A Study of Black Adolescent Females Writing in an Urban Public School

Dissertation

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By

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to contribute grounded theoretical constructs that address the gap in the knowledge about the classroom-based writing of Black adolescent females. The study focuses on the following research question: How do the contexts of language arts classrooms in urban public schools influence the writing of Black adolescent females?

The theoretical framework of the study is grounded in theories of writing as an ecological process constituted by interactions among systems of ideas, purposes, interpersonal interactions, cultural norms, and textual forms. In this framework, writing is viewed as more than an individualized interaction between a writer and her ideas; it is a social and interactive process that is situated between people, places, spaces, and ideas.

The study was conducted in an eighth-grade English literature and composition classroom in an urban public secondary school where 68% of the student population are native-born and newcomer students of African heritage, 18% are of Latina/o heritage, 11% are White, and 85% of the students receive lunch free of charge or at a reduced price [insert a description of the school and classroom here]. This dissertation reports on the writing and writing interactions of three adolescent females of African heritage and
varying ethnic backgrounds: Layla is a native-born student from the Midwest, and Mali and Nia, respectively, are children of immigrant families from West African countries.

The methodology employed was qualitative. The study began on 20 August 2014 and the field work was completed on 20 March 2015. The data collections methods employed were participant observations, field notes, interviews, and students’ classroom writing. The perspectives of thematic and discourse analysis were used to examine the data.

The major findings of the study were as follows: 1) the writing prompts, graphic organizers, and expectations for writing provided in the classroom constrained the students’ opportunities to write about their emotions, their racialized perspectives, and their individuality; 2) the writing prompts, graphic organizers, and expectations for writing provided in the classroom constrained the students’ writing process, that is, how they translated and organized their ideas into a written product; 3) the writing prompts, graphic organizers, and perceptions of the school’s expectations for writing provided in the classroom constrained the students’ writing process, that is, their ability to construct relationships to and with their peer-readers through writing.

The implications of the study are as follows: 1) the contexts of academic writing are not differentiated according to the needs, abilities and interests of Black adolescent students; 2) the tools used to support student writing and contexts of writing presume to identify students as “non-writers,” and they do not differentiate according to their needs, abilities, or interests as student-readers and writers; students are not acknowledged as readers or writers; 3) students are not provided opportunities to use writing powerfully; 4)
writing prompts and graphic organizers are not neutral, but are racialized tools reflecting the norms, values, and discourse patterns of the dominant racial group, which construct or constrain students opportunities to “come to voice” in school.
Dedication

To the bitter ends of the pages

To the last note in the score

To the final drops


Joy will eventually come in the morn’

This dissertation is dedicated to my dearest inspirations and my greatest loves,

Harper, Ryan, and Raymond
Acknowledgments

First, I want to acknowledge the brilliant Black adolescent female students who allowed me into their lives and into the stories, feelings and the emotions planted in the speech and silence(s) behind their classroom writing. Without them, I would not and could not have been able to talk about the nature of writing in schools or engage others in action toward social change.

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participation in that project changed forever the way I thought about reading and writing, and about issues of access and community in the context of teaching and learning.

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I am deeply grateful to my mother, Regina Crosby. Thank you, mom! Now that I am mother, I am beginning to grasp the level of sacrifice you have made, the wells of faith you tapped, and the deepest levels of love and commitment you have shown, and I am forever grateful. Thank you for supporting me unconditionally, praying without ceasing, and for encouraging me along the way. This moment is ours.

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for being the kind of man/father/husband that we dream of for our daughters. Thank you for you. Teamwork makes the Dream(s) work!
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Chapter 1: Introduction

National studies of adolescent writing in America have suggested that the nation is experiencing a “writing proficiency crisis” (Graham & Perin, 2007). Because only 20% of 8th and 12th graders were found to be writing according to grade level expectations (Persky, Danne, & Jin, 2003), the National Commission on Writing (2003) called for a “writing revolution” to raise the priority of writing during class time and the use of effective research-based writing pedagogies in classrooms (Graham & Perin, 2003). Although the call was issued nearly 13 years ago, adolescent writing proficiency has shown only marginal increases (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Within this national impasse, however, the historical findings of the report suggested that the consequences of the enduring crisis and the stalled pedagogical revolution have been the most detrimental to the writing potential of Black adolescent students in urban public schools in general and Black adolescent females in particular.

Previous research on writing has lauded girls for their writing proficiency (Mickelson, 1989; Pajares & Valiante, 2001), which has been higher than that of their male counterparts. However, the focus on proficiency in terms of race- and gender-based achievement has masked the widest disparity, which is in the average scores of Black adolescent females’ writing and White adolescent females’ writing in school. While intra-
racial analyses (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011) have shown adolescent females outperform their male adolescent counterparts, intersectional analyses of the data have revealed that the disparity between Black adolescent females and White adolescent females is the greatest of any other student subgroup. Intersectional findings showed that not only are Black female adolescents the least-prepared group of female student-writers, who scored an average of 28 points below their White female counterparts but also Black adolescent females, unlike their Black male counterparts, become less proficient in writing over time (Nations Writing Report Card, 2011). While this finding suggests that inequitable experiences of classroom writing and writing instruction occur along the lines and intersections of race, place, and gender (Nation’s Writing Report, 2011), there has been a minimal amount research on the topic to date.

**Statement of the Research Problem**

Disparity in the writing proficiency of Black adolescent females in urban public schools is reflected in the gaps in the research on writing. Although the research on adolescent writing has increased (Graham & Perin, 2007), the findings of a meta-analysis of adolescent writing research in the past 40 years pointed to gaps in the knowledge about writing instruction in underserved student populations. In *Writing Next*, scholars Graham and Perin (2007) concluded the following:

So, even though there is an impressive amount of research testing different approaches to writing instruction, the lack of information on effective writing instruction for low-income, urban, low-achieving adolescent writers remains a serious gap in the literature. (p. 25)
Graham and Perin (2007) imply that studies of effective writing instruction have been conducted predominantly with moderate to high-achieving adolescents in moderate- to high-income suburban communities. The focus on this segment of the student population has caused the study of the writing of adolescents in other settings to be neglected. It is also the case that the research designs reflected in the accumulated writing research have not used categories of race and/or gender to characterize the participants or to disaggregate the findings (Hillocks, 1986; Graham & Perin, 2007). Consequently, there is little scholarship on the writing of Black adolescent students in general and of Black adolescent females in particular. The latter constitute a sizable majority of students attending schools in urban and low-income communities (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015).

The few systematic studies of writing development conducted in urban and low-income communities with Black adolescent populations (Alston, 2012; Coker & Erwin, 2011; Geisler, Hessler, Gardner, & Lovelace, 2009; Graham, Mason & Harris, 2005; Yeh, 1998) have focused on testing the effectiveness of explicit instruction in teaching and learning the cultural knowledge and discourse patterns associated with dominant and standardized forms of writing. Although these studies demonstrated the ways in which direct instruction and informal communities can be utilized to provide contexts for remedial writing instruction, they draw on conceptions of writing that narrowly define writing development and quality in terms of increased word count and adherence to generic rubrics and writing prompts over time (Alston, 2012; Coker & Erwin, 2011; Geisler, Hessler, Gardner, & Lovelace, 2009, Graham, Mason & Harris, 2005; Yeh,
Furthermore, because these studies have focused on creating and testing instructional bridges between the cultural norms associated with the discourses of students’ homes and schools, we know little about how these interventions shape students’ potential as writers who write from and across racialized and gender positions. Previous studies of Black adolescent writing in school have focused on cognitive factors (i.e., what students know or do not know about the writing process) (Coker & Erwin, 2011; Graham, Harris & Mason, 2005; Yeh, 1998), and they have not included affective factors (i.e., what students think/feel and do not think/feel about the writing process), political factors (what students can and cannot say through and about the writing process), and spatial factors (where they can and cannot go and do in the writing process). The interactions among these factors constitute the context of writing provided for Black adolescent females in school. Systems of racism and sexism permeate the fabric of America, including the interactions that take place in its urban public schools. In order to change the situation of Black girls, we need to understand that context.

Unfortunately, in studies of writing that focuses on race and gender, studies of Black adolescent females’ writing have primarily been conducted in spaces outside the everyday contexts of language arts classrooms in urban public schools (Mahiri & Sablo, 1996; Muhammad, 2015; Wissman, 2011; Winn, 2010). These studies revealed that Black adolescent females used writing for purposes of self-definition, solidarity building, and social critique, and they spoke to the experiences of silencing Black adolescent females in school and in society (Carter, 2007). However, they did not show the ways in
which Black adolescent females negotiate the contours of racism and sexism when they express themselves through writing in school.

Thus, although previous research showed that Black adolescent females can write and are writing, the content and the context of their writing in school has been understudied. Thus, the research problem addressed in this dissertation concerns the generation of grounded theoretical constructs (i.e., grounded hypotheses) about the nature of the writing of Black adolescent females in schools and the contexts of that writing.

**Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to describe and to make visible the writing experiences of a small group of Black female adolescents in order to contribute to the knowledge about student writing in secondary language arts classrooms. This study is important because there has not been much research on this topic. Black female adolescents are inherently positioned differently than other student groups are because of the history of racism and sexism in the United States, which permeates nearly every aspect of society.

Evans-Winters and Esposito (2014) called attention to “the realities of the state of Black girls’ education”:

Girls of African descent are at the bottom of the social totem pole in society…. Currently not enough is being done by scholars in the field of education on the policy front or pedagogically to unabashedly develop and implement classroom practice and curriculum that directly relates to the needs of Black girls…. In the postmodern era, Black girls’ psyches and bodies are being subjected to
subjugation in the media, racist and sexist school policies that serve to exclude and silence Black girls, and social and legal policies that dehumanize rather than foster the quality of life of many low-income and working class young women. Young women’s existence at the margins presents both constraints and possibilities for all educational reform efforts and overall societal transformation. Therefore, research with and on behalf of Black girls benefit the whole society. (p. 22)

Based on these realities, Evans-Winter and Esposito also draw attention to the need for “scholarly endeavors that not only serve to empirically validate the experiences of girls of African descent, but also make use of such findings to … actively promote social and educational policies at the micro and macro level, with those in mind who exist at the intersections of race and gender (p. 15). This dissertation is a response to this need. In order to “unabashedly develop and implement classroom practice and curriculum that directly relates to the needs of Black girls,” we must first find out what they are. This knowledge cannot be gathered from teachers and administrators, deduced from lessons in educational settings learned from afar, or generated through statistical analysis. However, it can only be learned by entering everyday urban public language arts classrooms, observing instruction, talking with and listening to Black adolescent female students, and striving to understand the contexts of their writing from their points of view. Currently, there is little knowledge about Black adolescent females’ writing in language arts classrooms, and even less about pedagogies and/or instructional programs that might support these students in learning how to write in school.

In addition, the significance of this study is that because it contributes to the knowledge about teacher education in the area of writing, teachers could be more
effective in their work with young Black adolescent females. In particular, teachers need to be more effective not only in improving the quality of Black adolescent female students’ writing but in helping Black adolescent females use writing for multiple purposes, including self-definition and understanding and transforming the world in which they live.

**Overview of the Study**

This study took place in a Mid-western urban public secondary school in a language arts classroom where the teacher and her students were in process of developing a “writing community.” The teacher introduced the concept to the students during the initial weeks of the school year and had the goal of building a writing community over time. However, this study did not focus on the process of building a writing community but instead examined the nature of social relationships between students, the teacher, and the texts in order to understand the ways in which writing and writing instruction constructed and/or constrained students’ opportunities for authentic personal expression and social and cultural interactions.

I entered into the field to study adolescent writing in August 2013. I observed informal instruction and student writing practice in a journalism club, which was provided during normal school hours. With the elimination of the journalism club, in August 2014 I transitioned from studying writing in the journalism club to studying writing in the language arts classroom.
This seven-month study was conducted in an eighth-grade language arts classroom in an urban public school. The data collection began on 25 August 2014 and ended on 20 March 2015. The observations began on the first day of school, 20 August 2014 and ended in the week before the students left for the spring break on 20 March 2015. I made 52 observations between August 2014 and March 2015. The final observation took place in March 2015.

My data corpus includes classroom-based video-recordings that are focused on writing instruction, field notes, participant observations, student interviews, and student writing samples (i.e., in-progress drafts, final essays, and writer’s notebook entries) and classroom artifacts (i.e., district curriculum content, handouts, writing prompts, graphic organizers, supplemental reading material, and pictures of signage posted in the room). Table 1 presents the data corpus.

Table 1

<table>
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<th>Data Corpus</th>
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In this micro-ethnographic case study, I visited an eighth-grade English language arts classroom in an urban public school to observe writing instruction, specifically to
determine what the Black female students said and how they experienced the writing instruction. I was interested in how teachers and students constructed the process of writing and different types of writing genres (i.e., narrative, informational, and explanatory essays).

In order to understand the Black female students that I was working with and their experiences with the classroom and with the teacher, I used the method of participant observation. As a participant observer in the classroom, I alternated between participating in a peripheral role as an aide to the teacher and students and observing and taking notes during the instruction. I video-recorded the class periods that focused on writing instruction. I conducted 12 interviews with the students during the lunch period, which were an average of 40 minutes; I collected various types of student writing samples, writers’ notebooks, final essays, and teacher artifacts, including district-based materials, handouts, worksheets, and assignments.

I analyzed these data to see what the students were writing about and how they were experiencing writing in the context of the language arts classroom. I noticed that although the girls were active participants in class, often dominating classroom conversations and consistently submitting their writing tasks, they described aspects of their experience of writing in school as constraining. Through asking them questions, I found that they also wrote in other spaces, and that their engagement in writing outside school was more meaningful and enjoyable than in the classroom. In informal conversations and interviews, I began to ask comparative questions to determine whether
their writing was different, how it compared to the writing they did in school, and what features in the writing contexts they found enabled or constrained their opportunities to write. I was able to elicit the students’ definitions of constraint and the many ways in which constraints shaped their cognitive and affective experiences of writing in school.

**Research Questions**

The role of the research questions in a micro-ethnographic study is different from the role of the research questions in a traditional experimental study. The role of the research question is to guide the study. The research questions are developed and are informed by the research process. Thus, the research questions generated in this study were informed by the research process, and the focus of the research questions on student expectations, classroom writing prompts, and graphic organizers is based on the evolution of the fieldwork that was conducted over the course of the study.

This micro-ethnographic study was guided by a focal question: How do the contexts of writing in urban public language arts classrooms influence Black adolescent females writing in school? As I engaged in the recursive processes of data collection and analysis, I noticed my participants perpetually referencing perceptions of the school’s expectations for writing, writing prompts, graphic organizers as factors central to their classroom writing experience impeding their personal expression. As a result, I examine this broader question through three sub-questions:

1. How do Black adolescent females’ perceptions of the school’s expectations of writing influence their writing in and for school?
2. How do Black adolescent females take up writing prompts in school?
3. How do Black adolescent females take up graphic organizers in school?

Theoretical Framework

Historically, studies of writing have drawn on two theories of writing: writing as a cognitive process and writing as situated social practice. Cognitive researchers have located writing as occurring in the mind of writers, insulated from the influences of social contexts and translatable from thought into written text (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; De La Paz & Graham, 1997, 2002; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Olson, 1996). Social practice models have located writing in community connections between writers’ writing practices and the social meanings and uses they construct and leverage while participating in the community (Barton, 2007; Hamilton, 2001; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984). In both cases; however, scholars suggested that these models relied on static conceptualizations of writers and/or contexts of writing, which cut short relationships between contexts and systems of writing (Cooper, 1989; Kells, 2002).

Cooper (1986) offered an alternative to the cognitive and social practice models. She suggested that writing is ecological, that is, it “is an activity through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems (1986, p. 367). She suggested that these systems include the following: systems of ideas, systems of purposes, systems of interpersonal interaction, systems of cultural norms, and systems of textual forms. While Cooper’s model was conceptualized to think about writers and
readers in a general sense, I apply this model to language arts classroom in an urban public school and the social interactions between student-writers and teacher-readers.

**Systems of Ideas**

Cooper explained that writing is situated in multiple and overlapping systems of ideas. These systems of ideas are mediated by face-to-face interactions and/or interactions with secondary sources (e.g., textbooks and movies) (Cooper, 1986, p. 369). Ultimately, these social interactions form the knowledge base(s) and epistemologies through which individuals “read the word and the world” (Freire & Macedo, 2005). As writers approach a topic, the ideas they share are already situated in their existing experiences and understandings and therefore mark the continuation of what they already know and believe or have experienced (Bakhtin, 1981).

Hence, when writers write, they draw on prior knowledge, experiences, and understandings that are constructed in multiple social contexts in order to share their ideas about a topic (Winn & Johnson, 2012). Researchers therefore examine the ideas or topics presented in writing as continuations of ideas or links in a long chain of sociohistorical interactions, observations, and experiences. Researchers examine what is captured in writing in the moment and examine it in relationship to prior events, experiences, and understandings in order to understand how and why particular ideas about topics emerged. The researcher enters the classroom and suspends judgments about who writers are, what they think, and how they perceive the world and their relation to it. The researcher should see writing not as a complete picture of the writer or a closed
product, but as an entry point into extended conversations about where the participants have been, what they have seen, and what they have done in order to approximate what they know. The researcher asks writers about their experiences and the understandings captured in their writing. The researcher must take on the assumption that participants written and verbal responses indicate premises, claims, arguments, and systems of logic that drive their beliefs.

**Systems of Purposes**

Writing purposes are motivations that direct writers in the writing process (Cooper, 1986). These purposes influence what, how, and why they write. The purposes represent the writer’s plans and goals, that is, what she hopes to achieve and how she plans to accomplish it through writing. The purposes of writing are not insulated in the mind of the writer or unilaterally imposed on the reader, nor are they encapsulated in a single context and separate from other contexts across places, space, and time (Heap, 1991). Instead, systems of purposes for writing in school are situated in multiple and overlapping systems of purposes (Cooper, 1986).

Writing purposes can be both personal and social. They can be tied to the acquisition of an individual reward and to achievement within a social system. Personal systems of purposes can be based on an individual’s personal reasons for expression. Systems of purposes can also be the rationales that are established by social institutions such as families, schools, governments, and nations. For example, in school, a writer can write to receive a good grade on an assigned task, and he or she can write in order to be viewed positively by his or her family. Because of the unique ecologies of each social
system, the purposes of writing established by individuals can differ from those established by other social systems. Nevertheless, systems of purposes do not exist in isolation. Instead, they collide and cohere. Furthermore, although some personal and social systems of purposes can be aligned within a similar plan to support the same goals, in certain contexts of writing, there can be differences or tensions between purposes.

Writers usually have multiple and overlapping writing purposes, which drive the writing process because they dictate largely what the writers will write and how they will accomplish it. Ultimately, writers negotiate the demands of these systems as they enter the writing process.

Hence, researchers should question the extent to which what is written and how it is written reflect the writer’s personal purposes of writing, the social purposes of writing, or both. Researchers should not assume that writers’ systems of purposes are aligned. They should also examine how systems of writing purposes have changed over time and how they vary across social contexts in order to understand the unique features, culture, values, and structure of systems and the level(s) of influence that they have on the writer and the writing process. Systems of purposes also suggest that writing purposes are both created and provided. Hence, researchers should ask questions about how writers feel about these purposes in order to distinguish gaps between the actual purposes of writing and those that are desired or preferred. They should ask questions about the goals that are served by adhering to the writing purposes assumed by the language arts curriculum—the goals of individual students, the goals of the social institution, or both. Researchers should examine the extent to which such purposes are aligned or misaligned with broader
structures of power and the social order. In doing so, researchers acknowledge that the purposes of colonization, disenfranchisement, and racialization/white supremacy are historically embedded in purposes of educating adolescent students of African heritage. Furthermore, it is imperative to examine the extent to which legacies of the past are bound up with the purposes of writing in both general and particular contexts.

**Systems of Interpersonal Interactions**

Writing is a social interaction that is situated in an immediate environment that consists of two people: a writer and a reader. When writers write, they draw on systems of interpersonal interactions not only to communicate information to another person about a topic but also to sustain and/or construct different kinds of social relationships with the reader. These relationships are constituted by varying levels of “intimacy, or sense of closeness” to and “power, or measures of control” over the reader (Cooper, 1986, p. 369). For example, writers can write about personal experiences that provide the reader with access to their everyday lives or they can leave out intimate details of their lives in the effort to maintain distance from the reader.

In classroom contexts, writing is situated in the sociohistorical relationship between a student-writer and a teacher-reader. Writing interactions are not separate from the history of social interactions that students have had with their teachers. Through these interactions, students and teachers construct understandings and misunderstandings about one another, including their commonalities and differences, personalities and dispositions, perceptions about how they are being perceived, and the commitment, care, and interest in their lives. Their interpersonal interactions shape the extent to which
students feel connected to the teacher, and therefore safe and free to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in writing. What and how students write reflects the kinds of social relationships they have had, is having, or would like to have with the teacher.

Thus, the understanding of students writing cannot be separated from the examination and analysis of student-teacher relations in everyday classroom interactions. Because writing is situated in these interpersonal relationships, issues of intimacy and issues of power in the teacher-student relationship can be used as constructs in examining contexts of writing. For researchers, students’ classroom writing can be viewed as a context for gauging student-teacher relations and assessing the social and affective dimensions of writing interactions.

In the United States schools writing interactions are permeated by systems of racism and sexism. In this context, the race and the gender of the writer and reader matter in interpersonal interactions. All interactions are already racialized because before a student or teacher utters a word, their skin color gives the audience information about who they are. Because race is a social construct, its artificialness is accompanied by diverse narratives about the meaning of a person’s skin color. Given the systematic nature of racism and white supremacy, the meanings of White and Black have often been constructed as polar opposites and mutually exclusive categories not only in meanings but also in the consequential effects on the psyche (Fanon, 1952). For Black adolescent females, these effects include perceptions of White people as representing the standards of beauty and authority and perceptions of Black people as representing the opposite. Conversely, for White female teachers, this binary has meant that their perceptions of
Black adolescent female students are deficient and antagonistic (Morris, 2005). Over all, these perceptions, among others, are a part of the contexts of writing, which are deeply ingrained in the social interactions between Black students and White teachers, and they shape how Black adolescent females perceive and address their audience.

**System of Cultural Norms**

Writers are representatives of diverse cultural groups. When they write, they speak from multiple and overlapping cultural locations inside and outside school. They speak as students in the classroom and as members of racial, gendered, ethnic, and cultural groups and neighborhood communities. Through the use of language, they make visible their social identities and their membership in cultural communities visible.

Systems of cultural norms allow researchers to determine how writers identify themselves and locate themselves in relation to others. Writing reflects their membership in a group, their position(s) in and across contexts, and it can reveal both commonalities with members of their cultural group(s) and the heterogeneity within the group captured by their unique experience. When writers write, they also reflect and refract information about the norms, values, and experiences of the cultural group in ways that may seek to affirm, transform, or eliminate aspects of the system.

In school, Black female adolescents are members of multiple and overlapping cultural systems. These systems include the cultural norms of White middle-class communities that are traditionally taught and required in school, and the cultural norms of the racially, ethnically and gendered communities they embody and encounter in and outside of school. Because cultural groups are not treated equally and equitably, some
cultural norms are privileged in school, while others are devalued, marginalized, and ignored. The extent to which systems of cultural norms are valued influences the rate at which students perceive that they are provided opportunities to share their cultural perspectives or to leverage particular ways of knowing, being, and doing in their writing.

This construct is useful for examining writing in school because it allows researchers to ask questions about whose interests are served by the systems of cultural norms that are valued in writing interactions and how elements of those cultural norms influence how writing is done and what is written in school.

**System of Textual Forms**

Writers draw on textual forms in order to communicate their thoughts and feelings about a topic. When writers write, they draw on particular systems of writing conventions, grammar, language, and organizational strategies in order to construct a written text. Systems of textual forms enable the ideas and the actions intended in the writing to be recognizable and accessible to readers.

In school, multiple systems of textual forms are situated in writing interactions, yet not all systems are deemed acceptable for use in the classroom. Teachers provide instruction in particular kinds of textual forms that predominantly represent the discourse patterns standardized in White middle-class communities. Textual forms derivative of social institutions such as families and cultural communities are often excluded and marginalized. As students write, they make choices about which forms to leverage and how to use them to communicate in ways that will be understood and valued by the
teacher-reader. Ultimately, writing is done in these multiple and overlapping contexts. Writers draw on these systems in order to construct social interactions with readers.

In addition to using Cooper’s ecological model as a theoretical framework for my study, I also draw upon Nystrand’s (1989) social-interactive model. The ecological model of writing makes visible the systems that writers draw on in the writing process, whereas Nystrand’s social-interactive model of writing reveals the social relations that writers and readers leverage and construct as they move through the dialogic process of writing and reading. In this model, writing is conceptualized as a social and interactive process in which “what writers do is synchronized with what readers do when readers finally read the text” (Nystrand, 1989, p. 75). Nystrand (1989) described these precepts as the foundation for what he referred to as the “reciprocity-based grammar of written texts” (p. 80). In a “reciprocity-based grammar of written texts” writers and readers “play reciprocal roles in the enterprises of written communication” (Nystrand, 1989, p. 74). Both parties influence one another’s experience of the writing interaction. According to Nystrand, “In terms of writing processes” writing is viewed as “continuously constrained by the writer’s sense of reciprocity with her readers, just as the process of reading is continually constrained by the reader’s sense of the writer’s purpose” (p. 78). In order for readers converse with writers, the latter must have provided contexts of writing in which readers can easily join, engage, and sustain conversations about a topic.

The contexts in which these conversations are begun matter because they influence the degree to which writers and readers must work to find common ground and make meaning of the written text. Although “In real life, readers come looking for
texts… prepared to meet halfway the writers whose text they select” (p. 79), Nystrand (1989) suggested that “It is only in the case of school writing that writers may reasonably question whether or not their readers will share their interests and purposes” (p. 79). Because students’ purposes of writing are often set by the teacher-reader’s writing requirements, Nystrand’s (1989) notion of reciprocity provides a useful framework for conceptualizing power relations in contexts of writing and for examining the degree to which teacher-readers construct constraining or reciprocal relationships with and for students-writers.

**Definition of Terms**

This section lists and defines the key terms that are used to frame and guide this study.

**Adolescents.** In this study, the term “adolescents” is used to refer to females and males aged 11 to 18 years.

**Black students.** In this study, I view race as a social construction. Throughout this study, the term Black is used interchangeably with “African heritage” to describe both native-born and newcomers from countries in Africa. The social construct is used to draw attention to the processes of racialization that newcomer youth of African heritage encounter as they become students in America and to index the historical processes of enslavement and discrimination that binds communities of native-born and newcomer students in the shared status and position of Black people. This identifier is also used to identify students in local and national assessments, and it is used within districts to locate
and identify students. Although I believe the racial construct is problematic because it does not distinguish the identifiers related to ethnicity, language, and citizenship status held by Black students, it foregrounds processes of racialization as inherent in the acquisition of academic identities in processes of schooling. To distinguish differing kinds of Black students, I use qualifiers related to “native-born” and “newcomer,” which are also problematic terms, but they are useful in distinguishing variances in students’ spatiotemporal identities.

**Constraint.** I draw on Heap’s (1989) discussion of constraint as the “constraint on writer behavior—the rules, rights, and responsibilities that surround writing in classrooms” (p. 148). Heap suggested the following:

> Because of the authority of the teacher and the mandated curriculum, writing activities are encapsulated within normative orders (rules, rights, and responsibilities that condition the occurrence of those activities. No matter how loosely the teacher carries the reins of authority, he or she will still require that students write. (p. 149)

The rules, rights, and responsibilities in the classroom necessarily constrain all students, but particularly those from marginalized backgrounds whose forms and functions of cultural discourse differ from those sanctioned and privileged in the classroom. Constraints are limitations or restrictions imposed on what and how a student can write, including how a student can be recognized as a writer.

**Writing.** This study draws on Heath’s (1982) conceptualization of “literacy events” or “occasions in which written language is integral to the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies” (p. 50).
Chapter 2: Literature Review

There are few studies of Black adolescent female students writing in their classrooms. In my search for previous studies of Black adolescent female writing in school, of 21 studies, I found only one study that was conducted in a public language arts classroom (McLean, 2012). All other studies were conducted in spaces outside the classroom, in other spaces in school (Henry, 1998; Wissman, 2010), or in places where writing programs that were designed for Black adolescent females were constructed in the community (Edwards, 2005; Mahiri, 1997; Muhammad, 2012, 2015; Winn, 2007, 2010). Given the paucity of scholarship on the writing of Black adolescent female students, this review of the related scholarship is organized using the theoretical framework described in Chapter 1, namely Cooper’s (1989) ecological model. Cooper’s ecological model has six systems: systems of ideas, systems of purposes, systems of interpersonal interaction, systems of cultural norms, and systems of textual forms. To Cooper’s six systems, I have added a seventh system: systems of spaces. This seventh system was added because much of the related scholarship explicitly discussed spaces for writing.

Cooper’s ecological model posed difficulties in using it as an organizing framework for this chapter. First, Cooper’s six (now seven) systems do not map easily to the extant research, and, second, the terminology of these six (now seven) systems does not match the terminology of the related studies. Third, only a few empirical studies have
examined the writing of Black adolescent female writing in high school classrooms.

Fourth, the research that addresses each of the seven “systems” is varied quantitatively. That is, some systems are addressed more than others are. Thus, the length of the sections in this chapter varies widely. The shorter sections reflect the fact that the search yielded less research that addressed that system. In order to address these difficulties, I have used a generous interpretation of what might be included in each of Cooper’s systems, and I have expanded the range of related studies to include studies of the writing of African-American students in both classroom and non-classroom settings.

**Scholarship Related to Systems of Ideas**

Cooper describes the system of ideas as the ideas that a writer employs in her/his writing that derive from an individual’s background and experiences, which evolve during the writing and may be mediated by social interactions with others and their ideas. It is important to examine the ideas that students write about for at least three reasons. The first is that students will invest more effort and time in what they are writing in response to prompts that are culturally relevant (Norment, 1997). For example, Norment (1997) showed that when students had choices in the topics they wrote about, they wrote better texts, which was indicated by increased fluency, coherence, organization, and overall clarity. Second, it is also important to examine the ideas that students write about because the structure and complexity of an idea influences how it is written, what textual structures might be employed, and how the idea might be responded to by an audience.
(especially if that audience has authority and power, such as a teacher). Third, developing the writer’s “voice” is intimately linked to the content of the writing.

Researchers have found that, on occasion, Black students have been censored regarding the ideas they can write about. For example, Muhammad (2012) found that Iris, an eighth-grade Black adolescent female student, had been personally asked by a teacher to dilute or remove descriptions of her personal experiences as well as those of other Black adolescent females and Black women in her community (p. 209). Henry showed similar findings among a group of African-Caribbean adolescent females who wanted to talk and write about issues related to their emerging sexuality, boyfriends, and marriage (1998) but were not provided with explicit spaces and opportunities in school to do so. Ironically, even when Black adolescent students are provided spaces to speak and write about ideas that have meaning in their lives, they are not always provided with the opportunity to translate their ideas into authentic civic engagement and collective social action. Wissman (2008) found that although students were afforded opportunities to present speeches that they had voluntarily written to explain to administrators their anti-war sentiments and their desires to participate in a citywide student walkout, the school administrators used disciplinary sanctions to police their behaviors and to prohibit their participation (Wissman, 2008, p. 344). Wissman (2008) found that such censorship was painful for the students. It is reasonable to infer that such painful experiences affected the students’ enthusiasm for writing in school, their willingness to make efforts in writing tasks in school and beyond, and ultimately, their belief in the power and possibilities of their own voices and identities as writers.
With regard to developing a voice as a writer, researchers have found that Black adolescent female students have limited opportunities for developing their voices (similar to other Black students). Muhammad (2015) and Wissman (2010) found that Black adolescent female students were unlikely to be provided with mentor texts that reflected their lives or literary traditions, namely, mentor texts written by Black women writers. This absence of models makes it difficult to construct connections among Black adolescent female students, potential role models, and cultural literary traditions. This absence and other obstacles led Henry (1998) to question whether Black students were being given opportunities to practice “coming to voice.” That is, Henry argued that their writing is an extension of the dialogues Black adolescent females have in their communities today and of the dialogues that Black females have had historically. Henry further stated, “Although locating their identities and a sense of themselves in the world, voice is not always liberatory” (p. 246). Henry found that while some Black adolescent females’ writing came to voice critical perspectives on race, class, gender, and power in America, others came to re-voice “stories of women’s place in the social structure, [that fell] into traditional retellings of a sexist world” (p. 246). Thus, Henry’s findings suggest that gaps exist in writing instruction, which not only limits Black adolescent female students’ opportunities to develop as writers but also constrains their development as consciously critical thinkers.

