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DAUGHTERS READING AND RESPONDING TO
AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE:
THE UMOJA BOOK CLUB

A Dissertation in

English

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation details efforts undertaken by the researcher to address a group of African American adolescent girls’ need for positive role models and Black female-centered spaces where discussions of issues such as Black female identity, voice, and relationships could take place. During the 2005-2006 school year, I facilitated a book club with ninth and tenth grade girls participating in the Umoja Youth Empowerment Program. This book club provided an opportunity for teen girls to read and discuss with peers and adult mentors issues in young adult texts written by African American female authors. This book club aimed to examine how African American female readers discussed African American young adult literature (AAYAL) in an out-of-school context.

In Chapter One, I outline the theoretical framework that undergirds this study. It is largely informed by feminist and Black feminist/womanist theories that offer a way to discuss social, personal, cultural, and literacy issues concerning African American adolescent girls and women. Chapter Two describes the youth empowerment group from which participants were recruited and details my data collection methods and analysis procedures. In Chapter Three, I present the results of my textual analysis of AAYA novels read in the book club. I use Black feminist literary criticism to analyze works by Sharon Flake, Rita Williams-Garcia, and Connie Porter and to demonstrate how these authors use AAYA fiction as a tool to tell Black girls’ and women’s stories and to challenge the ways we view Black teenage girls. Chapter Four reveals the most frequently discussed topics among participants during the book club: relationships with mothers, relationships with boys, and support and guidance for girls. I employ Black feminist and reader-response theory to analyze the ways the girls responded to these topics. In Chapter
Five, I reflect on the research experience and emphasize the need for continued efforts to identify adolescent girls’ personal, social, and cultural needs and to affirm their identities. I also discuss the significance of this study to in-school and out-of-school literacy research and teaching practices.
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DEDICATION

It's not that I've already reached the goal or have already completed the course.

But I run to win that which Jesus Christ has already won for me.

Brothers and sisters, I can't consider myself a winner yet.

This is what I do: I don't look back, I lengthen my stride,

and I run straight toward the goal to win the prize

that God's heavenly call offers in Christ Jesus.

**Philippians 3:12-14, GOD'S WORD translation**

Ma, THIS IS FOR YOU.

You taught me how to run, and I can only pray that I am able to run my race with the

strength, courage, and boldness that you do. I love you.

*Your Daughter*
CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

Bria: Some people get out at two o’clock; parents don’t get home til’ five. Dat’s a long amount of time when they’re sittin’ home by themselves, and homework don’t take dat long, and some people don't even do it. So, you got kids, but no time. They need to get their kids involved in stuff.

Nakia: And get her some books. Like, if I wasn't here, I’d probably be layin’ down on the phone with some boy or somethin.”

Melvette: Okay.

Nakia: I’m just tellin’ the truth!

This excerpt from a community-based book club meeting with African American high school girls is testimony to the important role that out-of-school time activities can play in teenagers’ lives. “If I wasn’t here, I’d probably be layin’ down on the phone with some boy or somethin,” Nakia said. When I heard her honesty about the things besides reading and literature discussion that can occupy a teenage girl’s time, I could definitely relate. Although at the time that I facilitated this book club meeting I was not fourteen and in high school like the other girls present, I was a young African American woman who vividly remembered her teenage years and what it was like to be a Black girl growing up in an urban environment. Though my sassiness may have upset a few, I spent much of my time as a teenager participating in various church, school, and community programs. These types of programs, no doubt, kept me from being overcome by self-destructive activities well-known to youth just needing “something to do.”
Adolescence is a time when male and female youth begin to mature physically and also explore and define their cultural, gendered, and otherwise social selves. For African American girls, especially, adolescence can also be a time of learning to cope with racial and gender oppressions (Ladner, 1971; Wade-Gayles, 1984; Collins, 1991; Crew, 1994; Groves, 1996; Paul, 1999). In urban and predominately white classrooms, some female adolescents of color encounter sexist and racist practices that often work to silence voices of females (Fordham, 1996). Regarding these coming-of-age struggles, Kaplan (1997) urges that “What is begging for our attention is the fact that adolescence is a time when Black girls, striving for maturity, lose the support of others in three significant ways. First, they are abandoned by the educational system; second, they become mere sexual accompanists for boys and men; third, these problems create a split between the girls and their families and significant others” (p. 10). Much attention has been given to how young people’s social, cultural, and educational needs, such as those mentioned by Kaplan, can be addressed in the classroom, but not enough consideration has been given to how after-school or out-of-school programs might help address these vital needs (Mahiri & Sablo, 1996; Alvermann, Young, & Green, 1997; Mahiri, 1998). The American Youth Policy Forum (2006) asserts, “out-of-school time programs add productive time to the day and year for young people to develop a myriad of important skills, to supplement academic learning, to connect with caring adults, and to support their healthy development” (p. 2). In light of current school reform, I would also add that out-of-school time (OST) programs offer an opportunity for youth to develop academic, cultural, social, and personal literacies without the threat of failing to pass a test or be promoted to the next grade level. As Yohalem, Wilson-Ahlstrom, and Pittman (2005)
“With high school reform now a front burner issue, districts and communities cannot afford to have high school after-school on the back burner” (p. 1).

**Purpose of the Study**

Considering that adolescence, for African American girls, is often a time when they must grapple with racial, gender, and sometimes economic biases that may frustrate their adolescent experiences, it is vital to provide them with 1) gender- and culturally-nurturing spaces for their voices to exist, develop, and thrive; 2) spaces where positive adult guidance is available; and 3) spaces where their social, cultural, and literacy identities are accepted and nurtured (Fordham, 1996; Kaplan, 1997; Collins, 2000). Like Johnson (1990), Bishop (1990), and Groves (1996), I believe that African American youth’s engagement with literature that portrays diverse African American experiences has the potential to inspire young people’s imaginations, affirm their literacy, gender, and cultural identities, and challenge them to think critically about the world around them. Concerning young adult coming-of-age stories with African American female protagonists, in particular, Groves (1996) argues that portraying strong, young adult, Black female protagonists is very important, especially because youth can see people like themselves resisting defeat and resolving issues. She declares, “One of the goals of young adult novels written with African American female protagonists is to resolve the rage and restore the selves of these girls by offering strategies of resistance as they work toward liberation” (p. 64). She asserts that African American coming-of-age stories offer readers a chance to “identify with individual characters as well as the larger group in these stories and [offer them] new ways of defining themselves. They can view themselves and their lives in a safe, nurturing place, before
having to confront an oppressive world” (p. 64). Like Groves, I believe it is vital for young readers to read about realistic situations and to be able to see other young adults work through not-so-perfect lives.

