THE CAGED BIRDS SING:
HIGHLIGHTING THE VOICES OF BLACK ADOLESCENT FEMALES ON THEIR
LANGUAGE AND LITERACY PRACTICES –
THREE QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATIONS

By

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ABSTRACT

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The title of this alternative format dissertation, comprised of this author's edited previously published article and two manuscripts, was inspired by Maya Angelou's poem, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings." Although this poem was written years ago, it still reflects the desire of Black adolescent females to sing of freedom for the inclusion of their voices in how they express themselves through their language and literacy practices.

The first chapter titled, "'Oh, Those Loud Black Girls!': A Phenomenological Study of Black Girls Talking with an Attitude," is a research study, which was originally published in the *Journal of Language & Literacy Education,* about Black adolescent females who used the African American Women's Speech Practice, "Talking with an Attitude" (TWA), with or around their teachers. This chapter details the reasons behind their use of TWA as well as their teachers' role in their appropriation of it in the school context. The second chapter titled, "*Oooh, It's Sooo Good!!!* : Black Adolescent Females Experiencing the Delicacy of Reading," is also a phenomenological study designed to put forth the voices of Black adolescent girls who are avid readers. The girls' inspiration for reading, captivation with it, and need to share their avidity with others are analyzed in intricate ways that provide an in-depth understanding of those Black girls who do not fit the struggling reader stereotype. The final chapter titled, "The Roles of Digital Literacies and Critical Literacy for Black Adolescent Females," is an extension of the study in

the second chapter. This conceptual thought paper focuses on these young adolescents' critical literacy and digital literacies' prowess as it relates to their voracious reading practices. Through their voices, it was evident that the girls needed instruction in how to maximize technological tools and use it for advocacy or critical literacy.

The findings herein inform researchers and practitioners on research and pedagogical considerations that should be made when working with this powerful, yet silenced population.

To my sistahs whom have yet to have their voices heard

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Furthermore, I thank my father, George Koonce, ThD, and my brother, Kenneth Koonce, for all of their timely words of wisdom.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

...The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

-- *Maya Angelou,* excerpt from the poem, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings"

The title of this dissertation was inspired by Maya Angelou's poem, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings." Although it was written years ago, this poem still reflects, in my view, the desire of Black adolescent females to sing of freedom from covert, and even sometimes overt, oppression and marginalization. In this context, they sing of freedom for the inclusion of their voices in how they express themselves through their language and literacy practices. Although these girls have more opportunities for advancement than their mothers and grandmothers, they are still stereotyped in the media, and I dare say, in scholarly realms because when the attention tends to be negative and stereotypical as evident in the gaps or absences in the scholarly literature on their reading or language practices, it has the potential to portray an inaccurate, one-dimensional view of these girls' astute language and literacy prowess.

The issue of voice, illustrated in the title as singing, is important here because African American females, along with other historically-oppressed people, have been noted for having to face what W.E.B. Du Bois (1903/1994) calls a "double-consciousness." Du Bois states that the double-consciousness is "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (p. 2). He continues, "One ever feels his two-ness, --an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone

1

keeps it from being torn asunder" (p. 2). Du Bois, in these quotes, explicates the idea that African Americans have the burden of displaying two selves, one that is acceptable to dominant society and one that wants to be the true self. Both entities war within the African American.

Double-consciousness does not stop there, however, for before Du Bois, Anna Julia Cooper introduced the concept of the triple identity, which outlines the difficulties of being Black, female, and an American. Carby's (1987) work explicated, "Cooper argued that women should not be confined to narrow ideologies of domesticity and sexual objectification in either White or Black spheres of influence…" (as cited in Giles, 2006, p. 631). This racialized experience is still part of the African American woman's experience, and the stereotypes of African American adolescent females are indicative of the conflicts of their older "sistahs." This assertion is validated by the stereotypes of these girls as loud, aggressive, combative, and remedial learners. The studies within this dissertation smash those stereotypes, and illuminate the voices of girls who want to be heard for their multiple, diverse, vibrant, and respectable identities.

The first chapter of this dissertation titled, "'Oh, Those Loud Black Girls!': A Phenomenological Study of Black Girls Talking with an Attitude," is a research study, which was originally published in the *Journal of Language & Literacy Education,* about Black adolescent females who use the African American Women's Speech Practice, "Talking with an Attitude" (TWA), with or around their teachers. The study was inspired by the work of Maisha Winn, author of the book *Girl Time: Literacy, Justice, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline* and Grace Evans (1980) chapter, "Those Loud Black Girls" in the edited book, *Learning to Lose: Sexism and Education.* Winn's book highlights, among other important subjects, how African American females are being disciplined more often because of their use of language in a way that

resembles TWA while Evan's chapter illuminated the frustration some teachers felt due to the attitude of their African American female students. These readings, as well as my own experiences, demonstrated the need for a phenomenological study to put forth the voices of these young girls, so that they could speak back and further the conversation about these issues regarding their identities as young Black women and human beings. The findings indicated that the girls' use of TWA with or around their teachers was used in opposition to their cultural import. This chapter details the reasons behind their use of TWA as well as their teachers' role in their appropriation of it in the school context.

The second chapter of the dissertation titled, "*Oooh, It's Sooo Good!!!* : Black Adolescent Females Experiencing the Delicacy of Reading," is also a phenomenological study designed to put forth the voices of Black adolescent girls who are avid readers because of the singular focus on those Black girls who struggle with reading. Indeed, although the gender gap in reading has been reversed, the lack of those Black adolescent female voices who love to read leaves room for these girls to be pigeon-holed in a generalized group of girls who struggle with reading. The findings of this study reveal that the participants do not just love reading; they crave it like their most tantalizing meal. The girls' inspiration for reading, captivation with it, and need to share their avidity with others are analyzed in intricate ways that provide an in-depth understanding of those Black girls who do not fit the struggling reader stereotype.

The final chapter titled, "The Roles of Digital Literacies and Critical Literacy for Black Adolescent Females," is an extension of the study in the second chapter. This conceptual thought paper focuses on these young adolescents' critical literacy and digital literacies' prowess as it relates to their voracious reading practices. Through their voices, it was evident that the girls

needed instruction in how to maximize technological tools and use it for advocacy or critical literacy.

It is my hope that these studies highlight the singing of these caged birds, or Black adolescent girls', so that we have a balanced and comprehensive view of who they are and what they care about in the realm of their language and literacy practices. The findings herein will inform researchers and practitioners on research and pedagogical considerations that should be made when working with this powerful, yet silenced population.

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CHAPTER ONE

"Oh, Those Loud Black Girls!":
A Phenomenological Study of Black Girls Talking with an Attitude[1]

ABSTRACT

Current research suggests that it is imperative for researchers and educators to pay more attention to the needs of African American adolescent girls and how their race and gender affect schooling (Fordham, 1993; Morris, 2007). The purpose of this study was to highlight the lived experiences of two African American adolescent girls when they used the African American women's speech practice, "Talking with an Attitude" (TWA), with their teachers. Using phenomenology and Afrocentric feminist epistemology as methodological and theoretical approaches, interviews were used to collect and analyze data that revealed the nature of their lived experiences. Van Manen's description of selective highlighting of statements that point to themes was used as a means of analysis. The findings indicate that the girls reappropriated the use of TWA to resist what they perceived to be hostility and disrespect on the part of their teachers.

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[1] This paper was originally published in the University of Georgia at Athens' *Journal of Language & Literacy Education*.

Introduction

No matter how backward and negative the mainstream view and image of Black people, I feel compelled to reshape the image and to explore our many positive angles because I love my own people. Perhaps this is because I have been blessed with spiritual African eyes at a time when most Africans have had their eyes poked out....So, like most ghetto girls who haven't yet been turned into money-hungry, heartless bitches by a godless money centered world, I have a problem: I love hard. Maybe too hard. Or maybe it's too hard for a people without structure— structure in the sense of knowing what African womanhood is.
What does it mean? What is it supposed to do to you and for you?
(Sistah Souljah, as cited in Richardson, 2003)

While I did not grow up in the ghetto, like Sistah Souljah, the author of the above quote, I have come to love my people hard, so I have chosen to highlight their often unheard voices as they described their experiences with teachers as they used the speech practice, "Talking with an Attitude" (TWA; Troutman, 2010). As these girls navigated their school ecology, they were also exploring their identities as African American[2] females. Through the sharing of their lived experiences, educators may walk away with more knowledge about the development of their multiple identities and of the TWA speech practice, which is part of the African womanhood Sistah Souljah mentions. But first, I want to share my journey by describing personal experiences with the phenomenon.

As an African American adolescent, I attended public schools whose student populations were majority African American, and many of my female friends talked with an attitude. At the time, I did not understand talking with an attitude as a speech practice within the African American women's speech community (AAWSC; Troutman, 2010), but my recent studies have generated an interest in this language practice. Although other races, ethnic groups, and cultures may appropriate talking with an attitude, it has been recognized in the literature as part of the

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[2] Like Battle-Walters (2004), I will use the terms Black and African American interchangeably to include Black females who refer to themselves as Black and to provide a possible connection of this phenomenon to females of the Black Diaspora.

AAWSC and the Black Diaspora, so this study focused solely on African American girls because of its history within this community.

In the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (2010), the word "attitude" has several meanings including fitness, adaptation, disposition, and posture, that is, an outlook on the world. When talking about attitude generally, among the White dominant culture, the meaning of attitude denotes these characteristics. For the AAWSC, talking with an attitude means so much more than an outlook. Troutman (2010) states:

> For many African Americans that self-identify as members of the AASC [African American Speech Community], attitude holds another layer of meaning, including to the extent that attitude becomes manifested overtly, through language and kinesics, by a speaker's ability to **talk** with an attitude, **walk** with an attitude, **act** with an attitude, **be** with an attitude. In many instances within the AASC, then, attitude actions are marked distinctly and can be read by other group members. These are actions that are learned socio-culturally in socially real contexts (emphasis in original; p. 107).

She goes on to state that those outside the AAWSC may look at TWA negatively, but to those inside the group, TWA can also be positive as noted by some of her participants quoted in the following text.

In Troutman's (2010) study of fifteen African American women ranging in age from 20-74, she noted that her participants defined TWA differently based on age. The older generation thought that attitude exuded confidence and self-esteem while the younger generation thought that it meant having a chip on one's shoulder or talking back. I found the latter negative connotations to be true of some classmates in my early education, so that was how I defined TWA for many years until I went to college and graduate school. Now, I see TWA as an African

9

American women's speech practice that is used to show confidence or resistance in oppressive situations.

As stated earlier, in my elementary grades, I had constant contact with girls who engaged in the practice of TWA, and my ideas on how TWA was operationalized were different. My thinking toward TWA continued to be negative because I associated it with angry and threatening behaviors. My exposure to many girls who used this speech practice changed a little in high school when I entered honors and Advanced Placement classes, which many of them did not take.

As much as I hate to admit it, I was often intimidated by TWA and often did not respond to my peers adeptly. As a result, I hated this speech practice because I could not use it to stand up for myself, and consequently, as Morgan (2002) describes, I felt and looked like a fool. My lack of skillfulness with TWA was probably the case because of part of my family's child-rearing practices. For instance, my family taught me to restrain my tongue and avoid the semblance of conflict. Even instances of using TWA to form camaraderie with classmates was frowned upon, so holding in my feelings might have resulted in the inability to engage in TWA with my Black female classmates.

Another possible reason for my inability to engage in TWA might have been due to my socioeconomic status. My family was part of the middle class, and although we lived in a Black suburban neighborhood, I attended inner-city schools with many African American students from low-income families. This difference in social class probably accounts for some of the tensions between me and my classmates.

In fact, Morris (2007) describes the tensions within Black communities because of social class, but specifically hones in on the tensions among Black females and their Black female

teachers. In his analysis he noted that Black female teachers often, but not in all cases, experienced friction over the expectation that these girls should behave "ladylike" and avoid being loud or talking with an attitude (p. 506). He surmised that this expectation had to do with the social class the Black female teachers acquired by virtue of their position. While Troutman believes TWA crosses social classes (personal communication, February 4, 2011), that was not my experience, and I think it should be studied further to parse out this possibility.

Similar to the teachers in Morris' study, I also experienced tensions with African American adolescent female students as a student teacher; however, my cooperating teacher and I did not insist that these girls conform to the "ladylike" behaviors Morris describes. However, my cooperating teacher and I occasionally discussed our difficulties in reaching these girls, mainly because of their "attitudes." I remember her saying that out of the many years she had been teaching, she noticed an increase in African American girls talking with an attitude. I wondered why these girls used this practice. Perhaps my mentor and I had a lack of understanding of the use of TWA among young Black girls (as opposed to older Black women) and, as a result, it may have been a deterrent to reaching them. Furthermore, we were also using many Eurocentric novels and texts. Because of our lack of understanding and following school and district mandates to use several Eurocentric materials, we probably were not seen as allies and adults who truly cared about their wellbeing.

It was not until my doctoral studies that I began to understand the language and literacy practice of talking with an attitude and my Black "sistahs" who used it. I no longer loathed this practice, but began to appreciate it for both its seemingly positive and negative aspects. I now understand the self-esteem that comes with TWA that the older generation indexed in

Troutman's (2010) article, and I can appreciate its use as a form of resistance and a way to give voice.

At the end of my second year of doctoral studies, a former university professor asked if there was research or professional development available for teachers whose African American girls engaged in this practice because the school district was suspending more girls for behavioral issues which included TWA. My early experiences with TWA, this professor's inquiry, and readings provided the impetus for this study. In terms of readings outside of Troutman's work, Maisha Winn's (2011) book title, *Girl Time: Literacy, Justice, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline* also propelled me to initiate this study. Winn's book highlights, among other important subjects, how African American females are being disciplined more often because of their use of language in a way that resembles TWA. Furthermore, Grace Evans (1980) chapter, "Those Loud Black Girls" in the edited book, *Learning to Lose: Sexism and Education,* illuminated the frustration some teachers felt due to the attitude of their African American female students. In sum, these readings and experiences demonstrated the need for a phenomenological study about the experience of African American adolescent females' use of TWA with or around their teachers in order to put forth their voices, so that they could speak back and further the conversation about these issues regarding their identities as young Black women and human beings.

As such, the research question for this study was the following: What is the nature of the experience for African American adolescent females who talk with an attitude with or around their teachers? I explored the phenomenon of talking with an attitude using Afrocentric feminist epistemology (Collins, 1990) as the theoretical approach and phenomenology as the methodology (Van Manen, 1990). These two approaches allowed me to get at the issues of voice

for my participants. It was my goal to provide my participants with the opportunity to voice their lived experiences of talking with an attitude with their teachers without my judgment or criticism. Their voices provide an understanding of the nuances of their lifeworlds.

<div align="center">**Conceptual Background**</div>

Navigating Multiple Identities

The issue of voice is important because African American females, along with other historically-oppressed people, have been noted for having to face what W.E.B. Du Bois (1903/1994) calls a "double-consciousness." Du Bois states that the double-consciousness is "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (p. 2). He continues, "One ever feels his two-ness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (p. 2). Du Bois explicates the idea that African Americans have the burden of displaying two selves, one that is acceptable to dominant society and one that wants to be the true self. This conflict is reflected in the politics and realities of our day as well. For example, if one studies Arizona' s ban on the teaching of ethnic studies, one could infer that this law aimed at increasing Americanism (by banning curricula and instruction that officials believed resegregate people; Downey, 2012) creates a double consciousness for those who want to celebrate their culture. This example points to the reason why the voice of my participants is so important; they, even as young African Americans, might have a war raging within, as they have been privy to some racialized experiences with their teachers.

Double-consciousness includes all African Americans, but Anna Julia Cooper, a scholar predating Du Bois, introduced the concept of triple identity, which details the difficulties of

being Black, female, and an American. Carby's (1987) work explicates, "Cooper argued that women should not be confined to narrow ideologies of domesticity and sexual objectification in either White or Black spheres of influence…" (as cited in Giles, 2006, p. 631). This racialized experience is still part of the African American woman's experience. To explain, some African American women have stated that they had been sterilized against their wills throughout the 20th century (Volscho, 2007). This example points to the possibility that these women had a triple identity conflict because their color/race, gender, and Americanism all played a part in their sterilization. In fact, the state of North Carolina recently acknowledged the plan of mass sterilization of poor minorities in the 20th century, but the North Carolina Senate refused to approve compensation that the House had approved for the victims (Gann, Hutchison, & James, 2012). These examples point to the negotiation of multiple identities that African American women continue to face.

These examples are not given to place judgment on the morality of these laws/issues of banning cultural studies and sterilization; rather, it is to point to the multiple identities that women of color have to face in current times. This contention of managing a triple identity remains in current society, so it may also be a part of the lifeworlds of my adolescent participants who are learning to navigate this reality in their schools.

Indeed, many African American women have navigated their multiple identities positively as shown through the strength of navigating these identities in a prejudiced society. Even Cooper (1892/1998) stated, "But to be a woman of the Negro race in America, and to be able to grasp the deep significance of the possibilities of the crisis, is to have a heritage, it seems to me, unique in the ages" (p. 117). In current times, we explore the concept of multiple identities, especially for African American women who manage more than race, gender, and American culture. These

women also manage other identities such as socioeconomic differences, sexual orientation, and religious beliefs, just to name a few. Although Cooper explored the triple identity, she also noted the strength of African American women in balancing these roles. However, although this management demonstrates great strength in the African American woman, it could be burdensome for African American adolescent females whom are just coming into their identities. It is difficult for adolescents to manage multiple identities when they are just wrestling with who they are and where they belong.