The system of the ideas that are involved in writing and learning to write are also of concern for immigrant students and students of immigrant families. In this study, several of the students in the class were either immigrants or the children of immigrants.
Henry (1998) and McLean (2012) conducted separate studies of the writing practices and situations of immigrant adolescent female students of African heritage. They observed that the immigrants often wrote about ideas related to bringing together the different worlds of which they were a part, often pointing to the difficulties that occurred across the two worlds as well as the ways in which those differences cohered and collided in writing at school. The ideas they expressed were a means of working out who they wanted to be and how they were located both locally and globally. Such issues of voice and ideas are not unlike the issues that concern native-born writers, including students. They are also concerned about their identity. For example, in Henry’s (1998) study, Caribbean immigrant adolescent females wrote about their experiences of “fitting in” and establishing a sense of belonging in a nation where their social and cultural identities were marginalized. These experiences were not unlike those communicated by native-born Black adolescent females writing about their racial and gendered experiences of marginalization and rejection in social discourses and standards of American femininity and beauty (Sutherland, 2005; Wissman, 2008, 2009). As the native-born and newcomer writers negotiated their experiences of alienation and cultural dissonance, writing became meaningful in helping them to affirm their social and cultural value.

Native-born and newcomer Black adolescent females have similar experiences of the absence of their cultures in the classroom-based writing curriculum, yet they may negotiate this absence in different ways. McLean (2012) found that Caribbean immigrant adolescent female students negotiated the absence of their culture in the literacy education curriculum by integrating the discourse about their ethnic cultural identities
and native homeland into their classroom-based writing. In McLean’s study, newcomer Black adolescent females “co-opted” classroom-based writing to draw together ideas about their native and host “H/homes.” Mahiri and Sablo (1997) found that native-born Black adolescent students who encountered similar gaps in their classroom-based writing curriculum felt less empowered to create openings in the curriculum to write about their lives. Researchers found that Black adolescent students wrote outside school to make sense of the social contradictions and paradoxes they encountered while moving in and between school and society (Mahiri & Sablo, 1997). In their study, Mahiri and Sablo (1997) found that native-born Black adolescent students wrote about crime, violence, and poverty as a way to “bring order” to their lived experiences (p. 174). Ironically, researchers have found that students who were deeply engaged in voluntary writing outside school were often withdrawn and reluctant writers in school (Mahiri & Sablo, 1997; Muhammad, 2012). Some students were withdrawn and reluctant to write in school because they did not see any value in classroom writing (Mahiri & Sablo, 1997), and others lacked self-efficacy in their ability to communicate their ideas as writers (Graham, Mason & Harris, 2005).

In order for students to have and develop ideas to write about, they must be oriented to using “self-regulatory” strategies. That is, even when students have ideas for writing and can verbalize ideas spontaneously, they may lack the strategies needed to organize and translate their ideas into writing and produce a piece of writing of high quality. Graham, Harris, and Mason (2005) suggested that students should take the initiative in formulating and following a writing plan as well as in the “development of
rhetorical goals, the organization of text, or the needs of the reader” (Graham et al., 2005, p. 210). According to these researchers, students struggle to understand how to translate instruction into steps. They may struggle to transfer the lessons provided during instruction in daily writing practice and the principles learned in one writing task across diverse contexts of writing and different topics in which the demands for writing change. They may lack assuredness during the writing process in knowing if they have applied the principles correctly (in the moment and over time). In brief, they may lack the self-regulatory strategies on which high-achieving students tend to rely. These findings highlight the issue that the contexts and experiences that Black adolescent students often have in classrooms are such that the acquisition and development of self-regulatory strategies in the classroom are suppressed. Mavrogenes and Berkzruckzo (1991) found that comparative knowledge about their writing proficiency in relation to that of others, understanding how to organize the writing tasks, strength in communicating thoughts through written language, and the ability to generate ideas and appropriate responses to writing prompts (Graham et al, 2005) were often inaccurate and distorted by the experiences that Black students had in writing in school.

**Scholarship Related to Systems of Purposes**

Cooper defined systems of purposes as rationales for writing that are situated in and emergent from social interactions. With regard to the classroom writing of Black adolescent female students, writing is a space/place where a myriad of purposes from a myriad of sources intersect. There are the multiple purposes of the student, such as to express herself, to please her family, to please the teacher, to get a good grade, to explore
a topic and gain new insights, to have fun, to challenge oneself, and so on. The teacher may have multiple purposes, such as covering the curriculum, developing students as writers, sharing a love of writing with students, preparing students for high stakes assessments (which may include consequences for the teacher herself), and controlling the classroom. The purposes of the school include the obligations to the school district, the government, future employers, the family, peers, and so on. Purposes and sources can intersect to form instructional supports for Black adolescent student writing (Alston, 2012), or they can intersect to form pedagogical hierarchies that position the purposes of the teacher and the school at the center of instruction and those of the Black adolescent students at the margin (Mahiri & Sablo, 1997; Tatum, 2010).

Different pedagogical models and instructional supports have been studied to help students improve their abilities to accomplish multiple purposes of writing (Alston, 2012; Coker & Erwin, 2011; Graham et al., 2005; Yeh, 1998). For example, Graham et al. (2005) studied the impact of peer support on helping students retain and apply genre-specific strategies in persuasive, narrative, and informative writing (Graham et al., 2005). Although peer support did not have any statistically significant impact on the instruction, it served a meaningful social purpose in creating space for students to “think about, discuss, and evaluate their application of the learned planning strategies more broadly” (Graham et al., 2005, p. 238). Coker and Erwin (2011) found that when peer support was embedded in a collaborative community where Black adolescent students were supported by their teacher in applying and negotiating social, cognitive, and communicative strategies in oral argumentation, they were able to develop, maintain, and generalize
purposes of argumentative writing over time. Previous studies showed that when teachers make transparent the purposes of writing by articulating expectations of what should be included in writing, defining the objectives of elements of the literary genre, and providing practical strategies for accomplishing writing tasks both during the writing process, Black adolescents were able to meet and exceed instructional goals (Alston, 2012; Yeh, 1998). Moreover, although purposes for writing are often imposed on students in school, students enter the classroom with purposes of writing that are specific to their experience.

Muhammad (2012) argued that from the perspective of Black adolescent female students, one purpose of writing is to define themselves, to nurture resilience, to engage others, and to build capacity for social change. These purposes of writing are not unlike those of their Black female ancestors, who were similarly situated in unequal social and political locations in America (Muhammad, 2012; Winn, 2011; Wissman, 2009, 2011). Muhammad (2012) argued that some Black adolescent female students write to counter dominant dichotomies of beauty that serve as boundaries for and among Black adolescent girls (p. 208). Muhammad further argued that girls write as a form of liberation and emancipation from oppressive social discourses that have sought to divide, rank, and ultimately marginalize their bodies, their intellect, and their political expression. Girls write from various points of view about topics that are connected to their lives. Much like their predecessors, they write to describe the inequities they encounter in their everyday lives, and they often write to transform these realities into futures they wish to inhabit (Mahiri & Sablo, 1997; Royster, 1996; Wissman, 2012). They use writing to create
change and to advocate for themselves and one another by communicating empowering messages that promote sisterhood and resiliency and by engaging in social critiques and social empowerment.

With regard to the writing purposes of Black female adolescent students, Muhammad argued that some purposes may find expression in some classrooms, but in most classrooms, the purposes for writing are derived not from the students but from the curriculum. Moreover, although the Common Core Standards and many curriculum guides discuss voice, the standardized tests that drive the curriculum and instruction in most schools do not provide a way to value voice and apply non-White middle-class views of voice and writing in assessments.

**Scholarship Related To Systems of Interpersonal Interaction**

In this section, I conceptualize “interpersonal interactions” as interactions that students have with others (peers, family, teachers, etc.), including instruction, which is considered a form of interpersonal interaction.

With regard to instructional interaction, researchers have found that Black students receive writing instruction that is often focused on prescriptive grammar (Alston, 2012; Mavrogenes & Bezruckczo, 1993). Such instruction is didactic because teachers direct and students passively receive grammar lessons. The organization of instruction for Black students involving writer workshops, the use of mentor texts, sharing writing with other students, and receiving individualized feedback from the teacher were rarely found (Alston, 2012). Similarly, Graham, Harris, and Mason (2005) found that not much time was spent composing or extending writing. Mavrogenes and Bezruckczo (1993, p. 501)
suggest that, “Not only is little time spent on writing, but the emphasis of instruction is not on content and cohesion but on grammar and punctuation” (see also Graves, 1978). The rationale for this constraint is connected to the structure of the curriculum and textbooks, which foreground proficiency in skills through short and fragmented writing, thus backgrounding opportunities for extended writing and connections across writing tasks. Furthermore, teachers often lack the domain-specific knowledge (i.e., coursework) and/or experience and resources as writers, for applying the findings of writing research in pedagogical strategies for writing instruction (Lee, 2007, 2009; Mavrogenes & Bezruczko, 1993). These disparities have been found to be the most prevalent in schools serving Black students in low-income and urban communities (Alston, 2012; Lee, 2007, 2009). In these contexts, teacher-centered approaches to writing instruction have been used as a strategy for both addressing and overcoming gaps in teachers’ instructional knowledge and literary experiences, and for ensuring that instructional interactions are aligned with annual standardized assessments. It is easier to teach and control a class by using a grammar book than it is to teach the complex and necessarily student-centered processes of writing. Such instruction has been found by researchers to be counterproductive in facilitating student writing and student problem-solving (see Lee, 2007). In brief, Black adolescent students receive fewer opportunities for personal expression, extended writing, and engagement in the multiple stages of the writing process (Lee, 2007; Mavrogenes & Bezruczko, 1993, p. 501). These conditions have been shown not only to stifle the development of novice writers but also to stagnate the
growth of high-achieving Black students who enter grade levels in which proficiency in “basic writing skills” is presumed to have been achieved (Geisler et al., 2009).

There is ongoing debate about the pedagogical effectiveness of direct and indirect interpersonal interaction in helping Black students acquire secondary “academic” discourses. On one hand, Gee argued the following:

Discourses are not mastered by overt instruction, but by enculturation (“apprenticeship”) into social practices through scaffolded and supported interactions with people who have already mastered such discourses. (1989, p. 7)

Therefore, for Black adolescent students, teaching and learning to write should foreground opportunities to write in the context of community: speaking, being, and doing activities with expert writers and writing (Gee, 1989; Lave, 1988; Rogoff & Lave, 2004). On the other hand, Delpit (1988) suggested that “doing” writing would not automatically provide students with tacit knowledge about how a written text is constructed or how it functions. Instead, she suggested that classroom writing instruction is situated in a “culture of power” constituted by “codes or rules for participating in that power” that “reflect the rules of the culture of those in power,” which have to be “explicitly told” to members of communities who have been historically disempowered (1988, p. 282). In testing Delpit’s claims, studies of the writing of Black adolescent students in language arts classrooms in urban public schools have shown that the integration of explicit instruction to some degree is required in all pedagogical models (Alston, 2012; Coker & Erwin, 2011; Graham, Mason & Harris, 2004; Yeh, 1998).

Building on Delpit’s work (1988), scholars of composition studies suggested that explicit instruction about the forms and functions of literary genres provide Black
adolescent students with genre-specific strategies for planning, engaging, and sustaining classroom writing practice (Alston, 2012; Coker & Erwin, 2011; Graham, Mason & Harris, 2004; Yeh, 1998). For example, in study of argumentative writing instruction with middle schoolers of color in an urban and low-income community, Yeh (1998) provided students with a pyramid heuristic based on Toulmin’s model of argumentation, which develops a claim, supports it, and provides counter arguments. The students used the heuristic in writing argumentative response to one of three writing prompts that the researcher provided. Yeh’s findings suggested that the students’ writing improved.

Building on Yeh’s findings, Coker and Erwin (2011) used mnemonic devices as instructional supports to increase students’ “writing knowledge” and planning strategies for argumentative discourse. The mnemonic devices used in the study (Coker & Erwin, 2011) included D.A.R.E., which directed students to “Develop [their] topic sentence; Add supporting details; Reject possible arguments; and to End with a conclusion” (p. 125). Another device was and S.T.O.P., which guided the students to “Suspend judgment; Take a side; Organize ideas; and to Plan as [they] write” (p. 125). The students recorded their thoughts on the “think sheets” provided by the researchers in order to construct written arguments in response to “prompts selected to elicit students’ opinions on topics relevant to their lives, including such issues as whether children should be allowed to choose their own television shows, to eat whatever they want, or to choose what to study in school” (p. 126). In an individualized setting, the students also used the think sheets to construct oral arguments in response to a prompt and position on a topic (for or against) provided by the researchers (Coker & Erwin, 2011, p. 126). In previous studies, teaching
interventions were conducted by researchers and graduate students working in classroom settings, whereas Alston (2012) examined how instructional supports were operationalized by “effective” urban public middle school teachers (as designated by their district value-added models) in the context of everyday teaching and learning with Black adolescent students. The findings revealed that the teachers used a pedagogical strategy of highlighting to balance process writing instruction and strategy teaching and to provide explicit instructions during informal learning opportunities. This pedagogical approach was also found to improve student writing.

In the literature, however, tension underlies notions of pedagogical “effectiveness” and students’ perceptions of their interpersonal relationships with their teachers and/or teachers perceptions of their interpersonal relationships with their students. Although studies of Black adolescent classroom-based writing have largely focused on instructional outcomes, researchers have captured some dialogue in their reports to highlight the dynamics of interpersonal interactions in writing instruction. For example, Mahiri and Sablo (1996) found that teachers had very close interpersonal interactions with their students such that they were aware of their students’ engagement in writing outside class. Through their discussion of their students’ writing and the community contexts of writing, they reported a sense of sympathy with the inequitable social conditions of their students and dissatisfaction with the cultural (un)responsiveness of the district’s writing curriculum. Despite their close interpersonal interactions, the teachers also reported a sense of powerlessness in their ability to transform the writing
curriculum and the contexts of writing in school in order to respond to their students’ needs (Mahiri & Sablo, 1997).

A few studies revealed that these sentiments were also held by classroom teachers who utilized this pedagogical approach. In studies of the literacy education curriculum and culture, Carter (2005) and Mahiri and Sablo (1997) found that teachers reported their awareness of the narrowly constructed nature of their writing curriculum. Despite their feelings about the writing curriculum, both Black and White teachers in both studies reported a sense of powerlessness with regard to their abilities to change the system, that is, their classroom curriculum. Alston (2012) found that the teachers’ awareness of their own professional assessment made them sensitive to the ways in which their value would be measured based on student outcomes on standardized tests. As a result, in her study, many teachers utilized strategies to control the pace of instruction and monitor the coverage of the content on which the students would be assessed. These pedagogical decisions shaped the contexts of interpersonal interactions between the teachers and their students. Alston found that even among teachers who intended to deviate from direct instruction to include multiple modes of teacher-student interactions and opportunities for students to interact, the nature of everyday teacher-student interactions was often dominated by the teacher’s voice (Alston, 2012). As discussed in the following section on systems of cultural norms, the effectiveness of a pedagogical approach may have as much to do with cultural frameworks and other cultural issues as with the pedagogy per se.
Scholarship Related to Systems of Cultural Norms

In her book, *Playing in the Dark* (1992), Toni Morrison analyzes the complex positioning of the Black author in America. It is not just that the readership is dominated by White people and White institutions, it is the effect that this readership has on the Black author. Although they certainly are not at the level that Morrison discussed, Black female adolescent students who are writers face a similarly complex writing situation.

Scholars have suggested that the writing curriculum employed in teaching Black students in urban public classrooms is dominated by Eurocentric worldviews and the perspectives of White, male, middle-class scholars (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The topics and themes that emerge from these epistemologies and bodies of literature are perceived by Black adolescent students to be inauthentic according to their everyday experiences (Mahiri & Sablo, 1996). In their study of Black adolescent middle students’ perceptions of their actual and desired classroom writing practices, Muhammad and Behizadeh (2015) used Behizadeh’s (2014) definition of authenticity, which is “a student’s perception that a school task connects to his/her life” (p. 28), to study Black students’ perceptions of the authenticity of their classroom writing experiences. In a qualitative study of 12 middle school students, in the interview responses, the researchers (Muhammad & Behizadeh, 2015) found variations between their actual and desired writing practices as well as among students in the reporting of their actual and desired writing practices. The findings highlighted eight themes in their practices: expression, personal connection to writing (i.e., to students’ lives and identities), structured writing (graphic organizers and template writing), teacher’s choice of writing topics, students’ choice of writing topics, writing for
impact on self or others (including writing for significant purposes), sharing feedback, and critiquing writing with peers and teachers.

In brief, not only is their teacher likely to be White but also the school as an educational institution (regardless of the demographics of the student body) is grounded in the culture of White, middle-class America. Black female adolescent students are writing to a White audience (Fox, 1992), and they are writing through White discourse (Lee, Spencer, & Harpalani, 2003). Questions need to be asked about the effects of this condition on the Black adolescent female student’s identity as a writer and her cultural identity. At issue is the cultural context of the classroom, which affects both the writing and the writer.

Studies have shown that African-American students’ experiences of writing in school are largely shaped by the cultural dissonance in the discourse patterns they bring to their classroom literacy education and those of the predominately White and middle-class communities valued in school (Ball, 1995; Horton-Ikard & Pittman, 2010; Ivy & Masterson, 2011; Perryman-Clark, 2012; Yeh, 1998) For example, Yeh (1998) found the discourse patterns of argumentation of many African-American students differed from those of White students and White teachers. Other aspects of cultural dissonance included the structure of storytelling and narrative structures (e.g., Cazden, 1988; Michaels, 1981).

Studies in another body of literature that examines the writing of Black students found that the culture, language, and literacy practices that Black youth bring to their literacy education are different from those of the predominantly White middle-class communities that are privileged in classroom-based writing (Heath, 1983; Lee, 2003,
2007, 2009). As a result of this cultural mismatch, scholars have suggested that Black students’ experiences constrain their language use (Heath, 1983; Labor, 1969; Richardson, 2002; Smitherman, 1977), storytelling (Cazden, 1988; Cazden, Michaels & Tabors, 1985; Heath, 1983; Lee, 2003; Michaels, 1981), and argumentative (Yeh, 1998), and expository writing (Ball, 1992, 1995) with which they are the most familiar. Hence, their writing is experienced as a cross-cultural process. Although some students have effectively acquired a secondary discourse and learned to use writing as a tool to navigate relations across diverse cultural contexts (Canagarajah, 1997), others struggle to acquire a secondary discourse without threat to loss of cultural identity (Fordham & Ogbu, 1985; Fordham, 1986, 2005).

Studies have also found that approaches to teaching and learning that privilege individualism and immersion or learning through indirect instruction impose constraints on students’ experience of classroom-based writing (Delpit, 1995; Howard, 2010; Murrell, 2002). Scholars have suggested that as youth are socialized into particular cultural language and literacy practices, as language hearers and speakers, they are also socialized into roles and identities that predicate particular interactional norms (Rogoff, 2003). For African-American students, such socialization includes direct approaches to talk that privilege elders as speakers-teachers, children as listeners-learners (Delpit, 1986), and peers as social supports (Siddle Walker, 1992, 2001). The literature suggests that when students are not provided with learning opportunities that explicitly consider these culturally preferred ways of being in relationships with information and with others, they are not adequately supported in accessing literary expectations and applying them in
language and literary practice (Delpit, 1986; Gay, 2000). The absence of these cultural supports also creates stressful contexts for teaching and learning (Spencer, Fegley, & Harpalani, 2010), which influence the contexts of writing.

Despite such cultural dissonance, some African-American students enjoy writing in the classroom. For example, a case study conducted by Mavrogenes and Bezruckczo, (1993) found that a Black girl who enjoyed reading, and read a great deal, and wrote copiously both in school and at home was perceived by her teacher as above average academically and well behaved. However, her parents were “very unsatisfied” with the quality of their daughter’s education and had moved her to another classroom (to little effect). The girl’s writing experiences were profoundly different at home versus in school. Her writing skills remained static because she did very little composing in the classroom. Nonetheless, her attitude remained positive despite the poor instruction she was receiving. Social and cultural identities matter in contexts of writing for Black adolescent female students and their White female teachers. They are acting and reacting to one another, and they are acting and reacting to one another’s perception of them.

Cultural difference is not an issue in this study. However, it is an issue when cultural difference is treated as a cultural deficit and when there is no way for students outside the dominant culture to access the cultural practices and discourse of the educational institution. This lack of access by African-American students has been pointed out by scholars (e.g., Delpit, 1995; Yeh, 1998). One consequence of the lack of access to the cultural norms, practices, and discourses of the educational institution is that students have limited knowledge about what constitutes “good writing,” what “good
writers do,” and the strategies for transmitting ideas into an organized written product (Graham et al., 2005).

For at least the last two decades, scholarship has shown that there are myriad ways to bridge cultural dissonance. However, this scholarship rarely has been employed in the development of instructional practices. For example, Yeh (1998) contrasted the effectiveness of explicit instruction using heuristics in conjunction with immersion in debate and peer response activities and immersion alone in teaching argumentative writing to “economically disadvantaged” eighth-graders (struggling writers) of color in language arts classrooms in urban public schools. Through the use of heuristics or “plan(s) designed to help one in carrying out complex, non-routine activities for which trial and error is undesirable or unmanageable, and for which we lack a rule-governed plan,” teachers provided students with both explicit instruction in the thesis-support pattern of argumentation and enact these principles and patterns in peer debate to support students in developing argumentative essays. His findings indicated the importance of both explicit instruction and immersion (i.e., engaging students in the processes of writing and problem-solving and allowing them to be agentive in such tasks) for students of non-dominant cultural backgrounds in helping them to acquire the principles of writing and in preparing them to apply their knowledge in diverse contexts of writing. His research, among that of others, showed that when they have access to the rules and patterns, African-American youth are as capable of writing to high levels as their White middle-class peers and without losing their personal voice (see also Delpit, 1986, 1988; Farr, 1993; Reyes, 1992).
Similarly, research by Siddle Walker (1993) showed the importance of questioning assumptions about the effectiveness of writing pedagogies that are based on White, middle-class students. Siddle Walker (1992) found that the assumptions about teaching style and peer relationships associated with writing workshop approaches were in opposition to the values and culturally preferred styles of teaching and learning preferred by Black students. She found that “indirect teaching methodologies can be interpreted as efforts to avoid teaching and helping or as indicators of poor teaching” (Siddle Walker, 1993, p. 324). Siddle Walker (1993) also suggested that the writing workshop model relies on the “assumption that trust will be the basis of the relationship between teachers and students. This belief leaves unquestioned the assumption that all teachers will be able to create the relationship between themselves and students and facilitate relationships among students” (p. 325). This assumption overlooks the cross-cultural nature of teaching and learning, as well as the ignorance of students’ backgrounds and the misunderstanding of their cultural resources and strengths.

For some educators, the teaching of writing is connected to effective ways of helping Black adolescent students acquire the cultural discourses of White, male, and middle-class communities, which are valued in the classrooms of urban public schools (see Lee, 1997, 2007, 2009). Scholars of language, literacy, and culture (Lee, 2007; Richardson, 2009; Rogoff & Lave, 1984, 2004) have shared similar views of writing as a kind of “identity kit” in which individuals put on “the appropriate costume… so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize” (Gee, 1987, p. 7). However, they
disagree about the relationship of the goals of writing instruction to social identity and cultural identity.

Mahiri (1997) provided yet another approach to bridging the cultural dissonance of school contexts of writing. He argued that youth culture is a bridge to writing development. He advocated writing for personal uses and voluntary writing created for the students’ own purposes beyond school, that is, writing “street scripts” to reflect authentic perceptions and experiences of being young, urban, and Black. This kind of writing provides an opportunity to know who this generation is, their feelings, how their voices and choices reflect their apprehension and anxiety, and understanding their conditions. Mahiri argued that in order to hear their voices, educators need to be aware of the actual mediums and contexts that are appropriate for expression. Instead of banning “vernacular writing,” it needs to be welcomed in the classroom as a way to capture, reflect, and perhaps alter students’ experiences.

**Scholarship Related to Systems of Textual Forms**

Cooper defined textual forms as the forms of writing writers use to communicate information about their lives (p. 370). Who writers are and how they perceive themselves in relation to others is visible in the choices they make about what to write. Mahiri and Sablo (1997) distinguished between hopeful and hopeless adolescents, which is reflected in what they write. “Hopeful adolescents” have effective support systems in at least one institution compared to “hopeless adolescents who have no view of the future” (p. 58). Mahiri argued that various agents (e.g., educators, publishers, and producers of popular culture) of the dominant White middle-class culture work to characterize, stigmatize, and
marginalize Black youth as “dangerous Others” (p. 58). Mahiri further argued, “there is a tendency of people to act in the present according to images and ideas acquired earlier in a particular social, demographic location” (p. 59). Mahiri suggested that Black adolescents are aware that the narratives about their lives, desires, and dreams are constructed in the public spaces of politics and the media. They “write for [and about] their lives” as a measure of hope and resistance.

Mahiri presented a case study of Keisha, a 10th grader who used writing to respond to the circumstances and framings of her life. She wrote poetry, songs, rap lyrics, and a screenplay in which she documented the harsh realities of the gang violence, poverty, and drug abuse rampant in her community. Keisha was a reluctant writer in the classroom, but wrote prolifically in contexts outside school. Mahiri argued that Keisha is not an isolated case. Many Black and brown adolescents use writing and street scripts to help them make sense of their social worlds. Writing is used as a tool not only to express thoughts and feelings but also to challenge inequitable social conditions. Mahiri noted that the lives of Black and brown youth differ greatly from the way that they have been socially constructed and that it is important to read the texts that they compose.

Henry (1998) similarly argued for the use of literary texts in readers’ responses to reflect the lives of Black youth. She argued that students write to “come to voice.” Moreover, in supporting students in this process, texts that reflect their lives and their unique social and cultural positions should be available to them. Each time they write about their lives and the issues and concerns that matter to them, they gain practice in “naming issues critical to their own lives” and challenging the social systems and social
structures that position them inequitably. In her study of African-Caribbean adolescent working-class immigrant girls aged 13 to 15 years in an urban middle school, Henry focused on the way these female adolescents positioned themselves through journal writing and in the role of listening. Henry argued that issues of race, culture, class, and power relations are factors in literacy teaching, and they necessarily position Black adolescent females on the margins. She suggested, “for these students traditional forms of literacy education have often required silence, invisibility, and other forms of accommodation” (p. 236). Similar to Carter (2007), Henry argued that the silence of Black adolescent females in the classroom masks the wealth of conversations they have had, are currently having, and those they would like to have in and about the world. In this way, “Their silence, or non-speech, is a text in itself” (Henry, 1998, p. 236). Henry’s (1998) case studies provided evidence that writing and the texts produced by Black students (in this case, African-Caribbean students) can be critical to their development as writers and to the development of their social identities. In the literary text, students recognized familiar themes and experiences, which they could understand, address, and discuss through writing. For example, Kay, who entered the classroom as a reluctant writer, eventually drew on cultural storylines heard across her social spaces to analyze contradictions she noticed in social events (i.e., the O.J. Simpson verdict) and in literature (Henry, 1998, p. 244). Henry found a generative relationship between the use of culturally responsive texts in teaching and learning reader-response to literature and students’ growing confidence in writing responses from culturally marginalized positions. As students practiced leveraging their social and cultural experiences to interpret

**Scholarship Related to Systems of Spaces**

Schools have many differentiated spaces. Not only are there different classrooms for different subjects but also in some schools, students are explicitly or implicitly tracked (Spring, 2001). This differentiation often results in allocating different classroom spaces for different students for different purposes and goals of teaching and learning. There are formal spaces, such as classrooms, and informal spaces, such as clubs, after school programs, and so on. Moreover, a single classroom has differentiated spaces. Students might be organized into peer work groups and receive differentiated instructions in the classroom. In addition, the students may organize themselves in different social groups so that the differences in the groups provide differentiated spaces.

Although students often differentiate themselves according to varying factors, classroom instruction is rarely differentiated to address the varying learning styles, interests, and abilities among Black adolescent students in a single language arts classroom in an urban public school (Alston, 2012). Although Black adolescent students are disproportionately over-diagnosed as requiring special education (Kunjufu, 2005), high-achieving Black adolescent students among these student populations are readily overlooked (Geisler et al, 2009). Geisler et al. (2009), in referencing the *National Excellence 1993* report (2009), found that African-American students were provided fewer opportunities for writing enrichment, including high-achieving Black students who were proficient in basic writing skills. According to Geisler et al. (2009), “Economically
disadvantaged African-American students are offered the fewest opportunities for academic achievement in writing and are the most at risk for underachievement.”

Opportunities to write are often mediated by standardized textbooks and standardized writing curricula that are administered universally to student populations (Mavrogenes & Bezruscko, 1997). Hence, classroom writing spaces are often contexts where Black adolescent students are provided little agency in choosing the content and the frequency with which they write (Muhammad & Behizadeh, 2012).

However, even in spaces where much writing occurs and students have opportunities to make choices about what and how they write, the instructional writing needs of Black adolescent female students may still not be met. Graham et al. (2005) noted, “Although this model (Writers’ Workshop) is widely used, it is possible that it is not powerful enough to provide youth, struggling writers with the support they need to succeed“ (p. 239). It may be the case that opportunities to write and to learn are not the only factors that define the spaces of writing for Black adolescent female students.

Building on the work of Blake (1995), Henry suggested, “girls need permission to write in formal classrooms” (p. 58). Underlying this assertion is the assumption that in classrooms where opportunities to draw cultural connections between self, school, and society are not explicitly provided in writing instruction, these activities cannot and do not occur (Henry, 1998). In contrast, McLean (2010) suggested that for immigrant adolescents, writing is necessarily a dialogic process that is “embedded in and shaped by the multiple contexts, ideologies, literacy practices, and relationships that youth negotiate” (p. 232). While Henry confirmed these findings in her study of Creole-
speaking African-Caribbean girls in a transitional ESL program in a middle school, she found that these students found difficulty locating themselves and their perspectives (i.e. voices) in relation to others. Henry suggested that this difficult could be because the students were used to teacher-centered instruction and passive student roles as listeners and learners. Therefore, they were not adequately prepared to locate their ideas in relation to others or to speak out loud about their thinking. This inability to give oral “voice” to their ideas was reflected in their writing. They had trouble initiating writing and responding in writing to the texts that they read in school. According to Henry (1998), students experienced schools as spaces where their cultural identity, linguistic practices, and experiences as immigrants were neither welcomed nor reflected. Moreover, the difficulty that the students experienced responding to their readings of Eurocentric texts were reflections and refractions of their negative experiences of being accepted and participating in society (i.e., a form of cultural alienation and dissonance). Gaps in cultural and ethnic backgrounds create writing spaces where newcomer and native-born Black adolescents are silent not because they do not have things to say but because they have limited opportunities in school for developing acuity in verbalizing their thoughts publicly.

However, it may also be the case that the spaces of writing in schools need to be viewed from a broad societal perspective. Scholars have found that outside school, Black adolescent females in urban communities write to negotiate the tensions between social worlds, both real and imagined (Hurston, 1928; Mahiri, 1997; Winn, 2007, 2010). Mahiri (1997) argued that Black adolescents, particularly those in communities plagued with
crime and violence, are bombarded by “messages of rejection” (McLaughlin, 1994, p. 58) that characterize them and their communities as dismal, dangerous, and delinquent. Winn (2007, 2011), focusing on formerly incarcerated Black adolescent females “in between” imprisonment and re-introduction into society, found that they were immersed in a “discourse of personal failure“ or what she referred to as an “incarceration discourse” that reified stereotypes of crime, criminals, and punishment without considering the historical, social, educational, and economic disparities that often led to criminal activity” (p. 431). Winn (2010) found that her participants had internalized this discourse and consequently “felt trapped, or betwixt and between their current lives and the lives they desired” (p. 432). They wrote and performed plays to bridge the gap, that is, to create and enter alternative spaces and alternative realities where they could both problematize and solve issues of structural inequality and personal responsibility. They could also process and imagine lived experiences and possible futures beyond incarceration as a process of transforming and reintroducing themselves to society (Winn, 2011, p. 432).