This dissertation details efforts undertaken by the researcher, in conjunction with a community-based youth empowerment program, to address African American adolescent girls’ need for a) positive role models and b) Black female-centered spaces where discussions of issues such as Black female identity, voice, relationships, cultural awareness, and educational development can take place in order to help African American girls navigate adolescence (Sullivan, 1996; Cauce et al., 1996; Pastor et al., 1996; Leadbeater and Way, 1996; Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, 1990). During the 2005-2006 school year, I facilitated a book club with ninth and tenth grade girls participating in the Umoja Youth Empowerment Program. This book club provided an opportunity for teen girls to read and discuss with peers and adult mentors issues in young adult texts written by African American female authors Sharon Flake, Rita Williams-Garcia, and Connie Porter. The purpose of this book club was to examine how African American female readers discussed African American young adult literature (AAYAL) in an out-of-school context.

This study has two objectives. First, I examine selected works by Sharon Flake, Rita Williams-Garcia, and Connie Porter in an effort to identify and describe dominant themes and issues concerning African American female adolescence highlighted in these authors’ works. As related to this purpose, this study seeks to answer the following:
Research Question

1) What issues significant to African American female adolescence do young adult literature authors Sharon Flake, Rita Williams-Garcia, and Connie Porter address in their works?

Secondly, I present data from a community-based book club that reveal the responses of African American high school girls to African American women’s young adult literature as well as ways participants utilized the out-of-school opportunity to discuss African American young adult literature (AAYAL).

Therefore, this study also seeks to answer:

Research Questions

2a) What issues in African American young adult texts Who Am I Without Him, Like Sisters on the Homefront, and Imani All Mine appear to stimulate interest and critical responses among African American young adult readers, and b) in what ways do African American female readers respond to issues in these texts?

3) In what ways do African American teenage girls make use of the opportunity to discuss AAYAL in a community-based book club?

Significance of the Study

Research in education highlights effective practices and offers examples of classrooms and teachers who are sensitive to the diversity of students’ needs (Lee, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Manley & O’Neill, 1997; Meier, 1998; Hefflin, 2002), but schools, alone, cannot be solely responsible for students’ healthy development. In the Community Counts report, McLaughlin (2000) reminds us of the harsh circumstances with which some youth must cope. She maintains:
The odds are high that a young person growing up in one of the country’s troubled urban communities will do poorly in school. The odds are high that a young person growing up in one of America’s struggling rural communities will move onto welfare rolls, rather than into productive employment. The odds are high that youth with nothing positive to do and nowhere to go will find things to do and places to go that negatively influence their development and futures . . . For too many youth, the odds seem stacked against hopeful futures when their communities offer few resources for them. (pp. 2-3)

She insists, however, that “community—in the form of the organizations and activities it supports—can help youth beat the odds associated with gaps in traditional institutional resources” (p. 3). Because of this reality, I believe it is worthwhile to give attention to how out-of-school programs, like the Umoja Book Club, might help address youth’s multiple literacy and development needs.

This study contributes to research and scholarship concerning adolescent literacies by providing an example of an out-of-school approach to addressing some development needs of African American female youth by using the aforementioned components (gender- and culturally- nurturing spaces; spaces where positive adult guidance is available; spaces where girls’ identities are accepted). This study will contribute to research in young adult literature, literature discussion and book clubs, especially, because it is one of the few documented studies that combine literary analysis with observation and analysis of how the target audience, African American teenage girls, connects with the literature. Previous studies have theorized how young female readers might interpret or connect with young adult literature (Hinton-Johnson, 2003; Ross-Stroud, 2003; Groves, 1996), but there are still few studies that have observed how African
American high school girls discuss and interpret young adult literature by African American female authors (Hudley, 1992; Sutherland, 2001; Henry, 2001). These studies are needed in order to better understand African American girls’ engagement with literature, and they have the potential to help teach us ways to enhance the literacy experiences of African American youth. Some studies that have investigated African American adolescent girls’ literacy practices do not offer an African American woman’s perspective (Smith, 2001; Sutherland, 2001), but this dissertation offers analysis and investigation of African American female adolescents’ literacy practices from an African American woman’s point of view. My investigation of African American adolescent girls’ literacy practices is joined not only by research in this area, but also by a personal connection, personal understanding, and personal survival of a period of African American female adolescence.

Researcher Stance

In Black Feminist Thought, Collins (2000) explains that knowledge and wisdom are essential to Black women’s survival. She writes that there is a difference between knowledge and wisdom, and possessing only knowledge leaves one only partially equipped to resist intersecting oppressions that threaten Black women’s survival in the United States. Wisdom comes from experience, and she asserts that though knowledge may be sufficient for those in positions of power, “wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate” (p. 257). Therefore, she explains, the stories of Black women who have “gone through” are highly valued when it comes to listening and believing folks’ knowledge claims. As Collins explains, one’s lived

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1 See Collins (2000) for a discussion of “Lived Experience as a Criterion of Meaning.”
experiences are valued, credible, and vital for survival and resistance and for the passing on of stories of “how you got ovah.” It is with this in mind that I state that I did not approach this research from an objective standpoint. I carried with me into the field and onto paper my twenty-six years of African American female ways of knowing. I carried with me years of living in an urban African American community and longing to see a time when Black youth could mature and advance educationally without fear of being teased and accused of “acting white” and without being overcome by the temptations that threaten youthful innocence and personal, social, educational, and economic progress. I also carried with me a deep desire to engage with other African American girls, younger than I, but still holding a vibrant inner flame that yearned to learn from and build on each other’s confidences, uncertainties, and struggles.

I grew up in the same communities as many of the girls that I worked with in this study, so I had a personal connection and history with the community in which I conducted research. Additionally, I had, and still have, a personal history with the youth empowerment program that I recruited participants from, as I was a participant when I was in high school. This made my researcher/observer/participant/facilitator/mentor role often difficult to navigate. Having the opportunity to research in a community that I was familiar with came with many difficulties especially because, like Generett and Jeffries (2003), I was constantly faced with the dilemma of how to “understand the ‘other’ when [I was] the ‘other’ and few have been able to articulate a definition of ‘other’ that is acceptable to [me] and from which [I] can begin the understanding process” (p. 3). These histories, however, made it possible for me to pursue research in a community and with people that truly mattered to me. I did not have to settle for a site close to
my university only to complete my study and not return again. It was important to me to be able to add to and continue to learn from the people and places “where I grew up.”

Because of these personal histories and connections, it was difficult for me to describe my theoretical and conceptual framework. I found myself at a loss for perspectives to help describe my ways of thinking. Desiring a theoretical lens that emphasized centering African American language and culture in pedagogical practices, I found that Gloria Ladson-Billings’ (1994) *culturally relevant teaching* concepts described many of my thoughts about teaching and learning. I embraced Ladson-Billings’ work and the work of others who emphasized centering students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds in their learning experiences (Lee, 1993; Hale, 1994; Manley & O’Neill, 1997; Smitherman & Cunningham, 1997; Davis, 1998; Meier, 1998). Though *culturally relevant theories* helped me to discuss race, language, socio-economic and socio-cultural issues in the classroom, I still struggled to conceptualize *gender*, race, language, socio-economic, and socio-cultural issues in the classroom. I was especially interested in Black women’s pedagogical practices and how Black women’s ways of knowing and being took shape in classrooms and in their interactions with students. Scholars like Foss & Foss (1994), Fordham (1996), Collins (2000), and Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002 & 2005) helped me to be able to research and write about issues concerning African American female youth by offering a language with which to speak about these issues and showing that there is a community of scholars that values women’s knowledge, experiences, and scholarship.