Defining "Talking with an Attitude" (TWA)

The literature on learning to navigate multiple identities provides a conceptual starting point for understanding why talking with an attitude is important for further study, especially for the school context. As part of the specific experiences of Black females, Troutman's (2010) participants explained what talking with an attitude meant to them. First, however, Troutman explained that "*attitude* [is] a broad concept that can be displayed in language and/or kinesics" (p. 85, italics in original). She continued, "Its meanings and functions derive from social contexts and community norms" (p. 85). Troutman did not provide a definition of TWA because she used the method phenomenology that involves putting participants (referred to as participants for my study) in the subject position and allowing them, not the principal researcher, to co-define the term (D. Troutman, personal communication, February 4, 2011). Before presenting the definitions of TWA by her participants, however, Troutman provided the example below by Morgan (2002) to help the reader better understand the concept:

> A verbal routine that I remember as a child resulted in my losing face when two
>
> of my very "best friends" were talking to each other. I innocently walked up to them,
>
> listened for a bit, and then offered my expert advice about their conversation…. [T]hey

said to me: "This is an A and B conversation so C your way out!".... Fast forward to the

new millennium and what has happened to this kind of verbal death blow? It has becomes

[*sic*] even more lethal. The eyes and head still roll, but the lips say something that

requires insider youth membership. "Girlfriend" now says something like: "You just

AAAAALLL UP in the Kool Aid!—And don't EEEVEN know the flavor!" or "Stop

dippin' in my Kool Aid." (p. 41)

Notice how Morgan called this type of attitude a "verbal death blow" and "lethal" (p. 41). These

adjectives describe a practice used negatively. To further support this point, Morgan goes on to

say that her "sister overheard this and reported to everyone that [she] had no cool and had been

made a fool" (p. 41). Although Troutman agreed that this example has negative implications for

TWA, she added that it also has attributes that are positive. She stated that these "acts have been

socially learned, transferred, and sanctioned by specific communities of practice" (p. 96).

Although she believed this assertion to be the case, Troutman interviewed other Black women to

get their perspectives. In another conversation, she added, "Negative acts may have stood out

most prominently from the Morgan example, yet it struck me that positive associations must

have been and continue to be part of the TWA act; otherwise, it would not continue to be

appropriated within and beyond the AASC" (personal communication, February 4, 2011). In

other words, because TWA is still used within and beyond the AAWSC, it must be positive, as it

has been maintained as a part of the cultural and ethnic community.

As stated earlier, Troutman's (2010) participants defined TWA in positive and negative

ways. For example, one of them stated that it means "having a chip on your shoulder," or always

being upset, and "flipping the finger," while another one said that it is an "inflection in voice;

sass, talking back but it's not disrespectful" (p.99). Finally, another participant stated that it is

"confidence; I see it as a positive. Some people say, 'Get rid of the 'tude. When I first think of attitude, I think of it as positive" (p. 99). For instance, one of her participants stated, "models on a runway come out with attitude. [A] fashion director says, 'Give me some attitude'" (p. 99). Attitude to these women means exuding confidence, self-esteem, command of self, command of language, and being empowered.

When asked who talks with an attitude, some of the women stated it is "associated with teens and betweens," "older and younger," "Black females usually," and "People who are self-assured, confident in status, in themselves, in their community, their work, [and] their roles" (Troutman, 2010, p. 100). They added, "Teachers may [TWA]; ministers may; leaders do it; males in their own way; females in their own way" (p. 100). All of these definitions demonstrate the polyvocal nature of the term. In addition, one of Troutman's participants stated that for older African American women, TWA means confidence, but it was often looked at negatively by their younger counterparts. As it will be seen later, my participants also conceived TWA as a negative act. However, talking with an attitude on the part of young people could very much mean more than just having a chip on one's shoulder—as it is sometimes interpreted by teachers--it could also be used as an act of resistance on the part of Black adolescent girls (Fordham, 1993; Morris, 2007).

Possible Reasons Behind Adolescents' Use of TWA

Black girls talking with an attitude is not new. Grace Evans (1980), a former secondary teacher in Inner London comprehensive schools, "had a political background which included a commitment to feminism and the exploration of race as a personal and political reality" which informed her work (p. 183). As a former teacher of social studies, English, English as a Second Language, and special needs students, she heard her White colleagues exclaim, "Oh, those loud

Black girls!," in the lounge of her inner-city school (p. 183). Evans added that this exclamation was often "followed by the slamming of a pile of folders on to a table and the speaker collapsing into a chair or storming off to get a cup of coffee" (p. 183). Evans continued her narrative with the statements below:

> The words were usually uttered in response to a confrontation in which the teacher's sense of authority had been threatened by an *attitude* of defiance on the part of a group of Black girls...they patrolled this territory with much skill, sending out a distinct message of being in and for themselves. (p. 183, emphasis added)

These teachers were not necessarily remarking on the volume of the girls' speech (see Mitchell-Kernan (1972) on loud-talking); instead, they were incensed at the girls' attitudes of defiance. These teachers were frustrated because they felt their authority was undermined by skillful speakers who knew how to speak their mind and rebel against perceived misuse of teacher authority. Again, this use of TWA is positive in that the girls used it to maintain their cultural integrity.

Evans (1980) also argued that these girls, like their Black male counterparts, were not represented in the curriculum, in school exhibits, or in books. This omission was also generally the case in the school district where I taught. In fact, this hidden curriculum, as Evans termed it, suggested that they were destined to work the jobs of those low on the social hierarchy of the school. In her school, the majority of the teachers were White, and many of the cooks, cleaners, and additional employees were Black women. Evans (1980) stated, "Looking at the subject hierarchy of the secondary school, it is a small intellectual leap to make from identifying the subjects with the least status – home economics, needlework, child development – to observing

that it is in these spheres of work that Black women are to be found in the outside world [of school]" (p. 187). These young females had few role models of Black women from the higher social hierarchy from which to glean information that would help them climb this ladder without negating their language and literacies. In fact, Evans stated that a "good" education often came at the cost of one's Black cultural identity.

Finally, Evans (1980) pointed out the challenges these girls faced as a result of being Black and female. She noted that the experience of marginalization is different for Black and White women; for Black women have been castigated as "the mammy, the Aunt Jemima figure, the masculinised beast of burden and the sexually licentious, exotic nightclub singer/dancer/prostitute" (p. 188). These images often found in the media are difficult to erase when attempting to replace them with positive ones, such as the person who is excelling in the arts or sports. Even putting forth an image of a Black female as *only* able to succeed in arts and sports is somewhat marginalizing her. Images of women in business, education, finance, and politics present careers to which young Black adolescent girls should be exposed, in addition to arts and sports. A lack of access to positive images of Black women is a challenge that Black girls struggle with as they begin to develop their identities (Evans, 1980). Images of Black women who have been able to operate successfully in the dominant society are missing, and so are the ways in which they navigated TWA in their climb up the social ladder. This lack of positive images is problematic because teachers of Black girls' may also lack these positive images that could affect how they interact with them.

Similar to Evans' chapter, Morris' (2007) outlined the educational obstacles and perceptions that African American girls faced in his study, but in an American public, neighborhood middle school. Unlike Evans, Morris noted that African American female

teachers, as well as White teachers, disciplined African American girls for talking with an attitude. His examples demonstrate that teachers who share the same race and gender as their students can also carry out oppressive practices. In his findings, Morris noted, for example, that African American female teachers presumed that their African American female students lacked "interactional skills" because of their family's socioeconomic status (p. 504). Female-headed households in these socioeconomic groups were presumed inadequate to pass on values that the dominant society esteems. However, Morris made sure not to demonize these teachers because they seemed to have caring intentions. To explain, they did not want their African American female students to be marginalized by a prejudiced society that they knew awaited them.

As a result of his research, Morris developed three themes, which are relevant to the present study. The first theme, perceived challenges to authority, was created because teachers often chastised girls for subverting their authority in classrooms. After one teacher scolded one of her African American female students for being assertive by asking questions, the girl put her head down on the desk and was disengaged for the rest of the class.

Another theme that coincided with my research was perceived loudness. Loudness here not only represents the volume of the girls' speech, but attitude as well. One of the teachers told Morris the following: "The boys here are always quiet and the girls are real loud. Girls are loud at this age, they have *attitude*. They won't want to do something, or think something is stupid, and move their heads back and forth and click at me" (emphasis added, p. 505). While this teacher was speaking of girls in general, Morris noted that her description of clicking and head movement is stereotypical African American female behavior. Unfortunately, this perception of African American girls as loud led to disciplinary actions.

An African American male teacher in Morris' study described African American girls specifically as loud and confrontational. However, he added, "…[T]hey've learned to be combative because they don't have the system behind them. They've learned this to survive" (p. 506). Morris stated that this teacher's sentiment reflects scholarly research. My participants used their loudness or TWA in the same way.

TWA as a Form of Resistance

Several authors have discussed some aspects of language and literacy practices such as TWA among African American women and the women's struggles in American society. One such author, Gwendolyn D. Pough (2004), speaks of practices such as "bringing wreck," as a means of resistance. Specifically, she states, "Bringing wreck, as the term is used here, is a rhetorical act that has close ties to various other speech acts that are often linked to Black womanhood: talking back, going off, turning it out, having a niggerbitchfit, or being a diva" (p. 78). I suspect that if Troutman (2010) had written about TWA at the time Pough's article was written, the term might have been included in that list. In fact, Pough cites Troutman stating that Black women use their speech acts as a form of resistance. She references Troutman when she states, "Black women have had to develop and pass on to future generations of Black women a form of verbal and nonverbal expression that combines politeness with assertiveness" (Pough, p. 78). Pough is indexing Troutman's 2001 analysis of the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas investigation where she analyzed the assertive style of Anita Hill throughout the questioning. Anita Hill's assertiveness was used as an act of resistance, just as TWA is used in some situations.

Helping Black Adolescent Females Manage Triple Identity

Similar to Pough's discussion on the struggles of Black women, Battle-Walters (2004) talks about African American women's challenges with being African American and female in her published research study, *Sheila's Shop: Working-Class African American Women Talk about Life, Love, Race, and Hair.* Battle-Walters, who studied the impact of race on a group of African American women in a hair salon, discusses the realities of being discriminated against for being African American and a woman, reinforcing Philomena Essed's (as cited in Battle-Walters, 2004) concept of gendered racism. To begin this discussion on gendered racism, Battle-Walters began by asking her participants what it is like to be a Black woman in America today. The responses particularly resonated with one of her participants: "It's hard!" (p. 31). This client was alluding to the idea that it is hard for African American women to achieve success because they find resistance from supervisors and institutions.

This concept of the gendered racism is similar to the previous discussion on Du Bois' (1903/1994) concept of double-consciousness and Cooper's (1892/1998) notion of the triple identity. Black women have felt compelled to navigate multiple identities as a result of not only wanting to express themselves to the world, but also to gain access to the culture of power, or the economic and social power associated with the White or dominant society (Delpit, 1995). As previously stated, African American adolescent girls also feel the effects of the triple identity. Elaine Richardson (2003) made comments on the conflicts African American girls' face in regard to their language and literacies. She stated:

> For many African American girls…[t]here has been a conflict, between our mothers and others, about what language is and does for us. This conflict is so prevalent that many Black females at some time or another internalize it: Should we respect our language and ways of knowing as little girls, or in our homes as we develop into women? Or should we

gradually have our minds (our mother wits) erased with each passing year of formal

schooling? (p. 76)

This quote speaks to the need of helping Black adolescent girls in the development of their

identities by respecting their ways of knowing and educating teachers about their literacies.

Providing this information to teachers will help them understand and educate Black adolescent

females, so that their cultural expression is validated while they are simultaneously taught how to

access the culture of power (Delpit, 1995; Richardson, 2003). This knowledge will help all

teachers regardless of race. However, in this study, three White teachers may have needed this

information to avoid the racialized incidents with the participants. Knowledge about African

American girls' literacies and how these girls may use them as a defense mechanism may have

curbed the conflicts between the girls and their teachers. This concept of understanding TWA as

an avenue that African American girls use outside cultural contexts in order to defend themselves

is a point illuminated through the lens of Afrocentric feminist epistemology and phenomenology.

Theoretical and Methodological Traditions

Afrocentric feminist epistemology, a tradition best explicated in the work of Patricia Hill

Collins, came about because Black women wanted to have the ability to combine both

Afrocentric *and* feminist standpoints (Collins, 1990). She listed four dimensions to Afrocentric

feminist epistemology: (a) concrete experience as a criterion of meaning; (b) the use of dialogue

in assessing knowledge claims; (c) the ethic of caring; and (d) the ethic of personal

accountability. Concrete experience as a criterion of meaning indicates that Black women place

greater value on wisdom gained through experience than on knowledge of a concept (Collins,

1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994). The African American adolescent females in this study were

treated as experts having wisdom because of their lived experiences with the phenomenon.

During interviews with these adolescents, I purposed to place value on their accounts in order to honor the wisdom they brought to the phenomenon. Placing value on their experiences is critical because while I had exposure to TWA, I never used it with teachers, so their wisdom served as enlightenment for me as a researcher and educator.

I also employed Collins' use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims by talking "with" and not "to" the participants in order to dialogue with them instead of treating them as objects. Therefore, we dialogued as subject to subject. To elaborate on this tenet, Collins (1990) stated, "For Black women new knowledge claims are rarely worked out in isolation from other individuals and are usually developed through dialogues with other members of a community" (p. 212). Therefore, my participants and I worked through their knowledge claims by delving deeper into their stories through clarifying questions in order to come to a better understanding of their experiences.

Furthermore, in practicing the ethic of care, I encouraged these adolescents to tell their stories because I wanted them to walk away feeling the value placed upon their lived experiences. Care was also established through the solidarity gained by our interactions during their activities at the *Boys and Girls Club*. The girls' own ethic of care was demonstrated when they talked about their experiences witnessing classmates being verbally attacked by teachers. Through my research, they wanted other teachers to understand that everyone has feelings, and one may not know a student's life experiences.

Finally, I incorporated the ethic of personal accountability that involves an individual taking full responsibility for her knowledge claims and the researcher's evaluation of an individual's character, values, and ethics. Through my participant observation of the girls during their *Boys and Girls Club* activities and probing to ensure they indeed had these experiences, I

held the girls accountable for their knowledge claims. In turn, they held me accountable while I asked for clarification in order to get their stories right.

Along with Afrocentric feminist epistemology as a theoretical framework, I also used the method of phenomenology to get at essential meanings from my participants' lived experience accounts. In phenomenology, participants' experiences are reduced to a description of universal essences (Creswell, 2007). An essence refers to the "nature of an experience" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 10). Phenomenological research, according to Van Manen, is at its core the human scientific study of essences. My research question gets to the essence of the experience under study. Again, it is, "What is the nature of the experience for young Black girls who talk with an attitude with or around their teachers?" This question gets at the meaning of the lived experience instead of just the facts of the experience (Van Manen, 1990).

Also in the study of lived experiences, it is only possible to understand the experience through reflection, or after it has taken place, because it is impossible to reflect upon the experience as one is living it (Van Manen, 1990). This statement means that phenomenological research is also the explication of phenomena as it presents itself to consciousness. Therefore, in this research study, I attempted to provide an environment in which the participants were in a natural attitude so that they could provide a concrete, detailed account of their experiences (Van Manen, 1990).

Van Manen (1990) stated that "[it] does not offer us the possibility of effective theory with which we can now explain and/or control the world, but rather it offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world" (p. 9). In other words, we attempt to grasp the world pre-reflectively and immediately. This line of thought is similar to twentieth-century German philosopher Heidegger (1927/1962/2006), in that for him

phenomenology values lived experiences, precisely because the subject's experiences are "ready-to-hand" (p. 98). In other words, the experience is action-oriented. The subject is being by doing. In this research study, I was interested in my participants' ready-to-hand experiences. However, during data analysis, I took on the position of "presence-at-hand" (p. 101). Taking this stance means that I stepped back and examined or observed the phenomenon in order to discover what was happening. For instance, after I read the interview transcripts, I concentrated on meanings as they were presented, in order to illuminate them and provide an analysis of themes as they appeared in the transcripts.

Another aspect of phenomenological research is that it is the description of the experiential meanings we live as we live them. In other words, phenomenology values meaning over statistical relationships among variables, frequency of behaviors or statements, and so on. Van Manen (1990) also states that phenomenology differs from "other disciplines in that it does not aim to explicate meanings specific to particular cultures (ethnography), to certain social groups (sociology), to historical periods (history), to mental types (psychology), or to an individual's personal life history (biography)" (p. 11). Instead, phenomenology seeks to give meaning to our everyday experiences (Van Manen, 1990). Thus, I also strive to give meaning to the this study's participants. My purpose in this research is not to develop cultural meanings based on a certain social group but to come to more universally-shared meanings that may be relevant to those outside of the group[3].

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[3] Although TWA is located more in the AAWSC, it has possible applications beyond this group as well. For example, others reading this article may remember an experience of friction with teachers and identify with it. This example is part of what phenomenology is all about. It notes the importance of the phenomenon to the individual or specialized group, but some aspect of the experience could have universally-shared meanings.

Furthermore, phenomenology is a human science that focuses on the meaning of the "lived *human* world" (p. 11, italics in original). In studying the human world, phenomenological research is also the attentive practice of thoughtfulness toward our subjects. As I interviewed my participants and analyzed their experiences, I purposed to practice thoughtfulness and care, which relates to Afrocentric feminist epistemology.

Phenomenological research is also a poetizing activity. The phenomenological researcher will use language not to give the latest information, summarize, or conclude, but to elucidate the goings-on in the world. As we speak the world, it helps us improve it by giving voice to participants' experiences and making meaning out of them. This research empowers participants and enlightens readers to a phenomenon they may not have considered but to which they can in some way relate.

Orbe, Drummond, and Camara (2002) found many similarities between Afrocentric feminist epistemology and phenomenology. First, both frameworks treat participants "as experts of their life experiences" (p. 125). These personal experiences are considered as solid evidence in research (Collins, 1990; Orbe et al., 2002). Like Afrocentric feminist epistemology, phenomenology also asserts that personal expressiveness and emotion are important to knowledge, theory, and research. Next, both traditions "focus on the power of dialogue in creating knowledge" (p. 125). All in all, "Phenomenological inquiry creates a discursive space where African American women can give voice to the circumstances that are central to the ways in which they experience life" (p. 125). Providing an opportunity for African American adolescent females to have their voices heard in the conversation about TWA was important in the development of this study.