The research on criminality has focused on school-to-prison pipelines, the physical spaces of prisons, and the “ceiling” of Black adolescent female students’ bodies (Winn, 2011), but less attention has been paid to the psychological or cognitive prisons constructed within schools, that is, the kinds of boxes and lowered status that condition students. As Woodson (1993/1933) suggested, “they don’t need to be told to go, they will lower themselves automatically” (p.55). Further research is needed to understand how the agency of Black adolescent females is co-opted and redirected away from powerful expression in classroom writing.
Although there has been a recent increase in the focus on Black adolescent females “school-to-prison pipelines” and the hyper-penalization of Black adolescent females in school (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015), less attention has been paid to what I refer to as the “school-to-remediation” (remedial education) pipeline, that is the pipeline through which students who come to school daily do all their work but graduate either unprepared or underprepared for college, workforce entry, and the self-efficacy needed to sustain engagement in either. I argue that the criminality of Black adolescent female student “offenders” concerns a small minority of students. Moreover, the focus on criminality does not fully address the ways in which notions of criminalization and criminality are influenced by tacit notions of White supremacy, racism, and sexism that are taught and learned in schools and operate through students with high levels of proficiency. Although the needs of “offenders” cannot be overlooked, particularly because the “offenses” targeted in schools are often socially constructed and partially policed, the focus on the student-offenders locates the discussion in the behavioral responses of the student and makes the structures of schooling invisible, free from surveillance and analysis. In this way little attention is given to the institutional crimes against socially-complicit Black adolescent student “non-offenders” that are committed and pardoned everyday (Pollock, 2006). In such spaces, the feelings, bodies, and thoughts of Black adolescent females are often held hostage. Studies on the classroom discourse of Black adolescents reflect the ways in which they are directly and indirectly asked to “remain silent” and to submit to compulsory laws requiring them to do their time in school (Carter, 2005, 2007; Fine, 1987, 1989). The spaces they inhabit in school often
reify their marginalization and promote the “adultification” or loss of adolescence and childhood, particularly of Black adolescent female students who perform well academically (Morris, 2007). Research has found that issues of race, class, and gender intersect to position the “inquisitiveness and assertiveness” of the bodies and the speech of Black adolescent female students as threats to teachers’ authority and teachers’ conceptualizations of “femininity” (Morris, 2007, p. 502) and therefore in need of social regulation and discipline (Morris, 2007; Ocen et al., 2015).

However, schools do not need to be regulating and oppressive. Henry (1998) found that discursive spaces are needed, and they could be created for the marginalized voices of Black female adolescents (see also Richardson, 2003). Schools can be places for students to gain experience in self-expression and in articulating their own views through drama, group discussion, and writing. Classrooms can be spaces where students from marginalized backgrounds gain awareness of one another’s backgrounds and build solidarity in their shared struggles through writing and the spoken word. These “spaces may not always be easily found in multiracial, multicultural classrooms, but they are possible” (Henry, 1998, p. 248).

**Final Comments**

The previous studies reviewed in this chapter laid the groundwork for understanding the multiple and overlapping systems within which classroom contexts of writing are constructed. However, we know little about the inner workings of the classroom or how Black adolescent females negotiate the contours of writing in these everyday classroom contexts.
Contexts of writing constitute a constellation of multiple and overlapping interactions among ideas, purposes, people (interpersonal interactions), cultural norms, textual forms, and spaces. The literature suggests that for Black adolescent females, classroom-based writing interactions are often suppressive, marginalizing, and disempowering. The ideas that they desire to name and critique are often excluded from the curriculum. Moreover, and the purposes of writing that are central to their lives and to the lives of the people in their cultural communities are often ignored and dismissed. This level of exclusion is reflected in the lack of texts and writing prompts that are written from the perspectives of Black adolescent females and Black women writers. Previous studies showed that language arts classrooms are not being adequately utilized as contexts for preparing youth from marginalized backgrounds to use their voices and their writing to name, critique, or protest their racial and gendered oppression (Henry, 1998).

The fact that these practices are not embedded in the instructional curriculum does not mean that they do not influence students in their classroom writing. McLean (2010) showed that immigrant female youth of African heritage “co-opt“ academic discourses to serve their own social and cultural purposes. The present study begins the work of examining Black adolescent female students’ classroom-based writing by focusing on newcomer youth in public schools in suburban school districts. This study draws on an ecological view of school performance (Ogbu, 1998), which t presumes sharp distinctions and a cultural hierarchy among native-born (involuntary immigrants) and newcomer youth (voluntary immigrants). To date, no previous study has examined relationships in the ideas expressed in student writing in these groups. Moreover, no previous study has
examined the content presented in the classroom-based writing of native-born Black adolescent females.

Previous studies of written texts by native-born Black adolescent females have largely focused on creative writing, such as poetry and screen plays, to the exclusion of academic writing such as essays. In the only study of classroom-based writing (McLean, 2011), the writing was constructed as responses to a multi-genre assignment and an “American Dream” unit. Although it included a range of other writing, the focus was on the analysis of students’ poetry. While poetry and autobiographical writing are powerful texts for reading and reading students and their lives, it is likely that Black adolescent students also communicate powerful messages in their academic writing.

Scholars in the field have drawn on Black feminist theory as a framework for examining Black adolescent females’ writing. However, their studies have focused on writing that is conducted outside the traditional language arts classroom, predominantly genres of creative writing (e.g., poetry, screenplays, and theatre plays), and they have not included critical analyses of academic writing such as essays. Furthermore, Black feminist frameworks have foregrounded the ways in which pedagogies and curricula suppress and silence students’ ability to speak and write about issues of racial and gender inequity and social injustice. Although these findings are critical to understand the ways in which racism and sexism are not only embedded in the structures of writing instruction but also limit student’s opportunities to write, they reflect only one strategy that students use to cope in oppressive instructional environments. By focusing on “the silent” and “reluctant writers,” researchers run the risk of reifying the belief that Black adolescent
female students do not or cannot write. These deficit-based discourses could easily be used as a rationale for the achievement gap in writing proficiency between Black and White adolescent females. This dissertation contributes a step toward recognizing, analyzing, and understanding the academic writing that Black adolescent female students engage in every day. It thereby moves toward understanding the complexities and nuances in the contexts of writing that these students negotiate in the processes of teaching and learning to write.

Previous studies have shown the ways in which Black adolescent female students’ ideas, voices, and self-regulatory practices have been suppressed. However, little is known about the substance of the ideas and the voices that are captured in classrooms and expressed on the page. In their focus on the ideas, themes, and topics excluded from classroom contexts of writing, previous studies have not adequately addressed the ideas that Black adolescent females write about in the classroom.

Previous studies of writing performance have focused solely on self-regulatory strategies in terms of students’ ability to use the writing process, which is measured by the number of words and the number of aspects of writing included. Few studies have examined the substance of the ideas that students present in their writing. Similarly, studies of students’ writing have presumed that the content of the writing reflects all the students’ ideas, and they have not adequately addressed the extent to which students make choices about which ideas to present and which ideas to leave out. More research is needed to understand how students engage in self-regulatory strategies. Although scholars have shown that some Black adolescent students lack self-regulation in terms of
translating their ideas into written texts, we know very little about (a) the ways in which
these practices are influenced by social, cultural, and political aspects of the writing
context and (b) the ways in which students engage in practices of self-regulation, such as
cognition, affect, social, and physical interactions, to persist in classroom-based writing
practice both in the moment and over time. Previous studies have examined students’
writing in isolation from the classroom context in which the writing was produced. This
has meant that writing has been examined as separate from study of power and power
relations permeating the physical, ideological and social structures that prompt and
regulate their writing (Bloome et al, 2004; Carter, 2005).

Scholars have suggested that Black adolescent students lack proficiency in the
self-regulatory strategies needed to engage in developing and sustaining writing practice
over time. These scholars have shown the ways in which students’ writing can improve
with various instructional supports. Their conceptualizations of “self-regulation” and
“self-regulatory strategies” have focused on the mind or aspects of cognition related to
translating ideas into written text. They have not conducted intersectional studies of “self-
regulation” in relation to the control and discipline of the mind, body, and emotions. The
findings from these studies emerged from process-oriented views of writing, which
presume that writing is an individualized process and immune from contextual
influences. Consequently, although they provided insights into the ways in which
instructional supports are useful in helping Black adolescent students plan and execute
their writing, they do not adequately address the legacies of slavery, colonialism, and
oppression, which necessarily regulate the contexts in which students have opportunities
to write. Writing is an embodied process that requires the coordination of the mind, the
body, and the emotions. These studies have narrowly defined “self-regulation” in terms of
students’ abilities to translate their ideas into written texts, and they have not addressed
processes of self-regulation in terms of the mind, body, and emotions and its importance
in persevering in the writing process. These studies have also under-examined the ways
in which institutional demands regulate the contexts and conditions in which texts are
written. Studies have shown that the institutional demands imposed on Black adolescents
are perceived by some as stressful and arbitrary (Mahiri & Sablo, 1996), making it
difficult to sustain mental and emotional engagement in writing instruction and in
writing. While scholars have made headway in conceptualizing pedagogies that might
promote empowerment and engagement, previous studies have also shown that these
pedagogies are rarely adopted in schools (Graham & Perin, 2007). When they are
implemented, the aims of these approaches are not always met (Alston, 2012).

Scholars have found that the academic writing curriculum in urban public schools
is often disconnected from the lives of students. These disconnections reflect social and
cultural dissociations from the writing purposes valued by Black adolescent females.
Studies have shown that the communicative needs of Black adolescent females differ
from those of their privileged classmates. The research reviewed in this chapter has made
visible the ways in which school structures and writing pedagogies reflect White, male,
and middle-class discourses that often trample, overlook, and ignore the needs of others
in favor of the purposes and practices sanctioned in established curriculum. Previous
studies have focused on the purposes of writing that are specific to students’ identities as
Black, as adolescents, and as females. While the intersectionality of these identities undoubtedly influences the ideas and purposes for writing that students perceive and desire to express inside and outside the classroom, the discussion or investigation of student identities as writers have not been included in intersectional studies of Black adolescent females writing. Although the social constructions of race, gender, and youth are often imposed on students, these constructions are embedded in range of assumptions about how students identify themselves and how they imagine they are recognized in the world. While students understand that they are read through particular racial, gendered, or age-based lenses, the ways in which they are seen may not reflect the ways in which they see themselves and desire to be seen. For example, scholars have found that Black adolescent females students who are assertive and confident are often interpreted by White female teachers from middle-class backgrounds as threats to their authority or as “loud,” “aggressive, and “not lady-like.” The actions of students are primarily read as “adult.” Hence, researchers suggested that the “adultification of Black youth,” particularly of Black adolescent females (Morris, 2007), is constructed by teachers. It often contrasts the ways in which students experience and understand themselves. In a study of Black adolescent females, Edwards (2005) found that students often perceived that “they are only read in terms of their race” (p. 46). This narrow way of seeing and being seen limits the ways in which the bodies, minds, and feelings of Black adolescent females can be understood, as well as the ways in which contexts of writing and the needs of writers in school can be examined and addressed.
Scholars of cultural studies have been adamant in their rejection of so-called culturally responsive and/or culturally relevant pedagogies that superficially examine and integrate “Black texts” into writing instruction, and they have called for curricula and pedagogy that foster a comprehensive response to the needs of students. Although race and gender are undoubtedly central in the lives, educational experiences, and writing of Black adolescent females, they are neither monolithic nor monocultural. The ways in which these students’ experiences and understandings vary are often reflected in diverse ways of seeing, being seen, and seeing self as different from others. This diversity extends to envisioning ways and means for using writing to serve individual and social purposes. Broad ecological frameworks are needed to see, see through, and see beyond these intersections.

Scholarship has explored the ways in which systems of racism and sexism constrain the ways in which schools, administrators, and teachers view Black adolescent students as “purposeful” writers. However, these studies have focused on the ways in which these social systems have constructed inequitable home and community environments that inadequately prepare students to meet the demands of writing in school. These studies have not utilized strength-based frameworks based on the assumption that students are “already writers.”

The needs of Black adolescent female students have been defined solely in relation to their intersectional identities as members of marginalized racial and gender groups. While these identities mark powerful intersections in the lives of Black adolescent females, they are not always included in their identities as writers. The
identities associated with race and gender speak to the cultural knowledge and epistemologies of students specific to their “angle of vision” of structural inequities. Their identities as writers offer an additional framework for seeing and understanding their writing. Writers write with the understanding that a reader will evaluate their writing. Writers use a range of rhetorical strategies to communicate their ideas to their readers. With these strategies, writers can use writing to create distance or closeness between themselves and the reader and between their lived realities and that which they choose to reveal to the reader. Although the writer’s racial and gendered background influences the strategies they use, these aspects of their identities are not all encompassing nor are they applied universally. Black adolescent females have not been examined through strength-based frameworks that presume their competencies in academic writing. Consequently, we know very little about how Black adolescent females experience and negotiate classroom-based writing.

Research has shown that although Black adolescents students may share cultural backgrounds, as writers they have varying needs and desires (Muhammad & Behizadeh, 2015). Despite this diversity among Black adolescent female students, we know little about their experiences and perceptions of these instructional supports. Effectiveness has been defined in relation to teachers’ performance and measured in relation to the number of words or the number of aspects of writing included in an assignment. However, such constructs have not been examined from the perspectives of students, who have not been asked about the degree to which they find them helpful in their writing process. Studies of writing have primary emerged from studies that have utilized autonomous models of
writing, which tended to view writing as a process-oriented task. These findings have precluded discussions about the ways in which contexts influence the writing process, and the ways in which these influences are experienced in relation to race and gender. This gap in the literature is reflected in the difference in writing performance between Black and White adolescent females. Although two studies provided qualitative data on students’ experiences of writing pedagogies, the field is dominated by studies that use quantitative methodologies. Consequently, we know very little about what, how, or to what degree Black adolescent female students write in school. Previous studies of Black adolescent female writing that takes place in “other spaces” in school or in community-based writing programs have not conducted in-depth examinations of Black adolescent females’ writing or the conditions of their classroom-based writing.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach to examine Black adolescent females’ writing in school. This study seeks to (a) describe the writing in school of adolescent females of African heritage with a focus on equity and social justice and (b) raise theoretical issues about how writing contexts are socially constructed in schools. The purpose of this chapter is to describe and justify all aspects of the design and the methodology used in the study. To meet this end, this chapter is organized into three sections. In the first section, I describe the methodological tradition and the theoretical framework used to guide the research design. In the second section, I describe the research setting and explain the rationale used to select the study participants. In the third section, I outline the methods of data collection and analysis used to address the research problem.

Rationale for the Research Approach

This study is situated within the tradition of qualitative research, which seeks to understand human behavior in the context of social interaction (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 106). Thus, the focus of qualitative research is less on finding or proving a single truth than it is on learning how individuals construct, negotiate, and explain their versions of truth. Qualitative researchers enter the field understanding that their experiences and their ways of seeing the world frame what they see (Lather, 1986). Therefore, they reflexively
slide between theory and observations as “insiders” and “outsiders” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). The purpose of this study is to understand how participants make sense of the events, practices, texts, and contexts they encounter and create in their language arts classrooms, and more specifically in the context of their writing interactions (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Such understandings are not constructed to explain and predict the behaviors of the general population but are derived from a focused study of the lives of a few individuals to gain insight into the particularities of a local cultural context and/or broad social phenomenon (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 106).

While following the qualitative tradition, this study is also situated in ethnographic studies in education (Green & Bloome, 2004). Ethnographic studies in education are situated in the local and historical knowledges, experiences, theories, and concerns of educational researchers and teacher practitioners. They draw on cultural anthropological and sociological traditions of research to study how knowledge and learning are socially constructed inside classrooms and how the language that is used to construct events, practices, and identities within these contexts reflect and refract issues of equity and access in the society (Green & Bloome, 2004). Educational researchers employ several ethnographic methods, such as participant observation, in-depth interviews, and artifact collection as tools for learning from people (Spradley, 1979, p. 3), and learning through close proximity and direct participation (with)in the spaces/places, interactions, and activities that constitute the context of people’s everyday lives (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).
I adapted five theoretical constructs used by Ervin-Tripp and Mitchell-Kernan (1977) to study verbal interaction in classroom writing. These constructs extended notions of what constitutes writing to include all texts written in response to prompts to write. These types of writing include extended writing practice affiliated with narrative writing, narrated responses provided to open-ended questions, and short answer responses found in classroom discourse and content-based worksheets. The writing in these naturally occurring writing practices was examined at multiple levels of analysis across multiple and iterative phases. A detailed description of the processes used in the data analysis is included later in this chapter. The general principles and their associated implications for this study are presented in Table 2:
### Table 2

*Applying Ervin-Tripp and Mitchell-Kernan's (1977) Framework for Studying Verbal Interaction to the Study of Classroom Writing*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes applied to study of verbal interaction (Ervin-Tripp &amp; Mitchell-Kernan, 1977)</th>
<th>Implications for the study of writing interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Data source for studies of conversation should be natural language in context (p. 207)</td>
<td>Data sources for studies of writing should be the natural language generated within naturally occurring interactions, literacy events, and social activities. Opportunities to write are often naturally embedded in the processes of teaching and learning. Researchers often focus on “writing about” students classroom experiences, and they often overlook the writing that students are doing in the classroom and the ways in which they are already communicating about who they are, what they know, and how they perceive the classroom writing space. These forms of writing can tell and show researchers and practitioners more about the contexts of writing, and the ways students are negotiating speech within them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) The study of discourse includes elements beyond the sentence level… it has become apparent that multiple constraints beyond the sentence level operate on the production of speech (p. 208)</td>
<td>Speech is more than the generic skill of putting words together to form a sentence or a complete idea. Words are “used” to do work and perform social functions inside and through written speech. Constraints imposed on the writer can inhibit speech. In the process of fashioning written speech to serve a purpose, the practice of writing can be constrained at multiple levels. The study of writing should include not only textual analysis relevant to semantic and syntactical structures/choices but also ethnographic and micro-ethnographic discourse analytic perspectives.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continued
3) [T]he social and situational context affect[s] linguistic rules and output… In the mutual construction of their discourse, actors make selections about what they want to say next (semantic options), about how to say it (social options), and about the form it will take (linguistic options). At the basis of all these choices and impinging upon them, is a series of factors which can act as constraints. At the most general level, these include social and cultural facts such as social status and cultural norms. At the narrowest level are facts within the interaction itself, such as particular prosodic or phonological variations. (p. 209)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing is embedded within social and situational contexts. These include the social process of schooling and the situational process of particular literacy units dedicated to the teaching and learning of particular writing goals.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parameters of speech, then, are situated in a historical curriculum and historical relationships within the classroom. Writing practice is a situated response within these contexts, and it reflects the experiences and understandings of students, and the parameters of speech and silence in writing practice sanctioned in the contexts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parameters of writing practice set boundaries for “discourse choices” available to writers: (a) what writers write about, (b) how they write about it, and (c) how they present or use language, literary tools and rhetorical devices to communicate these ideas in writing. The range of choices available to students are determined by the social status and cultural norms imposed in the space. Both social status and cultural norms are socially constructed, as both teachers and students negotiate identities, positions, and speech within inequitable relations of power. These norms imply different freedoms and liberties afforded or denied to students within the contexts of writing. These parameters, norms, and social status influence their discourse choices that constitute their writing practice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continued
Table 2 continued

| 4) Linguistic rules are variable…. For example, … phonological rules vary according to the situation. It should not, however, be assumed that there is any regular one-to-one correspondence between particular constraints and rules and particular discourse features. Constraints may operate singly or in combination and across various discourse and linguistic levels. Factors of social status, for example, can influence both code choices and phonological variation; a contextualization cue such as a subtle rise in intonation can result in a change of code, definition of the situation, or phonological choice (p. 209) | Identity, social status, and perception of expectations affect discursive code choices.

Although various features of contexts of writing may be experienced as constraints by one student, they may not be experienced in the same way by another, just as the consequences of that feature may not have the same effect on the student or on their writing. Students identify constraints and affordances relative to their experiences and understandings.

Constraints can have both individual effects and cumulative effects on the speaker/writer and her writing. However, the way that the experience of constraint is operationalized by the writer in her writing may vary across individuals and also across an individual’s writing over time. Constraints experienced in one context may not be constraining in other contexts. |

| 5) [C]onversational utterances can serve multiple functions depending on the context (p. 210) | Written speech can have many social uses, and it can be used to accomplish many kinds of functions, both within the text to produce speech and through text to accomplish something between social actors within the immediate context and in broader society. These functions and uses can be multiple, contradictory, overt, and covert, all of which may or may not be known by the writer or the reader. |
The purpose of this qualitative inquiry is to study Black adolescent females’ writing in school, and to reveal features in the contexts of their writing that facilitate and/or constrain their abilities to write themselves and their worlds into words.

In this qualitative case study (Stake, 2010), I draw on the method of participant observation to describe and understand what is happening in the classroom context of writing. Participant observation helped me to gather data on students’ writing samples within the context of instruction, curriculum, and everyday classroom interactions between and among the teacher and students. In-depth interviews with the students afforded opportunities to ask students about their writing and the relationship between their writing and the context in which they wrote. In this study, I draw on these perspectives to observe how students act and react within the classroom and to examine the ways in which these face-to-face interactions are constructed and constrained by historical and political forces beyond the immediate context (Bloome et al., 2005; Street & Heath, 2008).

In applying these perspectives in the study of Black adolescent females’ writing, it is imperative to resist the influence of deficit-based discourses of Black youth as “non-writers” or “resistant writers” (Davis, 2012; Haddix, 2012) and accept that Black girls bring “multiple literacies” to their classroom literacy education (Gay, 2000; Street, 1984). They seek spaces inside and outside the classroom where their voices can be seen, heard, and understood. It meant taking seriously the students’ feelings and emotions about classroom writing, resisting “common sense” perceptions of literacy and schooling.
(Kumashiro, 2004), and thinking deeply about the consequences they have in the everyday lives of students.

This approach challenges the typical methods used to study writing, which assume that classroom writing is a neutral practice. It seeks to understand the ways in which the political and ideological forces of racism, sexism, and classism are reproduced and/or resisted in the immediate context and the content of writing (Apple, 2004; Finn, 2010; Fox, 1992; Street & Heath, 2008; Woodson, 1933). It means problematizing notions of literacy that drive the model of writing instruction that is imposed in the classroom. It means noticing which pedagogies, processes, practices, and power relations were dominant in classroom interactions and questioning why they were used and why they had to be used. It means asking about which purposes for writing are privileged, thinking deeply about whom these writing purposes serve, and querying the kinds of criteria used in determining what writing is and who should be recognized as writers. It means thinking in the moment about how writing interactions are constructed (Bloome et al., 2005) and thinking reflectively about the kinds of writers and writing trajectories were being produced (Finn, 2010; Fox, 1992).

It meant seeing that students were members of racial, cultural, and socioeconomic groups that were different from their teacher and the majority of authors that prompted their reader and writer responses. It meant reading speech and silences in verbal and written interactions not only as evidence of underdeveloped cognitive and ethical processes or marks of powerlessness or resignation but also as a sociopolitical strategy for negotiating oppressive conditions (Fox, 1994; Kirkland, 2013).
In this study, participant observation means negotiating acts of *silence* and *sharing* with participants in order to build relationships based on trust and transparency and sustained by open and mutual dialogue (Paris, 2011). It means asking questions and “*listening deeply and dangerously*” (Shultz, Jones-Walker, & Chikkatur, 2008; Baur, 1994, p. 304) for the logic that drives students’ decisions (Geertz, 1973; Street & Heath, 2008). It also means leveraging my experiences, understandings, and my identities as a marginalized Black female student-writer as a frame for understanding the social, emotional, and intellectual needs of Black adolescent females as student-writers. Furthermore, it means being sensitive to the ways in which my presence mattered to my participants and the ways in which the inquiry process provided opportunities for us to affirm one another’s identities, validate one another’s experiences, and nurture one another’s views of ourselves as expert writers and readers of the word and the world (Paris, 2011). It means stepping into the spaces, thoughts, feelings, and stories that Black adolescent females encounter in their everyday lives as students and *feeling* the extent to which the practices, processes, and people constructed and/or constrained opportunities for them to be seen, heard, understood, and nurtured. Adopting these ethnographic perspectives, I examined the student-writers and their written texts as living and interactional entities in conversation with the identities and ideologies present in the classrooms and encountered historically in the society.

For students of African heritage and their White middle-class teachers, these interactions are necessarily cross-cultural. They involve negotiating the privileged languages and patterns of speech constructed in academic discourses and sociocultural
communities (Lillis, 2003) by interlocutors from diverse cultural, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Through this methodological lens, writing interactions are viewed as “contact zones” (Pratt, 1991) or “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world” (p. 34). This framework is helpful in disentangling complex classroom writing spaces into constellations of inequitable social interactions where culturally marginalized students are drawn into contact with the language, practices, processes, and people of culturally dominant groups and where they are required to make decisions about what to include and how to construct written text in ways that will be valued by others.

In studies of composition and contact zone theory, writing interactions are understood to occur along multiple and intersecting dimensions of contact:

1. **Between the writer and the reader** (Canagarajah, 1997, 2013; Fox, 1992; Kells, 2002; Miller, 1994). The writer receives a writing prompt and later submits a writing response for evaluation by a teacher-practitioner. The nature of social relationships between teachers and students affects the extent to which their voices and perspectives matter and ultimately influences the decisions made about participating, sustaining, and/or withdrawing participation in writing practice. Social identities (e.g., race, class, and gender) influence students and teachers’ perceptions of how their words are evaluated. The curriculum also constructs the student and teacher writing/reading interactions, including the rewards and
punishments sanctioned in the space. Consequently, students often tailor their responses to please the teacher. The curriculum enables such responses by strategically leveraging speech and silence to respond to the prompt or to forego writing practice altogether.

2. **Between the writer and the writing space** (Bloome et al., 2009; Fecho, 2011; Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejada, 1999; Gutierrez, 2008). Writers negotiate physical and socioemotional interactions that are embedded in practices of writing in public. Students, particularly those in urban and underserved communities, are often required to write during class time as an alternative to writing at home. Underlying this requirement is the belief that students will not sustain writing practice at home or be motivated to complete classroom writing tasks when left unsupervised. As a result, students are provided spaces to write during the course of the school day and often during their class period. These spaces are constructed by multiple factors that affect how students are able to move about the room, the volume at which students may or may not speak, the extent to which they are able to work independently or with their peers, the amount of time they are provided to write, and the aesthetic climate constituting the space/place in which they must write. All these factors form the public conditions that students must negotiate in the process and practice of writing. Considering that writing is an embodied process that necessarily leverages the thoughts, feelings, emotions, and body of the writer, the conditions provided for students to write affect the ways they experience writing practice. These spaces and the associated social and aesthetic
conditions are shaped by broad issues, such as school funding, instructional
design, building architecture, poverty, which are also influenced by systems of
racism and classism (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Based on these assumptions, this study values the humanity of the writer and the
socioemotional vulnerabilities experienced by members of marginalized racial, cultural,
and linguistic communities writing to and for a predominantly White and middle-class
audience.

Writers’ reading audiences include members of the dominant groups present
within the classroom as well those enabling literacy interactions in the classroom. Hence,
their “discourse choices” (Ivanic, 1994, p. 5) not only reflect and refract their positioning
in society but also reveal their situated understandings and sociopolitical consciousness
of the social contexts in and from which they write (Schiffrin, 1996). Their decisions
about what they write and why they write are motivated by previous ways and purposes
(Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). They are driven to understand the rationale for not only
the topics they choose to write about but also the decision-making they use to disregard
topics. In this study, these aims were set in order to construct opportunities to learn more
about the features of the space and contexts of writing.

I draw on Ivanic’s (1994) view of writing as a set of “discourse choices” that are
related to the following:

1. The physical language written on the page: its content, sequencing, and wording
2. The actual context in which one writes, particularly the anticipation of how actual
   readers would respond
3. The range of discourses available in the sociocultural context

However, Ivanić conceptualized these choices as “unconscious decisions” made by the writer, whereas I assume that students from marginalized backgrounds are sensitive to the parameters of speech in school and are therefore cognizant of their options and strategic decision-making. Thus, their writing is sensitive to the discursive boundaries of how to talk as it relates not only to the language and linguistic registers that are appropriate for speech but also to the ideological and political constraints on what they should and could write about. Because writers’ choices are informed by their anticipation of a reader’s response and the texts of available discourses, I also assume that in spaces/places where power inequities are present, it may also be the case that silence and the silencing of voices are also a part of a writer’s context and discourse choices (Carter, 2006; Delpit, 1989; Fordham, 1993).

**Research Questions**

The theoretical framework described above is used to study Black adolescent females’ writing in school. The study is guided by three research questions:

1. How do Black adolescent females’ perceptions of the school’s expectations of writing influence their writing in and for school?
2. How do Black adolescent females take up writing prompts in school?
3. How do Black adolescent females take up graphic organizers in school?

**Research Setting and Context**

*Gaining access*
I entered Global High (a pseudonym) in the spring of 2013, when the school was in its third year of operation as a high school and its first year of operation as a grades 7-12 secondary school. Although I conducted a previous study during the 2013–2014 school year, the data from that study are not used in this dissertation. The initial study was conducted in order to gain access to an eighth-grade classroom where I could examine students’ classroom-based writing in the following year. This study was conducted during the 2014–2015 school year.

School

Global High is located at the interstice of urban and suburban neighborhoods in a Mid-western community. In 2010, Global High opened with 170 ninth graders, and since then it has grown to include approximately 800 students in grades 7–12 grade levels. Of this student population, 67.9% are Black and African-American, 17.9% are Hispanic, 11% are White, 2.2% are multiracial; 76.6% are from low-income families; and 16.1% are English Language Learners (State Department of Education, last accessed May 19, 2015). These concentrations of Black, Hispanic, and English language learning students at a theme-based school with international studies and language immersion programs represent part of a recent initiative of the school district to diversify the educational options for public schooling.
Table 3

*Global High School Building and District Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Multiracial</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Economically Disadvantaged</th>
<th>Limited English Proficiency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building</td>
<td>67.9%</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
<td>76.6%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>56.5%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
<td>78.5%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The school draws students from all across the city. Priority of admission is given to students who are enrolled in one of the district’s three language-immersion program/feeder schools. The remaining seats are offered to student-families seeking alternatives to their placement in their neighborhood schools and who are randomly admitted through the citywide lottery process. Through partnership with the district, the school added 400 students in grades 7 and 8, who were moved from the districts’ three French and Spanish language immersion schools. The annexation of these middle schools into the high school building brought middle school students and teachers from diverse ethnic and geographic backgrounds and academic performance levels under one roof. This school is the only “international” school in the district and the only secondary school that provides instruction is languages other than English. The students attending the school represent families who chose to enroll their children in the school because they valued teaching and learning contexts that include and nurture cultural and linguistic diversity.

*The English literature and composition classrooms*
I entered Ms. G’s eighth-grade English Literature and Composition (ELC) classroom in the fall of 2014. Ms. G. is the only middle school ELC general education teacher. There are approximately 25 students in each of the three sections of ELC, each of which meets daily in periods of 48 to 50 minutes. The classes include a diverse population of native-born and newcomer students of African and Latin American heritage who are both native English speakers and English language learners.

The general format of the classes began with “bell ringers,” that is, quick and focused writing where students wrote responses in their “writer’s notebook” to a writing prompt that was projected on the wall. After approximately 5-7 minutes, the students have the opportunity to share aspects of their writing with the entire group. Following this discourse, a mini lesson related to the day’s teaching goal was provided, and then time was provided for the students to work on tasks related to developing and demonstrating their understanding of the lesson. The classroom setting was an open space that was encircled by a wall of windows, a chalkboard, and two newly painted white walls. Ms. G’s desk was located in the back of the room parallel to one of the white walls, where she uses a projector to display her morning “bell ringers” and associated teaching materials. The students were placed in rows extending to the width of the classroom. They often moved the rows of desks to make groups of four desks where they worked both independently and collaboratively to complete classroom tasks.

This study was conducted during the 2014–2015 school year. The research process was divided into three phases: the recruitment, the data collection, and the data analysis. The length of time spent in each phase is shown in Table 4.
Table 4

*Research Overview: Phases of Research*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Phase</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Days in the Field; Sections of ELA Attended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1: Recruitment</td>
<td>August 2014 to September 2014</td>
<td>5 days per week; all 3 ELA sections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2: Data Collection</td>
<td>October 2014 to February 2015</td>
<td>3 days per week during general instruction; 5 days per week during writing instruction; all 3 ELA sections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 3: Data Analysis</td>
<td>March 2015 to June 2015</td>
<td>3 days per week; 2 sections</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the early stages of recruitment, I attended all sections of the ELA course five days per week. My goals were to develop relationships with the students and to build a rapport with them so that they would be interested in participating in the study. Hence, during this phase, I made the decision not to video record the ELA class sections. When the recruitment phase ended, I continued to observe the ELA class sections, and I began the formal data collection, which included reviewing and photocopying the participants’ classroom writing materials, video recording classroom interactions, and conducting in-depth interviews with students during lunchtime and the “free periods” in their school schedules. My attendance in the ELA sections varied during this time. During the weeks when the literacy instruction focused solely on writing instruction, I attended all three ELA sections four to five days per week. During the weeks when writing and/or writing instruction did not occur (e.g., standardized test taking, reading instruction, etc.) I attended all three ELA sections two to three times per week. Over time, as I became
familiar with my participants and then focused on a particular group of students (Layla, Mali, and Nia), my attendance in the third ELA section (third period) remained consistent at four to five times per week regardless of the focus of instruction. During the data analysis, my attendance shifted to one to two times per week because the students’ were involved in taking standardized tests.