With this study, I do not claim to know all there is to know about being young, Black, and female nor do I claim to speak for Black women. I also do not claim to have learned and captured all there is to know about reading practices of African American high school girls.
Instead, I write as an African American woman who had the privilege, and challenge, of interacting with and learning from a group of girls about their experiences as readers and as young, African American daughters trying to navigate adolescence, and I hope this work helps to give voice to the young, gifted, and Black girls of the Umoja Book Club.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is largely informed by feminist and black feminist/womanist theories that offer a means to discuss social, personal, cultural, and literacy issues concerning African American adolescent girls and women. Several additional areas of research including scholarship concerning women’s ways of being, African American girls’ adolescent development, theories of literacy, and theories of reading also shape my theoretical framework because these areas, combined, offer me a unique, yet critical lens with which to conceptualize and discuss African American girls’ literacy experiences.

Feminist and Black Feminist/Womanist Epistemology

One of the underlying principles of feminist epistemology is that women’s personal and lived experiences are valued (Walker, 1983; Foss & Foss, 1994; Allen, 1998; Collins, 2000; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005). Also key to feminist thinking is that these lived experiences of women should be discussed and viewed from an overall framework that intentionally aims to understand these experiences (Foss & Foss, 1994; Allen, 1998; Collins, 2000; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005). Though women’s perspectives and experiences have been given voice through feminist scholarship, historically, women of color, Black women especially, have noted a
disregard for the experiences of women who contend with multiple points of oppression in the United States: those who are woman, who are Black, and who are economically deprived and/or exploited. Historically, racist and sexist ideologies and practices have pushed Black women to the margins, and they have found themselves shut out of conversations and segments of society deemed “for whites only,” “for men only,” and “for white women only.” As a result, Black women have carved out spaces for their voices where they can express their own definitions of womanhood, Black womanhood. According to Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2000), because Black women have been, and continue to be, denied positions of power and shut out of spaces traditionally perceived as intellectually valid, Black feminist ways of thinking give credence to Black women’s “self-conscious struggle on behalf of Black women, regardless of the actual social location where that work occurs” (p. 15). Collins furthers explains:

Black feminist thought as critical social theory involves including the ideas of Black women not previously considered intellectuals—many of whom may be working-class women with jobs outside academia—as well as those ideas emanating from more formal, legitimated scholarship. The ideas we share with one another as mothers in extended families, as othermothers in Black communities, as members of Black churches, and as teachers to the Black community’s children have formed one pivotal area where African-American women have hammered out a multifaceted Black women’s standpoint. (pp. 16-17)

Alice Walker’s (1983) womanist perspective has also given Black women a framework from which to understand and talk about Black women’s experiences. Walker describes a womanist as “a black feminist or feminist of color . . . a woman who appreciates and prefers women’s culture,
women’s emotional flexibility, and women’s strength . . . committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (p. xi). Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002) expands on Walker’s definition of womanism by emphasizing the activist standpoint that often shapes women’s ways of being. According to Beauboeuf-Lafontant, this activist standpoint is both individual and collective, “Womanism recognizes women’s central contributions to the survival and transcendence of their communities. Because the female self is not constructed in passive and private terms, individual and collective engagement with the world is expected and demonstrated by role models who exhibit ‘strength, self-reliance, autonomy’” (2002, p. 438).

Feminist and Black feminist/womanist epistemologies call for the centering of women’s experiences in spaces that would otherwise silence and marginalize these experiences. Where other epistemologies and methodologies might value a distancing of the researcher from her participants, feminist and Black feminist/womanist epistemologies value “personal experience as evidence” (Foss & Foss, 1994; Collins, 2000; Cozart & Price, 2005). Giving voice to women’s first-person accounts, whether one’s own or that of research participants, allows for the emergence of a consciousness that uniquely grows out of one’s personal experience, resistance, and survival (Foss & Foss, 1994; Allen, 1998; Collins, 2000; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005). Foss & Foss (1994) maintain:

Because women’s first-person accounts traditionally are not listened to, believed, or taken seriously, women themselves often come to distrust and suppress their own knowledge claims . . . the epistemic challenge for women then, is to “claim their cognitive competence and authority, their knowledgeability, and their right to know.” The use of
personal experiences as evidence is one of the ways feminist scholars and their research participants are actively collaborating to achieve epistemic empowerment. (pp. 42-43)

**(African American) Women-Centered Networks and Women’s Ways of Being**

Sullivan’s (1996) research discusses the significance of relationships between adult women and urban adolescent girls. She explains that traditional approaches to mentoring characterize a *helping model*, an approach that is often unilateral and focuses on all that the adult has to teach or give to the adolescent. In contrast, she argues that meaningful relationships between women and urban adolescent girls are characterized by mutuality and reciprocity. She likens women who consciously teach and learn from adolescent girls to muses in mythology: “muses were women in mythology who acted as sources of inspiration; their role was to recognize and to help spark or draw out the genius or artistry of their charges” (p. 226-227).

Sullivan explains that muse-mentors foster an *evocative* relationship with urban adolescent girls, one in which women and adolescent girls are able to share their experiences, learn from each other, and strategize how to resist race, gender, and class oppressions. Sullivan explains that there are life-shaping benefits and therapeutic possibilities connected to women’s and girls’ talk. She asserts:

> Relationships with women may have considerable potential for healing among girls deemed ‘at risk’ . . . The intention is not for women to be therapists, but rather to foster relationships that are therapeutic: to create a safe place to speak, to listen and share their own experiences, to use their power when necessary to stop continuing abuse, and to
make possible for girls to speak the unspeakable and thus regain a sense of their own power. (p. 243)

Similarly, Collins (2000) has noted the significant role that women, “othermothers” in particular, have played in nurturing and connecting with children and adolescents in African and African American communities. She describes othermothers as women who “assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities” (p. 178). Historically, Collins writes, motherhood has been seen as a symbol of power as many Black women promote self-reliance and independence, rather than passivity, through their community nurturing. Collins explains that in Black communities mothering has been a form of social activism, and many Black women have seen the community as an extended family. Othermothers’ social activism is often demonstrated through an ethic of caring and an ethic of community service by helping girls, boys, men, and women in their neighborhoods: “Community othermothers work on behalf of the Black community by expressing ethics of caring and personal accountability . . . their purpose is to bring people along . . . ‘uplift the race’ so that vulnerable members of the community will be able to attain the self-reliance and independence essential for resistance” (pp. 192-193). Collins emphasizes that a significant component of Black women’s epistemology is Black women’s ethic of caring, which places value on individual expression and uniqueness, appropriate emotions, and one’s ability to empathize (p. 264). This ethic of caring has helped foster a sense of sisterhood that has sustained women-centered networks in Black communities and demonstrated value for women’s lived experiences (p. 260). Collins also notes that use of dialogue is central to Black women’s ways of being. Through dialogue, Black women are able to speak to and with other Black women and work out “knowledge claims” (p. 212). Viewing Black women’s talk as powerful
and life-impacting is reflective of African-centered thinking that views the word as powerful. The concept of *Nommo*, “word power” (Smitherman, 2000, p. 138), helps describe the opportunities that language affords for women, Black women in particular, to speak in their own words about their experiences, about issues and aspects of life that are important to them, and about the worlds in which they live, strive, thrive, and struggle.

