
visual imagery) help us to better understand how Black female adolescents like Nikayla and Chyvae (and Jordan) “do” literacy.

In the following section, I discuss the themes that emerged from my final research question—“What are the larger educational and political implications of using autotethnography to examine Black female adolescents’ lives and literacies”—and, hence, the implications for current and future areas of research, methodology, and praxis.

**Implications**

*RQ #3: What are the larger educational and political implications of using autoethnography to examine Black female adolescents’ lives and literacies?*

- Offers possibilities for what else qualitative research can look like or become
- Speaks to the sorely needed focus on the lives and literacies of Black female adolescents in educational research
- Addresses the role teachers can play in attending to the academic and socio-emotional needs and interests of Black female adolescents in schools.

This dissertation study has greater implications for the field of qualitative research, both in what counts as research and how research can be carried out by and with youth, in particular. Chase (2011) characterizes narrative inquiry as a (qualitative) “field in the making” (p. 421) that continues to examine the ways in which narrative can be used to facilitate social and personal change. Chase also cites the use of alternative methodologies (e.g., testimonios, narrative therapy, ethnotheater) as further evidence of
the expanding nature of this field, and hence, qualitative research, in general. Chase therefore highlights a particular set of urgencies evolving within the field that I believe this study also addresses and they include: 1) the urgency of speaking (one’s story) in order to effect (positive) change in one’s own life, 2) the urgency of being heard by others in order to invoke change in and for others, 3) the urgency of collective stories that relate one’s individual story to the experiences of a larger (and often marginalized) group, and 4) the urgency of public dialogue that centers on storytelling as a means to effect social change. Yet this study also makes urgent the need to engage youth in (qualitative) research that invites them to speak and be heard, to relate their stories to others and to also use these stories to initiate critical dialogue (Chase, 2011; Freire, 2000). This study demonstrates the significance of engaging (Black female) youth in research that privileges their perspectives in that it allows them to search for and make meaning of their own lives.

As I examined my own positionality and reflexivity within this study (see Chapter 1), I also examined the girls’ autoethnographic processes and products as they in turn examined their own and each other’s. As such, our work also demonstrates the multilayered effects of conducting autoethnographic research and the possibilities for what else qualitative research can look like or become. For these reasons, qualitative and/or educational researchers can continue to ask: What do (Black female) youth have to say about their lives and how might their stories further impact our research, praxis, and policies? What does it mean for youth (especially those from marginalized communities) to engage in self-reflective research? In what other ways might autoethnography be used to help youth search for and make meaning of their own lives? How else can
autoethnography be used to help youth effect change in others and/or society at large? Also, what other methodologies might we use in order to work for and with youth?

This study, too, speaks to the sorely needed focus on the lives and literacies of Black female adolescents in educational research, given that the lives of Black girls are continually framed through discourses of tragedy, lewdness, and failure (Frazier et al., 2011). As articulated by Evans-Winters (2005): “Coupled with the media, social science and educational research may lead the public and educators to become focused on Black girls as prostitutes, welfare queens, and crack addicts” (p. 10). She argues, “. . . the threat is that teachers unenergetically approach teaching Black girls from a disembodied standpoint, building from a fixation on immorality, contamination, and/or in a more liberal state, absolution” (p. 10). Teachers and researchers should then consider: What more can be learned about and from the lives and literacies of Black female adolescents? What other kinds of theories, methodologies, and pedagogies can be used to affirm the lives and literacies of Black female adolescents? Further, how else can we engage in research and praxis for and with Black female adolescents?

In order to challenge deficit perspectives of young Black women, Evans-Winters (2005) believes the solution lies in developing teaching and research practices that consider Black female adolescents’ lives and literacies from a strength perspective. In other words, teachers and researchers must learn to recognize Black girls’ resiliency and not merely their oppression. Yet Evans-Winters also recognizes the mental and emotional health risks involved in getting there. In the afterthought to her newly revised, _Teaching black girls: Resiliency in urban classrooms_, Evans-Winters (2011) calls for researchers
and educators to acknowledge the socio-emotional needs of their Black female students/subjects:

Carrying the burdens of racism and sexism is a weighty burden for young women to bear. For many Black girls, academic resilience may come at a cost to the individual and community. Once the scholarly community further understands gender and culturally specific ways of coping, then we can help facilitate Black girls’ educational resilience, personal growth, professional development, and collective consciousness. (pp. 176-177)

I am arguing that this study addresses the ways teachers can attend to the academic and socio-emotional needs and interests of Black female adolescents in schools by providing them (and I would argue all youth for that matter) opportunities to name power as well as their own pain and to also be given opportunities to seek human connection and affirmation (see also Camangian, 2010). Camangian’s (2010) work with his urban high school students (i.e., their engagement in autoethnography) underscores these sentiments:

As dominant corporate narrations of urban struggle have limited youth of color to the celebrated criminalization of men, the hyper-sexualization of women, and the glorification of social vice as viable means to cope with everyday life, urban educators must counter these narratives by offering young people opportunities to construct humanizing stories about life’s significant struggles [emphasis added]. Sharing humanizing narratives creates collective healing processes whereby students learn from one another’s lived experiences. (p. 201)

Teachers need to then consider the role they play in ensuring Black female youth (and all youth) leave school with a healthy sense of self—as confident and competent young
people—and in creating opportunities for them to gain visibility and foster relationships within the classroom.

In Chapter 2, I argue that “out-of-bound spaces” are “those individually and collectively constructed spaces that offer a sense of belonging, bonding, safety, seclusion, and interconnectedness” and that these spaces are, in fact, necessary to the development of Black female adolescent literacies. However, this study also has implications for how these literacies might be developed (and/or recognized) in-bound (e.g., classroom spaces). In working with Black female adolescents, it became necessary for us to create an out-of-bound that honored our innermost thoughts and desires and that affirmed our beings. In this space, we were able to read, write, speak, move, and create against gender-, race-, and class-based exploitation. Yet the girls were also able to affirm and resist in-bound through the use of public (digital) spaces such as Pinterest and Prezi. Moving such work in-bound (i.e., in classrooms) thus encourages everyone—Black female adolescents, their teachers, and their peers—to work collectively to disrupt the “single story” (see Adichie, 2009) of young Black woman- and/or Black girlhood.

Often in the rush to get through the content or lecture, we (e.g., teachers, professors) forget the time and the space our students need to heal and to reflect. Given the sociohistorical context of Black woman- and Black girlhood (see discussion in Chapter 2), I am arguing that this time and space not be negated for this is the sure way toward Black female adolescents’ collective healing, collective consciousness, and ultimately, collective transformation. Teachers must then consider: How can out-of-bound interests and activities be brought in-bound (i.e., in classrooms) for and with Black female adolescents? How might the creation of such spaces impact Black female
adolescents (and all youth, in general) as learners? How can I contribute to Black female adolescents’ sense of belonging, bonding, safety, seclusion, and interconnectedness within the classroom? What can I do to help ease the strain of oppression? Furthermore, how can I work to ensure Black female adolescents (and all youth) leave my classroom with a healthy sense of self?

Given that this study largely addresses Black female adolescents’ socio-emotional needs, I note the limitations of this study in regard to Black female adolescents’ academic literacies (or those literacies traditionally valued in educational and/or workplace settings that include advanced reading, writing, and language skills; see also essayist literacy, Farr, 1993) in the following section.

Limitations

Though the girls’ engagement in autoethnography emphasized their socio-emotional needs and interests (which I find to be extremely important), this engagement did not explicitly address their academic needs or literacies, the latter of which I also find to be essential to the 21st Century classroom and workplace. In Pathways to the common core: Accelerating achievement, Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman (2012) write:

Whereas twenty-five years ago, 95% of jobs required low skills, today low-skills jobs constitute only 10% of our entire economy. New levels of literacy are required in the information economy of today . . . The old mission for America’s schools—providing universal access to basic education and then providing a small elite with access to university education—may have fit the world of yesterday, where most jobs required low literacy skills, but children who leave school today without strong literacy skills will not find a job. (pp. 8-9)
Thus, it would have also been necessary to account for these realities as part of my examination into the literate lives of Black female adolescents.