Participants

Although literacy education and writing instruction began in the first week of school, I made the decision to refrain from videotaping until I completed the recruitment and received signed consent forms from the participants. I learned that most students did not want to participate because they did not want to do any additional writing outside class, and they did not want to give up their free social time during lunch or after school.

The initial stage of recruitment included 13 participants in the three sections of ELA. The 13 participants included two boys, one of Hispanic heritage and one of African heritage, and 11 girls, 1 of Chinese-American heritage, 1 of European American heritage, and 9 of African heritage. I learned that of the students who had provided their permission slips, there were two distinct groups: one group thought I was there to provide writing and literacy intervention and/or enrichment; and the other group enjoyed writing, and they were excited about the chance to talk to a university researcher about their writing.

After observing and interviewing the students, I quickly learned that there was a subset of participants (4 students) who not only were turning in writing assignments and participating in classroom discussion but also were voluntarily engaged in writing outside
the school. This subset included four adolescent females of African heritage, three of whom were students in the third section of ELA.

_Focal participants_

In order to gain a thick description of the contexts of writing in this urban public school, I chose to focus on the third section of ELA. In making this decision, I also chose to focus on three Black adolescent females. The aim of this study is to understand Black adolescent females’ writing in urban public schools. While the experiences of students who choose not to write or participate in classroom-based writing have much to tell us about the nature of classroom and community writing spaces, the writing of those who do participate can provide additional perspectives.

Of the 13 students who chose to participate in the study, five students had histories of being engaged in writing outside school (e.g., Layla and Nia were writers in an online writing/reading community, and Nia wrote poetry and musical lyrics in a spiral notebook). Three students were currently writing outside school on a consistent basis, two students had histories of being engaged in writing outside elementary school, and the other seven had no history of writing outside school. While I perceived all students as writers, that is, persons who had the ability to write thoughts or spoken words, I decided to focus on the students who were engaged in writing practice inside and outside the classroom on a consistent basis. I wanted to understand the experiences of students who were effectively negotiating their positioning in diverse contexts. Through the in-depth interviews, I learned that three of the participants were regularly engaged in voluntary writing outside the classroom. These participants were three adolescent girls of African
heritage who were enrolled in the third section of the ELA class and one who was enrolled in the first section of the ELA class. As I recruited the participants in the focal group, I chose to attend the third section of the ELA class. My focal participants included the following students:

**PARTICIPANT 1: LAYLA**

Layla and her parents were born in a Mid-western town in America. She identified as a Black female. Layla is an adolescent female who identified as a Christian with a bisexual orientation. She has a strong interest in popular culture, particularly musicology, television, and movies. Her interests are expressed in fanfiction reading and writing on the wattpad.org, which is an online writing community for persons around the world. Although she is a strong writer, Layla’s professional goals include starting an art and dance institute for children in underserved communities.

**PARTICIPANT 2: MALI**

Mali and her parents were born in the village of Agogo in Ghana, Africa. She came to the United States at the age of seven; she and her father resided in a predominantly white and wealthy suburb of a Mid-western city. Mali was a Christian who identified as Ghanaian and/or African. As a writer, she regularly read and wrote fiction in multiple genres in a digital community on wattpad.org, and she wrote essays as a member of the school’s speech and debating team. Although Mali participated in fictional and expository writing, her goal was to become a national ambassador for a country in Africa where she could lobby for social and global change related to issues of poverty and hunger.
PARTICIPANT 3: NIA

Nia was born in Nashville, Tennessee although her parents were born in Senegal. Nia is a Christian who identified as “African” and “Black.” However, she associated with students who were from African immigrant families that has recently immigrated to the United States. Inside school, Nia dislikes the approaches to writing instruction used in class. Although she did not enjoy writing instruction, she was engaged in various choral, dance, and performance clubs in the school, each of which supported her outside school writing practices, particularly writing songs in pop and hip-hop genres. Nia desired to leverage her many talents to become a national music artist.

Prior to enrolling in Global High, Nia and Mali were students at one of the language immersion schools that merged with Global High, whereas Layla was a student in an alternative STEM middle schools within the district (see Table 5).

Table 5

Comparison of Focal Participants’ Cultural, Linguistic, and Writing Backgrounds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Home school</th>
<th>Class section</th>
<th>Voluntary Writing</th>
<th>Involuntary Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Layla</td>
<td>African-American, native-born (OH)</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Alternative MS</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Popular Culture/Music-based Fanfiction in Wattpad; Twitter; Instagram</td>
<td>High productivity, low interest in topics and tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mali</td>
<td>Ghanaian, newcomer at age 8</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>French Language Immersion</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Transcultural Narratives in Wattpad &amp; Speeches for Speech and Debate Team</td>
<td>High productivity, high interest in topics and tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nia</td>
<td>African-American, native-born, Senegalese heritage</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>French Language Immersion</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Song writing, Hip-Hop lyrics</td>
<td>Medium productivity, low interest in topics and tasks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection

In the second phase of this study, the data collection was conducted. I collected data from October 2014 through March 2015. I used multiple methods of data collection, including participant observation, video-recorded interviews, artifact collection, and field notes.

Data Collection Protocols and Procedures

In my role as an African-American female doctoral student studying marginalized populations, I did not separate my position as a researcher from my historical position as a part of those being researched. I sought to foster humanizing experiences in the phases of the data collection and data analyses (Paris, 2011). In the following sections, I describe how I integrated this approach in the methods of data collection that I used in this study.

Participant observation. The participant observation occurred primarily in the classroom contexts of ELC teaching and learning. In the field, I exercised a flexible research orientation that was responsive to the structure, the social configuration, and students’ attitudes toward classroom activities, sliding between my stances as a participant observer who was directly engaged in participant activities and as a non-participating observer who was passively positioned on the margins of interaction (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). As I began to notice shifts in students’ unfavorable or favorable attitudes toward the teacher and toward varying classroom activities, I used opportunities to slide between these roles as strategy to align myself with the students in
order to appear distanced from the disposition and authority of the teacher and the nature of the writing activities assigned to the students. When the students displayed unfavorable responses to the writing tasks, I positioned myself as a non-participant/observer and engaged in an open field note writing activity to appear skeptical of the teaching practices in the class. I did this in order to demonstrate to the students my neutrality regarding the teacher’s practices, thereby conveying a commitment to their needs, which could be useful in interviews to provide a safe space where students could freely critique writing interactions and offer details about their experiences in the classroom.

I also positioned myself as a participant observer, and I immersed myself in the participants’ activities as much as possible. Because this immersion constrained my opportunities to write, I adopted a “participating-to-write fieldwork style” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) in which I used a “quick jotting” strategy to capture notes related to my experiences and observations at the moment and then elaborate later in focused and sustained writing.

**Interviews.** Throughout this study, relationship building was central in the data collection process. The in-depth interviews allowed me interrogate the connections that I observed and imagined between theories of writing and observations of classroom teaching and writing practices. I believe that in order for students to feel comfortable in sharing their experiences and understanding, particularly those related to critiques of social structures or invocations of marginalized contexts, they have to feel secure and trust the researcher. To create this rapport, I intentionally created opportunities during the
interview process in which I situated questions about them in stories about myself. By sharing stories and personal experiences, I created openings for them to ask questions. Thus, I learned about the participants, and they learned about me.

To leverage our shared identities as females of African heritage, I intentionally integrated African-American English, popular culture references, and stories about my life, my family, and my schooling as resources for contextualizing questions and building rapport with the students. I videotaped the interviews and wrote field notes immediately following the interviews. I deliberately chose to refrain from notetaking during the interview process so that the participants would perceive the interviews as conversations rather than research activities. I also made a conscious effort to share control over the content and context of the interview process by allowing the participants to deviate from the line of questioning and including issues and topics that were prompted and presented by the student. Over time, the participants and I assumed familial and conversational roles in which “playing the dozens” and joke telling were regularly exchanged in our formal and informal interviews and conversations. In the course of such conversations, I did not neglect my roles as a researcher and a potential role model.

Early in the study, I noticed that participants were excited to talk about their lives and felt sufficiently comfortable with me to seek my advice and my opinions about the quality of their classroom work, social relationships, college enrollment, and popular culture. Before the class, students regularly approached my table at the back of the classroom to greet me with a hug and to invite me to join conversations about school, popular culture, and daily hair or clothing trends. Sensing the development of familial
relationships with students, I used a flexible approach to interviewing, which allowed them to (re)direct the flow of the conversation. My flexibility with regard to the students’ needs and desires for conversation often led me to extend the interview process beyond the allotted time. I conducted a minimum of three interviews with each participant in intervals of 20–60 minutes. The interviews were conducted in the school in various spaces that were private and conducive discussion and video recording, including the family resource room, vacant classrooms, and office spaces throughout the building. The interviews generally took place during the students’ lunch or study hall periods. Some interviews were held during the class with students who had completed the required tasks and therefore were allotted free time by Ms. G.

The interviews were conducted in four phases that generally evolved from introductory conversation, thematic exploration, and focused discussion around their writing, to checking my understandings and interpretations of these interactions with participants (i.e. member checking, c.f. Lather, 1993). As the content from one interview was collected, datum was reviewed and integrated with data collected in field notes, participant observations, and classroom writing. All data were used to generate a working understanding as well as directive lines of inquiry over time.

**Phase 1: Introduction** The first interview was in the form of an introductory session where I focused on building a rapport with the participants and familiarizing them with the interview process and being video-recorded. The questions were open-ended and served as opportunities to get to know the participants and to share personal information about myself. I used the photocopied responses to the classroom writing prompts
captured in their ELC Writer’s Notebook to initiate conversations (Prior, 2003) about who they were, their interests, and their educational, cultural, linguistic, and literary backgrounds and their experiences of writing in school. The interviews were video-recorded and then transcribed following the session. Additional questions were developed following the review of the recordings, which were used in subsequent formal and informal interviews.

Phase 2: Classroom writing-based discussion. The second interview occurred after the participants had completed the unit on writing and had submitted their final writing assignment, which occurred during the weeks of 6 October and 13 October 2014. I photocopied the students’ final drafts and highlighted key passages in the texts. The content of the highlighted texts was used as the basis for discussion in the next interview session. The goal of this session was to elicit students’ accounts of their writing process and the associated metacognitive activities and sociocultural experiences they used to develop a written product over time (Prior, 2003). The participants were asked if they remembered writing the text. They then were asked to read the highlighted areas of the text. After the students read the section aloud, I loosely proceeded along two lines of inquiry: first, I investigated how the participants understood the writing task, that is, what they imagined the teacher was asking them to do. Second, I explored the participants’ experiences and understanding of their writing practice and writing space inside the classroom. The questions were semi-structured and open-ended. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and additional lines of questioning were developed and recorded for future reference.

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Phase 3: Classroom and community writing-based discussion. The third phase of the interviews focused on a discussion about students’ writing outside school. The purpose of these interviews was to explore and compare the students’ experiences and understanding of writing and writing spaces inside and outside the classroom. The questions were designed to explore the content and context of their writing and to provide the participants with the opportunity to characterize the structural similarities and/or differences they experienced in the space and in their approaches to writing. The transcriptions of the previous interview, as well as the final drafts of classroom writing assignments and their Writer’s Notebooks were used as referents to elicit discussion.

Phase 4: Member checking. The fourth phase of the interviews focused on checking my emerging understandings of relationships between students writing practices and the context of writing, with the participants. The preliminary findings were used to develop semi-structured and open-ended questions that gave the participants the opportunity to verify the validity and accuracy of my findings.

Artifact collection. Another method involved collecting classroom and community writing artifacts that were produced during classroom activities. I collected artifacts from the teacher, which included district-sponsored lesson plans, instructional handouts, passages in the textbooks, and supplementary texts, as well as the writer’s notebook developed by the teacher during instruction to guide discussion and to provide students with a mentor text for their writing. I also collected artifacts from the participants, which included completed worksheets, final drafts of writing assignments, and the writer’s notebook in which recorded their daily “bell ringer” responses,
classroom notes, and drafts of their writing assignments. When it was appropriate, I also collected artifacts from the participants’ writing sites in online communities (e.g., Twitter, Wattpad, etc.). All materials were photocopied or scanned and then returned to the students and the teacher.

**Field notes.** I also utilized field notes as an ethnographic method of data collection. In the field, I used two distinct approaches to the writing of field notes, which included jotting notes as well as detailed writing. As I slid between the roles as active participant observer and non-participant observer, these stances allowed for a wide range in the kind of field notes I was able to write while in the field.

When I directly participated with the students, I utilized the strategies of closed or discrete modes of jotting (as opposed to open jotting) from which detailed written and audio-recorded “spoken” field notes were constructed (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 41). When I was a non-participant observer, I was able to write extensively at the back of the classroom because I was not the focus of the students’ attention.

I wrote and audio-recorded three types of field notes: 1) field notes that characterized interactions observed during the class period or capturing my responses to writing prompts provided to students during classroom instruction; 2) field notes that explored theoretical implications or lines of inquiry triggered by observations or interviews; 3) field notes describing personal experiences, feelings, or understandings of participation in or observation of classroom interactions and informal conversations observed between students or with students.
**Videotaping.** I videotaped the whole-group and small-group interactions to capture those that occurred spontaneously between the teacher and the students as they engaged in literacy teaching and learning over time. The recordings were used to index the classroom discussion about writing instruction and to contextualize the students’ classroom writing practices. I analyzed the video-recordings to understand the kinds of activities and interactions that constituted writing instruction. I also used the video-recordings as an opportunity to conduct a focused review of the conversations that were constructed by the participants within naturally classroom interactions. The videotaped classroom sessions were logged, and sections where key literacy events emerged were transcribed for analysis.

Because of the limited number of participants in each class section and the physical design of the room, the options for positioning and angling the camera were limited. Generally, teaching and learning were provided through whole-group instruction. During those parts of the sessions, the camera was set on a tripod in the back corner of the room and angled to face the teacher or toward the front of the class where the lessons were projected on the screen. When the class moved from whole-group to small-group activities, the camera remained positioned in the back corner of the room, but it was angled to face the direction in which most participants were seated. Alternatively, I moved the camera to an area close to the participant interaction where I could focus directly on their participation and contributions in the small-group interactions.
Data Analysis

The data analysis was a recursive process in which the phases of analysis were completed iteratively over time. I used the method of discourse analysis to synthesize the data collected.

Phase 1: Inquiry. As I collected data from the interviews, the video-recorded classroom observations, and the students’ written artifacts, I reviewed the information at least twice by first watching or reading the student writing samples to gain a general understanding and then reading the writing to see what the writer was trying to accomplish. Lines of inquiry generally attempt to understand the “processes” of constructing teaching and learning interactions, as well as “the concerns, conditions, and constraints that actors confront and deal with in their everyday lives” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 147). Following this line of thought, I analyzed the data to answer the following questions:

- What are the participants doing?
- What are they trying to accomplish?
- How are the participants talking or not talking?
- What kinds of assumptions are they making about the process of literacy learning and teaching, about writing, and about society?
- What do I perceive as occurring?
- What kinds of choices are the participants making?
What do these notes tell me about the participants’ experiences and understandings in the space, in the process of writing, and relationship(s) with each other and society?

I wrote memos detailing my interpretations of the emergent findings. These interpretative memos served as a foundation for the next phases of the analysis. However, the theories and findings in each phase of analysis served as “working findings” that were used to locate patterns across the participants’ experiences, yet they were always subject to change based on the findings of the data analysis over time.

**Phase 2: Discourse analysis.** After I familiarized myself with the data in the initial phase of analysis, I conducted a close reading of the texts (Huckin, Andrus, & Clary-Lemon, 2012; Ivanic, 1994) to identify patterns and variations in the writers’ “discourse choices” (Ivanic, 1994). Following Ivanic (1994, p. 5) I analyzed the texts according to three elements:

a. The physical language on the page, that is, its content, sequencing, and wording

b. The mainly unconscious decisions based on the actual context in which they were writing, particularly their anticipation of how their actual readers would respond

c. These unconscious choices were made from a range of discourses that were available in the sociocultural context.

Because some writers’ choices are informed by their anticipation of the reader’s response, and their texts are drawn from the available discourses, I also assumed that in spaces/places where power inequities are present, it might also be the case that silence or the silencing of voices is also a part of the writer’s context and discourse choices. Based
on this assumption, I asked the participants about what they wrote and whether they wanted to write about something but did not include it on the page. Based on their responses, I analyzed what they wrote in relation to the conversation about what they did not write in order to understand the rationale underlying their discourse choices.

Using a process of “description” or “textual analysis,” I examined the ways in which the participants’ writing addressed issues of race, and I transcribed their spoken words and described the language and linguistic features utilized by participants. At this level of analysis, I drew on linguistic approaches to textual analysis (Halliday, 1978) to examine and describe the content and function of the language operating within the text through the writers’ semantic, syntactic, and rhetorical choices.

Analyzing features of text and interaction. Indexicality (Halliday, 1978; Ochs, 1992) is a form of language use that enables connections to be made across places, space, and time through a single word or a phrase. For example, personal pronouns (e.g., we and they) index belonging and levels of group membership. Possessive pronouns (e.g., my and our) index assumptions or realities of ownership and acquisition delineated by a particular group identity or membership. Verb tenses (e.g., am, was, and are) index states of being across time, that is, the past, present, and future. Because these forms of language are attached to a cultural body and are utilized in contextual spaces, their underlying meanings are also made visible and indexed within the classroom discourse.

In the present study, indexicality includes what Huckin (2002) called “textual silences.” Studies of writing have focused primarily on what is present on the page, whereas I include information that is relative to the participants’ experiences and
understandings, as disclosed during the in-depth interviews, yet, consciously or unconsciously omitted in classroom writing. Huckin (2002) identified five categories of textual silence: “speech-act, presupposition, discreet, genre-based and/or manipulative silences,” to which this study adds “discreet silences” (p. 351). Huckin characterized “discreet silences” (2002, p. 351) as occurring in the following situations:

(i) the topic in question is a socially, legally, or culturally sensitive one, and the writer/speaker is aware of this at some level; (ii) the writer/speaker [may] not intend the silence to be perceived as having communicative import other than perhaps reinforcing community norms; and (iii) the communicative effectiveness of the silence is not dependent on whether the silence is noticed by the reader/listener.

Discreet silences occur around “taboo topics” because the writer is aware or at least sensitive to the feelings of the reader or the structures of the social space. Hence, the writer refrains from addressing topics, introducing information, or describing personal experiences and understandings that may create feelings of discomfort in the reading/listening audience or that may break the normed patterns of interaction or dialogue privileged in the space. These kinds of silences generally are unnoticed in spaces and by audiences who are unfamiliar with the experiences of the writer, particularly in contexts where the silence surrounding taboo issues, such as race, class, culture, and gender orientation, are naturalized as part of the participation structure (Delpit, 1988).
In the second phase of analysis, I interpreted writing practices in the context of the social relationships that are co-constructed between the writer/speaker and other social actors in the space(s). Thus, in this study, writing practice is analyzed as a site of social interaction where texts represent both the processes of production, in which writers draw on discourses to represent their identities and ideas to an audience, and the processes of consumption, by which listener/readers interpret the discourse practices enacted by the writer to make meaning of the content and context of the writing (Ivanic, 1994). At this level of analysis, the text is examined and interpreted within an interactional framework (Goffman, 1957) as the “discourse choices” or social practices on which the writer has drawn to produce the text. These discourse choices are considered both active efforts to present self and ideas to an audience, to accomplish particular tasks associated with membership in the space, and to react to the social practices and modes of being and speaking/writing that predominate the space. In this study, I examined the discourse practices to determine the writers’ positioning in the classroom and the community writing spaces.

In the third phase of analysis, I analyzed the discourse practices that were evident in the participants’ writing, the in-depth interviews, and the classroom interactions to explain the relationships between texts, the discourse practices used, and the institutional and societal positions and positionings that were denied, provided, and created by the writers of African heritage (Fox, 1995).

Based on these relationships, I looked for instances across the data corpus where the writer made choices to include or not include information about herself, described
sociocultural experiences and understandings, and indexed social identities, relations, or discourse practices that were operative in the text or perceived to be operating in society. I looked for patterns across written and spoken communicative interactions, and I looked for variations within the patterns. I highlighted discourse (including topics, questions, language, etc.) and recorded it in quick jottings taken during or immediately after the interviews, and I highlighted the discourse recorded in notes and memos generated during and after my reviews of the video-recorded interviews. At each level of analysis, I read through the texts and highlighted the language (key events), and I kept a log of excerpts of the language used in each participant’s writing or video-recorded interview session to capture themes and patterns over time. The highlighted areas, which became key events, featured discourse that was related to or explicitly addressed the research questions, namely issues of writing, classroom contexts, and experiences in school and society. These key events were critical in understanding the participants’ writing and their classroom writing experience. The key communicative interactions observed in the texts or in the classroom interactions helped me to select which video-recordings to transcribe.

The patterns became the topics examined in the subsequent interviews with the participants. I then proceeded to code the data. In the open coding, I first highlighted areas in the interview transcripts where the participants referred to their writing. I put each passage into a spreadsheet, and I examined passages from the participants’ statements and created codes that described or summarized the passages.

**Thematic analysis.** As I highlighted and coded my data, I looked for datasets to identify themes or the patterns of thinking and interactions that emerged in the
participants’ descriptions of their experiences and understandings. After I engaged in a close reading of my field notes, I also highlighted and coded interactions that were related to the participants’ experiences in class, particularly during and regarding writing instruction. I looked for instances where the students participated in classroom discourse, as well moments during instruction when the teacher provided information, direction, or ways of thinking about writing and writing instruction in the classroom. I compared the themes that emerged in the participants’ writing and interviews with the themes that emerged in classroom interactions to understand the range of social identities, social positions, and positionings of the adolescent females of African heritage. I also compared the emergent themes with the opportunities to write, used, and marginalized in the classroom. I drew relationships between key events and themes in and across the data to understand both the writing and the contexts of writing constructed in the classroom.
Table 6

Thematic Analysis of Student Interview Data: Codes and Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing in School</th>
<th>Ways of being/speaking/voice</th>
<th>Purposes for writing</th>
<th>Nature of writing relationship</th>
<th>Nature of Writing space</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>monologic</td>
<td>uniformity</td>
<td>assigned</td>
<td>canonical</td>
<td>Focus is more on anticipation of audience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>constrained</td>
<td>consequence</td>
<td>coerced/compulsory</td>
<td>boring/zoned out</td>
<td>All about the reader</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fake/manufactured</td>
<td>credit (school/home)</td>
<td>conformity</td>
<td>censored</td>
<td>Constructing an identity that is palatable to the audience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>courteous</td>
<td>appeasement</td>
<td>corrective</td>
<td>decontextualized</td>
<td>Limited discourses available to define self, and self in relation to others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fake/manufactured</td>
<td>community of 'nonwriters'</td>
<td>out of date</td>
<td>Hypersensitivity to teacher audience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing out of School</th>
<th>Ways of being/speaking/voice</th>
<th>Purposes for writing</th>
<th>Nature of writing relationship</th>
<th>Nature of Writing space</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>free</td>
<td>organic</td>
<td>community of 'writers'</td>
<td>safe</td>
<td>Focus is more on the content</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intergenerational</td>
<td>creativity/imagination</td>
<td>connected/connection</td>
<td>sex, cursing, AAEV: 'Bad stuff'</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collaborative</td>
<td>entertainment</td>
<td>transactional</td>
<td>individualized</td>
<td>Constructing an identity that is distinct; a clear 'voice' to be heard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>choice/chosen</td>
<td>private/anonymous</td>
<td>Wider range of discourses available to define self and self in relation to others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dialog</td>
<td>synergistic</td>
<td>Writing in a 4th Space, between home and school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transcultural</td>
<td>current-popular culture</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing &amp; Identity in School</th>
<th>writing on page: content, wording, sequence</th>
<th>anticipation of audience</th>
<th>discourses available</th>
<th>Writing &amp; Identity in Community</th>
<th>writing on page: content, wording, sequence</th>
<th>anticipation of audience</th>
<th>discourses available</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constrained</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coerced/Compulsory</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credit</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>Creativity/imagination</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrective</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>Privacy/Anonymity</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courteous</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut apart/(de)Contextualized</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>Individualization</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conformity</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>Connected/Connection</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniformity</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Transaction</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of Date</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Current-Popular Culture</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequence</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Collaborative</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canonical</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Community of Practice</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monologic</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dialog</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Censored</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Synergistic</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean/Sanitized</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sex, AAEV, Cursing: &quot;Bad Stuff&quot;</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boring/Zoned Out</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Organic</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assigned</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fake/Manufactured</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Transcultural</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Intergenerational</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Total                        | 7                                             | 11                       | 7                   | Total                           | 7                                             | 6                        | 7                   |
Chapter 4: Findings on Layla’s Classroom Writing

The following three chapters report my findings and my interpretations of them. As described in Chapter 1, the purpose of the study is to describe and to make visible the experiences of a small group of Black female adolescents in order to contribute to the knowledge of Black adolescent females’ student writing and teacher education in the area of writing education. Thus, this dissertation aims to reveal students’ perspectives on the content and context of their classroom-based writing. In examining their perspectives, I was guided by three research questions:

1. How do Black adolescent females’ perceptions of the school’s expectations of writing influence their writing in and for school?
2. How do Black adolescent females take up writing prompts in school?
3. How do Black adolescent females take up graphic organizers in school?

In this study, all opportunities to write were constructed by writing prompts established in the district curriculum, and they were provided as tasks assigned by the teacher. The students received three different kinds of writing prompts that related to different kinds of writing assignments: (a) bellringers used to engage students’ attention and to scaffold their understanding of a particular theme or mechanic of writing, (b) guided reading questions collated as packets to support and assess students reading comprehension of a text, and (c) extended writing assignments provided at the culmination of novel reading.
A summative approach was used to measure the students’ mastery of particular genres of writing and comprehensive and detailed readers’ responses.

In reviewing my data corpus, including field notes, participant observation, student interviews, student writing samples, and classroom teaching artifacts, I found that the adolescent females of African heritage in this study had a shared experience of constraint regarding what they could write and how they were able to write. Each of the following three chapters represents the writing of one participant, which reveals a particular kind of constraint that was revealed through her writing and/or her talking about writing. I provide a brief description of the participant and then show how gaps between her identity and writing point to constraints in her contexts of writing. The writing of each participant is presented sequentially to illustrate the range of responses to the writing prompts in school and to highlight the many ways in which they communicated information about themselves in and through the content of their writing.

In the effort to center the study and the report of its findings in the voices and the experiences of the students, the teacher is not included. In efforts to center the study and the report of its findings around the voices and the experiences of the students, discussion of the teacher is minimalized. I note that the view presented of the teacher in this dissertation is limited to comments that the students had about the teacher.

In this dissertation, I argue that Black adolescent females’ writing in school is constrained by their perceptions of the school’s expectations of writing, as well as the writing prompts and graphic organizers that are provided. In this chapter, I focus on emotional constraints. By emotional constraints in writing, I mean the restrictions
imposed on the writer’s ability to connect emotionally to the writing practice and to provoke an emotional connection in their reading audience. Based on the data collected in the participant observations, student writing, in-depth interviews, and field notes, I found that Layla’s writing reflected multiple and overlapping forms of emotional constraint, including what I refer to as intertextual and metadiscursive constraints. Each type of constraint is related to the emotional constraint Layla experienced and perceived to be central in the expectations placed on her writing in school.

Intertextual and metadiscursive constraints were encountered in writing prompts and graphic organizers, respectively. For Layla, the writing prompts engendered an experience of intertextual constraint. By intertextual constraint in writing, I mean the restrictions imposed on the writer’s ability to leverage the shared knowledge of her audience, issues, and understandings of interest to them in constructing meaningful emotional connections with the audience through her writing. Writing prompts that were irrelevant to the everyday lives of Layla and her peers and their shared social and cultural interests prevented her from constructing authentic, engaging, and meaningful writing-reading interactions in the classroom. Although this form of constraint prevented Layla from connecting with a peer audience, I found that she also experienced constraint in the very act of writing, that is, between her internal discourse and her own writing.

I found that Layla experienced what I refer to as metadiscursive constraint. By metadiscursive constraint, I mean the restrictions imposed on the writer’s ability to access and leverage their thoughts as they are writing. Cognitive activities, such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating ideas, occur before and after the writing is carried out. These
activities can occur while individuals are actively engaged in writing. During the writing practice, individuals make decisions about the aims or goals of their writing and the directions they would like it to take. Moreover, ideas about what and how to write emerge as they write, or they write ideas that lead their minds or hearts to thoughts and feelings that generate new and enriched directions of writing. Thus, the writing process can be multidirectional, dialogic, and recursive the ways that content is produced. I found that the graphic organizers provided in the class were rigid and fragmented forms of thinking and writing that did not allow Layla to construct and utilize discursive thinking about her writing during her writing practice and the writing process. The students were required to write in ways that conformed with segments of the graphic organizer, so Layla was not provided the opportunity in the class to write freely and to allow her internal discourse to drive the activities of her writing. In the following sections, I discuss data that revealed the ways in which Layla experienced and understood her classroom context of writing as emotionally, intertextually, and metadiscursively constraining.

“I was in my feelings. Then, I remembered where I was”: Layla’s Perception of the School’s Expectation for Writing

Although writing in school is a public process that is directly linked to a reader-teacher audience, it begins first as a private interaction involving the writer, a prompt, her ideas, and a notebook. While the students were aware of the school’s expectations of writing, during the actual process of writing, the expectations were not always at the forefront of their writing practice. When they were reminded of the expectations, they adjusted their writing to meet the school’s expectations. An example is shown in the
following field observation, which I made immediately after the teacher issued a writing prompt and released the students to write independently:

Layla is writing feverishly. At 8:27 a.m., the teacher calls for students to stop writing and to share their writing with a partner. The teacher releases the students to share their writing with their neighbor. At 8:30 a.m., Layla is still writing. The students around her partner with others who are no longer writing. A girl sitting next to her asks her if she is done. I go over to see if I can overhear her talking about her work, but she tells her partner she “don’t want to share” and something about “her hand being broken” from all the writing she did. The remaining time is spent listening to her peer share snippets from her writing. As the five minutes concludes, the teacher reminds the students that she will collect their notebooks at the end of the class period, and that they should ensure that they have provided an adequate response to earn associated participation points. As the teacher shares this reminder, I see Layla beginning to scribble out large portions of her writing. I see her blotting out row and after row. Everything in me wants to scream out to her “Nooooooooo! Don’t do it!!!!“

What’s behind the Blackout?! (Field note, 4 September 2014)

Layla’s continuing to write beyond the time allotted for the activity despite the teacher’s call for the students to stop writing suggest that she was so engrossed in what she was writing about that she lost focus on or chose to ignore the audience. Although I was unable to see or hear what Layla had written, her decision not to share her work with her peers signaled the extent to which she perceived her writing as private and personal, and that the writing context was unsafe for sharing. This tension between privacy and public sharing were underscored by Layla’s scribbling over her writing when the teacher reminded her of the review and evaluation of the students’ writing in the notebook. Her response suggested that she did not want her private thoughts to become public.