Similar to Collins, African American literacy theorists have also given critical attention to the diverse ways that Black women intellectuals, broadly defined, have responded to racial, gender, and economic biases and oppressions. Scholars such as Troutman (2001), Morgan (2002), Richardson (2003), and Pough (2004) emphasize the cultural significance of literacies such as quilting, dancing, rapping, storytelling, and writing among African American females. Richardson (2003) emphasizes that various forms of oppression have prompted African American females to develop creative ways for coping and surviving and that African American women use literacy practices to assert their agency within oppressive situations. She describes these language and social practices that African American women draw upon as *African American female literacies* and defines these literacies as “ways of knowing and acting and the development of skills, vernacular expressive arts and crafts that help females to advance and protect themselves and loved ones in society” (p. 77).

**African American Women’s Ways of Being: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Classrooms have often been a site of Black women’s othermothering and ethic of caring (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). Ladson-Billings (1994) and Irvine (2002), among others (Howard, 2001; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Ware, 2002), have described how African American
female teachers’ unique pedagogies tap into African American youth’s social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds and experiences. Some scholars have described these pedagogies as “culturally relevant” or “culturally responsive” and have noted that African American women’s pedagogies are often imbued with “unique African-American teaching styles that appear to be related to black students’ achievement and school success” (Irvine, 1989). Recurring principles of culturally relevant teaching in the scholarship of Ladson-Billings (1994), Howard (2001), Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002), Irvine (2002), Ware (2002), include: teachers’ caring attitudes; teachers’ ability to promote a communally-centered atmosphere; teachers’ ability to make learning entertaining, interesting, engaging, and relevant; teachers recognizing the sociohistorical and political dimensions of education; teachers employing methods that validate and extend students’ literacy and cultural identities; teachers respecting and believing in the potential for students to achieve; teachers believing that teaching is a “calling” or their life’s work; and teachers disciplining. Gloria Ladson-Billings explains culturally relevant teaching as “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (pp. 17-18). Scholars argue that these culturally relevant ways of teaching convey to students that they do not have to sacrifice their home language or histories in order to be successful in school. Instead, Manley and O’Neill (1997) argue, students who are centered in their cultural background see that their knowledge, experiences, and histories are important and respected, and they are motivated to achieve academically.

Proponents of culturally relevant pedagogy also emphasize that using literature with images, experiences, and language practices that affirm students’ interactions, increases
opportunities for student academic achievement and interest in learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Hale, 2001; Teel and DeBruin-Parecki, 2001; Hefflin, 2002). Use of texts relevant to students’ linguistic, cultural, and gender identities helps students see how people in other situations react and interact, be they in fiction or non-fiction representations, and gain insight into how to make decisions and live healthy and productive lives (Rosenblatt, 1968; Lee, 1998; Bishop, 2000; Davis, 2000). Researchers also recognize the potential for culturally relevant literature to empower students because of their witnessing of shared experiences in literature (Davis, 2000). Exposure to relevant literacy experiences also increases the likelihood that students will continue to read and have a positive attitude towards literacy (Lee, 1998). When students realize the power that literature, oral or written, has to intrigue their imaginations, they are prompted to critically analyze the inner workings of literary products (Mitchell, 1988; Lee, 1991; Bishop, 2000). Stories offer adventure, reality, tragedy, comedy, struggle, and success, and their potential to assist in the cultural, linguistic, social, and intellectual development of students is heightened when educators use culturally relevant pedagogy to bring these themes to life for young people.

**African American Female Adolescence: Voice & Identity Development**

Feminist and Black feminist research in the area of African American female adolescence suggests that just as Black women experience life in the United States differently because of intersecting racial, gender, and socioeconomic oppressions, so do Black female adolescents (Ladner, 1971; Cauce et al., 1996; Fordham, 1996; Leadbeater and Way, 1996; Pastor et al., 1996). Cauce et al. (1996) describe the conditions with which African American girls must learn to resist and sometimes cope:
African American girls . . . grow up in a world that views them with suspicion and fear. The books they read and the history they learn in school are generally devoid of African American women and their contributions to society. There are countless derogatory portrayals of African American women in the media, and large numbers of African American girls live in neighborhoods where violence, drugs, and other forms of environmental stress are the day-to-day reality . . . The child-rearing practices and attitudes of their mothers reflect these realities. (p. 113)

These realities do not mean that African American girls are “doomed,” but they do mean, however, that African American women, especially, must aid African American girls in developing strategies of survival, resistance, and resilience. Pastor et al. (1996) argue that these struggles create opportunities for African American youth to develop a critical consciousness (see also Cauce et al., 1996) and assert their own identities in environments that would rather keep them “seen and not heard”:

Urban girls of many colors cannot simply pursue autonomy, freedom, and independence as Erikson (1968) theorizes. The challenges of racism, sexism, classism, and cultural hegemony profoundly interfere. This interference does not necessarily result in deficits for many urban girls, as for the African American women bell hooks (1990) writes about, because these challenges help girls learn how to develop critical consciousness. This critical consciousness allows urban girls of color to know that there is much that is wrong with the world and that they cannot hide or “go underground” within white-dominated, class-based institutions as Gilligan (1991) has so aptly demonstrated white middle-class girls can do. (p. 16)
Scholars also point out that adolescence, for White and (urban) girls of color, can mean a “loss of voice.” The nature of this silencing varies, but the consequences are critical and relevant to both girls’ and women’s ways of being and knowing. If not addressed during adolescence, we risk a loss of voice that transcends into adulthood, creating a cycle and culture of women who do not speak and who continuously question themselves and measure themselves against standards that cannot, will not, and do not want to rate women as self-sufficient and high-achieving. Scholars indicate that there is much that adult women can do to affect the ways that adolescent girls view and assert themselves as females: “Young women are hungry for spaces in which to talk and dressing rooms for trying on (and discarding) ways to be women: white, African American, Latina” (Pastor et al., 1996, p. 32). To address “loss of voice” and other adolescent female challenges, some suggest more research and neighborhood resources, early education and intervention, mentoring of girls (Leadbeater & Way, 1996), and spaces for girls and women to share their voices and knowledge (Gilligan, 1990). Rogers (1993) explains, “‘Finding a voice’ is not a metaphorical phrase, but a literal, psycho-physical finding of voice. The voice, played on breath and linked with real feelings, reveals the self—and is therefore vital to authentic contact and to the recovery of courage” (p. 281).