Now more than ever, the ability to write well has become the “gateway for success in academia, the new workplace, and the global economy” (Nagin, 2003, p. 2). The National Writing Commission (2003), a group consisting of literacy and composition scholars from across the nation, even go as far to suggest that without a serious transformation in the way writing is taught and practiced, our economic future may very well be at stake. The Commission senses that the “quality of writing must be improved if students are to succeed in college and in life” (p. 7). Thus, considering the written portion of the girls’ autoethnographies, I find Chyvae and Nikayla, in particular, needed added support in writing and language instruction (areas which constitute two of the four literacy strands delineated by the Common Core State Standards or CCSS\textsuperscript{21}). Based upon my observations of Nikayla’s work (e.g., “martin luther king if you have low self esteem or anything listen to is speech and you will have a better understanding,” “looking away from my pass & seeing straight to my future”), I find she would have benefitted from targeted instruction in capitalization, punctuation, spelling, and grammar. The CCSS (2010) language standard 1 & 2 for grades 11-12, for example, asks students to:

- Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.
- Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing. (p. 54)

\textsuperscript{21} In this section I highlight the Common Core Standards given the impact of this reform (that Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman name “the most sweeping reform of the K-12 curriculum that has ever occurred in this country,” p. 1) on school-age girls like Jordan, Chyvae, and even Nikayla who will now have to wrestle with its rippling effect on the workplace.
Chyvae would have likewise benefitted from added instruction in grammar and usage (e.g., “Rather it be mother or father. Teen pregnancy and love is not safe. Especially for low class black women.”), while both Nikayla and Chyvae needed further opportunities to engage in the writing process (i.e., “Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience,” CCSS, p. 46). And because writing and reading go hand-in-hand, Nikayla and Chyvae would have also benefitted from additional opportunities to read, analyze, and borrow from the literary and linguistic choices of published authors (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012).

Since Nikayla, Jordan, Chyvae, and the rest of my participants will have spent most of their lives in classrooms it is also necessary to consider what Black female adolescent literacies look like in these spaces. The scope of my study was within the confines of the library (i.e., an out-of-school context), therefore, I was unable to observe the ways in which the girls “do” literacy in school spaces. Thus, future research concerning the lives and literacies of Black female adolescents might address: 1) how Black female adolescents “do” literacy within in-school spaces; 2) how these literacy practices, then, compare to how Black female adolescent “do” literacy in out-of-school contexts; 3) the ways in which these literacy practices also shift, transfer, and/or converge across contexts; and, 4) the role educators and researchers must play in addressing and extending these literacy practices.

Still, in spite of these drawbacks, Nikayla, Jordan, and Chyvae, do make mention of how their participation in this study has impacted their lives and also in ways that the Common Core does not address. In the next section, I share some of the feedback I
received in order to highlight the significance of my research to Nikayla, Jordan, and Chyvae.

Significance

Looking forward and looking back: following-up with Nikayla, Jordan, and Chyvae. What theory, methodology, and findings do not and cannot always reveal are the relationships that emerge between the researcher and her participants as well as those that develop between and amongst the participants themselves. Three years ago, I set out to uncover the ways in which Black female adolescents understood themselves and the(ir) world around them. In the meantime, I discovered what meaning my research held for my participants, and unequivocally, it was the relationships that mattered.

In my follow-up interview with Nikayla, I ask: “What did you get out of being a part of my research study? And, why did you choose to participate both years,” to which Nikayla replies:

Because you helped me a lot about opening up and speaking about myself. . . But, basically you helped me open up more with myself . . . being shy and being a little more friendlier. . And the writing we did was interesting. And the questions you asked us about our goals and stuff like that. Took me around a different environment than I grew up around. (Nikayla, follow-up interview, February 2013)

What I gather from Nikayla’s comments is that she valued the relationship that had emerged between her and me. For Nikayla, I became more than just a researcher, but also a teacher, coach, guide, and muse (Sullivan, 1996). Our relationship also allowed her to
gain further insight into her past, her present, and her future and to become more aware of who/where she was and who/where she wanted to be.

During Jordan’s follow-up interview, I ask the same question (i.e., “What did you get out of being a part of my research study?”) and our exchange is as follows:

Jordan: I liked it. I got to meet other people and I just got to see other people’s views—like how they grew up.

Me: And why would you think that was important to you to be in that space hearing different stories?

Jordan: Just to be around something different.

Me: Did it make you think about some things?