Nevertheless, after the students turned in their notebooks and departed for their next class, I went to the bin to find Layla’s notebook and read her response (Figure 1).
I feel misunderstood around my grandparents all the time. They are super religious and don’t listen to music with or without cussing, but they love for us to listen to gospel. My grandparents once… gave me a lecture about why I had a poster of Mindless Behavior hanging on my wall instead of a picture of God. Then if my little brother hits me or doesn’t get his way I am forced to do whatever he wants to do…

my mom and dad don’t understand me…

that I don’t like to wear dresses…

to express my feelings like…

But back to the Mindless Behavior thing, they didn’t understand that I’m a 10-year-old maybe 11 girl who just saw a boy band like that should have been a no brainer that I was gonna like them. But it’s not like my room was filled with pictures it was a poster and out of all the things wrong in my room they pick a poster like for real. After I got my lecture, I went outside and rode my bike with my friends until my grandparents left. Then I went back in my room and turned on the album all the way to the max and stayed in my room for the rest of the day. (Classroom Writing, 4 September 2014)

In the recursive process of examining Layla’s classroom writing and the discourse provided in interviews and discussions inside and outside the classroom, I observed two
prominent, dialectical themes—force/freedom and time/change—that she experienced and sought in communities inside and outside the classroom. In her response to the writing prompt, “Describe a time where they felt misunderstood,” Layla recontextualized the prompt to write about a single occasion and her experience of being misunderstood by her grandparents. This shift in the focus of her writing suggests that she was trying to disclose and used this classroom assignment as an opportunity to invite the reader into the thoughts, feelings, and emotions related to her experience. She described the ways in which her “super religious” grandparents refrained from profanity and non-religious music. She also described having received a lecture as a reprimand for hanging up a poster featuring a R&B boy band on her wall, which for her represents a logical and appropriate way to assert her individuality, her interests, her youth, and her femininity.

While the writing appears to respond to the prompt, there are noticeable shifts in focus and format. The writing begins with a description of an incident in which her grandparents reprimanded her for hanging a secular poster on her wall. Following this brief description, in the center of the page right before the scribbles, Layla dramatically shifted the focus of the writing to a description of her relationship with her brother. She begins a new discussion by stating, “Then if my little brother hits me or doesn’t get his way I am forced to do what he wants to do.” Although this statement appears to diverge from her response to the writing prompt, Layla’s use of the word “then” indicates that for her, the experience of being misunderstood by her grandparents and being treated similarly by her parents are interrelated and ongoing. Following this statement, 13 lines were scribbled out. The repeated and intentional nature of the scribbling over and
crossing out the text illustrated her desire to conceal the content of the writing from the intended reader, who in this case was the teacher. Despite this deliberate attempt to hide the content of her writing, a few lines are legible. In the first and last lines of the covered text, Layla wrote, “my mom and dad don’t understand me,” “that I don’t like to wear dresses,” and “to express my feelings like…” Then following these 13 lines of text, Layla returned to responding to the writing prompt as though nothing had happened.

While I struggled to decipher the words buried in the obliterated text, some things were overwhelmingly clear about Layla, her writing, and her understanding of the classroom writing space(s). First, it was clear that Layla was struggling to understand herself and her voice in terms of religion, gender, and power. Although Layla defended her identities and practices as a “10- or 11-year-old girl” in writing, in the presence of her grandparents she remained silent.

After I got my lecture I went outside and rode my bike with my friends until my grandparents left then I went back in my room and turned on the album all the way to the max and stayed in my room for the rest of the day. (Classroom Writing)

Layla did not talk about her feelings with her grandparents. She left the scene to wait for their departure. When they had left, she returned to her room and immersed herself in listening to music. Underlying the disconnection between the description of incident with her grandparents and her relationship brother is the experience of silence or being silent. Although she was verbally silent in the presence of her grandparents, she described the experience of being silenced or having her feelings and desires overlooked in being “forced to do whatever he wants” and being “misunderstood by her mother and father.”
Over all, Layla’s writing revealed the experience of having little space at home to verbalize her feelings about religion, gender, and femininity. She is at a point in her adolescence where she sorts through what it means to be and to be understood as a “10 maybe 11-year-old girl.” Her writing revealed that Layla used the writing notebook as a safe space away from home, where she could freely share her feelings and emotions.

In an interview with Layla conducted two days after her notebook was submitted, I showed her a copy of her writing and asked her about her experience in producing it. To evaluate her understanding of the task in relationship to the content she produced I asked her what she thought the objective of the writing assignment was, or rather, what she thought the teacher was asking her to do. Her response was as follows:

I thought she was just telling us to tell how we feel. I saw it as an opportunity to express how I felt, and so that’s what I did… I felt like I was going off of topic so I just went back, like, I had to think about where I was at. Cause I was bout to... I felt like going in. Cause I was mad at my mom cause she was mad and me… I was “in my feelings” for a minute. I was like, I’m in school I can’t say what I wanna say. Imma be good… (Interview, 10 October 2014)

Layla’s response shows a difference between, the intended purposes for writing established in the writing prompt provided by the teacher, and the actual purposes for writing she took up in the context of classroom writing. The teacher’s goal was to have the students describe an incident in response to the writing prompt, Layla’s writing purpose was focused on herself and her feelings. Layla’s shift to an internal student-centered approach led her to discuss an enduring experience of feeling and being misunderstood in contrast to the single incident of being misunderstood requested by the teacher. Although the writing task was compulsory, Layla perceived it as an “opportunity
to express how [she] felt.” The nature of this writing prompt differed from the others she encountered in the class, which specified that the students respond to themes or issues. Further discussion about those kinds of prompts and her experiences writing in response to them will be provided later in this chapter.

It is important to note that in writing in response to this prompt, Layla was unique not only in approaching the task but also in perceiving the levels of freedom and constraint in the writing space (the notebook was shared by her and the teacher). On the surface, Layla responded to the prompt by doing what she was told to do or what she believed the teacher told her to do through the writing prompt. In the process of completing the writing task, however, noticeable shifts in the topic revealed the extent to which she lost “control” over the writing process. According to Layla, although she was aware of the prompt and was engaged in writing in the classroom, in the process she “[got] in her feelings” and stumbled into territories that she imagined to be beyond the scope of the assignment, beyond the view of her teacher, and ultimately beyond the parameters that determine what is appropriate for writing practice in school.

I saw it as an opportunity to express how I felt, and so that’s what I did…. I felt like I was going off of topic so I just went back, like, I had to think about where I was at. Cause I was bout to…. I felt like going in. Cause I was mad at my mom cause she was mad at me…. I was “in my feelings” for a minute. I was like, I’m in school I can’t say what I wanna say. Imma be good (Interview, 10 October 2014)

While she was writing, Layla sensed that her experience of writing was changing, that is, in the midst of responding to the prompt, she could feel the writing process taking her in another direction. She then began to describe “her feelings” and emotions about her
everyday life outside school. Layla viewed these topics as being related to the initial focus of her writing, but “off topic” for the “good” and proper discussions permitted in school. Layla confirmed that she wanted to write more, but she was reminded that she was in school, which prevented her from saying and writing what she wanted and from being recognized as “good.”

Over time, Layla grew to trust me and began to share details about her feelings of being misunderstood by her parents, namely her mother, which she expressed and then blotted out in her classroom writing.

She wants me to dress all girly girl, and that’s not even my style
Like I will put on a pair of sweatpants,
everybody knows that that not my style
and my mom just refuses to accept that I refuse to put on a dress or a skirt, like I don’t want to!...
My dad understands…
She be like ‘You need to be the little girl I raised you to be’ like, No! ‘You can’t make me do it’ and then She be like “I’m gonna get you a dress,” I be like, I’m not gonna wear it you can get it. I might wear it one time, maybe if it’s a holiday but you aint gon' see it again. Imma put it in a bag with all the other old dresses…
She be making me mad, I hate that she be asking me “how to do you want me to do your hair” I’ll tell her and then she’ll change it. Don’t even ask me if you’re not gonna do it
I just feel like “You can’t force me to be something I’m not”
If I don’t wanna dress that way I’m not gonna dress that way…. My mom she just wants me to wear dresses and skirts, because thats what my sister wears… I’m not my sister.
I like sports, in sports you wear shorts and pants..
you don’t wear dresses and skirts unless you’re playing tennis..
I don’t understand it, and everybody gets me but my mom
My mom doesn’t want me to play because she thinks I’m going to get a concussion. I wanted to play, everybody wants me to play, I wanted to play myself, but she kept telling me no. The Bobcats wanted me, the Steelers wanted me, I wanted to play… I come to the practices because my little brother plays and my dad is the coach… everybody wanted me to play.. they want me to play quarterback, I like playing quarterback, I like throwing the ball, and I’m fast. I like playing quarterback, but I don’t think I’m gonna play. I’m so used to being told no, I’ve moved on to basketball
In this interview, Layla described that she felt her mother was trying to “force her to be something she [was] not.” She felt that she was under surveillance and was coerced to perform femininity related to bodily expression, that is, by dressing and doing activities that were permissible. For Layla, such performances would force her to become someone she is not. Layla saw little logic in her mother’s thinking, particularly when “everyone else understands” her. The passage revealed that Layla had been very active in vocalizing her feelings of being misunderstood. However, after having her requests perpetually unanswered and/or denied, Layla chose to stop talking and to “move on” as strategies for coping with silence/silencing. The act of moving on described in the passage is also characteristic of the ways that Layla’s awareness and understanding of herself in relation to places and spaces were reflected in her writing and the discursive moves she made to construct the text.

The discursive moves made within the text revealed that Layla’s reconceptualization of the writing task from the prompt to “describe a time when she felt misunderstood” or the process of describing an experience of being misunderstood indicated that Layla expressed her emotions to make the writing task personal and meaningful. However, after being reminded that the notebook would be shared with her teacher, in the effort to “stay on topic,” she edited the emotional discourse that was the center of her writing process. Hence, she physically edited her own emotions and feelings to make the writing more appropriate for her reading audience.
“They force you to write about prompts you care nothing about”: The Influence of Writing Prompts on Layla’s Writing

In this study, all opportunities to write were constructed by the writing prompts in the district curriculum, and they were provided as tasks assigned by the teacher. The students received three different kinds of writing prompts to different kinds of writing assignments: (a) bellringers used to engage students attention and to scaffold their understanding of a particular theme or mechanic of writing, (b) guided reading questions collated in packets to support and assess the students’ reading comprehension of a text, and (c) extended writing assignments provided at the culmination of the novel reading unit. A summative approach is taken to measure the students’ mastery of particular genres of writing and the comprehensive and detailed reader response.

Writing prompts are designed to focus the writing process in ways that may empower writers to express themselves. By empowerment, I mean the experience of understanding the issues and criteria established in a prompt and independently governing the process and the product constructed to form an adequate response. Hence, writing prompts are as much about supporting the process of demonstrating knowledge, as they are about enabling writers’ confidence in their ability to produce a quality product independently. Despite these assumptions, however, I found that for Layla, the writing prompts were disempowering, and they constrained her writing process and her identity as a writer. In an interview, she described these constraints within an emotional framework.

In school, they force you to write about prompts you care nothing about…. If it was freedom to write about whatever, like, that’s one thing what I don’t
understand. Like, okay, we gotta write essays, why can’t we write about something we’re actually interested in? Like, why do we have to write about something that no one really cares about? When we could write about something that the, we know, the whole class would be intrigued in. We’re just writing essays, like…. (Interview, 12 March 2015)

Layla’s responses indicated that her experiences of writing in school were largely dominated by interactions where the parameters for writing were set and imposed by the teacher, that is, she was told what to write and when to write. According to Layla, these parameters did not include topics that reflected her or her peers’ interests, issues they cared about, or things that intrigued them. Although she described a classroom of students who were disengaged and disinterested in the topics they had to write about, her description of them as being “forced” indexed the experience of having to suppress their emotions in order to accomplish the writing process.

It is also important to note that Layla’s focus on being forced to both “write about topics they are not interested in,” and write about things that no one “cares about” or is “intrigued in” indicates two dimensions of the social constraint she experienced as a writer. As the first dimension, Layla suggested a constraint between the writer and her experience of having to write about a topic that she did not find interesting. As the second dimension, Layla suggested a constraint between the writer and her ability to produce writing that was of interest to her reading audience. When notions of care and intrigue assumed connections between the thoughts and emotions of an interactant, Layla suggested that without the ability to select topics that were valued by her peers, she was unable to draw on their shared knowledge, experiences, and understandings as tools for building and sustaining their interests in topics through her writing. These dimensions of
writing are constructed in binary opposition to those embedded in the conditions where they are “forced to write about prompts they care nothing about.” Layla’s statements speak to ways in which these kinds of emotional connections were central to her conceptualizations of both “freedom” in writing as well as the power of writing and writers to “capture and sustain” a reading audience in a “free market” of the ideas and products that compete for their attention.

Contrary to the robust and interactive nature of social and emotional interactions in writing and reading interactions that Layla perceived were available, she referred to her classroom writing experience as “just writing essays.” Her use of “just” to describe her engagement in writing is telling because it signals the historical experience of being a writer and a reader in a “writing community” and being situated by rote learning and skill-driven activities in which writers are emotionally detached from their writing and socially detached from their readers. Consequently, because their writing is culturally depoliticized, it does not serve a social or a personal function.

This whole *Night* book, the book is interesting. But then she talking about we gotta write essay about, I don’t even remember what she said it had to be about. But I’m like, what does this have to do with our life? This, this has nothing to do, this is not going to make us a better person because we writing an essay about somebody else. Like, I just don’t understand it…. They say it’s for the curriculum, but I say forget the curriculum. I just think it’s stupid (Shrugging shoulders) (Interview, 12 March 2015)

In this response, Layla described her interest in the book *Night*, (Wiesel, 1956) and she recounted her memory of the moment the teacher informed her and her peers that they had to write an essay in response to their reading of the book. Layla’s description of the book as “interesting” indexes the extent to which she experienced an emotional reaction
to the people, the issues, and the stories in the book. Her use of “But then” showed the ways in which the teacher’s announcement disrupted Layla, caused her to deviate from her emotional engagement with the text. Hence, Layla pointed to the ways in which “reading time” and “writing time” were constructed as separate and parallel activities. For Layla, the parameters of the writing prompt did not provide her the opportunity to leverage her affective connections to the text as authentic and meaningful prompts for writing.

Although at the time of the interview Layla did not recall the topic of the prompt, she was left with the sense that it had nothing to do with her or her peers, and it did not serve a personal or social function in their lives. Layla’s reference to writing as being “about somebody else” and being “for the curriculum” underscores the ways in which literary representations of her and her peers’ social and cultural communities were not reflected in the curriculum, and the extent to which she perceived that the school ignored, devalued and marginalized the feelings, interests, and the lives of adolescents of African and Latin American heritage. Layla continued, “Like, I just don’t understand. They say it’s for the curriculum. but I say forget the curriculum. I just think it’s stupid.” Although it is clear that Layla conveyed her emotional frustration, the extent to which she revoiced a particular logic about the writing provided to her in school cannot be overlooked. Layla’s use of the pronominal “they” is significant because it situates her understanding of writing prompts and writing in school in the history of the conversations she has initiated between her and her language arts teachers. Across this series of conversations, she was provided with the same response: “It’s for the curriculum.” This statement serves
multiple functions and provides insight into Layla’s writing in school as situated by the school’s culture, teacher-student interactions, and student writing interactions.

(a) **School culture.** The culture of schooling is curriculum driven, and the pedagogies and products are established by the district and implemented by the teacher. In both cases, the teacher and the students are positioned as servants to the text, regardless of the nuances of the context. The school culture represents a closed view of the ownership of teaching and learning as belonging to and primarily directed by “the curriculum.” The personification of “the curriculum” as a “person“ positions teachers and students in an inequitable relationship where they are required to comply. In these contexts, what they do and why they must comply are non-questions because their positions as servant-workers are naturalized and normalized.

(b) **Teacher-student relationship.** This relationship reflects Layla’s history of being in interaction with teachers who offer little explanation beyond those associated with the curriculum. Conversations around writing that have solely focused on writing for the curriculum have historically reified Layla’s belief that school and writing in school is not relevant to her. Therefore, this statement speaks to the larger experience of not having experienced pedagogies of care and love in writing instruction, especially those that engender a view of writing as having personal and social uses.

(c) **Student writing interaction.** What is critical to Layla’s statement is the fact that the statement “They say it’s for the curriculum” reflects the history of her
teachers having provided a similar response. What cannot be lost is the fact that this statement also represents the multiple times that Layla has had the courage to ask the question. Her repeated inquiries led to an experience of questioning and pleading for something different. These interactions marked repeated experiences of rejection and denial when Layla asked for a space and a place for her own writing. Continued rejection can be detrimental to the ways in which students imagine themselves and the power of their voice in school and in the world. Layla described ways in which the writing prompts cut short opportunities for her and her peers to be instrumental in changing their lives through writing. Rejection reifies the belief that students’ feelings do not matter.

Although Layla was frustrated by the repeated message that the writing was “for the curriculum,” in a previous interview she discussed her feelings about Elie Wiesel’s *Night*. On this occasion, she situated the teacher’s responses in relation to the underlying messages being communicated to her by the district.

Night is one of the first books I have actually felt interested in. No, it’s the only book I have been interested in; and it’s still not that interesting. It’s talking about the Holocaust and Jews. Yes, we understand that that happened, but that was like how many years ago? Like I just don’t understand, I don’t understand why it’s not up to date. Like, they don’t change the curriculum. They don’t change nothing around here with the district” (Interview, 19 October 2015)

Although Layla’s comment suggested that there are parts of the book that she “felt interested in” or emotionally connected to, the curriculum’s preoccupation with texts about historical events baffled her. For Layla, books that reflect the events of her life, her community, and her generation are the most interesting.
I only like the ones where you can like speak your mind about how you feel, like that Frederick Douglass essay. I get that it’s our history and we supposed to know that but it’s so boring, like she doesn’t make teaching fun and that just annoys me. Like, I just sit in class, wondering when the bell’s gonna ring. (Interview 2 May 2015)

Although Frederick Douglass was of African heritage, Layla still found the act of writing about him to be boring. This finding is important because it speaks to the ways in which superficial approaches to cultural responsiveness that only provide books based on the race, ethnicity, language or cultural background of the author or the characters may not necessarily align with the social and emotional needs of adolescent students in particular spaces, places, and times.

It is important to note that Layla distinguished between two kinds of writing prompts: (a) ones where she was able to speak her mind about how she felt, and others “like that Frederick Douglass essay,” which she implied are (b) ones where she is required to speak her mind about a topic and denied opportunities to speak her mind about her feelings. Although she preferred the first kind, her writing interactions in school were dominated by the obligatory relationship to her writing. When she wrote about topics, she “gets” she is “supposed to know.” In focusing on writing about topics, Layla perceived limited or no opportunities where she could “speak her mind” about her feelings. Her disposition to “just sit in class, wondering when the bell’s gonna ring” indexes the ways in which she is did not feel connected to teaching and learning. the pedagogies used in writing instruction did not engage her curiosity or her emotions.
I found that these constraints influenced how Layla approached writing and writing interactions in school. In an interview conducted in the latter portion of the school year, I asked her about her interest in writing in school.

“Those essays be dumb, so it’s like I don’t care. As long as I get it done. Like, that’s my main goal is to make sure my work gets done so I don’t got to hear my dad’s mouth and my mom’s mouth. It don’t got to be right, as long as it’s done. Like, I don’t care…. [I write in school] Cause I need the grades. I don’t do it just to do it” (Interview, 12 March 2015)

Layla summarized her experiences across multiple writing opportunities in one statement:

“Those essays be dumb.” Based on the “essays be[ing] dumb,“ she elected not to make any emotional investment in writing them. She focused instead on “getting them done” so that she could appease her parents and receive the grades necessary to show her proficiency in an area. Thus, her statement indicated the ways in which her motivations to write in school were primarily motivated by extrinsic factors.

However, it is important to note that Layla’s commitment to getting good grades did not change, and she was still committed to completing the writing tasks. The quality of the essays, however, does not reflect her capacities as a writer. Layla’s use of “dumb” to describe the essays, specifically the essay topics, is significant. Her use of the habitual “be,” which is used in African-American rhetorical discourse, emphasized the ways in which she personified the essay topics as always “dumb” because the topics demonstrate a level of ignorance and unawareness of her and her peer’s everyday lives, issues, and interests. By positioning the essays as dumb, she indirectly claimed her status as an intelligent person and a capable writer. Despite this view of herself, her statement signaled the ways in which she coped with(in) these inequitable conditions by
suppressing her feelings of discontent and frustration and focusing on the work required of her. This focus on doing “the work” or “just getting it done,” meant investing little or no emotion or thought in her writing, or improving her writing performance over time. Sadly, however, her response also revealed the extent to which she was rewarded both in and outside school for her underachievement.

Although the writing prompts constrained Layla’s ability and desire to make an emotional and intellectual investment in writing, I found that some features in the contexts of writing outside school empowered her to write because she felt committed.

“I can just come up with the topics as I go, as I think about it. But in school, it’s not the same”: Influence of Graphic Organizers on Layla’s Classroom Writing

I found that in school, the students not only were told what to write about but also were provided organizers that told them how to write. although heuristics and graphic organizers are useful for helping novice writers understand the form and function of writing, I found that for writers who do not perceive themselves as novices or “non-writers,” these tools constrain their ability to move through the writing process in ways that feel the most authentic. In an interview that took place following the submission of her informational essay, I asked Layla how her writing process in school compared with her writing process outside school:

H: You write on your own, but coming to write in this class is different, is that true? How is it different?
Layla: Cause when I’m writing by myself it’s like I’m free to write whatever I want to write, like, I can write about anything. But then, when it comes to like in school, they give you, like a, like….
You have to have a topic, you have to like have all these paragraphs, but if I’m writing at home
I can just come up with the topics as I go, as I think about it. But in school it’s not the same. That’s why I don’t like writing. (Interview, 10 February 2015)

In addition to describing differences in the freedom she experienced in what she could write about, Layla described differences in the ways in which she was free or constrained in moving through the writing process. At home, she is free to direct her writing process. Layla described her writing process in school as predetermined by the demands “they give” her. Her focus on “what” they gave her indicated that she was constrained not only by the topic but also by the features and directives of the instructional tools that mediated her writing.

Layla moved from describing the process of receiving a graphic organizer to providing details about the directives provided in the handout: “You have to have a topic, you have to like have all these paragraphs.” It is important to note that Layla’s use of the word “topic” does not refer to the subject or general theme of the essay, but instead is a conflation of the notions of topic and topic sentences. The topic of the essay was provided in the writing prompt. Her reference to needing to “have all these paragraphs” pointed to the ways in which she responded to the structure or the structuring of her writing and the rigidity of the writing process inscribed through the graphic organizer in contrast to the general topic of the writing prompt.

Layla’s shift from first to second person narration underscored her focus on constraints in the writing process, which were associated with the graphic organizer. As she shifted from the pronoun “I” as in “I’m free to write what whatever I want to write,” to the pronominal “you” to refer to herself as a student being directed to and through
writing in the classroom. This shift is significant because it signals the ways in which the use of graphic organizers (a) makes the writing feel less personal, (b) makes her feel distant from or emotionally connected to the writing process, and (c) makes her feel less in control of her personal expression.

In her final shift to “I,” she returned to describing her writing process at home. In contrast to having a topic and having to “come up with all these paragraphs,” at home Layla suggested that she could write about a topic as [she goes] and as [she] think[s] about it. Layla’s use of the phrase “come up with,” underscores the extent to which graphic organizers constrained her generative processes or abilities to “come up with” topic sentences in order to construct paragraphs. In Layla’s use of the phrase, “as I think about” contextualizes this constraint in relation to time. Hence, she suggested that the experience of constraint in using graphic organizers was particularly constraining in the early phases of writing when she was thinking about the topic and beginning the work of organizing her thoughts around the topic. She suggested that the timing of the use or distribution of graphic organizers did not align with her needs as a writer and therefore constrained her writing process.

The review of my field notes and classroom teaching artifacts provided an additional context for understanding Layla’s experience, particularly her writing about The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave by Frederick Douglass. This additional context underscored Layla’s point about the timing and use of graphic organizers in relation to the processes of thinking about a topic and writing about it.
### Table 7

**Instructional Sequence and Field Notes on Layla's Classroom Writing and Use of Graphic Organizers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Day</th>
<th>Handout/ Graphic Organizer Provided</th>
<th>Student Activity Observed in the Field</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>11/18/14</td>
<td>KWL Chart; Introduction to Writing Prompt and Literary Genre</td>
<td>The students shared things they knew about Douglass and questions and/or information they wanted to learn during their reading of the book. They began reading <em>Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>11/24-26</td>
<td><em>Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave</em>: Close Reading Selection #1- Text Dependent Questions and <em>Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave</em>: Close Reading Selection #2- Text Dependent Questions</td>
<td>Read Aloud in Class/Holiday Students answered the questions independently or in small groups, in class and for homework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>12/1/14</td>
<td>Writing Portfolio: Writing a Thesis (Claim) Statement</td>
<td>Teacher and students defined a claim and used the strategy of Turning the Question Around to develop a thesis statement in response to the writing prompt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12/2/14</td>
<td>Quoting Frederick Douglass on the effects of literacy as a slave and as a free man and excerpts from Douglass's speeches: “What Are the Colored People Doing for Themselves? (the introductory and concluding paragraphs of the speech only) and “Excerpts from Self-Made Men (A Speech) by Frederick Douglass, 1872“</td>
<td>Students read speeches, highlighted passages that stuck out to them, then cited the passage, wrote the quote and interpreted the meaning and implication of the quote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12/8/14</td>
<td>Writing Portfolio: Making an Outline (for essay)</td>
<td>Students are given sentence strips of paper featuring details of a sample essay, “Jacob Lawrence, an American Storyteller.” They are asked to work in a small group to organize the details into an organized essay using the organizer (including space for evidence and associated details) as a guiding template.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12/9/14</td>
<td>Writing Portfolio: Making an Outline (for essay)</td>
<td>Students are assigned time to fill out their organizer in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12/10/14</td>
<td>Writing Portfolio: Making an Outline (for essay)</td>
<td>Students are assigned time to fill out their organizer in class</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continued
My field notes showed that 1 December 2014, the students were provided graphic organizers to help them write their essays. In their initial interaction with the organizer the focus was on developing a thesis statement. It is important to note that the strategy used to help students develop their thesis statement or claim was embedded in an insular process of “turning the question around“ or “turning the prompt into a question and then writing a statement to answer the question.“ Hence, the thesis statement was already given, and the students were not required or provided an opportunity to probe their own thinking, feelings, or responses to the literature to “come up with“ the topic of the essay or the argument they were to make about it.

After the teacher and students established the thesis statement, the students were provided with two excerpts from Douglass’s speeches and an associated graphic organizer. The students were told that these speeches were delivered after Douglass became a free man. The students were asked to read passages aloud, and they were encouraged to identify quotes or details from the text to support their claims about the effects of literacy on Frederick Douglass as a free man. In the subsequent classes, the students were provided with graphic organizers that showed them how to outline their
essays. In one class, they were provided with the sentences of an essay and asked to use their knowledge of essay features to organize the statements into a sample essay. In another class, they were provided with a similar template to construct their own outline of a five-paragraph essay. Ultimately, Layla’s response and my field notes showed that although the students were provided strategies for constructing thesis statements (claims), main ideas, topic sentences, and supporting details, they were not provided adequate time to establish their thoughts and feelings about the topic or claims that they could use as thesis statements in their essays. Instead of having time to “come up with” a topic that they felt prompted to write about, they were given one that they had limited knowledge about, which limited their ownership of the argumentative strategies embedded in the writing practice. Layla’s response suggested that she perceived essay writing in school as a set of separate topics and answers or responses they had to “come up with,” instead of a dialogic process in which she could think about the text and the topic before “com[ing] up“ with sub-claims and details as “[she] thinks about it.“ This perception was underscored by the sense of constraint she experienced in her ability to connect with or participate in the writing process beyond rote levels of engagement, which included constraint on the inner dialogue that usually emerged in Layla’s writing outside school.

Layla indicated that it is for these reasons that she “don’t like writing.” I found that her dislike for “topic“ writing was specific to her writing in school where “topic“ was defined in disconnected ways. In the interviews with Layla about her writing in other contexts, I found that she used the same features of writing to talk about her writing in different ways. Over the course of the study period, I learned that Layla had a history of
keeping a journal and more recently of writing for Wattpad.com, an online writing
community. Although she saw the benefits of journal writing, she had trouble sustaining
her interest in writing without an audience, and she had trouble keeping her journal
hidden from her younger brother. Over time, she shifted from writing in her paper-based
journal to writing short stories online. In a discussion about her writing online, I noticed
that Layla used an array of privacy features offered by the space to ensure that she was
known by the strangers who read her writing, but she was “unknown” by her family.
Noting the similarities in the desires for privacy, I asked her to address the extent to
which her writing for Wattpad functioned as a journal:

H: This is your private space, it sounds like it is kinda like a journal, no?
Layla: I would say it’s not really like a journal, because it’s like I don’t write. I
was gonna do like a book, like and it’s just like my thoughts and stuff on certain
situations.
But then, like, like my books I write they’re about topics.
Sometimes I even go on there and ask people for references, like what do you
guys what to hear, what do you guys want to see,
I’ll ask people like if anyone wants to be a character in a book, like I’ll give
people a chance (Interview, 12 March 2015)

In this discussion, Layla distinguished journal writing from the writing she did in her
books. The descriptions of here books as being “about topics” instead of a random
assortment of her “thoughts and stuff on certain situations” indicated her awareness of a
topic as premised on a sense of coherence and continuity. Hence, she highlighted the
ways in which the graphic organizers reflected, constructed, or caused her to feel a sense
of disjuncture and discontinuity in her efforts to write about a topic.

Layla’s discussion about how she generated ideas for topics while writing in
conversations with other members of the Wattpad community further indexed the extent

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to which the dialogue and continuity between she and other writers and readers were critical in the planning and organizing of her writing. Layla’s statements highlighted the ways in which graphic organizers also constrained her ability to converse with others and/or generate feedback about ways to construct or connect the topics and details preferred by an audience of potential readers.
Chapter 5: Findings on Mali’s Classroom Writing

As I pointed out at the beginning of the previous chapter, the findings helped to build a big picture of the constraints on Black adolescent females’ writing in school. This study addressed the research questions listed below:

1. How do Black adolescent females’ perceptions of the school’s expectations of writing influence their writing in and for school?
2. How do Black adolescent females take up writing prompts in school?
3. How do Black adolescent females take up graphic organizers in school?

While the findings for each participant revealed experiences of constraint in writing, in this chapter I report the findings related to the participant Mali. I found that her experiences of constraint emerged from an experience of political constraint. By political constraint, I mean the restrictions imposed on students’ ability to address issues of race, racism, ethnicity, and society and to engage in counter storytelling in and through writing. Mali’s experience of political constraint involved related forms of political constraint, including what I refer to as dialogic constraint and rhetorical constraint. While both constraints are related to the sense of political constraint that she perceived to be central in the expectations for writing in school, they were encountered and expressed in relation to different aspects of writing instruction, specifically writing prompts and graphic organizers.
As discussed in the previous chapter, all opportunities to write provided in the classroom were facilitated by a writing prompt. These writing prompts defined what students were required to write about in relation to their experiences at school, in society, and particularly in the English literature curriculum. The analysis of the field notes, classroom observations, student writing, and in-depth interviews revealed that Mali experienced writing prompts in school as restricting the kinds of conversations she could have about the topics highlighted in the curriculum.

I found that Mali experienced what I refer to as dialogic constraint in her writing. By dialogic constraint, I mean the restrictions imposed on the kinds of conversations students can have about a topic. This conceptualization of dialogic constraint includes (a) restrictions on the kinds of conversations a reader-writer can have with herself as she is thinking about what to write and how to respond to a writing prompt, (b) restrictions on the kinds of conversations reader-writers can have with the literature in their reader-responses to it. When these prompts are provided prior to reading, the framing of the writing prompt can also frame the ways in which readers engage the act of reading, that is, the ways in which they are prompted to think about particular issues and perspectives; and (c) restrictions on the kinds of conversations students can have with one another in relation to their shared and non-shared experiences and perspectives as racialized beings. Over all, these findings revealed the ways in which the writing prompts provided in school constrained Mali’s ability to hear, share, and integrate marginalized perspectives of self, society, and literature in and through her writing. Thus, Mali was constrained in the ways in which she could leverage and/or extend her and her peers’ political
knowledge and racialized perspectives in the contexts and content of their writing. The data analysis revealed that the silences regarding issues of race, ethnicity, and identity in school and society, which were embedded in the writing prompts and in constructed contexts of writing, constrained her ability to capture and present her racialized and cultural interpretations of literary texts in her classroom writing. I also found that political constraint not only was enabled by dialogic constraint about the topics provided to the students but also was enabled by the structures through which the students were required to frame the substance of what they wrote.

In this classroom setting, the students were provided with graphic organizers as tools to support their movements through varying elements of the writing practice in a literary genre and the varying phases of the writing process that were engaged in over time. Although these tools were helpful for some students, I found that for Mali, the elements included in the graphic organizer reflected particular narrative structures that constrained the range of rhetorical strategies by and through which she could communicate with her reading, which I refer to as rhetorical constraint. By rhetorical constraint, I mean the restrictions imposed on students’ abilities to design interactions and/or leverage the rhetorical strategies that they perceive will be the most persuasive and have the greatest effect on their audience.