Data-Gathering and Analysis Procedures

27

Participant Selection

Data was gathered through two interviews with several African American girls over a one-month period. Although many girls were interviewed, only two of them who participated in a *Boys and Girls Club* in a Midwestern city, met the criteria for the study. That is, they were chosen because of their experiences with the phenomenon and their willingness to participate in the study.

To garner support for the study, I distributed a flyer in order to provide information to the girls and their families. The Teen Director also allowed me to have a meeting with all of the African American adolescent girls in the program in order to give more information and answer questions. In addition to providing this information, I participated in their games and other activities in order to become more acquainted with them. They coincidently belonged to the same middle school, so this fact probably played a part in the similarity of their experiences. However, they were not chosen based upon the fact that they attended the same school; on the contrary, it was their willingness to discuss their experiences with TWA was the reason they were selected.

Research Procedures

In my interviews with these girls, I was intent on getting the full story of what it was like to talk with an attitude with their teachers by attempting to create an environment conducive for a natural attitude. This attempt was made by asking the girls to tell me about their day. I also asked them to tell me about themselves, including their hobbies, their favorite part about school, and what they liked most about the *Boys and Girls Club*. During the main part of the interviews, I asked questions more pointedly about the phenomenon and used reduction, which is the process of withholding one's prior knowledge in order to see their experiences freshly. In other words, I

withheld my knowledge and experiences with TWA in order to listen and understand their experience as if the concept was new to me. However, in analyzing the data, I followed Van Manen's (1990) method of using my prior experiences with the phenomenon to inform my interpretation of it. I found this method helpful in understanding the girls' feelings about their teachers' behaviors.

Additionally, I audiotaped the interviews and after the sessions, I transcribed the interviews verbatim and reread them several times looking for significant statements to arrive at essential meanings, which Van Manen describes as the selective highlighting approach. While this method helped in gaining greater insight into the girls' lived experiences, I struggled with making meaning out of them. Because of this struggle, I solicited the help of a colleague astute in phenomenology to help me arrive at themes from the data. His probing and insight helped me to think more deeply about the themes within the text and how the meanings could be universally shared.

To arrive at the themes, I had to determine the usefulness of those themes by questioning whether they got at the meaning of the experience of these African American adolescent girls (Van Manen, 1990). The themes that were ultimately chosen seemed to get at the core of the "notion" we were trying to understand while also understanding that "no thematic formulation can completely unlock the deep meaning, the full mystery, the enigmatic aspects of the experiential meaning of a notion" (p. 88). Therefore, as the researcher, I worked toward making meaning out of the core of the experience, but also understood that my analysis might not completely get at the full mystery of the phenomenon.

Finally, after data analysis, I wrote what Van Manen (1990) calls "phenomenologically sensitive paragraphs," which refers to the poetizing aspect of phenomenology. Themes were worded poetically while also making meaning out of the experience. For instance, the theme, "My Cup Overflows – Talking with an Attitude as a Defense Mechanism," came about as a result of a participant's following statement: And, then I'll try to tell them and stuff and sometimes they may want to get an attitude and stuff, <u>but I try to hold it in as much as possibly like as long as I can. Sometimes, I do</u>. This theme gets at the nature of the experience, but does so with language befitting phenomenology because it transcends "everyday talking and acting in that it is always arrived at in a reflective mood" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 97).

Findings

The following themes represent my participants' lived experiences. Staying close to the girls' experiences was key in avoiding any attempt at a description of objective reality (what "really happened").

In this research, I hypothesized that the participants would initiate TWA, and, as a result, their teachers would not understand, which would result in conflict. This hypothesis was a result of my observations and Kochman's (1981) work, which talks about the cultural misunderstandings between African Americans and Caucasians. Instead, I found that in the world of the girls' experience, teachers started and/or escalated tense situations with the girls, which resulted in their talking with an attitude. They acted to defend themselves or to resist what they perceived to be disrespectful behavior (attacks on their cultural being).

The ensuing themes are organized in a temporal sequence—reflecting the temporal nature of lived experience. The participants' lifeworlds reflected:

1) their sense of being constantly exposed to a hostile school environment, which

resulted in:

2) their feelings of confusion;

3) their feelings of disrespect;

4) their compulsions to talk with an attitude.

Theme One: Living in an Hostile School Ecology

A constant throughout the girls' narratives is their feelings of living in a hostile ecology at their school. The word "hostile" here is not being used to describe teachers' malevolence or conscious, purposeful ill will toward students; rather, it describes an atmosphere where the girls felt unwelcome as if they were their teachers' enemies. In school, they sensed an antagonistic environment – not a warm, inviting place that would be ideal for learning. In fact, this reference comes from the first definition, part 4d, of the Online Merriam-Webster Dictionary, which defines hostile as "having an intimidating, antagonistic, or offensive nature <a *hostile* workplace>." As will be seen in the subsequent examples, their perceived climate was not only a hindrance to their learning, but it also made the girls feel uneasy and unhappy with their school. Through their words, it was evident that the girls expected school to be a safe place not only physically, but also psychologically and emotionally. Instead, they witnessed and received teachers' frustrations, so that the reality of the situation did not measure up to their reasonable expectations.

In her first account, Olivia described her hostile school ecology. She stated:

Um. There's this one teacher. He's my, um, Western Hemisphere teacher. I think he was racist, but he proved not to be because he treated White kids the same way. But, um, he would like whenever you would ask him a question or try to talk to him, he'd be standing right next to you and pretend like he don't hear you or whatever. He just be staring and

31

stuff and – I don't know you just have to wait on his terms for everything. He'll be like, "Okay, I heard you," and stuff, and we'll be like, "Well what are you waiting for?" I mean, like he – and he don't be doing nothing. And, he'll be like, "well wait until I get done doing what I'm doing." We be like, "So, what exactly are you doing?" and stuff. And, he just, I don't know. Nobody really likes him. And then his grading doesn't add up because when we get our progress reports, like if you had a certain grade, but all your papers at the percentages and stuff supposed to add up, so yeah my mom got on me a lot about him, but I would try to explain to her. But that might have been the class I got a bad grade in for an overall grade or whatever. And I was mad. Yeah.

In this narrative, Olivia and other students appealed to their teacher to answer their questions. Instead, they perceived him as ignoring them and only answering once he had had enough of their persistent questioning ("he'd be standing right next to you and pretend like he don't hear you"). The behavior was so offensive to Olivia that she thought that he was racist at first, which demonstrates the hostility she sensed in her school environment. This excerpt also shows how much power she attributed to the teacher and how she distrusted him ("And then his grading doesn't add up…but all your papers at the percentages and stuff supposed to add up…") She also found little relief that "he treated [the] White kids the same way." Olivia's experience is one where her teachers did not care; indeed, if anything, she found them to be going out of their way to mock and ignore them and to hurt them by unfairly changing their grades.

Another part of the dialogue that is worth noting is her use of the word "um." Olivia seemed hesitant to share her story about her Western Hemisphere teacher ("He's my, um, Western Hemisphere teacher – But, um, he would like whenever you would ask him a question – he'd be standing right next to you and pretend like he don't hear you or whatever.") Her

hesitation to share might point to a possible fear of reporting what was really happening in her school environment. As she shared her story, she became less hesitant demonstrating that she was more comfortable with me and in the "natural attitude," a term phenomenologist Max Van Manen (1990) uses to denote this comfort in telling the whole story.

Olivia's second narrative about this same teacher also demonstrated the hostile ecology created among students. She stated that although this teacher never had an attitude with her, she had witnessed him affronting another student. She recalled:

Yes. Ah, he disrespected this boy's mom. He, dang, he had got smart with the boy, and then they just kept going back and forth or whatever. And then he said something about the boy's mom, and then everybody was like [gasps]. He was sort of calling her a h-o-e, but I forgot how in the terms he used it. He's like "Well, your mom blah blah blah blah blah-" something. I forgot exactly what he said, but we was like, "Oh my gosh." And we tried to protest the teacher so many times and stuff, and the security guards they knew how he was, and they would try to tell the principal, and the principal just I don't know— He was White and she was White, so – The security guards were Black, and most of the class was Black. There was like three or four White students, but yeah, so....

Olivia experienced school as a place where White people oppressed Black people. Her voice and those of other Black adults, did not matter. Her lived experience leaves one to question how she could go about learning in school with these perceived thoughts of injustice .

Stephanie, another participant, also provided a narrative that described the school as a hostile place. She said about a teacher, "Like she's known for yelling. Like she's always yelling at someone or like getting mad. Like moving you or touching you. Sometimes, she can get annoying like a little kid." Notice that in Stephanie's description she notes yelling, and most

notably, touching ("like moving you or touching you") as a boundary that has been crossed. This boundary took away her feelings of safety. It is as if Stephanie, in order to get through the day, must set up a boundary around herself. When hostile teachers violate this space, feelings of strong annoyance are a result. She saw her teacher's behavior as childlike instead of demonstrating the caring adult figure she expected in this position.

When I asked Stephanie how the teacher reacted on one of the days she responded, she said, "I kept on talking like, and she'll say, 'Go in the hallway.' I'll ask her why, and she'll be like, 'Don't argue with me.' She'll just take your stuff and go out there. And then sometimes, some, like – this one kid she put her hands on."

These experiences demonstrate how school can be perceived as a dangerous place. Olivia and Stephanie did not feel safe in their school ecology – an environment where they expected care. Instead, they were left to use whatever tools they had for defending themselves in order to maintain a sense of self in this environment. One of these tools was TWA. All in all, the temporal process began with adapting to their hostile school ecology. Following this initial realization, they then experienced bewilderment at their teachers' actions.

Theme Two: Confusion as a Result of Unmet Expectations

In American society, teachers are expected to care, or in other words, have interest and concern, for students. As mentioned earlier, the girls felt no different, and told stories of teachers blatantly disrespecting them by unjustifiably yelling at them and using sarcasm to make them feel stupid. In the stories the girls relayed, these teachers seemed to expect the worst from their students. The teachers' lenses seemed to color what they saw in classroom situations, and according to Olivia and Stephanie, they behaved like loose cannons by blowing up and yelling at them and other students.

The girls were confused as a result of their unmet expectations, and they wondered why their teachers were mean, sarcastic, and angry. These students believed that they did not provoke their teachers' anger, so they were bewildered by it. They seemed to have the following questions: What would make a teacher so angry with students? Were they burned out? Did bureaucracy frustrate them? Had they been stepped one too many times by previous students and administrators? If so, these girls were not able to feel sympathy for their teachers.

Stephanie's remarks cited earlier also point to confusion ("I kept on talking like, and she'll say, 'Go in the hallway.' I'll ask her <u>why</u>, and she'll be like, 'Don't argue with me.' She'll just take your stuff, and go out there"). Stephanie was unsure of why her teacher wanted her to go into the hallway. The teacher's anger seemed unnecessary, so confusion set in. Stephanie also noted that she sometimes forgot who she was talking to when using TWA with teachers. She stated, "Yeah, I got angry with some teachers—[S]he'll yell like get really loud with me. I be like, *'Okay, you don't have to get loud with me.'* I just like forget who I'm talking to sometimes. Like, I'm talking with a friend or something, and I've crossed the line." Stephanie recognized that she was talking to a teacher, an adult figure, only after she used TWA (see italics), which indicates that she was confused by her teacher's behavior because she perceived it to be childlike.

Olivia also provided an example of an instance when she was confused: "It wasn't an argument; it was just like he got smart and like I left it alone. Sometimes, I do try to say something back because he try to make a lot of people feel so stupid and I be like "*Why you got to be like that? It doesn't take all that?*" I mean, eh [exasperation] I don't know. He try to make you feel stupid and be sarcastic and stuff." Later, she wondered, "Why are you [the teacher] acting like this? But he acts like that all the time." Clearly, Olivia was confused by her teacher's

stupefying actions. Additionally, she talked with an attitude with her teacher during one of his sarcastic moments (see italics). Her account indicates that she shut down when her teacher used sarcasm ("…it was just like he got smart and like I left it alone."). Overall, Olivia felt powerless, and her questioning the teacher in TWA was the only way to regain that power. These feelings of confusion and powerlessness led to an awareness of the disrespect they felt as a result of their teachers' behaviors.

Theme Three: Living in an Environment of Disrespect

After the process of bewilderment as a result of their teachers' behaviors, the feelings of disrespect set in. They expressed their frustration with not being respected as students: their teachers' behaviors were unacceptable. Being yelled at without reason violated the ethic of care they expected to receive, and it angered them. Furthermore, the girls were also tired of teachers' persistent disrespect. Olivia told me, "I just got tired of it all that time, and I would never do anything for him to act like that." Olivia learned to expect this behavior, but it did not take away her or Stephanie's frustrations the same disrespectful, angry behavior day in and day out.

Olivia recounted incidents of disrespect from a teacher stating, "Yeah, and I was about to ask my question. Before I got to do that, he was like 'Well, of course you have a question. That's why you raised you hand. Duh.'" This incident really seemed to bother her as she mentioned it twice in the interview. She commented, "He'll <u>always</u> be sarcastic with you and stuff…he get on my nerves." Olivia interpreted the frequency of the teacher's sarcasm as a put down. The behavior was also bothersome to her, which is evident in the statement, "he get on my nerves."

Olivia later shared an incident when a teacher yelled at her. She stated, "I may have been like, *'Well you don't have to yell at me or whatever.'*— I'd just tell him, you don't have to yell at me." In the interview, I discerned her sheer frustration and hurt over this teacher's yelling.

Olivia's used TWA (see italics) in this instance to stand up for herself. She wanted the teacher to behave as a caring and respectful individual.

Additionally, Olivia recalled another similar account. She shared, "…[C]ause I remember he had said something, and he was just yelling at me like I was stupid. And, he actually called the students stupid before. He's like, 'YOU GUYS ARE SO STUPID!' or whatever—We didn't even do anything—I was like, *'You don't have to yell at me.'*" Again, Olivia used TWA in order to defend herself. She continued, "'Cause I don't like being yelled at. I really don't…you got to consider people's feelings because you don't know what they've been through or whatever." In this quote, Olivia used TWA with the teacher to assert herself.

In this same line, Stephanie, as cited earlier, had gotten so incensed with a teacher that she forgot that she was talking to an adult who is supposed to, in her opinion, be treated with respect ("I be like, *'Okay, you don't have to get loud with me.'* I just like forget who I'm talking to sometimes. Like, I'm talking with a friend or something, and I've crossed the line."). Nevertheless, when teachers crossed her boundary and showed disrespect, she forgot this principle and talked to them with an attitude.

Theme Four: My Cup Overflows[4] – Talking with an Attitude as a Defense Mechanism

The teachers' disrespectful behaviors of yelling and use of sarcasm resulted in the use of TWA, which the girls knew well. However, in this instance, they used it not in play, nor as an expression of confidence or self-esteem as noted by many older members of the AAWSC, nor as a way to shame the receiver into a spirit of camaraderie as understood by those within that community. Instead, they used it (see italicized dialogue for instances of TWA) in an

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[4] This phrase is a biblical reference to Psalms 23:5 in The Bible in the King James Version, which states, "[M]y cup runneth over." While the meaning there is symbolic of being flooded with goodness, the reference here refers to being flooded with frustrating experiences. In both cases, the soul is being filled to the overflow. Unfortunately, for the participants, this aspect is not a good thing.

institutional context in order to defend themselves and regain power. Olivia explained that sometimes her teachers' negative behavior caused her cup to overflow. She stated:

> No. I try to be civilized as I can possibly be, but sometimes it's just the way they want to act toward you or if it's about a grade, I'll go up and confront them and I'll be like, "Excuse me, um, I think you might have made a mistake." And then I'll try to tell them and stuff and sometimes they may want to get an attitude and stuff, but I try to hold it in as much as possibly like as long as I can. Sometimes, I do.

In this instance, Olivia remembered trying to hold in her feelings and refrain from using the TWA speech practice with teachers, but as she stated, she could only hold it in for so long, so she sometimes talked with an attitude.

Olivia also shared a story of when a teacher yelled at her and she became withdrawn from the classroom conversation. She remembered, "I think it was just like 'UH, OLIVIA! [exasperating]' He just kept going on and on. He wasn't like, 'I wasn't yelling at you' like I expected him to say. He just kept going on and on and on about what he was talking about. I was like why are you yelling at – I was listening, but I wasn't listening. He was standing in front of me or whatever, and I was just like whatever and stuff, so, 'cause he yelled at me then. Um. Yeah." When this teacher yelled at Olivia, she shut down, which probably disengaged her from learning concepts that day.

Stephanie also gave examples of when her cup overflowed. As mentioned before, she stated, "I just like forget who I'm talking to sometimes. Like, I'm talking with a friend or something, and I've crossed the line." In this quote, Stephanie talked about forgetting that she was talking with an adult, which is an indication that she was fed up with teachers' disrespectful

behavior. Later, Stephanie noted that her teachers also "cross[ed] the line with [the students] too much" resulting in her use of TWA as a form of resistance.

Yet, by using this practice (which is already outside many of their teachers' cultural context), it was used as a mark against them, as is seen in the stories of these girls. They are seen as "those loud Black girls," or girls with attitude as defined by those outside of the speech community.

Consequently, the girls used TWA as a way to resist perceived oppression by their teachers. Of course, their teachers may also have viewpoints concerning their students' use of TWA, but that would go beyond the scope of this study. The purpose of this study is to hear the lived experiences of these girls and to gather meaning from it.

Conclusion

To reiterate, when I started this research, I anticipated that these girls' teachers would not understand them when they used TWA, and as a result, conflict would exist between the two. While this reasoning might be the case, I found that their teachers, according to the girls' accounts, started the verbal duels in class. This finding was not anticipated, but it is important to study further in order to help Black girls and teachers develop more positive relationships with each other so that learning can take place.

This research is unique in that it captures reality in a way that helps us all live more tactfully. It also gives a voice to a demographic that is often missing in the literature and lends itself to an understanding of the perspectives of Black female adolescents. This understanding is the first step a teacher needs in order to communicate effectively with these girls who have made it clear that they feel extremely misunderstood and mistreated. The individual interviews were also strong because the girls were less distracted and could focus on their own experiences

instead of mimicking their peers. Although there is not much research on this topic, I am hopeful that other researchers will take it up, so that African American families and educators will be better informed about ways teachers and African American girls can interact in ways that create an environment conducive for learning. I am also confident that there are already many teachers and administrators who are committed to the wellbeing of African American girls and are working toward helping them achieve their academic and career goals.