In urban classrooms and communities, some African American girls express themselves using culturally toned verbal and nonverbal communication such as bein’ loud and talkin’ back (Fordham, 1993), instigating (Morgan, 2002), signifying (Morgan, 2002), stepping (Gilmore, 1991), and stylized sulking (Gilmore, 1991). Fordham (1993) and others (Gilmore, 1991; Morgan, 2002) note that African American adolescent girls’ stylized ways of being are often met with resistance from adults inside and outside of African American communities. For example,
Fordham ("Those Loud Black Girls," 1993) and Gilmore ("Gimme Room," 1991) both relate the social and academic implications associated with the actions of African American girls who *loudly demand room*. In the schools and communities they studied, girls who were “seen and not heard” were taken seriously and *allowed* within the circles of academic excellence. Girls who resisted demands not to be so visible were seen as sexual, noncompliant, and not serious about academics. Ogbu (1995) explains identity conflicts experienced by some African American youth using his “involuntary minority” theory. He describes involuntary minorities as “people who did not initially choose to become members of American society. Rather, they were brought into U.S. society through slavery, conquest, or colonization” (p. 85). Involuntary minorities, he argues, do not interpret their cultural practices as differences to overcome. Therefore, some African American youth may seek to maintain their identity and may perceive learning or speaking Standard American English (SAE) or “behaving according to a white cultural frame of reference as threatening to their own minority culture, language, and identity” (p. 96). Fordham (1993) asserts that discouraging girls from being their authentic selves and encouraging them to mask their cultural nuances can prove to be isolating, from peers and community, and can involve “conflict, confusion, estrangement . . . and a plethora of unmarked beginnings and endings, jump starts, and failures. It is also likely to be a life in which a family of procreation and connections takes a back seat to ‘makin it’” (p. 24).

**Literacy: Personal and Social Functions of Reading**

Bakhtin (1981) asserts that our oral and written engagements are *dialogic*, that they carry with them a history. According to Bakhtin, our words and ideas are inherently laden with and
responding to “past and present discourses” (Ewald, 1993, p. 332). Building on Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism, Blake (1997) contends that readers and writers produce cultural texts that release “scents of gender, race, and class” (p. 108). She further explains, “Among urban writers, it is a text, perhaps, that reflects their particular aspirations, struggles, and realities. They are what the students bring to the texts they read; how they interpret texts, how they interact with the texts, how they react to the texts, and how they make connections to the texts they read in school” (p. 108-109). By focusing on the intersections of race, gender, and class, Blake’s cultural text perspective offers researchers interested in African American girls’ and women’s literacy practices, especially, a way to conceptualize the multiple identities and literacies that African American females bring to readings and discussions of literary texts. New Literacy scholars have noted the existence and significance of multiple identities and literacies at work in our communicative practices (Street, 1995; Gee, 1996; Macedo & Bartolomé, 1999; Martin-Jones & Jones, 2000; Richardson, 2003) and have also argued that teachers’ engagements of these literacy identities are imperative to students’ literacy development (Heath, 1983; Lee, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Delpit, 1995; Meier, 1998; Macedo & Bartolomé, 1999; just to name a few). Gee (1996) describes our literacies as Discourses. He writes that we all have a primary Discourse, which represents our home or first-language, that is acquired and not taught. He writes that we also learn secondary Discourses that provide us access to “social goods” in society such as status, education, housing, or careers (p. 8). Gee explains Discourse as “a sort of ‘identity kit’ which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular roles that others will recognize” (p. 7).
Scholars have also written about the ways in which our cultural, social, and linguistic identities influence how we engage literature and each other (Lee, 1993; Enciso, 1994; McGinley & Kambrelis, 1996; Meier, 1998; DeBlase, 2003). According to Deblase (2003), our subjectivity is influenced by various components. She argues that people’s experiences with “language, literacy, and patterns of interaction” shape their racial, gender, and class identities (p. 280). Lee (1991) explains how our subjectivities are acted out in her description of “literate behavior” (p. 292). She describes literate behavior as “attitudes toward language and uses of print that readers in particular communities bring to the material they read” (p. 292). McGinley and Kambrelis (1996) assert that reading and writing can have personal and social functions for individuals. In a personal sense, they write, reading can serve “as a means to envision and explore possible selves” and “to describe or remember personal experiences or interests” (p. 88). In a social sense, they explain that some readers use reading and writing in order to “understand, affirm, and negotiate social relationships and to develop their awareness of significant social problems” (p. 91). Also, Williams (1991), Enciso (1994), McGinley and Kambrelis (1996), and Long (2003) maintain that experiencing stories collectively such as in book clubs or literature discussion groups can also have personal, social, and cultural value, especially as related to literacy development. In classrooms, Williams (1991) asserts that by sharing personal stories young learners’ cultural and literacy identities are affirmed, and in turn, they are motivated to continue to indulge in literate activities such as reading and writing. In African American communities, storytelling is often employed by African American women. It is a practice in which tellers can relate tales of struggle, survival, and achievement. It often serves as a means for sharing with other Black women how you “got ovah” or “made it through.” (Collins, 2000; Richardson,
Bishop (2000) explains that stories are the *survival mechanism* of our cultures (p. 74). She contends that “stories enable us to interpret and shape our experiences as humans . . . [They] transcend time and place and cultures and help us to re-view the past, interpret the present, and envision the future” (p. 73). Additionally, in *The Call of Stories* (1989), Coles asserts that stories speak to our moral consciousness. He offers, “Novels and stories are renderings of life; they can not only keep us company, but admonish us, point us in new directions, or give us the courage to stay a given course. They can offer us kinsmen, kinswomen, comrades, advisers—offer us other eyes through which we might see, other ears with which we might make soundings” (p. 160).

My discussion thus far has introduced the epistemological and theoretical frames that inform this study. The upcoming section reviews research related to literature in the lives of African American youth and girls, the life-informing aspects of literature discussion, and the roles that teachers or mentors play in enhancing the literacy and life experiences of young people.

**REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE**

The objective of this literature review is to examine relevant research in several subject areas that are informed in part by the theories outlined above. The areas surveyed in this review include: Literature in the Lives of African American Youth; Female Protagonists in Young Adult Literature; and Adult Women, Adolescent Girls, and Literature Discussion.
Literature in the Lives of African American Youth

For many African American students, mainstream schools have been a site where their cultural, communal, social, and linguistic histories and practices have been undervalued (Ogbu, 1995; Smitherman & Cunningham, 1997; Fordham, 1999). This devaluing of students’ cultural identities often prompts student disengagement and resentment toward school priorities and administration. Scholars such as Bishop (1990), Manley and O’Neill (1997), and Meier (1998) have argued that the problem of underachievement in literacy experienced by many African American students is due in part to books, materials, and teaching practices that do not engage students’ cultural experiences and backgrounds. Studies in culturally relevant pedagogy have revealed that students who are centered in their cultural backgrounds have more confidence in learning environments (Bishop, 1990; Manley & O’Neill, 1997), and using literature with images, experiences, and language practices that affirm students’ interactions increases opportunities for student academic achievement and interest in learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Hale, 2001; Teel and DeBruin-Parecki, 2001; Hefflin, 2002). O’Neill (1997) maintains that students willingly bring and share their life perspectives and experiences when they know their voices will be heard in the classroom. In O’Neill’s view, “Instead of distrust and alienation, there will be a growth of positive self-regard and belief in a classroom community where they are championed instead of devalued” (pp. xiii-xiv). For instance, in an effort to stimulate students’ interests and tap into their personal and cultural experiences, Hefflin (2002) and her co-researcher developed a lesson plan that combined textual, social, cultural, and personal elements. They incorporated African American children’s literature and African American expressive practices such as call-and-response, and they used activities and reading questions that allowed
students to reflect on their own personal and cultural practices and experiences. They found that approaching teaching through a culturally relevant framework allowed them to meet goals such as incorporating multicultural literature, stimulating students’ interests, and covering required curriculum. Natasha Tarpley, author of African American children’s book *I Love My Hair!* (1998), also speaks about the power of stories, and she comments on the connection between storyteller and listener, “In the reading of a story, a natural space opens up for dialogue and exchange between storyteller and listener, reader and author. Good books allow people to see themselves reflected among the pages, but also push them forward, encouraging them to explore the richness of their lives and the world around them, and, hopefully, to share what they’ve learned” (Tarpley, 2003).