Mali experienced rhetorical constraint because she was not only restricted in not only what and why she could write but also restricted in how she could write. Writers’ identities shape the stories they tell and the rhetorical decisions they make about how they tell their stories. Graphic organizers are often perceived as neutral templates that
writers can fill with writing. However, Mali experienced the organizational schemes presented in the graphic organizers as forcing her to use structures that were inauthentic compared with the discourse patterns that she used in her everyday writing.

“I always have to go the Godly ways... I just decided to smile”: Influence of Perception of the School’s Expectations for Writing

During the study period, I attended the school regularly. My role of participant observer allowed me to be in the class during instruction, and it created the opportunity for me to travel with the teacher and the students to the auditorium for class meetings, to the library for school-based workshops, and to the computer lab for standardized assessments. It was in the context of travelling to the lab for assessments that I first encountered Mali directly. After the students completed their Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) assessment (Field note, 13 October 2014), Mali and a peer who was sitting next to her were conducting Google and YouTube searches on the internet. When I crossed the room to begin a conversation, her peer informed me that she was looking up natural hairstyles. In the midst of the conversation, Mali expressed her views that Black women were brainwashed and always wanted to look like White women (Field note, 13 October 2014).

From that day forward we had many conversations about ideologies of race and beauty, and as a researcher I listened for opportunities and silences in the classroom when she could share her racial and ethnic perspectives. Her classroom writing in response to the prompt, “Describe someone who has inspired you” was my first opportunity.
Nikkota Amoah, the “African Queen”

When I hear the word “inspire” I always think of one person Nikki. I always call her African Queen because, the pride and loyalty she has in Africa is more than I have ever seen. When I was 7 years old, my school travelled to Kumasi a city in Ghana. When I was there I met Nikki she was helper/mentor at the school I was studying at. She [taught] me how to use a computer for the first time. She asked to become my mentor, that moment was the start of something Good. Nikki is 5’7 thin but curvy, skin dark as chocolate, but smooth like rocks. She has kinky hair and always in African clothes. She was about 19 when I met her…. Nikki will always make me laugh even when I’m angry. She says “Yeme Esu abia wo ye Suri,” which means God cries when you are sad. As a Christian I always have to go the “goldly” [Godly] ways… Nikki has inspire[ed] me soo much. When I was coming to America, she said that the color of the African goddess is envied so be aware. She also told me to love myself because there’s no one like me. She’s no[w] 28 years old and have been married for 2 years, she will still inspire me until my last breath. (Classroom Writing, 15 September 2014)

Figure 2 shows the classroom writing Mali composed in response to the prompt to

“Describe someone who has influenced you” (Field note, 15 September 2014). The
writing task was included in a thematic unit on descriptive essay writing. In response to this prompt, Mali decided to write about a mentor whom she encountered as a child travelling in Ghana from her village in Agogo to the city of Kumasi. She described the context in which she met Nikki, and she provided a brief description of how their relationship was constructed. She then described Nikki’s physical appearance, her clothing, her actions, and the advice she had given over time in the effort to introduce her to the reader.

In this introduction, Mali chose to use figurative language to capture the multidimensionality of Nikki’s alluring presence. She described her as “thin but curvy, skin dark as chocolate, but smooth as rocks… she has kinky hair and always in African clothes.” She used similes and metaphors as literary tools for constructing Nikki’s body, skin, color, hair, and clothing as the epitome of beauty, desire, and indulgence. Although it was not required by the prompt, her use of the title, *Nikkota Amoah, the African Queen*, served as an additional strategy to capture the grandeur of her mentor. Mali was aware that her audience was not of African heritage and was not proficient in her first language. To support the reader in perceiving and seeing Nikki as she did, as examples, she used direct quotes in the Tree language with their English translations to guide the readers’ understanding. Interestingly, her description of Nikki as an “African Queen” rather than a Ghanaian Queen enables that issues of nation, color, and beauty that are embedded in her writing to be accessible to her audience, which in this case is a White American female teacher. She ends with descriptive updates on Nikki’s life in Ghana and the enduring impact of Nikki’s inspiration on her as a girl in America.
Mali organized her essay around a set of time shifts, which are distinguishable by the word “when”: “When I was seven,” “When I was there” and “When I came to America” mark transitions in her storytelling. Her use of the word “when” provides temporal and spatial markers that not only index structural shifts in the essay, but also point to her historical transcultural and transnational movements across place, space, and time. These moments capture the move from her village into the city of Kumasi, the move to a schoolhouse where she was exposed to technology and her mentor, and ultimately the move from Ghana to America.

It is important to note that issues of color and power are anchor themes in her writing. Positions of royalty (African Queen) and divinity (African goddess) are associated with being an African woman. The color of her skin is positioned as a cherished resource that all others seek or covet. As an African immigrant female with dark skin, Nikki’s advice is two-pronged: to love herself and value her uniqueness and to “be aware” of others who lack or do not share her skin color. The gravity of these statements are significant not because Nikki is a beautiful African woman but because the statements were provided in the context of an equitable mentoring relationship. Because of this reality, it is important to note that these brief passages index what Nikki said in complex extended conversations about color, race, power, beauty, femininity, nation, society, and so on. In the effort to protect Mali from the effects of colorism that she will encounter in America, Nikki used the identity of an “African goddess” to disrupt the racist and sexist ideologies embedded in colorist, racist, white supremacy hegemonic discourses that position women with dark skin from Africa on the lowest rung of the
sociopolitical and aesthetic totem pole. Her counter narrative is embraced as an
inspiration that Mali pledges to draw on “till [she] takes her last breath.” The dramatic
way that Mali concluded the essay reflects the poignant and enduring relevance of
Nikki’s advice and the critical ways in which she relies on her inspiration to survive
interactions in her everyday life.

In the interviews with Mali, I found that the direct and indirect quotes about Nikki
were soundbites and in some ways soundtracks of longer conversations about the racial,
gendered, ethnic (national) experiences, understandings, and perspectives that she
brought to her literacy education in the classroom. In other words, I found that although
Mali described her mentor to fulfil the criteria of the writing task, when I positioned
myself as a researcher who tried to see not only what she was writing about but also the
person that she was, I found that she provided both a window into her thinking and
feelings as an African immigrant girl with dark-colored skin and a window frame that
allowed me to see how she approached cross-racial interactions with those in and outside
school who did not share her skin color or African heritage. I found that Mali’s writing
was situated in racial and spatial perspectives that were related to transnational and
transcultural experiences and understandings of being Ghanaian in Africa and becoming
Black in America.

Through this frame, I found that Mali’s writing revealed an experience of
constraint outside school, which I later found to be connected to her experiences of
writing in school. This constraint is evident in the following excerpt:
Nikki will always make me laugh even when I’m angry. She says “Yeme Esu abia wo ye Suri,” which means God cries when you are sad. As a Christian I always have to go the “goldly” [Godly] ways…. Nikki has inspire[ed] me soo much.

In this passage, Mali provided a broad view of her emotions when she struggled with feelings of anger and sadness. Nikki was positioned as both a resource and a driver of change. She was a source helping her to process her feelings and reposition her thinking about herself, her beauty, and her value. Mali showed a renewed understanding of the ways her responses to life and her reflection should be aligned with Christian precepts that demand different ways of being and becoming, which differ from the anger and sadness that she had experienced. Her identity as a Christian constrained her negative emotional responses. It is interesting that in the interviews with Mali about her writing, she discussed her experiences in her predominantly White church, which pointed to differentiated approaches to being and performing a Christian identity, and therefore different ways in which she relied on “Godly ways” as constraints.

In the introductory interview with Mali, to become familiar with her I used her writing as opportunity for her to talk about herself through the experiences and understandings of the discourse choices she made in her writing. Before we discussed her writing, I asked Mali how she felt about being a participant in the interview generally and specifically how she felt about being asked questions about her cultural background. In response to these questions, Mali informed me that interviews are a routine part of her everyday life outside school.

Yeah, they ask me about it a lot. Um, people in my church. I go to a white neighborhood church, So they, it’s like, I don’t know they so interested in me, I guess, cause I’m from somewhere else. So, they always ask about this, and about that.

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Sometimes it’s like, they ask stupid questions, like they ask do Africans live in trees. Somebody asked me that! Somebody asked me if there’s water. If there’s internet, if there’s all these stuff, yeah… With the hair, she wants to feel my skin (shakes head). Like she say can I feel your skin. She say it looks different… It’s like teenagers, and also like, 20, 21 [year olds] White Americans, yeah…

Heather: How do you deal with that?
I am taught to be “respectful” (air quotes), so I just walk away. (Interview, 21 October 2014)

As a member of a church in a predominately White neighborhood, Mali described being asked ignorant and condescending questions related to the humanity of her people and the development and “civilization” of her society by young and older White Americans. Despite the variance in the age and gender of the members and the level of disrespect embedded in the questions, Mali used silence and withdrawal as a “Godly” response strategy. Her use of air quotes in describing these practices as “respectful” indicated the extent to which she questioned the validity and appropriateness of her actions. Nevertheless, her self-control in the face of these experiences showed her awareness of her body in the space and the many ways in which it might be read as either confirming and contesting assumptions and stereotypes about Africa and Africans. In a later conversation, I found that her actions and reactions were a conscious negotiation of the ways in which her body was read and racialized as Black.

I really don’t like pretending to be this happy
At home, like he knows how I am I don’t really pretend
I do pretend in church to be like this you know, but I’m really not
And then like, if you say something smart, I just like, made this like mad face, but I really, I really want to tell her, like, say something back to that person
But at my church with white people I can’t do that because they will get a bad, They will say ‘Oh she’s Black you know how Black people are loud and all that, so, it’s like, I stay quiet. (Interview, 18 March 2015)
Mali situated constraint within the enduring experience of having to pretend to be happy, or in this case pretending not to be saddened or angered by the comments and questions she encountered in her church. She described wanting to express her anger and wanting to respond, but she was constrained by how she and her actions would be perceived by the predominantly White audience. In this case, she alluded to using silence as a strategy to resist the reification of the cultural stereotypes ascribed to Black people and to distinguish herself as an African Ghanaian who was different from the locals who shared her skin color. I found that her experiences of “being African Ghanaian” and “becoming recognized as Black person” constrained her in relation to she responded in these interactions. It is interesting that Mali’s silence was constructed as both the acceptance of and the resistance to stereotypes about Black people. On one hand, her performance of silence was used to construct a counter narrative to ideologies that depict Black people as “loud and all that.” On the other hand, her explanation of these assertions showed a partial acceptance of the negative claims about the cultural practices of some native-born Black people, which were unlike those of African immigrants. The following passage exemplifies Mali’s experiences in church.

I swear the pastor, the church pastor, made a really racist comment, but I just decided to smile because I was XXX (inaudible) day. So we were, the youth group was supposed to come early at church. I was the first one there. And then You know what she said? She like, “Oh, the first person, um, Mali’s the first person here. The one from Ghana is the first person here.” Because Black people are always late. So I was like, and then she started laughing when she say that. I really, I just wanna like, speak (throwing her head back) like, just tell her. But I just can’t. (Interview, 18 March 2015)
In this passage, Mali recalled an interaction in her church’s youth ministry, in which a senior leader in the church made fun of Mali because she arrived at church early. Although the language used by the pastor suggested that she was making fun of Ghanaians and Ghanaian culture, Mali interpreted the interaction through a colored and racial lens where she perceived her body was being read not as African, but in terms of her “Blackness,” that is, as a Black American. Instead of accepting the association between lateness and Ghanaian culture established by the pastor, Mali assumed that the pastor’s interpretative frame was local, and that her skin color was read in relation to stereotypes of Blackness and Black people. It is interesting that she ascribed the negative stereotype to Black Americans rather than the culture of Ghanaian Africans. Although the extent to which the pastor read her behavior in relation to culture or race is unclear, it is obvious that Mali did not perceive an opportunity to have the conversation. Despite the burning desire to respond to, or “speak back,” to the pastor’s comments, Mali exercised constraint. The depth of her thoughts and feelings were silently masked by a smile.

Ultimately, Mali’s writing revealed that she negotiated issues of constraint in her experiences with predominantly White audiences outside school. I found that issues of skin color and race in relation to “being African Ghanaian” and “being recognized as a Black American” were central factors in the decisions she made about speaking to and speaking back to audience members in these contexts. Her writing revealed the ways in which issues of race and color mattered to the ways she read the world and the ways in which she understood her body to be read by society and her predominantly white audience. Her consciousness about how her body was read culturally and politically
reflect a broader understanding about how representations of Africa, Africans, and Black Americans are constructed in society and are negotiated in face-to-face interactions.

Mali’s responses exemplified the ways in which individuals use their agency to construct and contest the identities, positions, and positionings that are ascribed to them because of their ethnic and racial identities. Mali’s responses also indicated that her decisions to speak were influenced by her understanding of the audience’s perception of her, her actions, and her reactions. Mali’s everyday interactions outside the classroom were with an audience of predominantly White people who were sensitive to the color of her skin. Consequently, Mali cautiously negotiated the perceptions and stereotypes of what it means to be African Ghanaian and Black American. When she encountered the condescending questions of ignorant people and the micro aggressions by persons in authority, Mali chose the strategy of silence to maintain “godly ways” and a Christian identity. The strategies included performances of smiling, walking away, and “pretending to be happy,” when she felt angry, frustrated, and sad. Mali’s smile reminded me of the function of a “mask,” which was discussed 120 years ago by the African-American poet, playwright, and novelist, Paul Laurence Dunbar:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries

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To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask! (Paul Lawrence Dunbar, 1896)

As I got to know Mali, I learned more about the “tears and sighs” behind her youthful smile and the ways in which processes of seeing color and race, and being seen and read by others constrained her experience of writing in school.

Mali’s Experience of Writing in School

Although the students were able to generate appropriate responses to the prompts, I found that the content in Mali’s writing did not reflect all she knew and wanted to say. I found that the writing prompts constrained what she could say about topics in multiple ways:

1. They constrained the range of the conversations she could have around the topic
2. They constrained the function of conversation about a topic
3. They constrained what counts as knowledge and who counts as knowledgeable about the topic
4. They constrained the kinds of conversations that can be used as resources in writing.

Each these four constraints are discussed below.

Constrained the range of conversation she could have around the topic.

Writing prompts are often viewed as politically neutral, decontextualized, and bias-free tools that are used to trigger writing practice (Graham, 1992; Hudson, Lane, & Mercer, 2000; Graham, 2006).
2005), but I found that Mali experienced writing prompts as already embedded in issues of people and politics (race, place, and space) or as already political. By “already political” I mean that writing prompts are not cultivated in a vacuum, but they are created by people situated in particular places, spaces, and cultural communities, and they are designed, packaged, and provided to teachers in a curriculum that serves a sociopolitical function. By already peopled, I mean that the topics and directives constructed in the writing prompts are inhabited by the epistemologies, ontologies, experiences, and understandings of the people who created them. Therefore, the racial and spatial backgrounds of curriculum developers cannot be overlooked.

The people and politics embedded in the prompts constrained Mali’s ability to respond.

Mali: You know, like, it’s mostly white people talking about this They will not talk about how you know, like about, something in society or something. They will always give you the um, maybe the easy thing because you are like a child. You don’t need to be talking about stuff like that. You don’t need to be noticing something is going on here They always want to give you that happy thing. They want to make you close-minded about all these issues. Yeah, they don’t want you to think about all these stuff, very close-minded.

H: Who is “they?”

Mali: The people who control everything in school I mean people give her what to talk about right? They have the thing that they should talk about, they don’t write it. So, I think it’s somebody up there, maybe the government of the state, you know, people like that. (Interview, 18 March 2015)

It is interesting that Mali conceptualized the writing prompts in her class as extensions of spoken conversations begun by adults who were situated in particular White racial and
spatial communities and then distributed to the children in other communities. In the process of translating these White adult conversations into discussions that are suitable for children, as Mali suggested, White curriculum designers construct writing prompts that extract discussions about issues in society from writing, distract youth from noticing and reflecting on the inequities in society, and insert “easy” and “happy” topics to placate students’ feelings of anger, sadness, and frustration.

Central to Mali’s argument is the notion that writing prompts are tools for “make[ing] children close-mindedness about all these issues.” To accomplish this task, Mali suggested that writing prompts do not invite her and her peers to (a) talk about social issues, (b) be uncomfortable, or (c) notice what is going on in the country. According to Mali, this close-mindedness (i.e., acts of not noticing and not talking about difficult and sad social issues) is embedded in the writing prompts because White adults want to protect the innocence of children. Although this strategy is a part of the cultural values deemed appropriate for youth, which are situated in White middle-class communities, the strategy of not noticing the conditions of others may be helpful in protecting the youthful innocence of White children in middle-class communities. However, when they are imposed in classrooms on Black students who do not have the luxury of “not noticing” or who are dealing with difficult and disparaging social conditions, they are prompted to deny, ignore, and silence conversations about their lived experiences as marginalized Americans.

Mali situated the practices of closed-mindedness in the context of a national system where “White people [are] in control,” which is otherwise known as a system of
White supremacy. In this context, notions of close-mindedness serve the political function of maintaining the subjugation of marginalized populations and reproducing the inequitable social order. In an interview with Mali about Ghanaian culture and American culture, she offered detailed observations of critical differences in American society:

It’s about race here. Race against race…. You know how everything depends on what White people say. Everything in here, White people make the decisions on everything. We have to like get on their good sides to be able to do anything. That’s how it is here. (Interview, 18 March 2015)

Her statements reflect that American society is racialized, and racial groups compete with one another for social opportunities. Because White people constitute the ruling majority, appeasing or pandering to their needs and desires are the only avenue that members of marginalized racial groups have to acquire social capital. Thus, Mali was constrained in the discussions of race and society in her writing, which was a strategy for staying on her teacher’s “good side.” Hence, her practices in closed-mindedness were strategies that she use in writing for her White teacher-reader.

Constrained the function of conversation around a topic. I found that Mali’s status as an African immigrant constrained her ability to share her perspectives. I also found that the writing prompts did not address issues of race or support the students in having complex conversations about race in relation to marginalization in America. As a result, the sorely needed opportunities for dialogue did not exist.

Through the interviews and discussions with Mali, I found that racially diverse classrooms are complex spaces. Students of African heritage are overly homogenized
through processes of racialization, and in the process of “becoming Black Americans” the extent to which they are a minority among native-born African-American student populations is overlooked. It is also the case that because of the limited exposure to the rich history of Africans in schools and the heterogeneity of African cultures in African contexts, native-born African Americans lack awareness of the experiences and understandings of Africans and Africa beyond the skewed messages and distorted representations provided in the media. In the same vein, newcomer African youth enter urban communities of Black Americans having had little exposure to the rich history of Black leaders or the diverse experiences and understandings that exist in the Black community. As a result, the “single stories” about one another collide in school and classroom interactions where they share the same space. Through this lens, they see and see one another.

In an interview with Mali about her writing in school, I learned that she wrote outside school. I also learned that she had written a transcultural narrative of the experiences of a Jamaican immigrant trying to make a life for herself in America. Excited about the depth and complexity of her writing, I asked her if she felt that she could write similar content in her language arts classroom. When she responded “No,” I began to question the extent to which as a writer she felt free to write about issues of race, place, and space. She gave the following response to my question, “When don’t you feel like you can speak your mind?”

When you talk about… like, something that may be um, like, you can’t always talk about everything in there like you really can’t, because like, you can’t really...
Like you know how Ms. G is white?...
you can’t say a lot of stuff
and there a lot of majority of Black people
that think that is not true but it really is, so
Like African Americans
like to be honest I think you guys are really blind, you guys are really blind and
how you guys are like raised, are really maybe not very open minded about a lot
of stuff. kids are not very open minded about stuff
Heather: What about the Hispanic children?
The Hispanic children’s struggle is like the African Americans but I they get
treated much, a little better because they are like, lighter, it all depends of your
skin color, it really do. (Interview, 18 March 2015)

Mali revealed her belief that the classroom is not a safe space to talk and write and that
the presence of race(s) posed the greatest threat or constraint to her freedom as a writer.
In her response, she continually paused, searching for words to describe her experience,
which reflected the pressure of constraint: “You can’t always talk about everything in
there...you really can’t, because like you can’t really.” Her language conveyed the duality
of constraint in relation to what she could talk about and what she believed that she and
her peers were allowed to do or accomplish through language and literary interactions.
Hence, she addressed the extent to which writing prompts constructed opportunities for
her and her peers to discuss political issues of race, class, and culture, which were often
constructed as “controversial” or “taboo.” Because of the limitations on speech, she also
suggested that not only “[you] can’t say a lot of stuff” but also “you can’t really” do or be
a lot of stuff. In this statement, she was speaking to the ways in which the constrained
topics imposed constraints on her body. These intellectual and political constraints were
imposed on the bodies of her peers. Because the topics were constrained, she could not
disrupt the status quo, interrupt patterns of thinking, or say or write anything that was not “politically correct.”

It is important to note that although race and ethnicity imposed constraints on her speech, the presences of Whiteness, Blackness, and “Brownness” did so in different ways. She marked the Whiteness of her teacher as the first constraint. She said, “You know how Ms. G is White.” Her use of “You know” implied that she perceived that we had a shared understanding of Whiteness and racism. She indicated that her teacher’s authority in the space limited what she could write about and discuss. In a racist society, Whiteness and White supremacy is normalized and naturalized. Therefore, to raise issues of racism with a White teacher is viewed as a risky endeavor of which the costs and benefits cannot be calculated easily.

It’s about race here. Race against race…. You know how everything depends on what White people say. Everything in here, White people make the decisions on everything. We have to like get on their good sides to be able to do anything. That’s how it is here. (Interview, 18 March 2015)

Mali perceived that America is a nation that is controlled by White people. She described systems, structures, and social relationships that are both constructed and sustained by White people. According to her logic, in order to succeed in this context, you must play by “their” rules. Mali described her experience of “playing the game” or “going along to get along,” that is, choosing not to talk about issues of race as a strategy for social mobility. In this case, “playing the game” was avoiding situations and conversations that might make the teacher uncomfortable or decrease the likelihood that she would make decisions in your favor. According to this rationale, the constraint by these topics was a
deliberate and strategic response to the presence of the White teacher who represented the ongoing presence of White supremacy.

All three participants were selected because of their African heritage and their shared experiences as girls who were racially Black. In theory, as each girl became an American citizen, she became Black in ways that suggest the shared reality of being Black and female in a racist and patriarchal society. While these identities were embraced and cherished by each girl, their racial backgrounds mattered to varying degrees in their experience of writing in school. That is, the racial demographics of their teachers and peer audiences mattered in different ways for each participant. The analysis of the interview data showed that while Layla and Nia situated their experiences of constraint within T “we” identity of a peer community of culturally and linguistically diverse students, Mali consistently described her experience of writing as related to her identity as an African immigrant with dark-colored skin, who was negotiating the contours of a predominantly White and racist society and a classroom context composed of racially diverse African and Latin American peers.

As an additional constraint on her speech, Mali referred to the presence of her Black peers, who were the majority of the students in the classroom. She distinguished between herself as an African immigrant and her African-American peers, and she positioned herself in the minority. Her minority status was further discussed in terms of both her ethnic identity and her cultural background. She described African-American youth as having been socialized in different ways of being and patterns of interaction that made them blind to social issues of society and closed-minded regarding diversity in
thought and perspectives. In doing so, she affirmed the exceptionality of her identity and her rootedness in Africa and African culture. By making this ethnic distinction, she spoke to how the perceived differences in their cultural backgrounds, namely how they were raised. She believed that because of this distinction, safe and productive conversations with her peers about issues of equity and social justice were unlikely.

In this context, Blackness is conceptualized in relation to a local construction of identity that is distinctive to the history of race and racism in America. Blackness, or in this case the historical experience of being and becoming Black in America differed from Mali’s experience, as an African-immigrant. Mali perceived that her peers would not view her experiences of race/racism as an African immigrant as the same or equal to their experiences as native born African Americans. She perceived that her peers would contest her claims to experiences of racism Black in America, and therein contest and critique her identity and experiences of being Black in America. Despite their shared experience of racialization, Mali suggested that because Black youth are immersed in the process, they have grown closed-minded over time. In Mali’s view, her peers have been raised to be “really, really blind” and “not really opened minded about stuff.” Their perceived lack of consciousness and their inflexibility in listening to and accepting diverse perspectives created a context in which Mali was likely to be misperceived and misunderstood. Embedded in this belief is the assumption that African-American youth have narrow, localized, and insulated understandings of race. Mali perceived that these cultural dispositions prevented her from contesting the authenticity of her experiences and denied her the right to express her views of issues of race in America because of her
status as an African immigrant. Therefore, despite the shared skin color and shared racialization of being Black in America, the gap in the constructions of Blackness and Africanness positioned her as an outsider and a kind of “forever foreigner” among her native-born peers of African heritage.

Interestingly, while Mali was aware of her Hispanic peers in the space (i.e., the presence of Brownness), they did not pose a threat to her speech, nor did they appear to be the intended audience for her desired conversations. Instead, they remained in the background, literally and figuratively, of the kinds of conversations she wanted to have, which in this case may indicate issues of race rather than culture or ethnicity. This may in part be attributed to the ways in which colorist perspectives and racial hierarchies afford Hispanic Americans privileges that are unavailable to African Americans who face similar cultural struggles. This hierarchy of skin color was underscored by her perception, “it all depends of your skin color, it really do,” and it highlighted the extent to which the frame she used to perceive and read places and spaces was racialized and color-based.

In a conversation with Mali, she informed me that she had recently watched the film, *Dear White People*, which is a satirical drama about the experiences of students of color at predominantly White institutions of higher education. In the film, the leading protagonist is a girl of mixed heritage who develops the radio broadcast *Dear White People* to speak back to White people and systems of Whiteness. Interestingly, in a conversation about the movie, Mali discussed her desire to write a *Dear America*. I asked her if she felt that she could start *Dear America* in school. I found that her fears about how her speech and her identity might be perceived constrained her writing.
Mali: I just really want to start *Dear America* and how I see it from, um like maybe like a foreign person who came here and thought this place was really nice, but get to see what happens.

H: Do you feel like you could write that in school?

Mali: Um, I would but then, I swe- people would start saying something mean because I’m not Black I’m African, they really would, I swear they would say that. Because like, I don’t know how, like I don’t know what happens in the ghetto, I’ve never lived, that’s not my lifestyle. I don’t know how, like a lifestyle is like a rich spoiled person. I cannot tell that pers, pers… (perspective) I can only tell you my pers… that. It may be not, that’s not how everybody feels because not everybody has lived in the same shoes as I have. And I can’t tell about somebody’s experience because I have not lived in their shoes. But I just talk about how I see things (Interview, 12 March 2015)

Mali described wanting to create a space where she could share her perspective as an African immigrant, and in so doing problematizing representations of America that showed it as a perfect place (i.e., the paradox of America’s problem of race duality) and to expose the underbelly of American society that she had experienced and observed. Despite this desire, she perceived her Black peers as threatening her storytelling and writing. According to Mali, “people would start saying something mean because [she is] not Black.” Although Mali was willing and able to engage in these conversations about issues of race in America, she perceived that her storytelling rights would be contested, and the authenticity of her experiences and understandings as a Black American would be challenged based on her history as an African immigrant. This perception was interrelated with her belief that her peers are closed-minded and intolerant of perspectives on race in America that are different from their own. Although she gave credence to the fact that she and her native-born peers might not be able to understand each another’s cultural experiences, she desired both the space and the opportunity to share her
immigrant’s perspective on race relations and the “American Dream.” Despite her desire for these kinds of conversations, she perceived that no safe space existed for her to share her perspectives, and there was no opportunity for her and her peers to engage in such dialogue.

In part of an interview conducted later in the school year, Mali and I shared our experiences of watching the movie Dear White People. Through the conversation, it became apparent that she and the protagonist shared similar views of issues of race in America and writing. I asked her if she felt she could start a “Dear White People” in school.

H: Do you feel like, you could, do that Dear White People

Mali: I really really want to do that… I just don’t want people to know who I am, but I really really want to do that.

H: So why are you?

Mali: Its always restrictions against, like, you can’t do that… and when people hear my accent that I’m African, they probably will say you don’t know the struggle because you’re African you weren’t here, because mostly Africans live in white neighborhoods (Interview, 18 March 2015)

Mali’s response indicated that she wanted to replicate Dear White People, but she did not feel that she could. Although she believed that she was capable of addressing issues of race in America through writing, she also believed that her native-born peers of African heritage who lived in predominantly Black communities would contest the credibility and authenticity of her story.

Mali’s response was situated in the discussion of what she perceived to be a probable event. However, her comments revealed that she was aware of how others read
her body and her words and that that evaluated her based on what she said, who she was, and where she was from. Mali acknowledged that there are “always restrictions” or constraints on what people can say and how their messages will be understood. Her allusion to what her peers would “probably say when they [heard her] accent” illustrates that it is a type of constraint. Her use of “against” revealed that Mali perceived constraints as external forces and perceptions occurring in the minds of others, which constrain or restrict how they see, hear, and understand her. These constraints are (a) imposed on her by others and (b) obstructions to seeing and hearing the shared experiences of racial discrimination and white supremacy in America. In this interview, (Interview, 18 March 2015) Mali speaks to ways her peers are constrained by what they hear.

In the context of Mali’s school, the writing prompts provided by the district curriculum neither construct nor support writer-reader conversations about issues of race and society and do not give students the opportunity to clarify the misperceptions held by both peers and teachers. In an interview, Mali described wanting her teacher to create writing prompts that were more relevant to the exploration of issues of identity and society.

Like I want Ms. G to write about, who you are in society. I really want her to say we should write an essay about that; and then My audience would be everyone confused in society. Like I really want to write about that. Like who are like African Americans in society? Who are we in society? Who are females, or anybody? (Interview, 18 March 2015)

Mali proposed an essay writing prompt that would require her and her peers to explore “who they are in society.” As a writer, she distinguished her audience as “everyone
confused in society," thereby indexing the extent to which consciousness raising and counter storytelling are firmly embedded in her writing purpose. Through this articulation, Mali named the ways in which the writing interactions among her peers would promote equity and social justice by applying correct perspectives to representations of racial groups, immigrant populations, and gendered groups in order to counter the discourse that did not capture her truth or feature heterogeneous perspectives (Interview, 21 October 2014). I found that much of Mali’s desire for discussion about issues of race and society stemmed from what she perceived to be the media’s distortions of Africa and Africans.

The media makes Africa look so bad. They make them think everybody in Africa are poor. (Interview, 21 October 2014)

I hate the fact that they always show us the huts in the village there are houses made out of cement. That’s not even right, they always showing the bad side. It’s like really really nice there. (Interview 6 February 2015)

Mali called on the media to get their representations of Africa and African “right” through balanced depictions that would illustrate the variety of lived experiences. Similarly, she advocated for balanced representations of self and society in the writing interactions between her and her peers.

It is important to note that Mali called for meaningful and empowering functions of essay writing that not only asked students to acknowledge and document how they were represented or positioned in society in order to address inequities and inaccuracies in ways that spoke back to those in society who were “confused.” In contrast to the silence and silencing of social issues, Mali’s writing prompt would stimulate students to
synthesize the multiple and conflicting voices about who they are in society in powerful and transformative statements about self that could be read by others/Others.

It is important to note that in Mali’s writing prompt, she described not only providing students with a directive but also naming her audience and a meaningful communicative purpose. Her approach forms a stark contrast to the writing prompts provided in school and in standardized assessments that give directions and imply an unnamed audience. In this response, Mali highlighted the ways in which vague prompts and unnamed audiences constrained her writing process. In contrast, the structure, the details, and the focus of her writing prompts positioned Mali and her peers as powerful writers. The writing prompts provided in school do not adequately prepare students to write for and speak to a targeted audience. Therefore, they do not adequately prepare them to join, begin, and extend conversations.

**Constrained what counts as knowledge and who counts as knowledgeable about the topic.** In addition to experiencing constraints to the range of conversations she could have around a topic, I found that Mali felt constrained in her writing about what could be counted as evidence to support her claims. I found that the discourse in school privileged “facts” and marginalized Mali’s ways of knowing as a strategy for minimizing her credibility as a speaker.