Jordan: [nods head]

Me: What?

Jordan: Like Chyvae and her mom not being around. It just made me appreciate my mom. (Jordan, follow-up interview, February, 2013)

Jordan thus benefitted from being in touch with the lived experiences of others. For her, this meant gaining a new perspective on what it means to be young, Black, and female, and to grow up without. Other Black girls’ stories then became sources of healing for Jordan as they forced her to further reflect upon her relationship with her own mother.

Lastly, when I ask Chyvae what she got out of being part of my research study, her response is: “Meeting new people and understanding, like, what other people go through—some of the things that I didn’t have to go through” (Chyvae, follow-up interview, February 2013). I then ask Chyvae to elaborate further and her reply is as follows:
Like some Black girls—like being dark-skinned. I’m not dark-skinned. So most people—they say being dark-skinned about this and being dark-skinned about that and nobody likes dark skins. And then like the hair thing. The hair situation. I mean I didn’t like my hair at first. But, it wasn’t because I had Black girl hair. It was simply because I didn’t like how . . . how I didn’t get it done. I like to have my hair done. So it was more like a financial thing or more like a self-esteem thing where I just wanted my hair done . . . And I always thought of things because of my class and not because of, you know, my color or race. So it kinda opened my eyes to why I am in the [economic] class that I’m in. (Chyvae, follow-up interview, February 2013)

Like Jordan, Chyvae believes she benefitted from seeing life through the eyes of others (Dyson, 2007). Though her outer struggles (with poverty, abandonment) were much to bear, Chyvae could also empathize with other Black girls’ inner struggles (with beauty, self-esteem). Furthermore, Chyvae understands that these struggles (for her and for the other girls)—this pain—reveal how race, class, and gender impinge upon the lives of young Black women.

It is in these moments that I recognize how and why the human element must be brought to bear in our research (see Paris, 2010; Kinloch & San Pedro, 2013). Indeed, I am reminded that my own work was about recognizing the person and not just the participant, and also recognizing my Self and not just the researcher. In Chapter 1, I discuss the impact of this study on me as a researcher and also as a Blackgirlwoman and I return to these ideas in the section below.
Looking in and out: A blackgirlwoman revisited

When I set out on this journey three years ago, I understood that my role was to observe, record, write, facilitate, collect, analyze, process, inquire, test, hypothesize, and repeat. Yet from the beginning I also suspected that my role might require more than just “doing” the research. In my first post-session reflection, for instance, I question the act of just “doing” the research:

*I’m also having reservations “researching” the group. Why can’t I just be w/ them? Researching seems to take out the fun aspect and the good intent behind it, although, I do know what comes out of it will/might do something for them as well as for others. Me as well.* (research journal, 10/05/10)

Over time, I understood that my role was to also discover how my humanity was linked to theirs (Dillard and Okpalaoka, 2011). This is why in Chapter 1, I refer to myself as a “Blackgirlwoman” so as not to “distanc[e] myself from the research and the relationships I have built and will continue to build.” As a researcher, I wanted to explore what I might get out of being part of my research study and how I might be changed through this process as well.

Dillard and Okpalaoka (2011) believe that in order to be in relationship with our participants we must be willing to engage the mind, body, and spirit in our work. Dillard and Okpalaoka say it is the kind of research that “invites the whole person of the researcher and the whole person of the researched into the work, knowing that the mind, body and spirit are intertwined in their functions of maintaining the well-being of the individual and community” (p. 159). Dillard and Okpalaoka (2011), too, suggest,

The act of sharing with those who have been silenced and marginalized is a spiritual task that embodies a sense of humility and intimacy. Furthermore, a
sense of reciprocity is fundamental from this epistemological space, a sense that
the researcher and the researched are changed [emphasis added] in the process of
mutual teaching and learning [the self] and the world together. (p. 159)

Hence, in Chapter 1, I ask: “How can I take what I have learned to become a better
human being?” And my immediate response is simply to love (more). Listen (more).
Affirm (more). And understand (more).

As a high school English teacher, I was often concerned with covering the content
and with developing assignments that were both rigorous and relevant. Yet in the midst
of these concerns, I had neglected to establish an ethic of caring, comfort, and connection
as the cornerstone of my pedagogy. It was not until I began working with these young
women that I gained clarity and a better sense of my role as a researcher and as an
educator.