However, as a phenomenological study with two participants, this research is not designed to give ready-made solutions to this complex problem of teacher-student relationships when African American girls talk with an attitude. However, it puts forth the voices or lived experiences of girls who may not have had the opportunity to share their experiences otherwise. Unfortunately, these participants described a school ecology where there seemed to be no opportunities for the legitimate expression of their voices. TWA seemed to be their only opportunity to use voice, and, unfortunately, it was used as a defense mechanism. Indeed, much can be learned from their voices as we evaluate our teaching and develop appropriate relationships with marginalized students.

This study is important to me, not only because of its implications for educators, but also because of its impact on me as a Black female educator. I hope this research impacts others like me and of other races to pay attention to Black girls and take the time to talk with them and knowledgeable others who can help facilitate appropriate classroom practice.

Another important point from this study is that teachers should to reflect on their practice in order to ensure that they are teaching empathically. Ensuring empathic pedagogy will not only reduce teaching problems, but also foster an understanding about how all students experience school.

Albeit, for this cultural group, we must recognize that navigating when and how to talk with an attitude may be challenging for African American adolescent girls. These particular students may lack mainstream society's cultural and social capital, which they could use to make their voices heard and resist hegemonic practices in public school classrooms. These girls are in a position in which they have access to this speech practice and appropriate it in ways different from its cultural import because they feel disempowered. The solution lies in the voices of these girls, and educators should listen to them in order to evaluate the stance with which they take them. When teachers step back and reflect upon their practices, perhaps things could improve for both parties.

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CHAPTER TWO

Oooh, It's Sooo Good!!! :
Black Adolescent Females Experiencing the Delicacy of Reading

ABSTRACT

Black adolescent females have largely been neglected in the research literature on their reading ability. While Gibson (2010) explained that Black girls are often portrayed in this literature as struggling and even "remedial" readers, those Black adolescent females who are avid readers receive even less attention. A pathologizing view of Black adolescent female readers still prevails. The findings of this study indicate that these females go beyond loving reading; they crave it. The meaning of reading for these participants is caught up in their relationships with role models, preference for solitude while reading, and the desire for social interactions after having read texts. This study is significant because it provides a different, stereotype-debunking perspective on the traditional literacy of Black adolescent females.

Introduction

Black[5] adolescent females have largely been neglected in the research literature on their reading ability. While Gibson (2010) explained that Black girls are often portrayed in this literature as struggling and even "remedial" readers, those Black adolescent females who are avid readers receive even less attention. A pathologizing view of Black adolescent female readers still prevails. To study Black adolescent females who avidly read, then, is to examine a population of readers who have been stereotyped. Unpacking/deconstructing this stereotype—by closely examining the practices, mindsets, and contexts of these avid readers, up close and personal, through their eyes and perspectives—has the potential to understand Black adolescent females readers anew. This phenomenological study was designed to examine this population of readers by asking: In what ways do five Black adolescent females undergo and respond to reading experiences and contexts? Before answering this question, one must first unpack the problem.

Before unpacking the problem, it should be noted that throughout the findings, metaphors for enjoying food delicacies are used because the girls experienced reading as a delicacy to be enjoyed. Erykah, a Black adolescent female I talked with in relationship to this study, and Kayla, one of the participants, repeatedly commented on a book, or book series with, "It was sooo good," as if they had tasted a highly desired food, like a filet mignon or a moist, mouthwatering chocolate cake. Erykah was the first of the Black females to catch my attention with the phrase, "It [a book series] was sooo good." When talking about her favorite out-of-school book series, *The Hunger Games*, Erykah shared how she tried to persuade her family to read it or hear her

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[5] The description Black is used instead of African American because one of the participants, Kayla, is Kenyan, but had been in the United States five years at the time of the study. She was retained in the study not only because of exceptional experience with the phenomenon of loving to read, but also because of her insight into African American females who dis/liked reading.

talk about it because "it was sooo good." As she described her most treasured reading experiences, her descriptions, voice inflections, and body language seemed similar to those of food connoisseurs. She was deeply steeped and in love with text beyond word description; it was similar to tasting the best food ever. Therefore, although she was not a participant, Erykah's conversation with me when she repeatedly used the phrase, "it was sooo good," helped launch my investigation into the meaning of reading for the other Black females in this study, one of whom, Kayla, also used the phrase. All in all, through the investigation, I found that, for these participants, reading and thinking were life-sustaining for them every bit as much as food.

Conceptual Background

The Problem

One of the primary reasons that Black adolescent females have been negatively stereotyped in the research literature is because of their performance on standardized measures. At the secondary and post-secondary levels, boys have long outperformed girls on national measures of reading performance (Cohen, White, & Cohen, 2012). Even though recent evidence indicates that this gender gap is reversing, especially for reading (Freeman, 2004), the negative stereotype prevails. For example, data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that 12th grade females in 2005 outperformed male students in reading by a wider margin than they did in 1992. Thus, while more Black adolescent females are performing better in reading (Cohen, White, and Cohen, 2012), many are still lagging behind their Caucasian and Asian counterparts (Gibson, 2010).

Ironically, the performance gains and gap closing made by Black adolescent females have gone largely unexamined by scholars who could examine questions about: What excites

Black adolescent females about reading? How do they use reading? How important is it to relate to events and characters?

The result is an absence of evidence to counter the stereotype narratives of Black adolescent female readers. The limited evidence available suggests that the Black adolescent females who do not excel in reading are not engaged with culturally-relevant texts, interesting texts, and culturally-sensitive pedagogy (Brooks, Sekayi, Savage, Waller & Picot, 2010; Davis, 2000; Gibson, 2010; Sutherland, 2005). If engaged, these scholars argue, Black adolescent females would enjoy reading more, do more reading, and thereby, become more proficient readers.

Engagement and Reading

The correlation between engagement (i.e., interest and motivation) and reading comprehension has long been observed regardless of setting, participants, or methodology. Jiménez and Duke (2011), for example, using quantitative analyses, found that "even after controlling for prior knowledge, students' actual comprehension, as measured by recall, was much higher when students were reading on a topic of interest" (as cited in Duke et al., 2011, p. 61). And Finders (1997) using ethnographic methods, found that Caucasian adolescent girls engaged with texts that served as guide books for life, especially fictional texts about relationships, social memberships, and sexuality, just to name a few. These studies and many others demonstrate that engagement is closely correlated with reading comprehension for all youth.

The habits, identities, relationships, contexts, and dispositions of engaged readers have been found to follow consistent patterns. For example, Strommen and Mates (2004), found that tweens and teens who were engaged readers tend to:

(a) …regularly interact around books with other members of their social circle who love to read;

(b) …see being an active member of a community of readers as an important part of their identity;

(c) [have] parents or other family members…explicitly prioritize reading as a recreational activity;

(d) …have access to plentiful, varied reading materials; and

(e) …love reading.

Of particular importance is the literature suggesting there is a connection between engagement and self-concept or identity.

Engagement in Reading and Self-Concept/Identity

Pitcher and colleagues (2007), for example, noted the relationship between engagement and identity. In their implementation of the Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile, which assessed adolescents' motivation to read, they noted in one of their themes discrepancies between students' views of themselves as readers in school versus out of school. In most instances, students' self-concepts as readers and their value of reading coincided with their reading choices and overall enjoyment of reading. However, there were several exceptions to this expectation. For instance, some students claimed on the survey that they never liked to read, but when interviewed, indicated that they read magazines and other material. Pitcher and colleagues

49

(2007) suggested these incongruous findings reflected the disconnect between academic and pleasure reading.

Luttrell and Parker (2001), similarly, argued that students form their identities within and in opposition to the worlds of school, work, and family. For example, Alice, a high school student in their study, engaged in literacy practices that were not recognized in school. She thought her enjoyment of journal and poetry writing and everyday reading materials was disconnected from the world of school. Alice's thinking was reinforced when her teacher advised her to choose a simpler poem for a project because the one she chose and loved required too much research. Thus, Alice's identity as a reader was not acknowledged, and, as a result, she was not engaged in academic reading.

Sutherland (2005) specifically commented on the identity development of Black adolescent females in relationship to culturally-relevant texts. In her study of Black adolescent females reading *The Bluest Eye* in their high school English class, she found that the girls, in their group and individual interviews with her, "constructed identities as they validated, modified, or contested the ability of others' ascriptions of identity to act as boundaries in their lives" (p. 365). In other words, the females were able to contest and construct their identities because they were able to connect with the literature. Reading literature by and/or about Black females might have been the reason that girls also take to reading these kinds of texts outside of school. These research studies' findings that there is a meaningful relationship between engagement in reading and positive identity formation for all students, including Black adolescent females, leads to the need for more literature about motivation to read for this group. According to these authors, engagement promotes positive identity development because when

Black adolescent females see themselves in literature, they become more engaged with it because they identify with it.

Black Adolescent Females' Engagement for School Achievement

Given the positive correlation between engagement and comprehension, the relationship between engagement and other factors, and the connection between engagement and self-concept/identity, what does the literature indicate about the motivation for reading among Black adolescent females in particular? The most prominent pattern in the literature is that reader engagement is closely linked to the cultural content of texts (Brooks, Sekayi, Savage, Waller & Picot, 2010; Gibson, 2010; Sutherland, 2005). If the text reflected relevant life experiences to the Black adolescent female reader, then she was more engaged.

Gibson (2010), for example, argued that "unsanctioned" literature like urban fiction, which many Black adolescent females read outside of school, can improve the academic achievement of Black adolescent females. In contrast, Brooks, Sekayi, Savage, Waller, and Picot (2010) argued that culturally-relevant literature, which has been endorsed by organizations such as the American Library Association (ALA) and the International Reading Association (IRA), and has been sanctioned by many school districts in different parts of the United States, are better suited to improve the academic achievement of Black adolescent females. Yet other scholars (e.g., Davis, 2000) argued that culturally-relevant texts that focus on Black adolescent females' life experiences are not necessarily a key factor for improving academic achievement; instead, it is whether or not the universal themes (i.e., unconnected to race) of the female characters were relatable.

This lack of consensus about the reasons behind Black adolescent females' engagement in reading was another impetus for this study. This work not only adds to this scant body of

literature, but it also puts forth the voices of these girls in a way that not only uncovers possibilities for their avid reading, but also empowers them as they share this important practice that debunks stereotypical images of them as struggling readers.

Most of the previous scholars have argued for culturally-relevant texts that engage Black adolescent females in out-of-school reading to be infused in their school settings. Belzer (2002) also found that their older sisters/counterparts, Black women, initially disliked in-school reading as adolescents because the texts were not culturally-relevant, and therefore, not engaging. Furthermore, they were discontented that there was no student choice over which texts to read. When given culturally-relevant texts of their choice in a GED program, participants read more than was required.

All in all, the arguments for using culturally-relevant literature to engage Black adolescent females all bear attention because of its possible connection for their engagement with texts. Consequently, this study focused on the lived experiences of Black adolescent females who love to read. The findings illuminated the meanings of their experiences, and therefore give insight into their avid reading habits. Hopefully, this study will better inform educators about fostering the love of reading for this population.

Theoretical Tradition

To better understand the theoretical, conceptual, textual, personal, educational, and practical context for a study about the out-of-school engagement of Black adolescent females, I reviewed three related areas of scholarship: Black feminist thought, Afrocentric feminist epistemology, and Critical Race Feminism. For the purposes of this study, Critical Race Feminism (CRF) was the most relevant because it aligns with the study's intentions theoretically,

methodologically, and situationally. The following paragraphs outline CRF as it relates to this study.

Critical Race Feminism

The origins of CRF are in legal academic scholarship, where it emphasized the legal concerns of a significant group of people – "those who are both women and members of today's racial/ethnic minorities, as well as disproportionately poor" (Wing, 2003, p. 1). It provided explanatory power for how these women managed multiple identities in current society and for the challenges they faced living at the "intersectionality" of life as women of color.

Critical Race Feminists also use controversial narrative or storytelling techniques as a method to counteract the dominant discourse (Berry, 2010; Wing, 2003). This method is a perfect complement to phenomenology, the key methodology for this study. My goal was to get at the girls' stories about their reading lives.

Important in CRF is also critical race praxis. Adherents to CRF believe that they are responsible for acting to alleviate the pain and despondency of their sisters. It is not enough to theorize about CRF; one must also put beliefs to action (Berry, 2010; Wing, 2003). Giving my participants a voice in sharing their reading experiences and appreciating their contributions was my way of enacting a critical race praxis. Again, I valued their stories by indicating the importance of their accounts to them during the interviews. I also offered to recommend books and help them in their academic endeavors beyond the data collection if they wanted the assistance. By demonstrating my sincere interest in them and their stories, I believe my interactions with the girls enriched their lives.

CRF is different from Critical Race Theory (CRT) in that it puts the experiences of women of color at the forefront. CRF is also different from most feminist theory because

feminism tends to focus on the experiences of White women, not women of color (Wing, 2003). These theories are essentialistic; that is, they implicitly assume the experiences of men of color and White women overlap with the experiences of women of color. In a sense, however, as CRF adherents, we can also be essentialistic in that we may essentialize women of color as if we share the same experiences (Wing, 2003).

Nevertheless, Critical Race Feminists' knowledge of this possibility makes us more sensitive to it. Furthermore, knowledge of essentialism is also important because even within a race, there are differences. For example, just because one shares race and/or gender attributes with others does not guarantee that there are similar experiences. This fact was important as I considered my identity as a Black female reader as I made meaning out of the stories of my participants. I did not want to tell their story only from the lens of my own experiences with reading. Therefore, CRF reminded me to examine my pre-understandings about reading with those understandings of the participants. This checking was done from both my stance and theirs, recurrently, until I could come to truthful, sound, and insightful meanings of their reading experiences.

Methods

Given the argument formed in the preceding pages, the gap-filling research question for this study was: What is the nature of the experience of reading like for Black adolescent females who enjoy reading? To deeply examine and construct answers to this question from the lived experiences of Black adolescent females who enjoy reading, phenomenology was used as the methodological means for collecting, analyzing, and representing their experiences.

Participant Selection

The participants for this study were comprised of five Black adolescent females from two Midwestern cities in the United States; two attended an affluent suburban high school and the other three attended an urban high school. For this study, I chose to work with high school students (ages 16 - 18) instead of middle school students (ages 13 - 15) because of their increased ability to recall and think aloud with me about their love of reading.

I recruited the participants from the urban school by connecting with an English teacher in the area that I had worked with collaboratively five years earlier. This teacher knew her students well, and she allowed me to meet and explain my study to the participants near the end of the school day. All but two of the Black female students consented to participate in the study after giving it careful thought and consulting with their parent/guardian/case manager. One of the females who declined ended up leaving the school soon after our introduction, and the other young female did not get back to me in time to participate. The fact that nearly all of the Black adolescent females met my requirement of loving to read is mostly due to this urban teacher knowing and caring about her students deeply, meaning, she cared about their reading and other interests in and out of school.

To recruit the participants from the affluent suburban school, I solicited the help of a colleague who allowed me to interview her daughter who in turn shared the study topic with a friend, who also shared the information with her friend. One of these adolescent females was not included as a participant in this study because her responses did not lend themselves to the development of phenomenological meanings. In other words, she struggled with telling complete stories or anecdotes in response to my interview questions. Nevertheless, it was this young lady, Erykah, whose emphatic phrase, "oooh, it's so good," led to the deeper investigation of what it

55

meant to read for the other Black adolescent female participants in this study; therefore, her involvement was still invaluable.

Data Collection Procedures

Interviews

The primary source of data was interviews. In all research, it is the research question that determines what kind of interview method is most appropriate for its essential direction. In this study, I explored and gathered "experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 66). That is, I asked questions during my three interviews with participants that lent themselves to having participants tell stories, anecdotes, and examples in rich, concrete detail. From these narratives, I was able to later develop richer meanings of the phenomenon of loving to read.

In phenomenology, there are few initial questions. The researcher usually has one main question that gets the participant to tell a story or anecdote. I had additional questions on hand, but my initial question, with follow-up questions, was my guide. I asked two different types of interview questions: about in-school reading and out-of-school reading. By asking about these two reading environments, I captured a rounded picture of the girls as readers. I was interested in seeing whether their love of reading would remain the same regardless of the in- or out-of-school context.

During the interviews, I practiced a form of reduction that helped me refrain from seeing their stories solely through my own prior experiences. Initially, practicing reduction in the interviews was instrumental, allowing me to see the phenomenon freshly, which gave me a greater understanding of the participants' reading experiences from their vantage points. This practice later helped me during data analysis when I actively compared their reading experiences

with my own pre-understandings about the reading practices of Black adolescent females. This dialogue between the study participants and myself helped me come to an understanding of the experience of loving to read. If my analysis through this comparison came up short, I tried to see the experience again from their eyes. This process continued until I could bring both understandings together to make meaning.

For the first interview, I asked about their favorite book, essay, poem, or other written text. I wanted to know what they enjoyed about it, if the experience made them want to read more of that type of book or books in general (or other texts), if anyone had an impact in their love of reading, if they conversed about it with their friends, and other evolving questions from their previous responses. For the second interview, I inquired about their in-school reading experiences. I asked if they had a favorite book or other written text from school and if they had similar connections as they did with the out-of-school texts. I went through those initial first-interview questions again, if applicable, in this in-school reading interview, but also explored aspects involved in their like or dislike of in-school reading and how these aspects differed from what constituted meaningful reading out-of-school.

In sum, I looked for some experiences that demonstrated their love of reading. I also wanted to understand how these experiences played into their identity and impacted their peer relationships. Also important during the interview was to probe the participants into how they used reading, the reasons they read, and how the characters (if there were any) stayed with them after they had read the text. Finally, I wanted to know the differences in their love of reading when it came to in- and out-of-school texts.