In the first unit, both the classroom instruction and the topics of writing prompts were focused on helping students use language to describe the events and people in their lives. The figure below provides a list of the units covered during the study period.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Unit 1</th>
<th>First semester</th>
<th>Big Question: Is the truth the same for everyone?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20 August 2014 – 24 October 2014</td>
<td>Writing Portfolio: Narrative Writing: A narrative regarding truth</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing prompt: How does perspective shape the truth? After reading <em>Nothing But the Truth</em>, write a narrative about a personal experience in which different perspectives made it challenging to learn the truth. Interview a person whose perspective was different from your own and use both perspectives in your narrative. L2 Use point of view and organization strategies (e.g., as in <em>Nothing But the Truth</em>) to develop your work.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Unit 2</th>
<th>Second semester</th>
<th>Big Question: Can all conflicts be resolved?</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27 October 2014 – 9 January 2015</td>
<td>Writing Portfolio: Informative/ Explanatory Writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing prompt: After reading the novel, <em>Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave</em> and other sources, write an informational/explanatory essay that describes the effects of literacy on Frederick Douglass both as a slave and a free man. Cite examples from the text and at least two other sources as evidence to support your thesis (claim). Establish a strong controlling idea with a clearly developed focus.</td>
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The students were encouraged to develop topic sentences and to draw on their experiences and understandings about the event or the person in writing detailed descriptions of both. On multiple occasions, I observed that the teacher told students that they needed to write their own story and that she could not tell their story, but they needed to search their minds and hearts for their own way of seeing and understanding an event or person beyond simply describing them. The talk about evidence and writing changed dramatically when they began the unit on informational essay writing. Although the students and the teacher still used graphic organizers to plot their structure of their essay writing, the expectations for what information (premises, claims) could be used to support their topic sentences (and to construct the body of paragraphs) came to focus on information found exclusively in books.
The following writing prompt was provided for Frederick Douglass’s *Autobiography of an American Slave*: “Describe the effects of literacy on Frederick Douglass and a slave and as a free man.” The subject of the prompt is “the effects of literacy on Frederick Douglas.” In this prompt, the writers were asked to discuss the effects of literacy on Douglass in two periods: when he was a slave and when he was a free man. To support the students in talking about the effects of literacy on Douglass as a free man, the teacher provided them with a set of speeches he wrote after earning his freedom. As students read the text, they were provided with guided reading questions to work on at home, and they were asked to highlight quotations that could be used as evidence to support their claims about the effects of literacy. By the time the students were asked to engage in extended writing, the teacher reminded them that they already could use evidence from the book to support their claims. They were provided with graphic organizers to map their thinking and to fill in both topic sentences and supporting details to support their claims. Central to the prompt is the assumption that literacy produced effects on Douglass in different ways at different times in his life, and the primary role of the writer is to find evidence from the book to describe these perspectives.

Layla expressed disdain for having to write about Frederick Douglass and historical issues, whereas Mali reported that she “like[ed] writing about historical events” (Interviews, 6 February 2015, 18 March 2015). Despite her interest in writing about historical topics, I found that the communicative norms embedded in the writing prompt constrained Mali’s ability to acknowledge and construct connections between the topic
and her background as a student of African heritage and as a literacy and language learner. In analyzing the data derived from interviews and her classroom writing, I found that the notions of what she perceived could be counted as evidence or knowledge and who could be counted as knowledgeable constrained her writing.

It’s the same it’s like there’s always a limit, as to what you say. There’s always a limit in class or anywhere. Like, okay so you can’t really put your opinions in debate you should only put like, maybe one opinion, then you have to write a whole lots of facts. Which is the same as Ms. M.’s. It’s like on the Frederick Douglas one, like you cannot write your opinion. It’s like facts, like his bio and stuff. (Interview, 18 March 2015)

In this response, Mali compared her view of writing in speech and debate with her view of writing for class. Although the genre of argumentative writing is different from that of informational writing, Mali described the criteria for writing or the limits or constraints on writing as being the same (Interview, 18 March 2015). In this passage she says “you can’t really put your opinions in debate. You should only put like, maybe, one opinion, then you have to write a lot of facts.” Her use of the word “then“ to bridge “a lot of facts“ and “opinion“ revealed her understanding of thesis (claim) statements and that details in paragraphs are included to support the claim. Mali noted similarities between the form and function of the writing used in debate, which she used to support the writing of her essay on Frederick Douglass in class.

In both contexts, writing interactions were governed by rules. In both contexts, facts were privileged over opinions, and when the latter were permitted and required in conversation, the opinion of the writer was marginalized. In this context, Mali sensed that the quantity of the facts included in the writing demonstrated the extent of the writer’s
knowledge, which served to construct the writer’s credibility. To strengthen her writing in both contexts, Mali marginalized her opinions, that is, she included “maybe one opinion” or did not include any opinions. It is interesting to note that according to this logic, Mali constructed a ratio in which the inclusion of “one opinion” had to be balanced with “a whole lot of facts” if she and her claims were to be accepted as legitimate.

Although Mali described her experience of always being “limited, as to what [she could] say,” my analysis of the response revealed the ways in which these limitations or constraints did not apply to “facts” but were related to the opinions she could express.

In responding to the prompt, “Describe the effects of literacy on Frederick Douglas as a slave and as a free man,” Mali indicated her interest in the topic, but the conversation about the topic was constrained.

I mean Frederick Douglas is like, like an event that happened so you can’t really write your opinion about it, but if I could like make a story that’s similar to his, then I guess I could write about what he’s like and how I see him, not what everybody say about him. (Interview, 18 March 2015)

In a matter-of-fact manner, Mali described Frederick Douglass as “an event that happened.” The objectification of his identity and life as a fixed and static occurrence reflects the ways in which she experienced the conversation about him as closed. She did not perceive that she could draw connections between his life and her own or that she could problematize the extent to which literacy affected his life and the extent to which the acquisition of literacy skills ever made him “free.” When Mali imagined the boundaries of essay writing as closed to her, she indicated that if she were provided the opportunity to write in a story format, she could write about “his life and how [she] sees
him,” she would be able to distinguish her voice among the voices of others – in the classroom and in the broader sociohistorical community. Her emphasis that her story was “not what everybody say about him” indexed the extent to which her narrative would disrupt the master narrative, that is, the prevailing beliefs and assumptions about Douglas and the significance of his life. Although Mali sought to add nuanced perspectives to the conversation about Douglas and to extend the discussion about his life and literacy, the focus of the writing prompt constrained the range of the conversation.

Mali’s response and its implications for the directions in which she wanted to take the conversation are indicated in the following excerpt:

I really don’t think he’s that much of a big deal. [I don’t think he was] A very big like hero or whatever. He was, he was um, half-white, so he would take his master’s side instead of, maybe some of the field slaves. That’s how I feel. I feel like he was, wasn’t he a half slave? He was half white. He took his master’s side because he probably didn’t want to get in trouble. Well it’s like people praise him a lot but I’m pretty sure there are a lot of people who did more than he did for African Americans but didn’t, weren’t very known. Everybody know Harriet Tubman was like a huge hero, Maybe he was probably working with somebody else who did most of the work. You never know But they like their praising him. (Interview, 18 March 2015)

Mali’s opinions revealed that she viewed Douglass and his contributions through a racialized perspective. Because of his identity as a child of a White mother and an African father, Mali highlighted the privilege afforded him because of his mixed racial status. In contrast, Harriet Tubman, who was an African-American woman, was not afforded the same privileges. Through this racialized perspective, Mali indicated that she was suspicious of the praise assigned to Douglas, therefore problematizing the inclusion of his text in the curriculum and questioning the function of this text in her classroom.
context where the majority of her peers were Black Americans whose identities were
closer to Harriet Tubman and the people that Mali believed were “[doing] most of the
work” while Douglass got all the praise. Nevertheless, because the conversational norms
demanded that her writing used facts from the text, her feelings were deemed an
unreliable source of information in her writing.

I also found that the writing prompt constrained the extent to which the writers
could engage the topic. In the writing prompt, “Describe the effects of literacy on
Frederick Douglass as a slave and as a free man,” a particular distance was constructed
between Douglass and the writer. The writing was constructed at a level where writers
were asked to provide a superficial description. By superficial description I mean the
ways in which the writers were asked to construct a linear cause-and-effect relationship
between the events of Douglass’s life as a slave and as a free man. Although the process
of synthesizing information presented in the text that is germane to determining cause
and effect, the writers were not invited to acknowledge or change their vantage points or
to voice to their perspective or the diverse perspectives of others. I found that the writing
prompt constrained Mali’s ability to write all that she wanted to say.

I really didn’t want to write about the effects.
I wanted to write give my opinion of him.
And how If I was like, an African-American back then I would really view him as
Cause I really don’t think he is that, big hero, you know, I think, member,
Don’t you just realize that when he got freed then he started um, saying that, he
say they shouldn’t blame the white people for something but I don’t think he
would have done that is he was a slave because he knew he wasn’t, maybe he
wasn’t gonna get free by them if he’s talking bad about the white man
He’s like up there.
Knowing he’s like down here.
And he’s trying to like, talk. (Interview, 18 March 2015)
Mali described her experience of wanting to write about issues other than the effects of literacy and of wanting to give voices to people and perspectives that she perceived to have been intentionally left out of or marginalized in history. She did not realize that her claims to truth could be substantiated by “facts” that reflected her opinion but instead viewed her knowledge solely in terms of her opinions.

In addition to the text, Mali responded to an excerpt from Douglass’ speech “Self-Made Men,” which was provided as a primary source of evidence to support claims made about the effects of literacy on Douglass’ life as a free man. It is important to discuss the extent to which both the speech and underlying narratives about self-reliance and autonomy were constructed as bridges for the teacher to encourage a stronger work ethic among the students (Field notes, 12 December 2014). In this context, Mali desired to engage in a broader and more complex conversation about issues of race, privilege, the politics of literacy acquisition, and in-depth discussions about the meaning of literacy in a racist society, who has access to literacy, how people “earn” literacy, or who is recognized as literate. However, the conversations about the topic were tightly constrained.

“I start with the body, when I’m done I think about the intro… that’s how I really write”: Influence of Graphic Organizers on Mali’s Writing

Although the graphic organizers used in school did not overtly constrain the political nature of the content of Mali’s writing, they did constrain the ways in which she was able to communicate what she wanted to say in delivering her message. Although Mali enjoyed the writing process, I noticed that when the graphic organizers were
provided, and the students were released to work on them, she sometimes struggled to
decide what to write in the spaces (Field notes, 1 December 2015, 9 December 2015). In
one interview, I asked Mali how she would design classroom interactions if she had the
authority to teach:

H: If you had to design a classroom, you had to go back and teach and had to
teach kids how to write what should school look like?

Mali: I don’t really like how the essays supposed to be like, when I wr-,
I think essays supposed to be, write whatever you like, and then just,
like, summarize the important stuff and the conclusion.
I don’t like how it’s like supposed to be the introduction, then body and then the
conclusion
I think it should just be the body and the conclusion together, and you can just
write it any way. Then the conclusion just to summarize everything.
Or you can just like write like whatever you like. (Interview, 18 March 2015)

In the initial question, I asked her to propose alternative pedagogical conditions for
writing instruction. She described the essays as being an aspect of instruction that she
would want to modify. When Mali described the elements of the essay, her use of “then”
to introduce the names of each section, that is, “then the body, then the conclusion,”
suggested that she was the most interested in changing the sequence or order of writing
inscribed by the graphic organizers. This rigid structure prevented her from “writ[ing]
whatever [she] like[d]” (Interview, 18 March 2015). This point was confirmed in her
response to a subsequent question about her feelings about the use of graphic organizers
in language arts classrooms and in speech and debate:

Heather: How did you feel about the graphic organizers?
Mali: I just don’t like the introduction cause the introduction means I have to
think of very, or something… something very good, or like, something
inspirational or something like that. When you do that you just get a better grade,
so.
Heather: When you wrote your speech for the debate team how did you start that?
Mali: I start with the body. I don’t start with the intro.
I just get right into the body and when I’m done, maybe I’ll think of the introduction.
That’s how I really write (Interview, 18 March 2015)
Mali’s response reiterated her disdain for graphic organizers and indicated the ways in which the structure of the organizer imposed demands on her as a writer. Mali’s definition of the introduction as requiring her to “think of very, something very good… or like something inspirational” suggested that she understood the introductory paragraph as the section in the essay where the writer introduces the reader to the argument and the theme of the essay (Interview, 18 March 2015).

Although Mali did not suggest that she was against or did not like writing for purposes of inspiration, her comments implied that this literary function did not need to be achieved in an introductory paragraph. Her approach to “get[ting] right into the body and when she[s], maybe… think[ing] about the introduction” suggested that it is a negligible feature of the discourse structure and does need not be included in the essay. However, although Mali perceived little value in writing an introduction, she acknowledged the social value they had for her teacher-reader and ensured that she included them in her writing anyway. I clarified Mali’s perception of the introduction and its role in her writing by asking a question about her approach to her writing outside school.

H: Is that how you write for Wattpad?

Mali: Not really.
The prologue that’s like the introduction.
I’m not starting from like the beginning, the beginning.
I’m starting to give you what the story is going to be about,
Summarizing it. (Interview, 18 March 2015)
Mali’s response indicated that her approach to organizing her writing outside school was different from her approach to organizing her writing by using the graphic organizers provided in school. Instead of beginning with an introduction, Mali began with a “prologue.” Although the use of a prologue is specific to her writing in Wattpad, which features various genres of narrative writing, her discussion of the rhetorical function of the prologue is significant. While she described it as a kind of metaphor for “the introduction,” that is, they both served a similar literacy function that involved summarizing the content, her description of “not starting from like the beginning, the beginning. I’m starting to give you want the story is going to be about” indexed the content included in the prologue as being situated in another story. Hence, her response signaled the ways in which she preferred to “introduce” her readers to the story through the telling of multiple stories that may or may not be focused on one single topic. It is also important to note that Mali’s use of the pronominal “I” and “you” in describing what she is “starting to give” the reader suggests an authorial stance that is in control of the story and its themes. Instead of revealing them in the introduction, she prefers to feed information to the reader in ways that reveal the story’s theme over time. The “topic-centered styles of sharing” put forth by White children begin with the introduction to a single topic and an overview of the story, thus establishing the reader’s expectations. In contrast, Mali demonstrated her preference for a style of sharing that is similar to the “topic-associating styles of sharing” used by Black children, particularly the Black girls in Michael’s (1981) study of storytelling during “sharing-time” (p. 429).
The structure of the graphic organizers is not overtly racial because the discourse styles they reflect are normalized and naturalized as the “correct” ways to construct an essay. Nevertheless, my analysis of the data collected in the interviews with Mali showed that the organizing strategies for structuring essays constrained her ability to control of her relationship with her reader and the ways in which she wanted to introduce her readers to the topic.
Chapter 6: Findings on Nia’s Classroom Writing

In this dissertation, I argue that Black adolescent females’ writing in school is constrained by their perceptions of the school’s expectations for writing and by the writing prompts and graphic organizers provided by the teacher. In this chapter, I focus on the constraints on multiple intelligences and learning styles. By constraints on multiple intelligences and learning styles, I mean the restrictions imposed on writers’ ability to leverage their diverse learning styles and individuality in the writing process.

1. How do Black adolescent females’ perceptions of the school’s expectations of writing influence their writing in and for school?

2. How do Black adolescent females take up writing prompts in school?

3. How do Black adolescent females take up graphic organizers in school?

“I don’t do well in small places”: Influence of Space/Place on Nia’s Writing

Nia immediately caught my eye. Six feet and one-inch tall, she was regularly adorned in brightly colored lipstick, nail polish, and oversized sweaters. Clearly, she enjoyed “sticking out” in a crowd. She appeared joyous, youthful, and confident, and she was always surrounded by a group of friends. In the classroom, she was always among the first to contribute to discussions. However, my initial perception was broadened in my first interview with her. In the first interviews with the girls, I routinely asked them to tell
me about themselves before I used the content of their writing to ask specific questions.

The following is Nia’s response to this initial question:

I am a unique person. I am exotic. I am weird and I embrace it. Weirdness and my ratchetness shows off a lot, and it reflects on other people, it can be good on them or it can be bad on them… Ratchet to me is like weird, fun and being yourself God gave you your ratchetness and you should embrace it. Everybody calls me ratchet, No but, I don’t take it offensively. To us, to our generation ratchet means like your fun, yourself, cool, but your weirdness, but you can like, make it work, ummm, I make it work (flipping her hair).

Heather: Why did chose to be called Nia instead of Djeme? I didn’t like Djeme and plus I was exotic no one else would be named Nia, and like in Tennessee they had Jamie, so I’m gone be Nia then, be my own self. I am exotic. I am unique, I’m my own person. (Interview, 20 October 2014)

As I moved between interacting with her face-to-face and interacting with her through her writing, I found that the latter revealed that she experienced constraint in school. The following is Nia’s response to the prompt “Write your [their] story”:
I am Nia. I was born June 23 2001. So I’m 13. I have two siblings. I am the oldest child. I am from Senegal but was born in Columbus. What makes me the person who I am today is my personality, my attitude. I do not do well in small places. My favorite colors are orange and blue. I babysit. I have travelled a lot and I love food even to cook it and that’s all I have to say.

When I analyzed Nia’s writing and interview data, I found the theme of relationship between space and identity. For Nia, the physical parameters of the space affected how she experienced her identity and the degree to which she felt that she had opportunities to be and become herself. As the quoted passage indicates, the students were provided a prompt to write their story. In an interview following the writing task, Nia explained to me that she understood the prompt to be an opportunity for the following:

Write about my life, what’s happened in the past, what’s happened in the present, not the future cause nothing happened yet. Important details; and details you’re allowed to talk about (Interview, 10 October 2014)
In Nia’s response, she distinguished the classroom writing as a space where she was not “allowed to talk about” some things about her life. Hence, she revealed her insight into the ways she experienced classroom writing as a surveilled space that disallowed the expression of some aspects of herself. Despite the prohibitive nature of the classroom writing, Nia began her essay by giving the reader background information about her birth date and birth order in her family. She ended the first paragraph with a description of her birth place(s). Nia described herself as being “from” Senegal but having been “born in” Ohio. According to federal legislation and Census Bureau documentation, Nia is considered an American citizen. However, Nia’s contrary use of the prepositions “in” and “from” reveal that she imaginatively shifted her identity from her African heritage to America. She said she was “from” Senegal although she had never set foot on the shores of Africa. Her use of language also showed that she perceived herself as being in “in between” identities. Her language also pointed to the ways in which she resisted constraints and resisted being put into a box whether geographical or ethnic. A similar expression of her resistance to confinement is voiced in the paragraph that precedes her description:

What makes me the person who I am today is my personality, my attitude. I do not do well in small places.

As Nia conveyed her story to the reader, she explained that her personality and her attitude are the central in how she defines her personhood. By following her statements with the declaration that she does “not do well in small places,” she suggested that she has a big personality and attitudes that cannot exist, survive, or thrive in small and
constraining spaces and places. Instead, she needed spaces and places that did not constrain her self-expression. This quest for moving and movement was further indexed by the description of herself as an international traveler.

Although Nia defined “her story,” and “herself” in terms of moving and movement, it is important to note that she concluded the passage with “and that’s all I have to say.” The use of the phrase “all I have to say” marked her experience that writing is a closed space, that is, one in which there is an initiated prompt and direct response. Hence, writing is not experienced as “telling” her story but a task that requires Nia to provide enough information to satisfy the prompt. The big attitude and personality that Nia describes herself as having are testament to the extent to which she experienced writing the “small place” of this context.

**Influences on Nia’s Perception of the School’s Expectations for Writing**

Writing prompts are often discussed as interactions that solely occur between the writer and the text. Similarly, the practice of writing in schools is described as requiring the discipline of the mind and not the body. The participants described the school as a space that imposed various constraints on what could and could not be said in their writing. Nia was constrained by the space in relation to what her body was permitted to do, be, and become. I found that the writing prompt constrained her conduct in the following ways:

1. The contexts of writing constrained her ability to be herself.
2. The contexts of writing constrained her ability to lead and be autonomous.

3. The contexts of writing constrained her ability to express her individuality.

4. The contexts of writing constrained her ability to be original.

The following is her description of her perceptions of school:

Oh my gosh, school is a sorry excuse to be social, that what I think school is. It’s an excuse for people to make friends, my gosh, teachers try to teach and we try to learn but… like what do I need to know, I’m not going to use any of this in my life… English. I might, the only English I need to know is some words, what they mean I speak English. I won’t ever write a book, so I don’t know why I am using this… (Interview, 20 March 2015)

Nia described school as a façade or a building where teaching and learning were intended to occur, but in reality it had become a meeting space for students to be social. Nia said, “teachers try to teach and we try to learn but” ultimately, their attempts were unsuccessful. Nia attended school regularly but perceived that the literacy education curriculum was limited to developing her vocabulary in the English language and otherwise had no value in her life. In addition to the experience of “doing school,” Nia also described her experiences of being a student in this context.

If I be myself, I get kicked out. This class is so ‘boughie,’ it’s so fake It’s like, its tiring, and then like, if somebody, because this class, like we like to talk we can’t stay quiet like I know all these people you can’t keep us quiet for more than five minutes, and sitting down in one place for more than five minutes we have to do something like tap, or something but we can’t like sit still and not be talking…
Nia viewed her acceptance in the classroom as conditional because she was welcomed if and only when she was able to sit still and say nothing. It is important to note that her statement was situated in the historical experience of being expelled or sent to “In School Suspension,” which transpired during the study period (Field notes, 17 November 2015) Although Nia had been expelled, the majority of her experiences in the class were predominately attempts to stay quiet, sit in one place, and not tap.

Instead of communicating with her classmates in ways that were the most natural, Nia was forced to be silent and still. Her experience indicates that although youth desire to be social, their classroom interactions stifled by anti-social conditions. The anti-social conditions of stillness and silence made the classroom space seem “boughie and fake.” By “boughie and fake” Nia meant the ways in which the rules of conduct established in the classroom reflected the values and practices of the bourgeois middle class, and therefore were “fake” or unnatural behaviors. Although Nia described the experience of sitting still and silent as tiring, later in the interview, she introduced an alternative. Not only did the prompt constrain her ability to move and to speak, it also constrained her ability to be fully present in the teaching and learning process. In response to my question about how she felt about being in class, she said:

I be zoned out. That class is so boring. The books we’re reading in class… It don’t interest us (They’re) not my type of genre. I like what’s called mysterious drama, and like romance, but like backstabbing things, they’re juicy though, like, I read this one book, it was by LA Candy, it was, I forgot what the name of the book is. So she was drunk and she slept with her boyfriend’s best friend and then, so the paparazzi took pictures and guess what happened, guess who told the paparazzi? her best friend and she just tried to, and they all have a TV show that they are on. But they all have to be so fake and booghie like, there’s this one girl name Sarah and she like hates this girl, but they are forced to be friends. (Interview, 20 March 2015)
The experience of being still and silent and being bored with the reading constructed a climate that constrained Nia’s ability to stay engaged. With nowhere for her body, her voice, and her mind to go, she “zoned out.” Nia said that she “be zoned out.” Her use of the colloquial “be,” which is characteristic of African-American English, indicated that she ”zoned out” regularly. This offering indexed the extent to which being zoned out is a part of her classroom experience.

In many ways her response was in line with the disclaimer that she featured in her classroom writing, where she explicitly stated, “What makes me the person who I am today is my personality my attitude. I do not do well in small places.” In this statement, she informed her teacher-reader that she needed room for the expression of her personality and her attitude so that she could feel like herself. When spaces were too small or constrained her, she did not do well. Similar to a tourniquet that is applied to constrain the circulation of blood, Nia alluded to her experiences in small places as eventually causing paralysis. Nia described the numbing effects of being silent, sitting still, and reading books that were not interesting caused her to be “zoned out” during instruction. The experience of being “zoned out” was in stark contrast to her experience of reading books that were “[her] type of genre.” Her description of the texts as her type of genre indexed the ways in which the topics and themes of the texts were aligned with the elements of her personality and attitude.

Nia described her type of genre as that which foregrounded “mysterious drama… romance… backstabbing things… [that are] juicy.” In the midst of describing a book that
she had been reading outside school, she quickly summarized the plot and then asked me to guess what happened in the climax of the story: “So she was drunk and she slept with her boyfriend’s best friend and then, so the paparazzi took pictures, and guess what happened? Guess who told the paparazzi?” Before I could respond, she immediately provided the answer. This urgency of speech was evidence that although this type of book may not be direct indicator of who Nia is as a person, it reflects the excitement, spontaneity, and surprise that she experienced when she enters this literary domain. Her mind was free to move in ways that were unavailable in the classroom where issues of adolescent love, romance, and personal drama are marginalized.

After reading Lauren Conrad’s *LA Candy Series*, Nia described how the characters who betray one another are coerced into pretending to be friends in order to be featured on “Reality TV.” She described these characters as acting “boughie and fake.” Because she used the same phrase earlier to describe the performances of the characters in her language arts classroom, she indexed the extent to which the characters in Conrad’s novel are “forced to show up/perform” is analogous to the coercive performance she and her peers experience during instruction. This analogy draws a parallel between notions of “Reality TV” and the “poor excuse to be social” that she experiences as school.

In this study, while all participants discussed the experience of being constrained by the curriculum, the findings showed that Nia experienced writing prompts as constraining her learning behavior in terms of her interaction with the teacher in the
language arts classroom and in terms of the categorization and management of her body, which determined whether she would advance to higher educational tracks.

When I asked Nia about her feelings about the curriculum, she repeatedly referenced “the system.” Because I wanted to understand her conceptualization of the system, I asked for her response, which is shown below:

The **system is you have to follow** the teacher
The system they have to follow what the teacher says
everything, in the curr.,
everything the teacher has planned for us is what the system does, oh my gosh!
The system ‘booughie and fake,’ oh my gosh!
It’s so complicated... and then they giving us the PARCC test,
and then they givin me the OTELLA test like I don’t speak English!
Like, you might have to go over this to **make sure** I’m speaking English
next thing you know I might be speaking Chinese.. like Nee How?!
**It was trying to prove that I’m not American**, that what it was trying to prove, I feel like that
Because you don’t see no white people taking it, you see Hispanics and Africans, that’s it. The system or the FBI, I feel like they think we’re illegal. Ooooooh, they’re trying to put us back in Africa, but I was born here, so hah! (Interview, 20 March 2015)

Nia initially located “the system” in a compulsory relationship between her and the teacher in the classroom. In this relationship, the teacher led and spoke and Nia and her peers followed and listened. As Nia reiterated the rule for behavioral conduct for students to “follow what the teacher says,” she began to talk about the curriculum, thus indexing the extent to which what the teacher says is dictated by the curriculum. In the next line of dialogue, she constructed a relationship between the classroom as a system and another system outside the space. As she indicated that “everything the teacher has planner for us is what the system does” she revealed her view of both systems as parallel contexts.
It is important to note Nia signaled that she understood school and schooling as a socializing function and her teachers and the curriculum as socializing agents. Her use of the phrase “boughie and fake” indexes the ways in which this socializing function was partially about socializing her to be someone different or unnatural in relation to her authentic self. Although Nia perceived that the socializing mechanism embedded in the curriculum contrived to shape her behavior and identity, she also perceived that writing in school and the purposes of education served other functions.

She said, “Oh my gosh! It’s so complicated. And then they giving us the PAARC test and then they givin me the OTELLA test like I don’t speak English.” She used the pronominal “they” in referring to the system, thereby distinguishing other social actors as part of the system but different from her teacher. In marking the curriculum as driving the interactions in her classroom, standardized assessments are constructed as the accountability measured enacted by the system to ensure instructional compliance. In this response, Nia talked explicitly about two standardized assessments valued by the schools in her district: the Partnership for Assessment for Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) English Language Arts test, which is provided to all public school students to assess their competencies in reading and responding to fiction and to non-fiction texts, and the Ohio Test of English Language Acquisition (OTELLA) test, which is used to evaluate the English language proficiency of “Limited English Proficiency” students. It is important to recognize that in Nia’s discussion of the PAARC test and the OTELLA test, she positioned herself in a compulsory relationship where she was given a test that she does not perceive she needs but that she and her peers are required to take.
In describing being given the PARCC and the OTELLA tests, she used the pronouns “us” and “me.” The system requires all students to take the PARCC test to assess their proficiency in literacy learning. This test is administered publicly through computer modules. The OTELLA test is only given to her because it is applied individually to measure language proficiency. Combined these tests constructed Nia’s experience of having both her language and literacy evaluated. According to Nia, these assessments were used as tools to ensure her compliance with speaking English and exposing her behavioral non-compliance with being an American. She suggested that the functions of these assessments, particularly the OTELLA test, were deeply racialized: “you don’t see no White people taking it, you see Hispanics and Africans, that’s it.” In this response, Nia questioned the extent to which measures of compliance and non-compliance were enacted and the extent to which only some groups of students’ identities and behaviors as Americans and English speakers were profiled, policed, and evaluated. She used sarcasm to describe what she perceives to be the illogical premises of the assessments:

They givin me the OTELLA test like I don’t speak that good English! Like, you might have to go over this to make sure I’m speaking English. Like next thing you know I might be speaking Chinese. Like Nee How?! (Interview, 20 March 2015)

Nia perceived that her identity as an American and her proficiency as an English speaker were blatantly obvious. She was unnerved by the assumption of the need to check whether she spoke English in her daily life. That possibility for Nia is just as illogical as the belief that I, as a researcher, would need to go back and check my data to make sure that she had not abruptly shifted from speaking English to speaking Chinese in our
interaction. Through using humor, Nia emphasized her experience of being monitored from a distance, that is, being assessed by a system that was clearly disconnected from seeing, listening, and interacting with her every day. As a result of the racial and patriarchal undertones of her experiences in schooling and assessment, she linked local systems of schooling and assessment to broader and national systems of authority.

The system or the FBI
I feel like they think we’re illegal. Ooooooh, they’re trying to put us back in Africa
but I was born here, so hah! (Interview, 20 March 2015)

In this connection, she associated local functions of schooling and assessment with national assumptions about communities of immigrants of African and Hispanic heritage. She therefore pointed to the sociopolitical functions of surveillance and sorting. Later in the interview, I learned that Nia perceived that sorting and surveillance were applied not only in cases of national citizenship and deportation but also in terms of institutional practices to stream students to higher and lower educational tracks.

Because you see the OTELLA test, They tryna prove I can’t speak that good English and, they’re make this, they tryna put labels ‘Honors English’ and ‘Regular English’
We do everything the same in that class.
It just has a higher name - “Honors.”
I have some friends in the ‘whatsa call it.’ I don’t know the difference
We have everything the same
We read the same book
We do the same work
I don’t know why its honors (Interview, 20 March 2015)

Nia explained that she was made to take the OTELLA test not only to disprove her English language proficiency but also to sort her into a lower-level educational track.
Based on her experience in the “regular English” section of the course compared to her friend’s experience in the “honors English” section, she suggested that they “do everything the same”: they “have everything the same… read the same book… [and] do the same work.” Nia struggled to understand the meaning of the differences constructed by the labels. Because she is in the “regular English” class, she is confused about the differences in the education provided in the classes and in language and literacy proficiencies of students in the “honors” class. She was really asking and how their “beings” differed. The scope of this study did not include observations of teachers. Because I was not able to access academic records and standardized literacy assessments, I was not able to confirm or deny the truth of her claims. Nevertheless, important in her discussion are the ways in which she perceived, that systems/spaces and identities of exceptionality and esteem were constructed and understood within contexts of constraint and control, and the extent to which the desires for movement by regular students in these system are dismissed and denied. For Nia, the awareness that she had not been placed in “honors English” class was experienced as the system trying to “put her in a box,” or in her words, trying to force her “small places.” She rejected the legitimacy of the system, the assessments, and the ways in which they functioned to surveil and sort her and her peers into asymmetrical relations and homogenous groups. Nia perceived herself and the high marks on her test scores to indicate that she was just as intelligent and just as capable as her peers who used the same books and did the same assignments in the classroom down the hall.
In defining “the system,” Nia actually described what could be considered an ecology of constraint. In describing this ecology of constraint she highlighted the interconnectivity between classroom systems, systems of curriculum and assessment, and the national police system. At the core of this interconnectivity are interrelationships between ideologies and procedures of learning, test taking, and policing, which assign privilege and practice constraint. As the students navigate these systems, conduct that is deemed unnatural or “boughie and fake” becomes naturalized and normalized.

Although Nia desired to progress in her language learning interactions and be moved to the honors English class, she was repeatedly denied. Nia’s experience of writing is situated within an entrenched culture of constraint that is enabled by compulsory practices in obeying the teacher, being quiet while she teaches, responding to the questions she poses, moving at the pace she deems appropriate, forever “following the teacher,” and therefore never learning to lead.