Harris (1990) explains the potential consequences of not exposing youth to texts that they can identify with culturally, socially, and linguistically: “If African American children do not see reflections of themselves in school texts or do not perceive any affirmation of their cultural heritage in those texts, then it is quite likely that they will not read or value schooling as much (p. 552). Though above Harris speaks specifically about African American children, scholars note that all students benefit when they and their peers are recognized and valued as participants in the learning process. Johnson (1990) argues that because books are used in formal education and as a socializing agent for children, it is imperative that youth are exposed to literature that not only stimulates their imaginations but also offers realistic depictions of their cultural, social, and linguistic realities. Johnson does not claim that literature that does not represent students’ culture, ethnic background, language or social practices will not appeal to readers. Nor does she argue that culturally relevant literature is the “answer” to literacy, learning, and identity issues.
among youth. She does contend, however, that “literature must be inclusive of a multitude of experiences. Black youth should be exposed to literature which either blatantly or subtly—but always consciously—builds upon a foundation of African American experiences and sensibilities” (p. 2).

Macedo and Bartolomé (1999) assert that cultivating the literacy, cultural, political, and social identities of students is not just about sprinkling in multicultural literature occasionally. They explain that it is a conscious pedagogical approach, a philosophy of teaching and learning that puts students’ identities, experiences, and citizenship needs at the forefront of their educational experiences, and it is a continuous effort to be informed about your students’ communities, beliefs, and language practices. Macedo and Bartolomé (1999) maintain that culturally responsive pedagogy is not something that can be hastily taught to preservice teachers as the “right” or the “latest” teaching method that will “somehow work (emphasis mine) on minority students” (p. 120). They conclude that educators must broaden their perspective of what instruction is beyond the specified curriculum and standardized testing mandates because we stymie student success when we think that instruction does not need to consider historical, social, and political aspects of education.

In addition to underscoring the cultural significances of literature in young people's lives, scholarship in young adult literature has also emphasized the significance of literature that relates to young people’s gender identities. The following sections focus on the significance of female characters in literature and female-centered discussions of literature.
Female Protagonists in Young Adult Literature

In “Journey or Destination: Female Voices in Youth Literature,” Vandergrift (1996) asserts that exposing young female readers to stories with strong female characters can significantly influence how they interact with those around them. She explains that “girls need stories that will provide them with a rich variety of strong female characters, both young protagonists and older women, to serve as role models at critical stages in their development. These stories,” she argues, “help to shape the lives of young women and also help to shape the ways females are perceived by young males” (p. 18). Similarly, Meier (1998) maintains that books that offer diverse characters, themes, and situations, real or imagined, that help affirm students’ identities, especially in classroom spaces, and “help make the act of literacy meaningful to children’s lives” (p. 96.) She offers the example of a second grade girl who drew a picture of Harriet Tubman and Rosa Parks. The young student explained that she wanted to be a “freedom fighter” just like these women. Her drawing and “freedom fighter” aspiration are indicative of the substance that girls can get from stories that recognize and respect their heritage and highlight women’s heroism. Others have also acknowledged the potential to cultivate a positive sense of self by exposing girls to stories with strong female characters (Orenstein, 1994; Crew, 1996; Groves, 1996; Hayn & Sherrill, 1996; McKinney, 1996), but some caution that the mere presence of female characters in a story does not ensure a positive representation of girls and women or that girls will connect with the story (Paul, 1999; Kaplan & Cole, 2003; Blackford, 2004).

Kaplan and Cole’s (2003) study affirms that not all images of girls and women are healthy images and not all mediums aimed at youth audiences will prove helpful in promoting
positive identity development. Their study found that the messages received by a group of
White, Latina, and Black girls reading Seventeen and Young and Modern magazines failed to
offer them useful ways of dealing with their feelings about boys, femininity, and sexuality, nor
did the magazines offer them positive images to identify with. For example, three Black girls in
the study, ages 15 through 16, who referred to themselves as “hood rats” (p. 153), noted that teen
magazines seldom included images of Black girls, and when they did, they were not depicted as
feminine. The girls were perceptive in observing the magazines’ shortcomings, but the self-
reference “hood rats” made by the girls underscores the potential of negative images in one’s
immediate environment and in media portrayals to be ingrained in one’s mind and negatively
affect how one comes to view and act out sexuality, adolescence, and femininity. The fact that
the young ladies used a negative term that people sometimes apply to Black girls in their
economic and geographic situation instead of using terms that might better describe their realities
and aspirations is testimony to how negative images and terms can devastate one’s personal,
cultural, and social worldview. In a related sense, Paul (1999) emphasizes that how girls read is
just as important as what they read. In a comparison of books with Black heroines to those with
White heroines, Paul found that both books portraying White heroines and those portraying
Black heroines offered negative portrayals of mothers. However, regarding books featuring
Black female protagonists, she observed that Black girls were portrayed as strong and enduring,
but “some of the Black mothers, however, are poor and weak and greatly resemble the stereotype
of the Welfare Queen (p. 64). She concludes that “children’s/adolescent books . . . reflect a
trickle-down effect of images of Black females, as well as poor White ones, that appear in adult
books and cinema” (p. 63). Because of the potential impact that continued exposure to negative
representations of Black women, mothers especially, can have on young African American readers, and readers of other ethnic backgrounds, Paul recommends that adolescents are taught to read critically, to question these types of stereotypical portrayals, instead of reading passively, just taking them in without thoughtful reflection.

In contrast to studies and theories that underscore a need for socially- and culturally-relevant literature, Blackford’s (2004) research contributes another view of literature in girls’ lives. Though literature “mattered” to the girls in her study, she found that the girls most enjoyed literature that least depicted their everyday, real life experiences. They preferred to read imaginative literature that took them “out of this world” into another filled with people, places, and experiences unfamiliar to them. As Blackford explains, these girls “read for a good story, and a good story means one that they are not living—that actually looks nothing like the life they know” (p. 6).