Home Visit

Getting the full picture of my participants' reading lives required more than interviews, so I visited their homes to see their reading environments[6], and asked what they liked most about it, how they prepared to read when there, how they felt in that environment, and if they would change something about it, what would that be, along with follow-up questions. Seeing their reading environment opened up a different, important dimension of their reading lives.

The data I collected included photographic data of the reading areas, notes on reading inventory, audio recording of the participants explaining how their reading environment made them feel or how it made it more conducive for reading, and audio recording on the reading life of parents and siblings and how that influenced their love of reading.

Activity

During one of the interviews, I asked the participants to bring two artifacts that depicted their love of reading and to come prepared to tell me why these artifacts were important to them. Then I invited them to tell a story about the artifact and its connection with their reading experiences (e.g., tell me about a time when you read and lost track of time and missed dinner or a sport). This artifact, like the home visit, gave a richer perspective of their reading lives.

Data Analysis

In my analysis of the interviews, I used my knowledge of the hermeneutic circle as a guide. The hermeneutic circle is a cyclical dialogue between the researcher and her texts (transcriptions). This process of understanding can be best described as being in dialogue with my own expectations and the experiences of the participants. This process or dialogue ended when it led to my own deeper understanding of the meaning of reading for these the Black adolescent females.

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[6] These participants read books at every opportunity, so they really had a number of reading environments. However, they had special places at home, their consistent dwelling, where they enjoyed reading.

The processes previously described involved listening to audio recordings of the girls'

interviews multiple times and taking notes. I listened for ways in which they used reading, the

reasons they read, for what purposes they read, and how the characters (if there were any) stayed

with them after they had read the text, and so on. The analysis involved highlighting interesting

statements, and taking marginal notes. This highlighting and note taking served as precursors for

the development of themes. This method is referred to as the "selective" or "highlighting"

approach in isolating thematic statements (Van Manen, 1990). In this method, I asked myself,

"What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon

or experience being described" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 93)? In this iterative process, I developed

themes by using my dialogue with the text, while concurrently applying the theoretical

framework, CRF.

The structure for writing the themes also came from Van Manen's (1990) explication and

examples for how to write thematic statements. In fact, Van Manen stated:

Just as the poet or the novelist attempts to grasp the essence of some experience in

literary form, so the phenomenologist attempts to grasp the essence of some experience in

phenomenological description. A genuine artistic expression is not just representational

or imitational of some event in the world….An artistic text differs from the text of

everyday talking…In other words, the artist recreates experiences by transcending

them…[Unlike] literature or poetry (although based on life), [which] leaves themes

implicit…, phenomenology attempts to systematically develop a certain narrative that

explicates themes while remaining true to the universal quality or essence of a certain

type of experience.

Developing narratives in the form of sentences that explicate themes in an artistic manner

while maintaining the integrity of the essence of the experience was the goal in the writing of the themes herein. For example, theme one, "Role models including, but not limited to, loved ones, educators, librarians, and book characters have an indelible influence on adolescents' affections for reading" is a sentence that tells a story that explicitly explains the essence of the event while using beautiful prose (i.e., indelible influence, affections). The entire thematic statement, then, is written artistically while maintaining the integrity of the experience.

Findings

Background for Themes

Three themes emerged from the data. I will focus in particular on out-of-school reading because these experiences had the more rich and nuanced textures that lent themselves more easily to phenomenological study. It seemed as if out-of-school reading was more pleasurable than in-school reading for these participants because their loved ones' and peers' presentation of reading as a pleasurable and beneficial activity made their own experiences of reading more meaningful. More specifically, and in line with the food metaphor, their loved ones and peers introduced the experience of reading as one to enjoy and delight in, one that is good for them in terms of bettering themselves academically and preparing them for economically-enhancing and fulfilling careers. In their efforts to introduce the benefits of reading, their loved ones seemed to especially stress that reading would make their lives more beautiful.

On the other hand, while their high school English teachers seemed to also want them to enjoy school-mandated or suggested novels, they often introduced them as something to be analyzed through the use of literary devices. While the girls mostly enjoyed their in-school books, they preferred to get lost in the story of a novel without also having to analyze it for these literary elements. In other words, they wanted to lose themselves in the book and relish the story

60

and characters rather than a purely disembodied analysis of the book. So while Kayla continued to use and adapt an in-school book analysis sheet for *Fried Green Tomatoes,* a book she said she would read in her own time, this action was not consistent with her overall preference for out-of-school books. In fact, when asked if it was common for students to like what they read outside of school more than inside, she stated, "Uhm hm, because they're not forced to read it. I mean outside of school you pick what you want to read. Inside of school, you're told what you're supposed to read, and I mean there's this thing where you want to rebel against the school, and also the books they pick are super old." Being forced to read was about as pleasurable, in most cases, as being force fed. Food is more than nutrition, and reading is more than literary analysis. In both cases, soulfulness is exactly what is at stake, and what is needed.

Hence, for the purposes of this study, I chose to focus on the only experience that we might truly call reading: Black adolescent girls' engagement with out-of-school texts, and in particular, as we shall next see, plot-driven novels.

Grounding and Organization of Findings

Throughout the findings, the themes focus on the lifeworld existentials of time and social interactions because of their pronounced appearance in the data. The lifeworld existential of time means exploring whom the girls are as people in relationship with time, especially as it relates to the busyness of a typical North American teenager's life. Focusing on time is the direct result of the girls' constant referral to it in their responses to my questions. In addition to time, social interactions around books made the reading experience more meaningful. Although reading a novel was an enjoyable solitary act, they also longed to share this experience with a caring other.

In order to elucidate the meaning of reading for these girls, the findings are organized into three themes, which flow in a temporal sequence—reflecting the temporal nature of the lived experience. The themes are the following:

1) Role models including, but not limited to, loved ones, educators, librarians, and book characters have an indelible influence on adolescents' affections for reading.

5) While reading a captivating book, we are so immersed into the action of the plot that passing time is irrelevant.

6) Developing and searching for companionship is essential for those wanting to share their passion for reading fascinating texts.

This temporal process described above flows first from the participants being introduced to reading and how that initial experience with reading was meaningful. In theme two, the girls were engrossed in the act of reading and wanted complete solitude, but as will be elucidated in theme three, they desired to share their reading experiences with peers and/or loved ones.

The findings section is structurally organized using the following format: a thematic sentence description; examples from the interviews, artifacts, and/or home visits to support and unpack the theme; and an interpretation of the examples. As mentioned in the introduction, metaphors for enjoying food delicacies are used throughout this section because the girls experienced reading as a delicacy to be enjoyed. The girls had a soulful gustatory relationship to reading—it was an act not only of bodily, but soulful, sustenance. While at times this is a relationship of slow and easy digestion, there are other moments where an inner hunger overwhelms these girls, and they devour plot, if not binge.

The food metaphor breaks down, however, in theme two that discusses how the time it takes to read a book becomes irrelevant to the girls. Instead of savoring each word, they raced

through books and got "caught up" in the story anxiously wanting to know what happened next. It is at this time that their starvation for the story is different from the descriptions in other themes where they take their time in choosing excellent books to read (theme one) or partake in or wanting to share their experience of reading/ "eating" a book "sooo good" because they wanted their peers and loved ones to have that same experience just as other loved ones introduced this pastime of reading to them (theme three).

Rationale for Food Metaphor

An example of this comparison to highly desired food comes from Erykah, the Black girl I talked with in relationship to this study, and Kayla, one of the participants, who repeatedly commented on a book, or book series with, "It was sooo good," as if they had been starving for a good story that satisfies, and subsequently, read a book that was not only just good, but exceptional, similar to having a highly desired meal. Unlike most people who are ravenously hungry and grab for any and everything to satisfy their appetite, these participants were particular about choosing books that were engaging and captivating. As connoisseurs of good books, they were not satisfied with "eating" like ravenous people who eat whatever they can grab; rather, they sought gratification and soulful sustenance, choosing books based upon the book's ability to draw them in. It was awe-inspiring to see these girls love, even obsess, over stories, because it was a picture rarely documented in academic literature. Loving to read is more than just a score; it is a way of life for these girls – part of their living, eating, and breathing.

To further explain, if I could continue Erykah's or Kayla's statement, "It's sooo good," I would add, "It's sooo good, I can hardly stand it. I can't even put into words how it is so good." Their excitement while saying those words indicated that particular books were so good that, at the moment, it was hard to elucidate with words how or why it was so good. Although the

statement "it was sooo good" was their initial description, they were later able to unpack that

statement in our talks or interviews. The books were good for several reasons, including, but not

limited to, imagery, a portrayal of various points of view, dynamic characters, and vivid

descriptions that evoke feelings such as compassion and outrage toward characters. The

participants had become experts at what makes a book good. Their investigations included

consulting peers, loved ones, and teachers; reading particular reviews on YouTube; reading the

first chapters of a book; and even following the attractiveness of book covers into what made a

book good for them. In short, the phrase, "It's sooo good," means more than the surface-level

expectation of a delectable book, it stems from a deep hunger, even starvation, for rich stories,

and it ends with a deeper satisfaction that is particular to these Black adolescent girls, which will

be discussed throughout the themes and conclusion.

Thematic Expositions

Theme One: Role models including, but not limited to, loved ones, educators, librarians, and book characters have an indelible influence on adolescents' affections for reading.

In our search for phenomenological meaning, it is important to study the life existential

of social interactions. Before sharing their thoughts about books with others, the girls first had

powerful connections with role models who encouraged them to take up reading. Their loved

ones, educators, and/or librarians played a major role in the girls trying out books to see if they

liked them. This tasting of books took on a life of its own as they found that the books were

amazing[7], and something to be treasured as one cherishes good food that provides nourishing

sustenance. The ways in which their role models, including a few schoolteachers and librarians,

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[7] The phrase "taste and see that the books were good" is a Biblical reference (Psalm 34:8) to gaining the greatest highest experience with God. The writer wanted his readers to taste (experience) for themselves that God is good in much the same way the participants wanted their friends and loved ones to taste and see that reading fascinating books were good.

introduced books as something to take pleasure in took precedence over the didactic strategies (e.g., emphasizing literary elements for analysis) other teachers used to engage students in books. While didactic teaching is important (as Lisa Delpit (1995) reminds us), it is not the introductory method that caused these participants to love reading. Didactic teaching was unpalatable in getting these girls to love reading; instead, it was the presentation of books as an enjoyable, fulfilling activity that influenced these girls to try reading and experience it in a more meaningful way.

Again, the promptings to read from those role models started the impetus for their love of reading. Once they determined that reading was good, they decided to take hold of these reading experiences and make them a pastime that they also wanted others to try. In other words, role models became the influencers and communicators of the value of reading, so the girls wanted to share this same gift with loved ones and peers who had yet to taste the succulent words in well-written books. In addition to sharing with nonreaders, the participants also wanted camaraderie with peers who loved reading as much as they did. Consequently, the social aspects of reading for these Black adolescent girls are tied up in two ways. First, it is tied to their affections for their role models who encouraged them to try reading as something to enjoy, and second, the meaning of reading is caught up in their consequent desire to share their love of reading with others, as will be discussed in theme three.

In the beginning of her reading journey, Alexandra's role models – her mother, teachers, and a school librarian – developed rapport with her and she in turn admired and respected them, which led to her often taking their advice and following their example. Because of her admiration for most teachers and a school librarian, she happily accepted their book suggestions, and found most of them fascinating, including her favorite book series, *The Hunger Games*.

Before her encounter with school role models, however, Alexandra's mother primarily influenced her to read voraciously and to make African and African American texts an important part of her reading selections. Her mother, who, interestingly enough, is an avid reader and serves as a director for a multicultural awareness initiative in a major school system, instilled pride in Alexandra for African and African American history, literature, and culture. Alexandra grew up with her mother reading her and her brother African American children's stories in the book, *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales*, told by Virginia Hamilton (1993), so she had an early instilment of self-worth by seeing her value in an acculturating childhood book during recent times when society frequently devalued the African American experience. Her mother's prodding to appreciate her race and culture, herself really, is a treasured experience for Alexandra, one that introduced her to the love of reading.

During my home visit, Alexandra explained that she loved those stories and showed me this book. She also excitedly talked about her mother's trip to Africa the previous summer, and how her mother was eager to share her experiences from the mother country with her children. Alexandra consistently and proudly spoke about her mother's influence on her tendency to subconsciously choose books by or about African Americans. However, Alexandra preferred only those books that did not possess overt images of racism, which will be explained later. Nevertheless, Alexandra's mother made her reading experiences a cultural one where Alexandra took pride in learning about her race and culture. This pride and love in African and African American culture encapsulated their close mother-daughter relationship around reading, and made the experience of it even more meaningful for Alexandra because her mother, who serves as her role model, was the stimulus for her favorite pastime.

Similar to Alexandra, the meaning of reading for Taylor is connected to her close relationship with her mother. Although her mother dislikes reading, she knew that avidly reading could open social and economic doors for her daughters, so when Taylor was a young child, her mother signed her up for a reading program. Through this program, the leaders would send books to their house, and her mother encouraged her to read those books, which Taylor did. Taylor also mentioned being involved in library reading programs in later summers where they were given a list of books that adolescents could read, and her mother "encouraged [her] to do that in the summer instead of just like laying around, being lazy in the summer." In this way, Taylor, like Alexandra, wanted to please her role model, her mother, when she first tasted reading to see if it was worthwhile. Furthermore, Taylor and her mother cared about being different from others who were "lazy in the summer" and did not read. Instead, Taylor wanted to be admired for her reading and resulting scholarly productivity during her summers so that she would gain admiration from teachers and future employers or clients as a result of avid reading. In this way, she cared about what people outside her immediate circle thought about her reading or what reading produced for her. Therefore, the meaning of reading for most of these girls meant not only pleasing their role models but also those in their schools and communities.

In contrast to Alexandra, however, Taylor also has an older sister who had a smaller, but significant impact on Taylor's love of reading, for she, too, is an avid reader. Taylor shared:

And then also with my sister, you know, she was always bringing home like big bags of books from the library…I know she really liked [the] *Harry Potter* series, and she'd always talk about how good that was. And I personally could never get into *Harry Potter* but seeing how much she loved the books, I think that had some influence on me. Oh, maybe I could find a book that I love as much as she loves that series.

In Taylor's case, she did not necessarily want to please her sister; instead, she was emulating her. Taylor wanted the joy and satisfaction she saw her sister experiencing with reading, so that is why she tried it for herself. Taylor's admiration and desire to emulate her sister is also evident in the following response:

> I know there are certain things about her that I look up to and definitely, I think reading is, her love of reading is definitely one of them. I think seeing her read instead of like doing, being out and doing other things that other people her age would do that might get them in trouble, I think is definitely something I look up to.

Although Taylor credits her mother as the primary influence and genesis for her love of reading, her sister serves as a model and friend in reading also, for Taylor holds elaborate conversations on books with her sister more than her mother and father, which will be expounded upon in theme three.

In line with Alexandra and Taylor, Sydney also credited her parents for fostering her love for reading. She shared that her mother reads as much as she does, which involved for Sydney, reading around five or six two hundred-plus page books a week. I witnessed her mother happily reading from her Nook in a corner of a restaurant where Sydney and I held our first interview. When commenting on her mother's reading habits, Sydney stated, "And so like I've gotten used to seeing her reading, and I always used to think, 'I wonder what she's reading about. And I wonder if I can read as much as she can, things like that.' So I had started reading, and then, I've just been kind of flying through books now." So like Taylor, Sydney wanted to experience the excitement her mother seemed to have for reading, and as a result of trying it, she is completely absorbed in it now.

Sydney's father also had a powerful influence on her love of reading. To explain, Sydney and her father enjoyed comic books. She noted:

> Yeah. He – when he was younger, he used to read a lot of comic books and things like superheroes, like Marvel superheroes and DC superheroes. And like he kind of introduced me to, like, the world of Marvel and DC, and I got so interested in that, that's what I, that's when I started reading comic books and a lot of graphic novels. Things like that. And for a while, that was all I would ever read. And I would get through them in like maybe five or ten minutes, right after I got them from the library, so I would have to get a lot of them at one time.

Sydney's father not only introduced her to the world of comic books and superheroes, but he also encouraged her to read "chapter books" or novels. Sydney stated that he wanted her to "enhance her vocabulary… and "broaden [her] horizons other than just graphic novels all the time." Although Sydney has an older sister who influenced her to read the *Twilight* series, she credited her parents as the impetus for her love of reading because her sister was extremely busy in extracurricular activities, and she "really never saw her with a bunch of books." Similar to Alexandra and Taylor, the meaning of reading is found in Sydney's relationship with her role models, her parents. This admiration for their parents and other loved ones led these participants to wanting to see for themselves why reading was so important and enjoyable. They wanted to taste and see.

Unlike the rest of the participants, Gabrielle primarily came to love reading through the role model in the form of a character. To explain, she needed an escape from the harsh realities of her foster care life, so the character Harry Potter served as someone with whom she could relate. To explain, she related to Harry in powerful ways because he was also a mistreated

orphan. She found comfort, solace, and communion with Harry because of her circumstances, and in the instance of Harry's letter from the Hogwarts, she found hope that she could also receive a similar letter and escape from her negative circumstances.

Before foster care, however, Gabrielle noted that her grandmother loved to give her books, so she had a significant impact on Gabrielle's reading because she appreciated the love and care from family members since she did not have it in later years. Reading in this context for Gabrielle, then, also meant having a role model, especially a family member, who cared about her wellbeing, which included excelling in reading. For Gabrielle, reading served to remind her of good times with her grandmother and an escape from tough times for most of her life.

One hero or role model that Gabrielle talked about was the character, Harry Potter. His trials and triumphs as an orphan gave her strength and hope for a brighter future. While she wanted to please her grandmother and make her proud with her reading, she later wanted to experience freedom from mean foster parents like her role model, Harry Potter. Indeed, she desired to escape her terrible circumstances in order to really experience life to the fullest – to have a vibrant, liberating life. In fact, she credited reading, including her reading of the *Harry Potter* series, for literally saving her life. She expressed this belief in our following conversation:

G. It [reading] makes me feel good. There was a lot of times when I would just want to crap out, but I never did.

R. What does it mean, "to crap out"?

G. To like, just give up, to let go. And I just never did. Reading kept me grounded, which is something I really like, makes me grateful that I didn't just crap out.