**Influence of Writing Prompts on Nia’s Writing**

Each participant talked about writing prompts as constraining their writing practice. Nia also talked about writing prompts as constraining who she was allowed to be and become. The following is her response to my question about the writing prompts provided in school:

“It’s not allowing me, because I have to like do the same thing as somebody else, and I don’t like doing that, it’s like copying. Plus it’s like, that room it’s so gloomy, so boring, it’s like raining everyday in that class, especially with the lights off, it’s like rain, rain go away (Interview, 20 March 2015)
Nia located the writing prompts in a constraining relationship where they were “not allowing” her to be herself or engage in her fullest expression. This restriction was constructed by having to “do the same thing as somebody else.” For Nia, the practice of responding to the same topic in the same way as somebody else felt “like copying.” The act of copying implies, for Nia, the identity of being a copycat or becoming a replica of somebody else. For a girl who prides herself in her uniqueness and the boldness of her attitude and personality, the idea of having to be someone else is disheartening. Themes of conformity enacted by the writing prompts, for Nia, were reflected in the mundane working conditions that constructed the classroom space.

The classroom space consisted of four walls: two blank white walls, one wall with a chalkboard and shelves below where the students’ homework and writer’s notebooks were collected. The back wall lined with large windows facing the school’s football field and the teacher’s parking lot. The classroom had two desktop computers. The teacher’s desk was located in front of the windows and facing the largest white wall. The teacher used the projector to show writing prompts on the wall. During the summer months, the teacher brought in fans, opened the windows, and often turned the lights off to create a cooler environment for her and the students. During the winter months, while the windows were closed and the blinds were lowered, the lighting in the space was often dimmed (i.e., the lights at the front of the room were turned off and the others were turned on) in order for the students to be able to see and read the projections on the wall.

Nia said, “that room, it’s so gloomy, [and] so boring.” She described that the lights were often turned off, and she compared her experience of being in the room to a...
being in the rain every day. It is important to note the aesthetic dimensions of the classroom space affected Nia’s mood. Studies have found that the interior design of a space has a direct correlation with the productivity levels of factory workers (Mills, Tomkins, & Schlangen, 2007) Nia’s statement revealed the ways in which factory models of interior design are replicated in the language arts classrooms of urban public schools. These classrooms are experienced as “factory-like conditions” that affect the moods and motivational levels of students therein. Studies showed that lighting and design were related to the production of the factory workers employed to produce uniform commodities. Nia experienced the classroom not as an independent and unique space that would encourage the creativity but instead as a product or object. Thus, she and her peers were assumed the same, and they were constructed to be and become replicates of one another. This framing of students did not align with how Nia saw herself or the ways in which she made meaning.

The writing prompts provided in her classroom primarily required the student-writers to demonstrate their knowledge of assigned texts and the mechanics of writing one literary genre. In this study, I found that the lack of variance in genres and modes of expression constrained Nia’s experience of writing. When I asked her how she felt about the kinds of prompts provided in school, she said the following:

Songs are more... me.
Like music. I’m a musical learner
They say, we took the test, like in the whole school,
They said I was a musical learner, and visual
Like with music, I can catch on faster
And visual learner, like, 3D and that stuff
And hands on
we like, did it multiple times (Interview, 20 March 2015)
She described herself as a musical and visual learner, which are categories of learning styles and multiple intelligences theorized by Gardner (1987). Her description emerged from participating in a school event that was produced in partnership with a local non-profit organization (I Know I Can), which was designed to help students identify their strengths as the foundation for career exploration. At this event, she and her peers responded to a Multiple Intelligences Assessment and later received information pertaining to their multiple intelligences and their individualized learning styles. To understand how she conceptualized this information, I asked her to clarify how these findings indicated that the genre of songwriting suited her:

Because I get to like make it  
Visual is I can see it, like I can like critique it and that stuff and like give my own opinions  
Musical - it’s a song. (Interview, 20 March 2015)

In her response, Nia described a literary space where she could create her own boundaries for expression. In this space, she “can see it… critique it… and give [her] own opinions.” She is able to enjoy the fruits of her labor in ways that are not allowed in the classroom context. Nia’s explanation aligns with Gardner’s discussion of multiple intelligence theory. Gardner (2013) suggested that these differences challenge an educational system that assumes that everyone can learn the same materials in the same way and that a uniform, universal measure suffices to test student learning. Indeed, as currently constituted, our educational system is heavily biased toward linguistic modes of instruction and assessment and, to a somewhat lesser degree, toward logical-quantitative modes as well” (p. 38)

Gardner argued, “a contrasting set of assumptions is more likely to be educationally effective. Students learn in ways that are identifiably distinctive. The broad
spectrum of students—and perhaps the entire society—would be better served if
disciplines were presented in a range of styles and if learning were assessed through a
variety of means.” Nia’s statements point to the ways in which she imagined that
openings could and should be available in literacy education classrooms. Nia proposed
the following change in the curriculum:

Like I think the curriculum could be so different because we’re all different
people
we’re all bosses, we cannot stay following someone else
We can’t.
Like we’re not followers
It would be so different for everybody
we would have our own things to do,
like our own projects for every other person
and our own work and our own books and stuff
Like I would give them students different books, that’s like, their genre.
and make them like, do what, like with it,
and let them choose what they would want to do with it
but they would have to do some work.
you can either write a song, or a, like, you can choose
You know like that interpretative dancing?
You can do something with the book.
Like you can make a dance, for the book
Like there would be different classes.
Okay so, you know the musical students? We would have a music class that you
can learn music and make it into a song in that class
There would be a journalism class, where you can do new writing and that stuff
There would be an interpretative dance. (Interview, 20 March 2015)

Central in Nia’s curriculum design was the assumption that she and her peers were “all
different people… all bosses… and cannot stay following someone else.” This
knowledge of herself and her peers is in stark contrast to the conduct imposed by the
system, where they have to be “following the teacher.” Based on this premise, Nia
imagined an individualized and differentiated teaching and learning environment where students could be bosses or managers of their own teaching, learning, and assessment.

In contrast to the systemic curriculum design, which she experienced as pre-packaged content and pedagogies, Nia described an open approach to a curriculum design that accommodated the diversity of students. While she acknowledged that all students must “do some work” or demonstrate that they were learning standardized content, she foregrounded the multiple paths by which that learning could be done. Nia’s use of the metaphor of “interpretative dancing” to describe curriculum design revealed the complex ways in which she imagined the possibilities of being, doing, and moving in school. Hence, she revealed the ways she conceptualized the body as a written text. For Nia, movement was a form of literary expression, and dance is equivalent to a book. Writing prompts are often viewed through two-dimensional framings that focus on the written interaction between the writer and the text, and they background the ways in which the physicality of the body and the aesthetics of the space are also a part of writing practice. Nia’s response points to the ways in which writing prompts constrain the multidimensionality of writing and the experiential depth of knowing

**Influence of Graphic Organizers on Nia’s Writing**

Graphic organizers do not address the multiple ways she organized things in her head, and they do not include or address different styles of learning.

H: What’s your writing process, first second third?

Nia: I turn on the radio, the music, or put some headphones on and then like, see if there’s a beat that I can like
or I sing along to the song.
Or I just visualize it, like I’ll just like think, like, or do dance steps to it, or like visualize me singing a song (Interview, 20 March 2015)

Although listening to music is an auditory process and dance is a kinesthetic process, these activities help Nia construct graphics or visualize ideas and concepts in her mind, which can be expressed in writing. Because I wanting to understand how she moved from the visualizing process to the writing process, in the interview, I asked her a subsequent question about her drafting process:

H: Do you write the whole song or just move on to the next song? Or do you like edit?

Nia: It takes time to write a song because like first you have to get the lyrics
If they don’t go well you have to mix them up and like erase and
Then you have to make a beat to it
Then you have to make the genre, the like the label and that stuff
The title, I don’t ever start with the title!
I used to do that. It was horrible!

H: What happens when you start with the title?

Nia: Then you just want to change the title.

H: For me, I usually need a title and that helps me know what I’m gonna write. But you don’t use a title. What do you do?

Nia: I just write it down first. I used to use the title and then I would change it. But Now I just write it down then put a title to it, to see what the title goes with. (Interview, 20 March 2015)

Nia stated that her drafting process was time consuming. She then talked about having to reorder and/or delete some lyrics in the process of revision. When her second draft was established, she then created a beat or melody that could be paired with it, and she revised the form and function of the lyrics to “make” them fit with the audience’s expectations of
a particular genre or label, thus increasing the song’s accessibility. While Nia used a title to describe her lyrics, she was adamant about not having a title before she began writing. Nia implied that establishing a title before she began would constrain her writing process.

It is important to note that Nia’s rejection of a title suggests her preference for an open space in which to construct her writing and the freedom to generate the focus of her writing over time. Writing without a title provided her opportunity to focus on getting what she wanted to say onto the page, whereas stating a title at the onset would require her to focus on trying to get what she wanted to say to reflect a pre-imposed topic, which would likely change during the writing process. As I listened to Nia discuss her writing process, I wondered how notions of planning would apply to her writing process. In a subsequent interview question, I asked her about her approach:

H: So when you are writing do you know what you’re going to write about, before you write about it?

Nia: No

H: How do you know what you’re writing about?

Nia: I just listen to music then, then I’ll just think, and I’ll like be zoned out to what I’m doing and so I’ll blocked out sound, and then I’ll start writing

H: Do you write stanza by stanza?

Nia: I write it all down, then, I’ll do like stanza by stanza, and then make the bridge, make the chorus and that stuff

H: What does it look like?

Nia: I swear my writing looks horrible. It looks like, it’s all like combined, and I add this and that, and it may be a bunch of erasing. But I do it after. I need a lot of paper (Interview, 20 March 2015)
Nia responded that she did not know what she was going to write about as she was writing. Hence, she did not plan her writing in the initial phase. Instead, her first step in the writing process is to “block” everything out and “write it all down.” Nia’s description of the her first draft as being “all like combined” suggested that what she had written down resembled a stream of consciousness or a combination of ideas and thoughts that may or may not cohere as a single topic. However, her use of “then” as link between “write[ing] it all down,” “do[ing] stanza by stanza,” “make[ing] the bridge,” and “make[ing] the chorus and that stuff” suggested that a process underlies her writing and that it includes revision and organization. Nia’s response revealed a holistic approach to organizing ideas that are not easily divided among the sections of the graphic organizers that the students are required to fill in independently. Instead, the description of her writing process indicated the ways in which narrow parameters that attempt to isolate sections of her thinking before she has the opportunity to write them down are constraining. I noticed that Nia’s description of her writing process differed from the pattern constructed by the graphic organizer. In the interview, I asked her if the use of graphic organizers had been helpful:

H: The way you approach writing song really interesting. Are those graphic organizers helpful?

Nia: No, because I just like to write stuff down first, and then I’ll know Then she forces you to write an outline first. I don’t do that, because I’m gonna change it later

H: Was it helpful? How would you have written about it?
Nia: I would have written it all down, and then like, see, and then write it again, but clean and neater, and outline it too, when I’m writing it. (Interview, 20 March 2015)

Nia’s reply revealed not only that the graphic organizers were not helpful but also that outlining her writing in the initial stages inhibited her ability to organize her thoughts. Nia’s description of the teacher “force[ing] her to write a[n] outline first” highlighted the compulsory nature of the use of graphic organizers in the classroom, and it signaled the ways in which this instructional tool was experienced as constraining her writing process. It is important to note that Nia did not suggest that the graphic organizers were completely useless. Instead, she said that the sequence in which they were provided was problematic. In school, she is required to use the graphic organizer to write “a[n] outline first”; in other contexts, this phase in her writing occurs later in the process.

Nia’s use of the conjunctive adverb “then” links the phases of her writing process: first, she “writ[es] it all down,” then she “write[s] it again, but clean[er] and neater.” Nia’s use of the word “when“ suggests that for her, the process of outlining occurs in the second phase of writing and in the revision stages.

Nia describing an approach to organizing her writing in which she first wrote all her ideas and thoughts on the page so that she could see them. When they were on the page, the structure of the text began to emerge and form. As she moved into the next phase of drafting, she re-wrote the text to structure the ideas that it expressed. In this second phase, she began to outline her document while she organized her thoughts into a clean and neat draft. Hence, her approach to the writing process was situated in visual, spatial, and kinesthetic styles of learning that privilege the graphic nature of ideas and the
importance of seeing ideas and having the freedom to manipulate them. Nia’s responses showed that the styles of learning that enable the design of graphic organizers, specifically the sequence of their use in instruction, constrained her writing process.
Chapter 7: Discussion of the Findings and Their Implications

This chapter presents a discussion of the findings and considers their implications for teaching and research in the area of writing.

1. How do Black adolescent females’ perceptions of the school’s expectations of writing influence their writing in and for school?
2. How do Black adolescent females take up writing prompts in school?
3. How do Black adolescent females take up graphic organizers in school?

In the following section, I will provide an overview of the findings and locate them in relation to prior research.

In the Classroom, They Do Not Write about Topics That Are of Interest to Them

The findings showed that despite the presumed autonomous nature of writing, the Black adolescent females in this study did not experience a sense of autonomy in their writing. Instead, the opportunities to write in school were a function of pre-packaged writing prompts in the district curriculum, which the teacher and provided to the students. The topics, purposes, and audiences of writing were pre-established in the writing prompts, which did not reflect issues that they cared about or elements of literary texts that piqued their interest. Instead, they wrote about when, where, what, how, and why was they were commanded. These findings indicate that some Black adolescent females have very little autonomy in their writing. Although writing prompts are intended to
facilitate democratic and self-directed approaches to learning, they are experienced by some Black adolescent females as a coercive force to which they must respond in order to advance academically and socially. The authoritative nature of writing prompts constrains not only their writing process but also the ability to form and sustain identities as writers.

Although national assessments of writing are designed to evaluate students’ ability to “write for diverse cultural audiences and communicative purposes” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010), the writing prompts some Black adolescent females receive do not allow them to address their culturally and linguistically diverse peer audience. Some Black adolescent females are not able to write about the cultural issues that matter in their lives, and they are not able address the cultural issues in their classmates’ lives. The findings of this study extend the research on the “whitestreaming” of literacy education (Salazar, 2013; Urrieta, 2010) beyond language and linguistic measures of Whiteness and notions of a standard written language of wider communication to include the ways in which some Black adolescent females in urban and low-income environments are required to write as if they were White girls in middle-class communities. They are expected to write outside the hard, sad, and infuriating conditions of marginality and marginalized communities and experience the luxury of “talking about the easy thing” and not notice that “something is going on here” (Interview with Mali, 18 March 2015). Some Black adolescent females are not afforded such equitable distractions.
Some Black adolescent females associate writing prompts with “what White people talk about” (Interview with Mali, 18 March 2015). They experience the writing prompts delivered to students in urban and low-income environments as invitations to continue the conversations about texts and topics started by White middle- and upper-class adults in middle-class communities. Some Black adolescent females not only have to write about topics that are interesting to White adults. They are also expected respond those topics in the same way as White middle-class audiences do. For some Black adolescent females, to meet this expectation means focusing on topics that are important to others and often ignoring those that they believe deserve attention. Ultimately, the dissonance between what they see and what they are required to focus on constrains the ways in which they are able to address the topics provided in prompts.

Nearly everything that some Black adolescent females want to say about a topic is not expressed their writing. As participants in a conversation where responses are demanded, they tailor their writing to meet the needs and comfort levels of their White female teacher-reader audience. Subsequently, this tailoring process includes practices of marginalizing or excluding their opinions and refraining from talking about the “sad,” “hard,” or infuriating social issues they confront daily. Although some Black adolescent females want to integrate perceptions of self, society, and social change into their classroom writing, the fixedness of Whiteness and middle-class communicative norms of speech and silence embedded in the writing prompts limit the range of the conversation they can have about topics.
They Are Not Able to Form Emotional/Affective Connections to Their Writing or Their Reading Audience

The findings showed that the topics provided in the writing prompts made it difficult for the study participants to draw connections between their experiences of classroom-based writing and the cultural and contemporary issues they experience in their everyday lives. Consequently, they experienced classroom writing as being “about somebody else” and being “for the curriculum” (Interview with Layla, 12 March 2015). In both instances, the cultural, temporal, and geographic distancing embedded in the writing prompts make it difficult to form and sustain emotional connections to their writing and to their peer reading audience.

This study found that some writing prompts did not support the students in making connections between literary texts and their everyday lives or between their sociohistorical backgrounds and identities as marginalized Americans, African immigrants, and/or females through writing. The writing prompts also lacked an auxiliary language that invited and supported students in their written discussions about complex and emotionally charged topics.

Experiences of emotional detachment manifested in decreased motivations to begin and sustain a quality engagement in the writing process, which resulted in the perception of classroom writing as a rote and meaningless endeavor. Students “could be writing something, [they] know the whole class would be intrigued by” they are left “just writing essays” (Interview with Layla, 12 March 2015). This experience contrasted the writing purposes of some Black adolescent females who find it more meaningful to write
outside school. Although some Black adolescent females complete and submit the required writing tasks, they do so in ways that meet the associated requirements but fall short of their potential as writers.

In their experiences of writing voluntarily outside school, some Black adolescent females write in a community of readers and writers. They are intrinsically motivated to write, and their writing is designed to provoke an emotional response in their readers. They leverage their shared knowledge about their peer-readers’ identities and interests to construct texts that will attract and sustain their readers’ attention. In contrast, some Black adolescent females do not find the writing prompts intriguing, and therefore find that completing writing tasks requires a “forced emotional effort.” Such writing is not likely to offer emotionally rewarding experience to readers.

The findings also indicate that the writing prompts associated with classroom-based writing did not provide Black adolescent females in this study with opportunities to write about their personal and/or social development. In contexts where opportunities to write primarily emerge from writing prompts, writing practice is solely experienced as a process of either staying on or deviating from the topic. Even in contexts where Black adolescent females might accidentally “get into their feelings” in responding to a writing prompt, both they and their teachers police the boundaries of the written text and physically and figuratively delete their emotions. Because writing prompts focus on demonstrating particular writing skills, such as describing, informing, and/or persuading, feelings and emotions are positioned as marginal details rather than driving forces or resources for writing across contexts.
They Are Not Able to Use Writing to Engage in Consciousness Raising or “Counter Storytelling”

The findings indicate that Black adolescent females in this study situate their writing practice in a social community and therefore in relation to serving broader social functions. They have strong opinions about the social issues they observe in society, and they have distinct responses to the themes that emerge in the texts they read in and outside school. They have beliefs about people, institutions and politics, and they are deeply aware of the ways in which they are (mis)read and (mis)represented by others in society. However, the findings showed that the participants were less aware of the ways in which they misunderstood others. For example, the newcomer girl of African heritage held internalized beliefs about the supremacy of White people in America and the closed-mindedness of the native-born youth of African heritage in the community. These misunderstandings constrained the extent to which this participant perceived the freedom and opportunity to express her perspectives in the racially diverse classroom “writing community.”

In language arts classrooms in urban public schools, writing communities are constituted by native-born and newcomer youth of African and Latin American heritage and by native-born White female teachers from middle-class communities. However, despite the diverse cultures present in the classroom space, the writing prompts do not encourage students to write for their culturally diverse audiences. Hence, writing prompts tend not to specify an intended cultural audience. This absence in the writing prompt
leaves room to construct a cultural audience that is White, female, and middle class by default.

Newcomer girls of African heritage are in the precarious position of having to negotiate multiple layers of misrepresentation because they are African, immigrants, Black, and female. The findings indicate that although newcomer and native-born girls of African heritage may recognize racism and Whiteness as oppressive, they are able to articulate their cultural oppression as Africans and as African Americans. They do not have the language and the historical background to articulate and appreciate their shared heritage and their shared position in America. Therefore, they resort to forms of alienation and social distancing in and outside the classroom. They do not have the space to reflect on their thoughts and feelings about themselves and one another, and they are not provided opportunities to use writing for cross-cultural teaching and learning. Instead, they are tasked with writing to White female adult audiences about generic topics within decontextualized frames. Thus, they do not have the opportunity to develop rich cross-cultural conversations with their peers.

Writing prompts focus on evaluating students’ abilities to write descriptively, informatively, and persuasively. However, these writing purposes do not foreground the synthesis of multiple racial or cultural perspectives. Neither are they conducive to analyses of culture, race, and gender. The students are encouraged to erase their opinions and replace them with facts and evidence from the assigned text to support their claims. The findings indicate that some Black adolescent females are not able to write in ways that distinguish their voices from the voices of others. They are not provided
opportunities to use their writing for purposes of “counter storytelling” or consciousness raising. By counter storytelling, I mean the ways in which readers tell diverse versions of a story through writing. Writing from diverse social positions allows different elements of self and society to emerge, which would otherwise be overlooked in master-slave narratives. Some Black adolescent females have cultural ways of knowing and reading that allow them to deploy racialized perspectives in ways that provoke racial, gendered, and cultural literary interpretations. These interpretations offer possibilities for generating dialogue that not only disrupts but also creates patterns of thinking, feeling, and sharing, which are otherwise limited through decontextualized, generic, and skill-driven discussions about literary texts.

They Are Not Able to Activate or Leverage Their Diverse Learning Styles

The writing community constructed in language arts classrooms in urban public schools is primarily constituted by singular styles of teaching and learning, in which students learn according to one style of reading and writing. The use of writing prompts is symptomatic of an institutional culture of constraint and control, which does not fully acknowledge, support, or cultivate individuality. In these passive and submissive learning conditions, writing prompts are provided to guide the form and function of student writing. The writing prompts provided to students are uniform, that is, the same writing prompt is provided to all students. Underlying the use of writing prompts is the assumption that all students are stimulated to address the same claim or directive and that the values of uniformity and efficiency should be privileged in writing practice and evaluation. In classrooms settings where the aesthetic surroundings resemble bland
factory settings, some Black adolescent females experience these instructional approaches and pedagogical tools as constraints based on the systemic assumptions of educational administrators about who they are and who they should become. Some Black adolescent females perceive these prompts as reifying the assumptions that they are all the same, that they all are interested in writing about the same issue, and that the written content they produce should be “the same as somebody else’s.”

The controlled nature of this process has led some Black adolescent females to believe that “the system” or the educational administrators did not perceive or value their individuality and diversity as learners. As shown in this study, some Black adolescent females are provided opportunities in school to assess their multiple intelligences and confirm their proficiencies in visual-spatial, auditory-musical, and bodily-kinesthetic skills. Based on these assessments, they are able to validate their strengths in visualizing concepts and ideas and in discerning and distilling information from pictures, diagrams, and other visual aids. Their capacities for learning through rhythm and melodies are affirmed, and their ability to process information through movement rather than sitting down is distinguished and lauded. Although some classroom teachers monitor these assessments, which are reflected in the grades of the students, they continually apply pedagogies and curricula that are resistant to change and unresponsive to the diversity of the learners and learning present in the classroom.

This resistance and the lack of response are reflected in the constraints that some Black adolescent females experience while writing in and for school. Uniform and one-dimensional prompts, teacher-centered instructional approaches, and bland classroom
settings construct “small spaces” where girls with “big personalities and attitudes” and diverse learning styles “do not do well.” As the findings of this study showed, some Black adolescent females who are kinesthetic, visual, musical, and spatial learners are constrained. They are not allowed to be, learn, teach, or show who they are, what they know, and what they can do in the ways that are the most conducive to their strengths. Consequently, the work that they submit often does not represent their best efforts. As Nia stated, and I observed in the participants, some Black adolescent females with multiple intelligences or, in this case, strengths in visual-spatial, auditory-musical, and bodily-kinesthetic capacities for being, learning, and teaching, “do not do well in [these] small spaces.” Ironically, the findings showed, the possession of such multiple intelligences places moderate and high-achieving Black adolescent females at risk for disciplinary infractions and punishments in school.

The findings indicate that although some Black adolescent females pride themselves in their individuality and uniqueness, and they are able to regulate their physical and verbal expressions more closely, the classroom conditions constrain their abilities to be themselves and leverage their diverse learning styles to show their knowledge through classroom writing. A single focus may not reflect the ways in which Black adolescent females interpret literary texts and society. Similarly, a single genre may not adequately reflect or capture what they have to say and how they want to say it. Because the heterogeneity of girls of African heritage has become increasingly complex, some Black adolescent females feel constrained by writing prompts that do not offer them ways to express their individuality in their writing. Some Black adolescent females
are not provided opportunities to focus their time and energy in school in order to move through the processes of documenting, reviewing, refining, and publishing their writing on the topics, issues, and ideas that they perceive to be important in literary texts. Instead, the range and diversity of expression in the classroom and in classroom writing is constrained by the single writing prompt given to all students. Some modes of communication are best suited to particular kinds of storytelling. Similarly, the same stories can be interpreted differently when they are narrated by different storytellers.

Some Black adolescent females are not afforded full rights as storytellers, and they are not provided opportunities to listen to and learn from one another’s stories. Teaching and learning are dominated by the teacher and varied interactions of reading and writing. Students’ response to literature is facilitated by standardized prompts that regulate what, why and how they respond to text, exclusively in the form of five-paragraph prose essays, offering little opportunity for full range of literary expression and assessment.

Although this literary genre is one way to assess reading comprehension and help students synthesize their reactions into organized responses, other genres could be used to achieve similar teaching and learning objectives and embody modes of knowing and showing. Some Black adolescent females who have strengths in visual-spatial, auditory-musical, and bodily-kinesthetic expression are not provided opportunities to leverage their multiple intelligences and their diverse learning and teaching styles in communicating their knowledge. Hence, some Black adolescent females are not provided spaces in literacy education classrooms where they can perform or coordinate practices of
thinking, feeling, and movement into literary expression. Although some Black adolescent females are engaged in writing poetry, songs, and fiction and in interpretative and popular dance, they are not provided space in the classroom to perform. For some Black adolescent females, this means reifying and reproducing the existing social, emotional, and physical gaps between the predominantly White, male, middle-class sociohistorical worlds they encounter in textbooks and the experiences in their everyday lives.

**Contributions to the Field**

This study was influenced by the existing scholarship on the writing instruction provided to students in language arts classrooms in urban public schools as well as school-based literacy studies with Black adolescent females in language arts classrooms. Theoretically, this qualitative study sought to understand Black adolescent females’ classroom-based writing, which is a departure from previous studies that have focused on adolescent females’ experiences of in language arts classrooms, studies that have focused on the writing conducted outside language arts classrooms, and studies that have focused on the constraints, particularly those by scholars who valued psychological views of writing and autonomous models of literacy. This study shifted the focus from deficit views of Black adolescent females as either silent participants or non-writers to examine how the classroom context limited the expression of some Black adolescent females. This dissertation extended the work of a previous study (Siddle Walker, 1993) on the affective experiences of Black adolescents in environments where process approaches to writing instruction were used. The study conducted for this dissertation provided a wide scope to
conceptualize the varying dimensions of students’ affective experiences beyond those associated with mismatches between African-American culture and the cultural styles of teaching employed by White teachers. This dissertation shifted the focus from the teacher to the institutional norms and the sanctioned curriculum in which the role of teaching is embedded.

Second, this study extends the understanding of writing as a social practice, and therefore expands the understanding of classroom writing practices and school-based writing contexts as situated in concepts and assumptions of race, place, and space. The findings problematized cognitive theories of process approaches to teaching and learning writing, and they indicated that writing embodies writers’ cognitive, social, affective, and physical needs, which should be addressed to facilitate expression.

Implications for Teaching and Researching Writing Instruction with Black Adolescent Females

The need to take seriously notions of audience and leverage diverse contexts of urban public language arts classroom as resources for writing instruction and social change. This dissertation has implications for how notions of audience are understood and applied in writing instruction. The findings indicate ways in which invisible and unnamed cultural audiences are embedded in writing prompts and are evidence that Whiteness and White supremacy are naturalized and normalized in the curriculum. Teachers and students avoid hidden conversations about the values and discourse patterns that constitute White culture, what it means to address White audience members, and why the primary focus of instruction is generally on writing for a single
cultural audience. Based on these findings, this dissertation demonstrates the need for White teachers to articulate their positions as White people, to enhance students’ metacognition of how writing is read and written from the cultural position of the White middle class, and to create spaces for teachers and students to discuss cultural and linguistic diversity and strategies for addressing audiences with diverse cultural backgrounds.

The findings of this study showed that Black students are well aware of systems of oppression, and the ways in which such systems are institutionalized in their literacy education. We must not shy away from conversations about race, culture, and language our students are already having. We must embrace discussions about the ways in which race, culture, and language affect the structure and content of writing, its meaning, and the ways in which it is interpreted in and across communities. We must create spaces for students to locate themselves in their texts and contexts, and to be unafraid of communicating their interpretations of the world and the word from their unique angles of vision.

The findings suggest that to achieve this goal, teachers must also be proactive in constructing bridges between the social worlds represented in literary texts and the social worlds that students negotiate on a daily basis. Generic and decontextualized writing prompts do not go far enough to create socially, culturally, and emotionally meaningful relationships between texts, writers, and the writing process. By including these connections as an explicit part of instruction, students would be better supported in drawing and leveraging the intertextual connections that are revealed in reading and
writing. As classrooms become increasingly diversified, notions of “cultural
crnsponsiveness” will not require a particular kind of “cultural text.” Therefore, the
assumption that books are required to reflect all cultures at all times may not necessarily
be valid although it would be helpful in enriching literacy learning. Significantly, the
findings of this study showed that some Black adolescent females identified at least three
gaps in texts and contexts that compromised their ability to connect with the texts
provided in school: (a) temporal, that is, the era in which the book was published or the
social world it captures differ from those of today; (b) biographical, that is, the characters
featured in the text do not share commonalities with the students or their peers; (c)
developmental, that is, the purpose of reading the text does not provide students with
opportunities for personal development. Based on this knowledge, it is possible to
construct clear and explicit connections that provide students that scaffold these levels of
literary disconnection to better support the meaningfulness of reading and writing in
school.

The findings of this study also indicate the need to take seriously notions of
“audience” in peer reviews. Classrooms in urban public schools comprise a rich diversity
of native-born and newcomer youth from various parts of the world. These students
should be reminded that their unique perspectives matter and that they could serve as
resources for writing and for supporting the development and enrichment of other
writers’ work. However, the peer review has been conceptualized as an instructional
component and an accountability measure for evaluating students’ adherence to the
various mechanics of writing. These ways of being together are contrary to the
intracultural peer relations in African-American communities (Siddle Walker, 1993), which privilege notions of community and social support, as well as the practices of talking and praising the work of others. This study points to the need to reframe the peer review process used with students of color to include ways of being together that support collegiality, friendship, and social critique while providing an authentic context for vetting ideas, stories, and arguments and cultivating strategies for writing for culturally diverse audiences and communicative purposes.

The findings also showed that although the native-born and newcomer youth were with each other more than they were apart, they still harbored prejudice, bias, and misperceptions. These misperceptions negatively affected their ability to communicate openly and initiate conversations about issues of race, class, and culture in the classroom. This finding reflects that the students were provided very few opportunities in the classroom to have dialogues about social issues, to disrupt stereotypes, or to mount cross-cultural strategies for social change. This gap in the instruction has led to the lack of strategies for empowering marginalized youth and equipping them with the literary tools to resist their own marginalization.

The need to take seriously public and private issues in writing practice. The findings of this study showed that some Black adolescent female participants wanted to write about issues of race and disclose their emotions. Although they felt comfortable doing so through writing, they perceived that the school, their teacher, and possibility their peers would misconstrue their work, which often constrained their expression.
These findings suggest the need for features in writing instruction that afford students measures of privacy and/or anonymity in their writing and in peer reviews. Previous scholars have prescribed writer’s notebooks to draft texts, take notes, and move students through the writing process (Angelillo, 1999). However, the findings of the present study indicate the need to extend the usage of such notebooks to include opportunities for non-graded reflection (Hampton & Morrow, 2003) and reciprocal journaling (Tillman, 2003). Although these notebooks have been used in teacher education to increase self-awareness, interest, and meaningful learning interactions among students and teachers, the present findings indicate that they could be used to support the positive learning outcomes of adolescent students.

**The need to construct a writing community.** Some Black adolescent females often feel alienated by Eurocentric literary texts and contexts of teaching and learning. The results showed that the participants in this study were also alienated from one another with respect to the social distancing between newcomers, native-born peers, and their White female teacher. In these experiences of alienation, the notions of “writing community” need either to be reworked to account for differences and discord or to be replaced completely. In both cases, teachers and researchers need to think deeply about the kind of work they prepare youth to do and the kind of world in which they will be working. Therefore, this dissertation revealed a false boundary between the social discord and disharmony found among adults in the national and global “community” and that occurring among our students.
There is a dearth of research on Black adolescent females’ experiences in school. There is even less research on Black adolescent females’ experiences of writing instruction and classroom-based writing. More research is needed to explore these issues. Adolescent females are positioned among the lowest in terms of their writing achievement (Evans-Winters, 2014). Further studies are needed to understand their classroom experiences and their classroom writing practices to determine the ways in which institutional racism, sexism, and Eurocentric standards are promoted in today’s educational systems.
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