Scholarship concerning female protagonists in young adult literature seems to suggest that even though stories with positive female images can have significant influences on girls’ self-esteem, self-perception, and worldview, girls have diverse reading interests. Vandergrift (1996) asserts that “Readers look to stories for confirmation and illumination of their own life experiences and (emphasis mine) for vicarious experiences very different from their own reality but that, nonetheless, extend their perceptions of the world and their understandings of those who share that world” (p. 27). It is important to expose girls to, help them find, and encourage them to read stories that challenge, stretch, and stimulate their imaginations.
Adult Women, Adolescent Girls, and Literature Discussion

In 1992, Hudley studied literacy practices among a racially diverse group of high school females in an informal classroom environment and found that using material relevant to “unmotivated readers,” in conjunction with positive female role models who facilitate literacy events, positively influences students’ literacy identities. In this study, women facilitators shared with participants realistic, motivating, and thought-provoking literature that they, as women, had enjoyed reading. Hudley’s evaluation revealed that over the course of fifteen weeks, students’ attitudes changed positively. She argues that the significant change in attitudes speaks to the potential of such communally-centered literacy intervention programs.

Sutherland’s (2001) more recent investigation of high school female’s interactions with texts stresses to teachers and researchers that engaging students’ imaginations is not as simple as add ethnic literature and stir. Sutherland studied how six female high school juniors interacted with Toni Morrison’s (1970) The Bluest Eye. Her analysis revealed that while the young women “connected” with the text in some way, it was necessary to know and understand their personal perspectives and experiences to realize the significance of these connections. She states that for some classroom teachers, the nature and significance of those connections would not be readily apparent because understanding students’ perspectives takes more than classroom observation and grading students’ papers. She argues that in order to verify our assumptions about the effectiveness of literature that may seem relevant to students, we must allow students to tell their stories and express their experiences in relation to texts. She urges that we not assume that African American author + African American reader = connection. As Sutherland explains, we must learn about and take genuine interest in students’ experiences. Henry’s (2001) study with
eighth-grade Afro-Caribbean girls also emphasizes the importance of listening to and understanding students’ adolescent struggles. She agrees that culturally relevant literature can be very significant to the cultivation of students’ literacy identities, but she laments the fact that in classrooms use of this type of literature is often not enough to facilitate discussion and full participation in literacy activities because school curriculum does not allow for the discussion of heavy issues such as poverty, teenage pregnancy, or biculturality. She argues that because young students are unable able to deal successfully with these types of issues, they often “go through their schooling without opportunities for self-discovery” (p. 188) She contends that we must not naively think that culturally relevant pedagogy will be the answer to unmotivated students, but in literacy instruction, it is imperative that teachers consider what students bring to school, not just want they can take away from it. These scholars underscore the ways that classroom practices and environments can restrict and stifle students’ literacy and social development, especially among girls, as well as stymie peer relationships and student-teacher interactions.

Smith’s (2001) study of adolescent readers provides insight into the purposes for which some young people read. She found that White, Black, and Hispanic girls participating in an after school book club used the gathering as an opportunity not only to discuss occurrences in the texts, but also to reflect upon and critique their roles as White, Black, and Hispanic females. Smith also observed that the participants used reading and discussion “combatively,” to resist passive female stereotypes and assert themselves as knowledgeable and independent, and “exploratorily,” to explore their interests in sexuality and romance.

Though the combination of culturally relevant literature; engaging, culturally relevant teaching; positive role models; and literature discussion has proven to be significant in
cultivating girls’ identity development in positive ways (Hudley, 1992; Sutherland, 2001; Smith 2001; DeBlase, 2003), more studies that explore the benefits of young people’s interactions with literature in out-of-school settings might help parents, community workers, and teachers create environments and employ practices that better promote reading for pleasure and other literacy skills. Vandergrift (1996) calls for studies that evaluate the role of adult intermediary in transactions between youth and literature as well as reader response studies that explore whether or not adolescent readers identify the same themes as adult readers and evaluators of young adult texts. Studies that explore these elements might provide greater insight into the significance of reading as a communal or social activity, especially between young people and adults (Cherland, 1994; Alvermann, Young, & Green, 1997).

**SUMMARY**

Chapter One described the purpose and significance of this study. It also included the theoretical framework for the study in which the researcher used feminist and black feminist/womanist theories to discuss African American women’s pedagogies, African American female adolescence, and literacy practices. Additionally, this chapter reviewed relevant research concerning the significance of literature in the lives of African American youth; female protagonists in young adult literature; and adult women, adolescent girls, and literature discussion. This chapter attempted to illustrate a need for more research concerning African American adolescent girls’ responses to young adult literature, in classroom and out-of-school settings, and to demonstrate the significance of approaching these types of inquires using a framework that centers Black girls’ and women’s cultural and social histories and experiences.
CHAPTER TWO:
BOOK CLUB METHODS

This study investigated the ways in which a group of African American adolescent girls responded to issues in African American women’s YA literature within the context of a community-based book club. It was initiated on the premise that out-of-school literature discussion with peers and adult mentors within the context of a book club might help meet some of the needs that literacy and adolescent development theorists have noted as key to, and often lacking in, healthy female adolescent development (Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, 1990; Cauce et al., 1996; Fordham, 1996; Leadbeater and Way, 1996; Pastor et al., 1996; Sullivan, 1996; Kaplan, 1997; Collins, 2000). As outlined in chapter one, Black feminist/womanist theories and literacy theories provided the theoretical basis for this research. In addition, this research was guided by methods common in cultural anthropology, namely ethnographic inquiry (Spradley, 1980; Moss, 1992; Bernard, 2005). Moss (1992) describes ethnography as a “method that allows a researcher to gain a comprehensive view of the social interactions, behaviors, and beliefs of a community or social group” (p.155). Though this study was short-term, ethnographic methods allowed me to gain not only a view of African American adolescent girls’ thoughts about YA literature, but to also be “part of the research itself” and become an “insider” (Blake, 1997, p. 135). My role as a participant observer provided an opportunity for relationships to emerge as the participants and I learned from, shared with, and thrived off each other (Rogers, 1993, p. 267). In “Voice, Play, and the Practices of Ordinary Courage in Girls’ and Women’s Lives,” Annie Rogers (1993) argues for a relational approach to research, one that involves “listening to girls and women as authorities about their own experiences and representing their voices in written texts” (italics
mine, p. 267). Similarly, Blake (1997) asserts that ethnography, coupled with a feminist epistemology, allows girls’ and women’s issues to be at the center of research (p. 136). Street (1995) emphasizes the value in studying literacy practices in “‘real’ social contexts” and not just theorizing about them in educational discourse (p. 3). It was with these perspectives in mind that I pursued this study and sought to respond to Vandergrift’s (1996) call for research that not only offered adult analyses of YA texts but also explored, in “‘real’ social contexts,” the differences and similarities in adult and young adult responses to YA texts.