R. I don't want to have you go back to bad memories –

G. That's okay, it's fine.

R. But I wanted to ask you, when you talk about crapping out, giving up, letting go, what would that have looked like for you?

G. Well, for one, I wouldn't still be in school. I'd probably be homeless right now. Or maybe been not living, 'cause I've had those thoughts, too.

R. Wow.

G. But I never really went through with it.

As Gabrielle said, reading kept her grounded and safe. She started reading for the escape, and perhaps unbeknownst to her, to be like her role-model character, Harry Potter. Escaping through reading was one aspect of her life she could control during that period of her life, but now that she is on her own, she simply loves to read as a pleasurable activity.

For all of these girls, loving to read meant gaining the love, attention, camaraderie, and support from loved ones, educators, and librarians, or in Gabrielle's case, book characters like Harry Potter. Whether they were attempting to please a parent, follow in the footsteps of an older sibling or cousin, or finding solace through a character's similar experiences, the meaning of reading for these girls meant trying to emulate and/or please a role model. As a result of this emulation and placation, they tasted books and found they were indeed good.

Theme Two: While reading a captivating book, we are so immersed into the action of the plot that passing time is irrelevant.

Another important aspect of phenomenology is the lifeworld existential of time. All of the participants talked about getting so involved in a book that they became carefree, distracted, and oblivious to time. In other words, they created a space where time in their books mattered more than the time in the actual world. This use of time was precious, especially since most of them led busy lives filled with sports, dramatic arts, public speaking, singing engagements, and so on. Similar to the beat of their busy lives, they sometimes read quickly to obtain more details

of what happened next in the plot. While it could be argued that the participants were not fully absorbing the intricacies of the books, I beg to differ. In my conversations with them, I perceived that they fully enjoyed every morsel of the plot; their insatiable appetite for the next event in the story just made it difficult to put down their fascinating books.

Some of the evidence of the girls' complete captivation with books and poems involved not hearing parents calling them to do chores, missing what a teacher was saying (for those girls who read personal texts in class), ignoring text messages and phone calls, and locking doors. In fact, Alexandra explained:

> Well, during – well, when I read the first book [from *The Hunger Games* series], I was in my room for like two days straight, and that's when I finished the book in two days. But uhm – you know, take my food upstairs, finish reading. Go downstairs, clean the kitchen, run back upstairs. But, you know, when anybody…would text me, I'd be like, 'I can't talk right now. You know, I'm trying to finish this book.' I don't know why I was so – well, I definitely know why I was – I just wanted to finish the books so bad because I wanted to get through it but – because I loved reading, and I wanted to know ***what happened next*** [emphasis added]. But like just isolated myself from everybody, from everything. Uhm, so yeah. I was ***so caught up in the books, so caught up***. Uhm, I just enjoyed them. I loved them.

This mesmerizing experience due to a powerful book is evident in Alexandra's inability to do almost anything except read (with the exception of texting a response to friends informing them that she was busy reading). Passing external time was insignificant because she was completely immersed in the plot and time within *The Hunger Games* (2008), and because of this immersion, Alexandra consumed physical food quickly so that she could delight in the delicacy of the book

72

further. Also notice how she said she "wanted to know what happened next" (see bolded italics) as her reason for reading through the book quickly. She wanted to know what happened next in order to remain in the complete spell of satisfying immersion in the story. In fact, this wanting to know what happened next was her reason for "wanting to get through it." Savoring each word where time stood still in the plot was not the point – she was simply interested in the evolving chronology of the story. Alexandra enjoyed the plot so much that she could not wait for the next piece of action. Unlike racing through events as a teenager just trying to get a task completed without necessarily enjoying it, racing through reading for Alexandra meant getting "caught up" in the lives and happenings of the characters, taking in the dramatic events they experienced and their reactions to those circumstances. All of the participants were plot-driven, that is, they did not take the time to taste every ingredient of the plot, seemingly because they desired the overall story. As mentioned earlier, focusing on the lives of the characters and the overall plotline was an escape from the in-school practice of literary analysis and an even more tangible escape from their challenging personal and troubling racial struggles.

Alexandra's captivation is also evident when she did not accept text messages. This ignoring of text messages is important because Alexandra brought her iPhone as one of her artifacts for an interview where she was asked to bring something that depicted her love of reading. She stated that she used her phone quite often for reading texts, e-mails, and Facebook statuses. Alexandra thought that the phone was fitting to bring in because people read from it everyday, throughout the day, so to ignore her phone while reading *The Hunger Games* series (2008) was to put emphasis on the importance of not only her captivation, but also the importance of traditional print text.

Alexandra was not the only participant whose experience with reading was all consuming. Taylor also talked about reading an out-of-school book at every opportunity, even at school. She stated:

When I really get into the book, I read it every chance I get. As soon as I finish my homework, instead of hopping on the computer, I'll read; or when we have down time in class, I'll read; or whenever the teacher's not actively teaching, and I'm done with my work, I'll read. And I'll just, I'll read it as much as I can. And then I'll, I'll go home and just read, sit on my bed and just read for hours, if I really like the book and get into it.

Like Alexandra, Taylor chose reading a book over technological tools because it is something she enjoys. Her practice of consistently reading books for pleasure had become a part of her daily life. Unlike Alexandra, however, Taylor took advantage of every opportunity to read her favorite personal books, even during school. She savored every free moment to partake in the joy of reading.

Like Alexandra and Taylor, Kayla also explained being consumed with reading and time being an inconsequential factor in reading an excellent book. In fact, Kayla shared staying up all night until 5:00 a.m. reading the first book of the series, *Vampire Academy*, only to get to a cliffhanger at the end of the book. So in order to obtain peace, she went online and read the next two chapters of the next book in the series in order to get the resolution of that plot. Only then did she find contentment. Like Alexandra, she cared about what happened to the characters more than she cared about sleep. Her complete immersion in the plot is best described in her own words. She stated:

When I get really into a book, like you can't even talk to me, like you can be talking to me, and screaming at me, and I won't even listen to you. I will just be into the book. The

74

other day I stayed up until 5 o'clock in the morning reading a book because I really wanted to know how it ended, but then they left like a cliffhanger in the end, 'cause there was another book that came after it, so I was like, "I read all that time to get a cliffhanger?!" I was really mad. So I searched out the book online, and started reading the first two chapters, but the questions/the cliffhanger they left the answer in the first two chapters, so I was like, "Okay, good." So then, I could actually sleep, 'cause like if I have questions in my mind that aren't answered, I can't sleep.

Notice how Kayla was mad when she got to a cliffhanger in *Vampire Academy*. She was angry because she cared about the characters, and like Alexandra, wanted to know what happened next. Not getting the resolution to the characters' dilemmas frustrated her, so she felt compelled to research the next book in the series to get the answer, and therefore, find contentment. Just like Alexandra, Kayla was "caught up" (see Alexandra's previous quote) in the lives of the characters, and this assertion is evident when she stated that was "so into the book" supporting this theme that external demands on her time were insignificant and mostly ignored. She literally absorbed the captivating plot of *Vampire Academy* like a sponge taking in every piece of the action, ignoring outside interruptions and only living in the ever-evolving time of the series.

While these last two participants did not address time in the same manner, their responses demonstrated that it was a still a significant factor in their reading. For example, Sydney explained that when she reads an enchanting book, she "guess[es] it's kind of like jumping into a different world really. Like you're kind of escaping reality for a little while when you're in a book. Like when you're really in a book." For Sydney, "jumping into a different portal" represented being able to have control over some aspect of time in her life where she mostly lacked control in other areas because of schoolwork and other responsibilities. Escaping her

reality, which could be tiring given her busy adolescent life, provided her the opportunity to enter the world of the characters and enjoy their realities as a break from her own. Time, therefore, is represented by the "escape" she experienced while reading a book that really lured her into the storyline. Similarly, Gabrielle described an escape, though for her it was a literal one.

As mentioned earlier, Gabrielle spent years in foster care where some of the foster care parents were mean and insensitive. So to escape her environment, Gabrielle often hid under the covers or tables from her siblings and caregivers, so that she could fully escape her reality and "jump into the portal," like the one Sydney mentioned. Gabrielle stated, "Yeah, I always had to be under stuff, because, even now, when I read – when I lived over, before I moved, I would read under the kitchen table with all the chairs pushed in – I don't know why, I just read under stuff. It's kinda weird. And now I live by myself, and I read under the cover. Even though I don't have to . . ." Again, Gabrielle's relationship with time was to escape from it through reading. At the time of this study, she was living on her own as a high school senior, so she no longer needed a literal escape and lifesaver. During our interviews, Gabrielle shared, she just reads because she loves it.

All of these girls described their love of reading as if it satisfied a never-ending ravenous appetite for books. Many also described an escape from the realities of the present time. Although some of the girls seemed to race through novels, they were actually anxious to delight in the next part of the plot. The fact that they enjoyed the "escape" from their present realities also supports the assertion that racing through reading means getting involved, absorbed really, in the lives and happenings of the characters, taking in the dramatic events they experienced and their reactions to those circumstances as a way to take a hiatus from their overly occupied lives.

Truly, reading quickly does not mean that they were not taking the time to take in and enjoy the story; on the contrary, it means that they enjoyed it so much that they could not get enough of it. They wanted more and more of it in order to fill their appetites for interesting plotlines. In fact, they seemed to immerse themselves in the novel as an inside observer taking in the action. Consequently, time stood still for them, and they loved every moment of delectable reading.

Theme Three: Developing and searching for companionship is essential for those wanting to share their passion for reading fascinating texts.

Just as in theme one, the participants' responses for theme three hinged on the lifeworld existential of social interactions when it came to interacting and discussing books with others. This interaction was just as important as the enjoyable solitary experience of reading, which was discussed in theme one. Without social interaction, they were sometimes despondent and lonely, but with it, they were overjoyed and connected with others who would listen to or share their fascination with reading. The etymology for the word *companions,* according to the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (2013), comes from the Latin derivative of **com-** together + **pānis** bread. Literally, the term means, then, those with whom we share bread. This explanation fits the context of this study, for although the girls wanted solitude while reading, they longed for companionship or social interaction around their reading interests. They wanted their peers and/or loved ones to join in their excitement for the story. The girls wanted others to hear about, or better yet, share their affection for reading. In essence, companionship for these girls meant giving part of themselves through sharing their affection for reading (like the sharing of bread) with those they admired or desired to impress.

Furthermore, my participants craved to be a part of a community of readers. This assertion is based upon the interview data, which indicated that the girls' desire for a community of readers was met with either loneliness or communal bliss. Some of these adolescents

expressed elation when they able to share their love of reading with other peers – Black and other races alike – while other participants seemed lonely and discouraged over their lack of companionship. Alexandra expressed this latter sentiment, and was the most vocal and downcast of the participants as she described her sparse relationships with other Black adolescent females. However, her lack of companionship may be due to the lack of Black adolescent female avid readers in her school context, or it may be due to her not venturing out to find girls who shared her interests. Of all the participants, she was the busiest as a high-achieving student athlete, and might not have had or taken opportunities to meet more Black female peers.

Regardless of the reason, she was still feeling the negative effects of not experiencing kinship with Black female readers, and this aspect of her reading experience bothered her. She explained:

But uhm – so obviously, you know – and I knew – a lot of my friends, I'll hear them [Black adolescent females] all the time, like "Oh, I hate reading. I hate reading this, hate this book," and you know I'll be on the other end like, "I like that book." So it's like – so then you don't kind of want to – I don't know. Well, I mean, I'm not one to care if somebody doesn't agree with my opinion. So I mean I'll say, "Yeah, I liked the book," but you know I can't go in and say, you know – because a lot of them are kind of hard-headed sometimes. But uhm – all right. I've seen – they're kind of hard-headed, so when you give them your opinion on something, they'll just kind of brush it off like, "Oh, okay." You know, they don't want to have a debate with you. They're just like, "Oh." I don't know. It's just like they don't have that passion for – I mean, you don't even have to have a passion, a loving desire to read, to be able to, you know, have a conversation about it. But they don't even want to do that.

This excerpt directly shows Alexandra's desire to have debates and conversations with peers, but she is disappointed that her peers, especially Black females, will not engage in debates, which she feels can be done even if one does not love reading. Lacking a community of readers seemed to affect Alexandra more acutely than the other participants, and perhaps even the mainstream population, because she perceived reading and academic life as one of being ostracized by her peers (Black and White) for "acting White," as she mentioned later in that interview.

Unlike Alexandra, Sydney enjoyed a vibrant group of avid readers from various racial and cultural backgrounds, Black females included. She described treasured experiences debating and conversing about various plotlines with readers like her. Sydney explained, "The pleasure I get from discussing and debating books is seeing what another person's opinion might be of this plotline or this character or the author. And seeing if maybe we share the same opinion or if we have different opinions…" When asked the reasons she found this companionship enjoyable, she stated, "It's enjoyable because I'm happy to see someone else who shares my love of reading, so I like to maybe see if we can have like discussions like this a lot. If we maybe end up reading the same book again and maybe develop a friendship over this kind of thing." She added later that friendships had formed around reading frequently.

In commenting specifically on what it is like to be part of a community of readers, Sydney stated:

It feels really good because I feel like I'm not just this, like I don't feel as weird when I might just sit in the lunchroom or something, or I might sit in the lunchroom, just reading a book instead of maybe talking to a lot of people. Or if I'm just in class and we have free time, instead of going over to talk to my friends, I decide to finish whatever book I

79

was reading. So I don't feel, it doesn't feel as weird to me, when I see that I know there

are other people who also do the same thing.

In contrast with Alexandra, Sydney found companions, which included Black females, so she did

not feel weird or strange because of her insatiable appetite for reading. The other participants fell

within these polarized experiences of Alexandra and Sydney when it came to finding

camaraderie through reading.

Gabrielle's need for companionship is slightly similar to Alexandra because she desired

opportunities to share stories with others, but believed those opportunities were rare. However,

she had one companion who shared her same passion for reading the *Harry Potter* series.

Gabrielle told how they used to talk about it all the time, and although at the time of the study

she was eighteen and he was nineteen, they continued their discussions about the *Harry Potter*

series. She explained that "it just excites [her]" to talk about books with others. In addition to this

friend, she also enjoyed opportunities to talk about books with teachers. Explaining her

experience talking with a teacher about the book *Catch-22*, she stated that she "guess[ed] it was

just another person [she] could talk to about something that [she] like[d] to do." In response to

the question about why she got excited about talking to other people about books, she said, "It's

so rare that when it happens, I can just babble on and on." Gabrielle can talk incessantly about

books, but similar to Alexandra, she found those opportunities hard to come by.

All in all, sharing their thoughts and feelings about books were a crucial part of these

girls' reading experiences. Without this final aspect in their temporal reading process, the act of

reading was still enjoyable, but it was not as fulfilling. Their sharing practices affirmed or

troubled their sense of self in regard to personhood and race. While many of the girls had a

connection with other Black communal or familial peers who affirmed their self-worth by

placing importance on these girls' love of reading, Alexandra, while confident and sure of herself, was discontent with not being able to connect with others, especially those in her own race, about her love of reading. For all of the participants, then, companionship was a vital, necessary part of the reading experience.

Conclusion

This study is significant because it has the potential to help us reexamine our images of Black adolescent girls as avid readers. Although research shows that they are excelling in reading and have reversed the gender gap, the image of them as remedial or struggling readers in academic literature prevails (Gibson, 2010). Indeed, even the absence of their stories as lovers of reading shows that little attention is given to this population that are not only stereotyped as readers, but as Black females as well (e.g., loud, talking back, disrespectful). The participants' stories give another needed truthful and positive dimension of the complex lived experiences of Black adolescent females.

As I worked through my analysis, I wondered why these girls, while particular in their book choices, were so hungry and ready to consume their carefully chosen books quickly. In reviewing the interviews, I gathered one of the primary reasons behind their hunger was a need to escape from the disturbing realities of racial conflicts and tough circumstances in their lives, and in some books. Consequently, they were starving for books that did not have overly "harsh" (as the participant Alexandra termed it) racial tones, or even no signs of racial issues at all. This preference may exist because they deal with this reality everyday in their interactions with those who do not understand or take time to understand who they are in terms of their thoughts and feelings about themselves, their families, their communities, and their world, simply because they are Black. These girls also wanted a break from the many novels in school that focused on

race. Kayla noticed race in almost every book chosen by her school, but she perceived that these books were chosen so that they could learn lessons on the importance of equality. While she recognized the importance of learning these lessons, she preferred more genre variety in the school's book selections because, at the end of the day, the constant bombardment of racial tensions in books was getting old.

Because they were bombarded with negative, depressing images of racial inequality day in and day out, they hungered for a reprieve from these realities and preferred more light-hearted books as Kayla often stated. The girls just needed this temporary diversion in order to find hope that their lives could indeed be better – that they would not have to face such overt racism and could overcome difficult circumstances like the characters they admired. Reading also gave them a sense of control in their lives. To explain, reading provided a diversion from racial conflicts in life and in novels, so they were able to control the amount of information on race that they wanted when choosing books. This agency is something that society does not provide them.

Kayla was not the only participant to hold these sentiments, for Alexandra, a very interested reader of African and African American books, also preferred books without "overly harsh" racist events. While the other participants did not point to uneasiness with books with highly racist language and characters, their proclivity for fantasy and adventure novels over African American novels shows that they also preferred more "light-hearted" books. In fact, Taylor and Sydney stated that they did not understand why the Black experience could not be more integrated with other races' experiences in books. They did not understand, in Taylor's words, "why it had to be separate." Their thinking further supports my assertion that they were more interested in books that provided an escape than books that were focused almost solely on race.

Consequently, after the girls discovered that books provided a reprieve from their busy, trying, and racially-challenged lives, they craved for more and more for books to alleviate their despondency of past and current racial and life-confining conditions. They wanted a place to just "be" – be themselves and an active observer of someone else's life. Perhaps they were also learning how to deal or cope with their own personal hardships aside from race, as is most obvious with Gabrielle, the participant who received poor foster care. These considerations serve as a call to educators and caregivers to revisit their conversations on race in society, media, and books for all students/children so that Black girls and other minorities are not alienated from reading, that is, not enjoying the reading experience.