In Chapter 1, I also ask: “How does being Black and female connect us all?” and
after reflecting upon the girls’ and my own autoethnographies, I can clearly see how our
stories are similar and also different. Like Nikayla, Jordan, and Chyvae, I experienced
many of the same struggles with self-esteem, self-awareness, and support and guidance. I
understand what it is like to desire support and guidance from the person you feel should
know you best. For example, when I write, “When I was 17, Mom and I were like
strangers,” I can relate to what Jordan and Chyvae have experienced with their mothers.
And when I write, “You searched for love in many of the wrong places . . .,” in “A Note
to My Seventeen-Year Old Self,” I understand what it is like for Nikayla to want to feel
loved. But, then I recognize, too, that many of my childhood experiences were quite
different—I was forever obsessed with making top grades, I could purchase just about anything I wanted (from my paycheck or my parents), and I made friends easily. And unlike, Nikayla, Jordan, and Chyvae, I was spoiled and selfish. Yet writing my autoethnography forced me to remember who I was and to recognize who I had become, and most significantly, to consider who else I would like to be.

In the next section, I propose several recommendations for future research and praxis, and in the final section, I offer concluding remarks.

**Looking Beyond: Further Suggestions**

In order to pick up where this study leaves off, I offer the following list of suggestions for researchers and/or teachers to consider in not only working with Black female adolescents, but any and all populations of students. These suggestions help us to envision what more can be done in understanding the literate lives of Black female adolescents and in advancing the field of adolescent literacy, in general, and they include:

- Engaging in research that examines the ways in which Black female adolescents’ out-of-school literacy practices converge with and diverge from their in-school literacy practices. Hence, how can such research help us to better understand Black female adolescents’ conceptions of self and society? And, what role do their in-school (i.e., traditional, academic) literacies play in developing these conceptions, and particularly with how they identify as writers and readers, in particular?
Engaging in research that examines the ways in which Black female adolescent literacies converge with and diverge from Black male adolescent literacies (and also White female adolescent literacies). In other words, what do Black male adolescents have to say about their lives and the(ir) world around them and how might that compare to what Black female adolescents have to say? Also, how do race, class, and gender impinge upon how the two groups learn and interact within the classroom space? And what are the short- and long-term effects?

Engaging in research that explores how Black female adolescents engage in the writing process. For example, what does engaged writing look like for Black female adolescents? How do Black female adolescents engage writing in different formats (e.g., digital, on paper)? How might their digital writing (e.g. tweeting, blogging) be used to support and/or bolster traditional school-based writing tasks (e.g., essays, reports)? Also, what is the role of the teacher in supporting their writerly identities?

Engaging in research that further explores how Black female adolescents communicate in digital spaces. With other youth? Also, how do Black female adolescents

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22 This recommendation is in response to the recent rise in research focused on the lives and literacies of Black male adolescents (see Ferguson, 2001; Kirkland & Noguera, 2013; Kunjufu, 2004, 2005, 2010; Noguera, 2009) and to the lack of attention given to their female counterparts. I also make this recommendation based upon the closely related sociohistorical experiences of both groups (see Bennett, 1993; Franklin, 2010; Gates, 2012). I make this recommendation so as not to dichotomize the literacies and identities of Black male and female youth, but to better understand their socialization processes within classrooms, our role in creating and responding to these processes, and how our responses affect learning outcomes.
adolescents use such spaces to reappropriate and/or resist language, images, and symbols, particularly those represented in popular culture? How does their communication in such spaces affirm their ways of both seeing and being in the world (or not)? And how can such research help us to further understand their literacies and identities?

An Opening, and Not a Closing: One Final Note

In considering my work with Black female adolescents, I find that my research demonstrates how and why Black female adolescents’ lives and literacies must not be ignored. My research also gets us to think further about how theory (i.e., Black feminism and critical pedagogy), methodology (i.e., autoethnography), and praxis can converge to inform understandings of Black female adolescents’ lives and literacies in- and out-of-school contexts. And most importantly, my research helps us to recognize that Black female adolescents can and do have much to say about their own lives when we adults are willing to take the time to listen.
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