In summary, the narratives of the participants demonstrate that Black adolescent females who read voraciously are not an anomaly, but an ever-increasing group. Their stories, in line with Critical Race Feminism (CRF) and phenomenology, show us the importance of the narrative (Berry, 2010; Van Manen, 1990; Wing, 2003). Listening to the girls' stories herein is important in order to know the context of their development as Black adolescent female readers who appreciated their role model influencers and desired to share their passion for reading with peers and loved ones. Making their stories important to their exposure to teaching and learning experiences also centers, rather than marginalizes, their personhood (Berry, 2010). It also decidedly breaks long-held stereotypes about their dis/like of reading in and out of classrooms.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that whatever it is that these girls do with books in school does not count as enjoyable reading. The same richness of the experience is simply not present there. Because the introduction and focus of reading books in school was often on literary analysis, these Black girls were not as excited and engaged in reading as they were out of school. The presentation of reading by their peers and loved ones made the enterprise of reading

more appealing and worth trying out or tasting reading for pleasure for themselves. This difference in the way reading novels is presented is worth noting for parents and educators who care to foster the love of reading for their students.

In fact, the meaning of the reading experience for these girls in caught up in their relationships with their role models, the escape from their busy and challenging adolescent lives, and their relationships with peers and/or loved ones as they shared their reading experiences. The importance of social interactions and time, the life existentials that surfaced in the data, were crucial to loving reading for these girls. The importance of social interactions first surfaced in the admiration they had for their role models who introduced the joy of reading through modeling and discussing the personal, academic, social, and academic benefits that could be found in this pastime. In terms of time, while reading, these girls were mostly oblivious to it, and only cared for the story as a means of escape, as previously mentioned. The end of their temporal process of reading goes back to the importance of social interactions, for similar to their role models, they wanted to introduce and share these benefits of reading with others they cared about personally and/or wanted to please or impress. Searching for friends during this third phase was perhaps most important because the girls wanted, more than sharing the benefits of reading, to experience companionship with those who understood their interest and passion for reading – a pastime which made their lives more soulful and beautiful.

Finally, this study provides a different perspective on the traditional literacy of Black adolescent girls. Many research articles focus on how they struggle with reading and the solutions to helping improve their reading comprehension. Society's assumptions about Black girls' reading confine them, and this study shows that these girls are enjoying reading despite the

stereotypes. Narrowing in on this aspect provides a liberating instead of a confining view of

Black girls and traditional literacy.

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CHAPTER THREE

The Roles of Digital Literacies and Critical Literacy for Black Adolescent Females

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this conceptual thought paper was to outline the digital and critical reading experiences of Black adolescent female avid readers by focusing on the question: What are the technologies and practices used by Black adolescent female avid readers, how and why do they use them, and what are their implications for educators? To answer this question, the voices of Black adolescent female readers from this author's previous study were used to give insight into the exploration of the *method* of critical literacy and the *medium* of digital literacies from their lived literate experiences. Their experiences, along with their positional identity as young Black women in American society, put forth the need for educators and scholars to combine the method of critical literacy with the medium of digital literacies in order to augment their voracious reading practices. Not only would the concurrent instruction improve the young Black adolescent female avid readers' reading experiences, but it would also amplify their voices with the greater digital world on the social ills they witness in books and in life.

The Roles of Digital Literacies and Critical Literacy for Black Adolescent Females

Introduction

The reading experiences of Black adolescent females have largely been neglected in the research literature. Even when reported, Black girls are most often portrayed in this literature as struggling and "remedial" readers (Gibson, 2010).; overlooked are Black adolescent females who are skilled, avid readers Because of this neglect and mis-portrayal, a pathologizing view of Black adolescent female readers prevails. To study Black adolescent females who avidly read, then, is to examine a population of readers who have been stereotyped to a large extent. To unpack/deconstruct this stereotype—by closely examining the practices, mindsets, and contexts of these avid readers, up close and personal, through their eyes and perspectives—is an opportunity to understand Black adolescent females readers anew.

To examine the reading experiences of Black adolescent female avid readers anew is to do more than disaggregate their standardized scores from those of others, or, to parse their performance from matched groups of teen readers. It is to examine these young women's literacy practices *in situ*, with an eye toward the *medium* and *method* of their reading practices. Where the *medium* could span the spectrum from print-on-the-page to pixels-on-the-screen, and the *method* could range from mainstream comprehension practices to complex critical reading strategies. But given the rising tide of digital tools in teen life and the push by educators, leaders, and parents for teens to be more astute and canny users of these tools, an examination of the media and methods of Black adolescent female avid readers has the potential to shed appreciably more light on this oft stereotyped population.

More specifically, to examine the proclivities of Black adolescent female avid readers for consuming and producing digital texts (i.e., the *medium*) could yield a better understanding of

how to empower and support their academic pursuits that employ online tools. In turn, educators could then be better equipped to assist these girls in developing their digital literacies skills, which they will likely need to succeed in the ever-increasing digital global marketplace.

Furthermore, to examine the critical literacy strategies (i.e., the *method*) of Black adolescent female avid readers as they engage with a range of texts in a variety of contexts could bear a fuller understanding of how these teens actually learn to do things with texts for various purposes. Such purposes, for example, could be the need to express frustrations about negative dominant views of their personhood or to bring greater meaning to their lives (e.g., Hall, 2011).

Taken together, these renewed understandings of Black adolescent female avid readers and their digital and critical literacy (i.e., the *medium* & *method* of their literate activity) have the potential to inform the design of voracious-creating reading experiences tailored to Black adolescent females. With the designs for such experiences in hand, educators could better equip Black adolescent female avid readers to (a) capitalize on the affordances of digital tools and texts, and (b) transpose their needs and ambitions (whether they are personal frustrations, academic challenges, or professional goals) into social action targeted at change.

This paper, then, outlines the digital and critical reading experiences of Black adolescent female avid readers by focusing on the question: What are the technologies and practices used by Black adolescent female avid readers, how and why do they use them, and what are their implications for educators? Before answering this question, the problem must first be unpacked.

Conceptual Background

The Problem

How are Black adolescent female readers seen through the lens of their race and gender? The research literature indicates that Black adolescent females are stereotyped as remedial

readers. One of the primary reasons that Black adolescent females have been negatively stereotyped in the research literature is because of their performance on standardized measures. At the secondary and post-secondary levels, boys have long outperformed girls on national measures of reading performance (Cohen, White, & Cohen, 2012). Even though recent evidence indicates that this gender gap is reversing, especially for reading (Freeman, 2004), the negative stereotype prevails. For example, data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that 12th grade females in 2005 outperformed male students in reading by a wider margin than they did in 1992. Thus, while more Black adolescent females are performing better in reading (Cohen, White, and Cohen, 2012), the prevailing image of them in the scholarly literature is that they need assistance with reading. While it is admirable to help Black adolescent female struggling readers, the lack of attention to those Black adolescent females who love to read leads to a gap in the literature in terms of their voices stating why they love to read, what led them to love reading, how they use reading, among other questions. This gap is problematic in that it provides a one-dimensional view of the reading lives of these girls.

In fact, the result is an absence of evidence to counter the stereotype narratives of Black adolescent female readers. The limited evidence available suggests that the Black adolescent females who do not excel in reading are not engaged with reading either because of the lack of culturally-relevant texts, interesting texts, or culturally-sensitive pedagogy (Brooks, Sekayi, Savage, Waller & Picot, 2010; Davis, 2000; Gibson, 2010; Sutherland, 2005). If engaged, these scholars argue, Black adolescent females would enjoy reading more, do more reading, and thereby, become more proficient readers. This researcher's phenomenological study on Black adolescent females' love of reading gets to the essence of these questions for the study

participants, and establishes that they craved reading as one does a favorite dish, but were also particular like food connoisseurs.

Now that the need to study Black adolescent female avid readers has been established, the argument of this paper is to emphasize the need to also study Black adolescent females' digital and critical literacy skills as it relates to their voracious reading practices. As students in the 21st century, it is vital that these girls are proficient with digital texts (books) and tools as well as critical literacy skills. My participants loved to read and wanted family and friends with which to share this desire to read. All of them also owned or desired to own electronic readers. Their desire for companionship around reading along with their interest in digital books contained great possibilities for enhancing their reading experiences, finding virtual companions in order to share their love of reading, and expanding their knowledge of using digital tools for the purposes of critiquing books. Through our interviews, the Black girl avid readers pointed to their limited knowledge in engaging with novels in these ways. If they had knowledge of these possible avenues to heighten their enjoyment of reading, they would have done so.

As I thought about these aspects of their reading experience while also reading scholarly literature, I found that it was important to explore how educators could best help their Black adolescent females, as well as other minority or marginalized students, become well-rounded individuals prepared for the demands of the digital world while simultaneously teaching them how to question books and advocate for themselves and others. To do so, educators would do well to consider purposefully designing pedagogy to enhance and promote a combination of digital and critical literacy. The meshing of these two literacies is especially important for marginalized students because it helps them question the status quo thereby empowering themselves to advocate for social change.

Teaching for Social Justice: Critical Literacy

Several scholars have written about the importance of incorporating methods of critical literacy in pedagogy, specifically for minorities and urban youth. Fecho and Waff (1998), Mahiri (1998), and Morrell (2008) are three such modernist scholars whom have purposed to help students question, challenge, and change the status quo. In their scholarly writings, they have encouraged other scholars and practitioners, to focus, in scholarship and practice, on developing relationships with students by incorporating community norms and language in curricula. They also challenged us to teach for social justice across the disciplines, because in an era where discrimination and hegemony continue to abound, students need a curriculum that incorporates the skills of rhetoric and calls for action to eradicate social ills. Social injustices can include immediate concerns about problems locally or abroad, and exploring these topics, which are of keen interest to marginalized students, engages them in subject matter. Oftentimes, teaching academic subject matter alone creates a resistance among students because they do not see the relevance of the curriculum to their daily lives (Mahiri, 1998). These authors challenge us to educate students for the purpose of equipping them to thrive in a world that continues to promote systems of oppression on people of color and the poor. Employing critical literacy instruction empowers students to articulate and expose these exploitive systems in order to initiate change.

While some may argue that incorporating critical literacy is difficult to do in an age of accountability, Avila and Moore (2012) have suggested techniques for incorporating this literacy in disciplinary classrooms. For example, in the case of the current Common Core State Standards, these scholars extracted specific standards that were malleable for inclusion of critical literacy pedagogy, so that teachers could recognize that using this pedagogical method was possible.

In addition to arguing for the pedagogical method of critical literacy, Morrell (2008) also provided several examples of how to include it in most, if not all, of the disciplines. For instance, in a unit on the *Odyssey,* he assigned students question systems that tend to downplay cultural norms scaffolding their ability to identify these systems in literary and other written works. To make *The Odyssey* more relevant to their lives, he connected incorporated the *Godfather* trilogy in this unit, and using both texts, he prodded students to question whether the values displayed in the works of literature were values forced on them by society. The students' questioning was a tenet of critical literacy as they read and questioned Homer's *Odyssey*. Morrell's practical methods of incorporating critical literacy with a group of secondary urban students are just one of many exemplars for teachers and scholars to study for use in other disciplinary contexts.

Teaching for Technology in the 21st Century: Digital Literacies

Similar to the method of critical literacy, there is also a growing concern among scholars that many teachers are not engaging their students in the medium of digital literacies. To illustrate this dilemma, Hicks, Turner, and Fink (2013) wrote about two fictitious schools, which were composites of schools where they observed and conducted research, and represented dichotomous schools on the continuum of digital literacies implementation. On one end of the continuum, there were affluent schools that were not using technology in meaningful ways, and on the other end, there were teachers in under-resourced schools who could have increased their efforts to secure technological resources in order to obtain comparable, if not equitable, opportunities to engage in the medium of digital literacies.

For example, in Hicks and colleagues' (2013) affluent fictitious school, "Access Academy," the students were surrounded by technology affordances such as interactive

whiteboards in every room, devices for every student, and full Google integration with students having access to free Google apps. Even with these devices and teachers' and district leaders' expressions of commitment for helping students improve their digital literacies proficiency, teachers infrequently used these tools, and only employed them if there was 'extra time' at the end of the unit. They were "never [used] in a sustained, inquiry-based manner" (p. 58). As such, the resources were an add-on, not an integral part of the curriculum. According to these scholars, these circumstances were indicative of many affluent schools that have plentiful technology but do not use it for helping students create and consume texts in critical ways that enable them to develop critical thinking skills.

On the other end of the continuum, Hicks and colleagues (2013) described an under-resourced fictitious school that they named "Exodus Elementary." The problem of scarce funding and technology was exacerbated by the reality that many students lacked personal computers and other technological devices that would assist in their development of digital literacies practices. Without these technology affordances, Exodus students were set up to be less competitive with affluent students with these resources. The authors urged teachers in these situations to upgrade their search for technological resources that enable their students to have equitable opportunities. Obtaining these resources would likely level the playing field for these students, which would increase their chances for gaining quality higher educational and career opportunities. Important in both cases is to recognize that for both fictitious schools, improper or no implementation of digital literacies instruction was problematic.

Existing Tensions for Digital Literacies Implementation

O'Brien and Scharber (2008) also understood these problematic dichotomies in the implementation of digital literacies instruction that Hicks et al. (2013) described in their

composite schools. However, O'Brien and Scharber also pointed out the problematic tension between educators when contending for the inclusion or exclusion of digital literacies instruction in schools. On one end, educators passionately advocate for the inclusion this instruction, but do so without honing in on the importance of using them effectively to meet curricula goals. Conversely, other educators continue to adhere to traditional literacy instruction to the detriment of students who need technological skills in order to compete in today's digital world. The authors recommended blending the two extremes in order to create a balanced implementation of digital literacies instruction, which would create magnificent possibilities for engaging adolescent readers. In fact, O'Brien and Scharber (2008) stated:

> Some tech enthusiasts might be tempted to import into school the most enjoyable aspects of young people's social worlds and pleasures gained from creating and using digital literacies. This desire should be tempered with the understanding that the use of digital technologies in schools should be driven by educational purposes rather than social ones. That said, compelling possibilities for using digital literacies tools and practices to engage, motivate, and enhance students' learning abound" (p. 67).

Accordingly, these scholars, like Hicks et al. (2013), understood that digital literacies instruction cannot wait, but they also emphasized the importance of retaining traditional literacy skills. In other words, they believed in balanced instruction.

Role of Educators in Use of Digital Texts

Similar to O'Brien and Scharber's (2008) argument for balance in digital literacies instruction, Gee (2012), with his focus on print and digital literacies and *texts*, pointed out that whether the text was print or digital, the modeling and oral scaffolding from an adult in how to critically think through and use these texts had the potential to determine whether the young

97

person would achieve economic success or not. Gee specifically commented on what he called "grades" (i.e., degrees of quality) in traditional print and digital literacies. To explain, as he commented on traditional print literacy, he stated that the premium grade led to success in the modern world while the average grade led to working-class jobs, which had lower benefits and less union support. Gee also expressed the importance of knowing and utilizing academic language that is associated with traditional print literacy. He added that many people groan at the mention of academic language when it comes to traditional print literacy, but that "the forms of language used in research, empirical reasoning, logical argumentation" are connected to people getting good jobs adding that those who attain these high-level positions "are often there because they got through their high school chemistry book and argued and debated their way through a good college" (p. 418). In other words, traditional print literacy skills remain important when it comes to having social and cultural capital.

Analogous to traditional print literacy, digital literacies, according to Gee (2012), also has a premium and average grade. For instance, "premium digital literacy is the ability to use specialist/technical language connected to digital tools," and it is also the ability to use academic language connected to institutional and public-sphere knowledge-building and argumentation" (p. 418). In both types of texts, language, although different types, is important, and instruction and scaffolding by an adult is necessary for students to be prepared for career opportunities. In sum, instruction in both types of texts is necessary for students to be versatile and adept in both genres, which will be part of their future academic and career endeavors. Since the benefits of using traditional print texts are well understood and implemented in schools, it is also important to understand specific ways in which digital print texts are useful in schools.

Webb (2007), a professor and former classroom teacher, found digital texts an effective means of enhancing students' ability to enthusiastically engage with literature in his former English language arts classroom. When his literature anthologies did not arrive on time, Webb was forced to turn to digital texts. In searching for literature, he found a plethora of digital readings that allowed students to obtain more in-depth background information, definitions, connections with authors, among other benefits that made their texts come alive. In the case of their poetry unit, students were more engaged as they found online recordings of poetry, local poetry reading announcements, newsletters, and other resources all on one website, which also had teacher resources. In another case, students were able to read various translations of *The Odyssey* and create their own line-by-line translations of it based on more in-depth understandings of the work due to their exposure to different versions of the play. These are just a few examples of the ways in which Webb (2007) found literary digital texts exciting and engaging for students.

Relationship Between Digital Texts and Reading Comprehension

However, when it comes to benefits for reading comprehension with digital texts, Wright, Fugett, and Caputa (2013) found no change when using digital instead of traditional print texts with elementary-aged children. Also, the children's reading time was consistently longer when reading from an iPad than from a print source. On the other hand, the children made more use of reading support sources such as dictionaries when reading from electronic texts, and their enjoyment of reading increased when they read literature electronically. So while no change in comprehension was found, this study corroborated the findings of Grimshaw, Dungworth, McKnight, and Morris (2007) who conducted a similar study. In the Wright and colleagues' research, the children gave the following reasons for their enjoyment of reading digital texts:

The iPad is easier to hold, liked the option to change the screen's contrast to

lighter or darker, enjoyed turning the pages, liked using the electronic book-marker,

could understand the story better, and liked the iPad better because the paper book hurts

when trying to hold the pages. (p. 374)

Truly, although these studies found that reading comprehension remained unchanged between

print and digital texts, the fact that children's enjoyment of reading and use of comprehension

tools increased is a good reason for educators to incorporate digital texts (and digital literacies

instruction) in classrooms, for fostering the love of reading is just as important as improving

students' reading comprehension skills. Therefore, as Hicks et al.'s (2013) article title indicated,

digital literacies (and texts) are no longer a luxury that can wait.

Combining Critical Literacy and Digital Literacies Pedagogy

Peters and Lankshear (1996) discussed the importance of teaching students to not only

critique traditional print texts, but digital texts as well, by answering these essential questions:

Why are certain bits of text brought [sic] together in a particular constellation? On what

principles are images, sounds, and texts amalgamated in this way, in these particular

circumstances, at this time? What purposes or interests do these assemblages or

constructions of the world serve? How do they affect the way people live? Why are these

elements of text, sound, and image brought together in this way and not in other possible

combinations? What might it do to put music to this text or text to these images? And so

on.

These questions are indeed foundational in critical and digital literacies instruction; however, the

focus of this paper is to point to the end result of this questioning, and that is the social action

tenet of critical literacy. Because of the vast audience the online environment provides, it is an

effective means for students to advocate for themselves and others. Classroom instruction must

play a part in how to do so safely and most effectively, so that students are able to get the results

they hope to achieve. Getting results, especially for the silenced, are most important, so it is

imperative that educators are adept in both literacies in order to adequately prepare students to

make a difference in their lives and the marginalized citizenry.

Empirical Background

Based on evidence from the author's previous research with Black adolescent female avid

readers, this section focuses on the critical literacy and digital literacies practices used by a small

sample of these teens. As the five girls in this study described their experiences with reading,

data was collected about their knowledge of how to question authorial intentions and issues of

power through digital means. The following paragraphs illustrate the strategic what, how, and

why these Black adolescent female avid readers employed when using digital literacies as a

means to engage in critical literacy.

Participants' Uses of Critical Literacy

Alexandra (a pseudonym), an intelligent culturally-conscious Black adolescent female,

was attuned to issues of race and equality in readings, whether real or perceived. Her ability to

notice issues of race in books was largely due to her mother's influence. Her mother, who,

interestingly enough, was an avid reader and served as a director for a multicultural awareness

initiative in a major school system, instilled pride in Alexandra for African and African

American history, literature, and culture. Alexandra grew up with her mother reading her and her

brother African American children's stories in the book, *The People Could Fly: American Black

Folktales*, told by Virginia Hamilton (1993), so she had an early instilment of self-worth by

seeing her value in an acculturating childhood book during recent times when society frequently

devalued the African American experience. As such, when Alexandra read her favorite book

series, *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (2008), she was disturbed with the image of

Black people in one district because they worked as food gatherers. She grappled with the idea of

Black people doing work that she considered similar to slave labor in a futuristic setting. At first,

she wondered if the author was trying to send a message about society's thoughts on the

occupational and societal roles Black people should hold. She stated:

> I guess I was like kind of curious as to why she had written it that way. I really – I was
>
> trying to figure out like deeper into the story what – what it was, like if she was trying to
>
> say something. Maybe they've got – maybe because the capital is kind of like this – it
>
> seemed like this white community, as far as people, but I mean, there were – there was
>
> one other black person. His name is Cinna, and he was like the designer of Katniss. But,
>
> I mean, uhm, he was the only other black character in the capital, so it kind of made me
>
> wonder if she thought that maybe society thinks that slavery is like almost a necessity or
>
> if it's something that would make the community better or make the world better.

Notice the likelihood that Alexandra was hesitant, as noticed through her "uhms" and breaks in

speech, to accuse the author of maliciousness. She wanted to be fair in her assessment while also

stating her confusion and concern.

As Alexandra continued to question the rationale of portraying Black people as food

gatherers, she moved from wondering if the author thought society felt that Black people should

be in slavery-type positions to wondering about the author's personal intentions. Alexandra

stated:

> I guess I would have felt better if it weren't so – like, if were more diverse. And if it was
>
> noticeably diverse. But like, I mean, of course I know it's just a book, but you know I

also know that the author's White. So that's one of the things that comes to mind when I

think of it. For gathering, you know, why would you use Black people? It just kind of

runs through my mind when I -

Although she was far from ever pointing to the author's intentions as racist stating that it was

because she had never conversed with her, Alexandra was curious about the reasoning behind

Collins' choice to portray most of the Black characters in this way. Her curiosity and questioning

demonstrated her moving through the method or process of critical literacy.

Although Alexandra's concern may have been a bit off-centered, that is, she had not yet

grappled with the scene enough to consider all of the polysemous prose; namely, the probable

meaning that Collins' portrayal of Black people as mostly food gatherers was probably to

capture, in its most extreme form, the unjust treatment of the citizenry by the Capitol

(government officials in authority). Nevertheless, Alexandra was adept at questioning and

considering other possible meanings and implications, other than malicious intent, behind the

author's words. She had yet to formulate a solid conclusion at the time of our meetings.

Although Alexandra was one of several teen participants to openly question an author's

intent, the other participants also thought deeply about books and connected to them in personal

ways; however, they did not take the next step and question the authors. Additionally, all of the

participants, including Alexandra, had yet to use questioning to move toward social action,

which could have been used to speak out against any possible malicious authorial motives. This

skill is one they needed in order to combat the fatigue and frustration Alexandra and another

participant, Kayla, felt as a result of curiosities about authors' purposes.

In sum, even though some teen participants engaged in critical literacy practices, their

knowledge of how to fully engage with texts critically was limited. In essence, they seemed to

lack a range of strategies for how to question authors' purposes and issues of power in books. If they had been taught this skill, which none indicated they had, perhaps they would have felt more empowered and confident in their assessment of an author's intent as well as knowledgeable about ways to advocate for those marginalized populations who may have been, in other cases, inappropriately portrayed in books.

Participants' Uses of Digital Literacies

In terms of their digital literacies text and tool preferences, the adolescent participants in the author's research were mainly *mono-literate* in that the medium in which text was delivered was the same (print or digital books). The girls still read books whether they were in print or digital format; they were simply preoccupied with reading material of any form. In fact, Taylor, one of the participants, loved her Kindle:

> …[M]y dad got it for me last Christmas and I just, it's so wonderful. This is, it's definitely helped me to get books easier, since the books come from Amazon and I can just go right to the store and pick out books I wanta get. And I was so excited when I got it 'cause I was just like, "oh, I want this book and I want this book and I want this book." And I actually have a whole list of books that I want… And this has definitely helped me because before, when I didn't have my Kindle, we'd have to go to the library, and we couldn't always get to the library because my dad, he works late some days and even on Saturdays, like he just came back from teaching at [a local school] a few hours ago. And so we never really had the time to get to the library. And so during that time, I didn't read as much. I had to always depend on the school's library, but now that I have my Kindle, it's so much easier, so much better. It really makes me happy.

Like Taylor, the participants who owned an electronic reader, enjoyed having the ease of securing books quickly and relatively inexpensively while also having the ability to read and carry around several books on one device. Although Kayla talked about the comprehension tool on her Kindle, she found the ability to secure some of the complimentary books quickly more appealing than the tools. Consequently, what the participants appreciated most was the ability to engage and purchase multiple books frequently. In essence, while Taylor and the other participants loved their digital readers, they did not use them in ways that enhanced their reading enjoyment other than having books at their disposal all of the time.

The difference between these participants and many other adolescents who have Internet access is that they did not produce any digital artifacts such as blogs, iMovies, YouTube videos, vlogs, tweets, or Facebook notes and statuses (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, and Morris, 2008). In fact, when I asked Kayla, a participant who had online access, whether or not she did anything with her reading pastime online, she stated, "I've heard of Goodreads, but I haven't really gone to it. And I don't have a Facebook and Twitter; it's a waste of my time. Like, I just read. I just read." Indeed, Kayla, like many of the participants, was primarily a consumer of books. This pattern was consistent across most of the girls in the study: whether they had access or not, the girls were content to sit in their reading environments and read books whether they were paper/hardbound or digital in order to fill their unquenchable desire for more and more appealing plotlines. With one exception, their love of reading hand a limited connection to any online activity that involved production (e.g., writing, designing, communicating, etc.).

So why did these girls refrain from sharing their love of reading except through formal or informal gatherings with friends, listening to YouTube reviews (a step up from in-person conversations), and/or watching the movies based on their fascinating books? Listening to their

descriptions of their teachers' classroom lessons revealed that a traditional view of literacy was utilized, so they did not view these technological avenues as relevant to their reading experience. The girls did not express technology as being used in their classrooms in diverse, novel ways.

The participants' focus on consumption, and not production, speaks to the need for teachers to share and demonstrate how digital products are beneficial to the reading experience, whether students are wired at home or not. All but one participant had Internet access at home, but those wired still did not actively engage or produce digital artifacts. Their responses established that they were not knowledgeable about the ways in which producing artifacts could enhance their reading experience and connect them to other readers and interested parties.

Because the girls wanted companionship around their love of reading, it pointed to the necessity for teachers to communicate the benefits of loving to read as well as instruct them on how to share their fervency with others in the greater world. While the girls had some digital literacies skills, they could have been amplified for the purpose of obtaining the companionship they desired, which would, in turn, elevate their already sheer enjoyment of reading. Of the participants, Sydney was most connected online, but she still was not making the most of her online resources. To explain, Sydney enjoyed watching YouTube book reviews on the Cass Jay Tuck Channel in order to decide what books she wanted to purchase and have someone to engage with after having read a book. She found this tool especially useful if none of her friends had read her particular book. The reviewer on the Cass Jay Tuck Channel was the person she could relate to online. Not only did this reviewer confirm or contest Sydney's own thoughts about the book she had read, but she also served as a role model of sorts in that she was able to witness that there were indeed people in the world who shared her love of reading. In fact, Sydney stated:

It means like I'm not the only out – like out there who loves to read and that there

are other people who are out there who really like to voice their opinion about the

books that they read. There are other people who agree with those opinions. And

then there – you have people who disagree with the opinions, and you're able to

have a debate over it and it's pretty cool.

In her case, Sydney debated with the reviewer on the YouTube Cass Jay Tuck Channel virtually

by watching and reading – not participating in online discussions. Nevertheless, this watching

and reading were sufficient enough for Sydney because she had access to someone else that not

only enjoyed reading the same books, but also shared the same passion for reading. This

reviewer was Sydney's virtual companion.

On the other hand, because Sydney did not participate in the YouTube dialogue or

produce her own digital artifact (e.g., blog or vlog), she was left out of book conversations on

deeper levels. This void is where a teacher or another adult could have intervened and scaffolded

her knowledge of digital practices and connected them to her love of reading. As Gee (2012)

stated, digital literacies skills are more effective when a knowledgeable adult supports the young

learner. Sydney could have benefited from having a more knowledgeable person as a resource

for the purpose of making her reading experience even more rewarding.

Implications

Given the conceptual and empirical material presented in the previous pages, a number of

implications can be drawn for educators who design reading experiences that support the digital

and critical literacy experiences of Black adolescent female avid readers. In terms of *digital*

literacies practices, the design of reading experiences works optimally with a balanced approach,

where teens are prepared to read traditional print texts *and* online digital texts critically. This

balance means preparing them to read texts in ways that imagine textual meaning that is imbued with a broad range of cultural and linguistic factors in mind. For instance, with the U.S. "projected to become a majority-minority nation for the first time in 2043" … where "no group will make up a majority" (Census Bureau, 2012), readers need to apprehend texts as polysemous, signifying meaning that varies across people groups, place and time. Thus, designing the use of digital texts for Black adolescent female avid readers will require a multi-dimensional model for balancing the many elements at play when the digital medium of literacy is constituted by many forms with polyvalent functions.

In terms of *critical literacy practices*, this paper highlights issues raised by the voices of Black adolescent females who were marginalized and silenced because of their race and gender. In many respects, a complex, complicated, discriminatory background has rendered them invisible in national dialogues on literacy. By amplifying the voice of those Black adolescent females whom have pastimes such as reading—a habit that has largely gone unnoticed and unexplored in scholarly realms, —the stereotypes that sustain a myth about Black girls and their reading can be re-examined. Such an examination provides liberatory power to those oppressed by a discriminatory political and social system. In addition, a re-examination promises to open a future for Black girls that is less silencing and more opening to their lived literate experiences.

In recent years, a growing number of scholars have engaged in excellent work on behalf of many of the marginalized and silenced. I take up their conversation to further the thinking about the particular population of Black adolescent female avid readers because little attention has been given to them in scholarly literature. In the pages that follow, I will draw upon ideas and issues at the intersection of digital and critical literacy in order to more purposefully identify K-12 classrooms practices that could enable all students, especially Black adolescent females, to

find voice that would advocate for their own needs as well as those of other silenced groups.

Conclusion

In summary, the conceptual and empirical backgrounds of this thought piece indicate Black adolescent avid reading girls do engage in digital and critical literacy, but in limited ways. Furthermore, the literature and evidence suggests that more direct support for teaching critical literacy and digital literacies could develop strategies beyond these limited ways. In his study with African American adolescent female writers, Hall (2011) concluded that instruction in digital literacies would be ineffective without explaining how these tools could bring meaning to their lives. Due to discrimination based on their age, race, gender, and acuity, Black adolescent females have much to say regarding their lives and their lived literate experiences, which could be expressed through various digital venues (e.g., iMovies, blogs, vlogs, social media networks). Although data from the author's research revealed some of the participants' knowledge of moving through the critical literacy process and using digital tools, their use of the method and medium was not maximized, seemingly due to the lack of purposeful instruction connecting the two literacies together in their disciplinary classrooms.

The dearth of research and praxis on the voracious reading practices of Black adolescent females as well as their proficiency with critical literacy and digital literacies indicate a need to understand their digital and critical literacy practices better. By understanding the what, how, and why of their avid reading practices, educators can move from teaching these concepts without consideration of student experiences toward teaching them *in situ*, with relevance, and concurrently. Combining the teaching of these literacies has many benefits, including enhancing the reading experiences and abilities of Black adolescent females for advocating, through digital means, for the oppressed, marginalized, and silenced in books and in life. In the realm of

literacy, reading in particular, the possibility of dual instruction is especially important for these young women, who desire reading companions and an audience with which to share their thoughts on issues, such as racism, sexism, and ageism, important to them. Probing into this issue and conversing about deliberate methods for dual instruction of critical literacy and digital literacies would help Black young women as well as other silenced groups to receive the attention they deserve regarding their thoughts on literacy and in/justice.

To realize the goal of supporting all girls' digital and critical literacy, more research is needed to paint a more encompassing picture and hear a broader range of voices on the current state of Black girls' avid reading expeinces. Finally, more work is needed to build on the work of Avila and Moore (2012), so that teachers understand that instruction, especially for Black adolescent females and other silenced groups, can integrate critical literacy and digital literacies instruction into and throughout accountability standards. There is much work to be done, and it is essential to take up the task, so that many more students' voices are considered when the design of reading experiences is carried out for Black adolescent female readers.

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CONCLUSION

Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.
–   Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The quote above from Civil Rights Leader, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. encapsulates the reason for this research as well as embodies the condition of Black adolescent females. To explain, part of my life's purpose is to become *vocal* about the language, literacies, and personhood of Black adolescent females. Joining other dedicated researchers and educators, I purpose to be vocal in order to lessen, and hopefully, obliterate the possibilities of misunderstandings and marginalization of these girls due to their race, gender, and American identities, whether they are United States citizens or not. The latter statement about US citizenship was made because of Kayla, one of my participants from Kenya, who experienced frustrations because of her race and gender while in the United States for nearly six years.

Even today, the color of one's skin sometimes outweighs the content of our character, as Dr. King stated he wished would not happen for his children in his famous, "I Have a Dream" speech. The dreams and aspirations of these girls may be more likely to be realized due to the racial and gender progress this country has made since King's time; however, there is still work to be done as was evident in the news media during the case on Trayvon Martin's death. When the witness, Rachel Jeantel, was questioned, she was misunderstood literally because of her use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and consequently, was accused of being an improbable witness because the court officials did not understand, or seek sources to understand, her use of the language. As such, her race and class were also on trial as AAVE is most prominent among the African American working class. She is just one example of how Black adolescent females are still caged birds singing, for every time they do so, they are mocked and ridiculed.

The goal of my research, then, is not to spotlight myself, but my younger sistahs who are still fighting society's attempts to silence them as it relates to their language and literacy practices. The invisible cages where these Black adolescent girls find themselves are dangerous places because they are unable to move about freely in order to sing widely about the many facets of their personhood. I once read a blog post by a person who calls himself "aomuse." The blog was titled, "[I]f you claim to be pro-black girl, you don't get to choose which black girls are worthy of defending." It goes on to list just a few of the many identities of these girls, including, but not limited to, the following: poor Black girls, sexually-active Black girls, abstinent Black girls, queer Black girls, immigrant Black girls, disabled Black girls, and so on. These multiple identities exemplify the many faces of Black girlhood, which result in not necessarily one monolithic voice, but many different voices that sing in unison because of their common experience of gendered racism (Essed as cited in Battle-Walters, 2004).

As a result of my work with the participants in my qualitative studies, I have learned to listen and learn from them, making sure not to project my own experiences with Black girlhood and womanhood on them in order to ensure that I, too, avoid pigeon-holding these girls in one group. As such, I have learned that these particular girls will defend themselves when attacked resorting to using a cultural practice against its original import as in the case of the participants using the speech practice, "Talking with an Attitude" (Troutman, 2010). I have also learned that reading voraciously has been a way of escape from the constant reminder in books that they were/are not seen as capable because of their race and gender. Last, but not least, I have learned that these girls need more instruction on how to make their voices heard on a larger scale through the use of digital and critical literacy. All in all, I have learned, then, that there is still much work to be done in order to have their voices heard prolifically throughout the world.

116

Although I pick up the baton in this quest, I also issue a call to current and future educational researchers to explore the language and literacies of Black adolescent girls' in order to fill absences/gaps in the scholarly literature and to smash stereotypes of their personhood. I also issue a call to classroom teachers to be willing to listen and learn from these girls, as I had to learn, even as a Black adult female researcher. For certain, there is much work to be done, and I, for one, as Dr. King stated, will not be silent, but will indeed sing loudly in my research, presentations, and day-to-day interactions, for these girls do indeed matter.

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