This following sections explain the research context, including my rationale for selecting a particular study site and a description of the youth empowerment group from which participants were recruited, my role as researcher, the structure of the book club, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Site Selection

I undertook my search for a suitable research site with several criteria in mind. First, I wanted to work in Prince George’s County, Maryland. I sought to conduct my study in this region because this is the area in which I grew up, and I wanted to conduct research in a geographic setting that I was familiar with and with people that I could potentially still have a relationship with after the research period had concluded. For this study, I also wanted to collaborate with an African American female, a teacher or community worker, who was willing and able to assist me in recruiting African American female youth in the ninth grade. I sought to work with ninth grade students because, in addition to adolescent stressors such as parents,
friends, and physical and emotional changes, the transition from middle school to high school can be an added source of tension, especially for adolescent girls who may already be dealing with body image, self-esteem, loss of voice, or academic issues (Fordham, 1993; Orenstein, 1994; Leadbeater and Way, 1996; Task Force on Adolescent Girls, 1998; Aikins, Bierman, & Parker, 2005). I also felt it important to work with someone with at least four years experience in teaching or working with youth. I felt that someone with at least this amount of experience would be a valuable resource to me and be able to help facilitate discussion and to deal with sensitive subjects in our discussions should they arise. Having a co-facilitator in the area was also important to me because I would be commuting from my university for the first few months of the study due to teaching commitments. Additionally, I wanted to host the actual book club in a setting that was outside of school, such as a library, local bookstore, church, or home environment because I did not want the book club meetings to seem like school.

When researching, I learned that the public libraries in the county provided private meeting rooms at a minimal price, so I noted a local library as a potential site to host the book club meetings. During the spring of 2005, I contacted two high school teachers that I knew in the school district, but I found that they had only been teaching for two years. I continued to search for prospective sites to recruit participants from and made contact with a few other potential co-facilitators, but none of these contacts materialized. During the summer of 2005, I had a conversation with one of my mentors, the executive director of a youth empowerment program in Maryland called Umoja\(^2\) (pseudonym). I shared with her my research interests and that I was looking for high school girls to work with for my dissertation project. I informed her that I was

\(^2\) I chose the pseudonym Umoja for the program’s name because the principles promoted by the organization are African American-centered. Umoja means “unity” in Swahili.
especially interested in working with youth in Prince George’s County because I wanted to do research in my community. She updated me on the progress of the group and shared challenges that the mentors experienced working with the youth. She explained that while Umoja used various approaches to address social and cultural issues among its participants, there remained a need for positive role models and discussions of issues such as identity, sexuality, and relationships. We also discussed Umoja’s aims to encourage youth to read literature and expand their reading practices. It was during this conversation that she offered me an opportunity to work with Umoja’s high school girls for the 2005-2006 school year, and I accepted. The opportunity to work with Umoja meant meeting all of my site selection criteria. Working with Umoja also offered me resources that I had not realized would be so valuable at the time, such as strong parental support and a young, energetic co-facilitator who had a strong relationship with the potential participants. Working with Umoja was also a bonus for me because I have a personal history with the youth program as a participant. My involvement with Umoja began when I was in the ninth grade, and I graduated from the program in 1998. After graduating from Umoja, I still worked closely with the program as a mentor, motivational speaker, and workshop facilitator, so I was excited about this opportunity to continue to work with Umoja youth and mentors. Umoja was also an ideal site for me because my initiation of a book club, the book club’s use of African American women’s YA literature, and the book club’s potential to foster peer and intergenerational relationships between the participants and adult co-facilitators would parallel Umoja’s African American-centered curriculum and emphasis on peer and intergenerational relationships.
Before the 2005-2006 Umoja year began in September, I followed-up with the executive director and had a planning session with the Program Director, Cheryl (pseudonym). Cheryl and I graduated from Umoja together in 1998, and she assumed the position of Program Co-Director in 2000. Since then, she had become the Program Director. During our planning session, I informed Cheryl about my discussions with the executive director, shared with her my research interests, and shared my interest in starting a book club in the program and giving ninth grade girls an opportunity to read and discuss young adult literature. Cheryl wanted to know why I was only interested in working with ninth grade girls, and I talked about my memories, observations, and research concerning coming-of-age and coping with the transition from middle to high school. She explained that she thought the tenth grade girls would also greatly benefit from my efforts and the book club because she had seen the sophomore girls struggle with similar issues. She talked about the differences in social interaction and group participation that she had observed among the ninth and tenth grade girls in comparison to the eleventh and twelfth grade girls. After more discussion about issues affecting adolescent girls and reflection on our own experiences, I agreed that the book club was a potential resource for both ninth and tenth grade girls, and I agreed to solicit volunteers from the ninth and tenth grade female population in the group. We also discussed a calendar for the book club and logistics such as meeting times, dates, locations, book order and distribution, and supplies. Since Umoja already demanded a lot of participants’ time, we decided to space the book club sessions so that we met every other month. This would give participants an opportunity to balance school, Umoja, and other responsibilities with their book club readings. Though we were only reading three books, I did not want the book club to seem burdensome for the young women or their families. In the book
club, we would read *Who Am I Without Him?: Stories About Girls and the Boys in Their Lives* by Sharon Flake, *Imani All Mine* by Connie Porter, and the third book would be by author Rita Williams-Garcia. I planned to have the participants choose if they wanted to read Williams-Garcia’s *Blue Tights* or *Like Sisters on the Homefront*. Lastly, Cheryl agreed to be my co-facilitator for the book club, and I informed her that neither the youth program as whole nor the participants would suffer any expense, outside of gas and time, since I had grants to offset expenses for the book club project.

**The Umoja Youth Empowerment Organization**

Umoja is a non-profit, community-based, youth empowerment organization that has been a resource for high school-aged youth in Prince George’s County, Maryland for fourteen years. Prince George’s County is located in what is considered Maryland’s Capital Region. It borders the nation’s capital city and is sometimes considered a suburb of Washington, D.C. According to a 2005 U.S. Census estimation, Prince George’s County is over sixty-five percent African American and has over 840,000 residents ([State and County QuickFacts](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table?GID=33060000000,33070000000,33080000000&geoID=06060000000,07060000000,08060000000&units=CTY&mapflag=0&geo='; n.d.). The county reflects an urban atmosphere and boasts major attractions such as FedEx Field, the home of the Washington Redskins, and Six Flags of America. It is also cited as the most affluent predominately African American county in the United States ([Humphreys](https://www.google.com/search?q=Humphreys+2004+%22African+American+Historic+Resources%22&num=10&tbm=isch&source=lnms&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjLk6P56Nj5AhXyF2MKHdk3ACoQ_AUIBigB&dpr=1); [African American Historic Resources](https://www.google.com/search?q=African+American+Historic+Resources+2006&num=10&tbm=isch&source=lnms&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjLk6P56Nj5AhXyF2MKHdk3ACoQ_AUIBigB&dpr=1), 2006). However, observation along with analysis of census data, historical documents, and reports in media outlets such as the local news, the county’s popular newspaper *The Gazette*, and *The Washington Post* suggest that landmarks, tourist attractions, and

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3 See Chapter Three for textual analysis of novels read in book club.
affluent residents have not been enough to adequately address needs such as affordable housing, safe communities, and quality schools.

Most of the students participating in Umoja attend school in this county, which has a public school system that serves over 134,000 youth. According to the school system’s Annual Report for the 2005-2006 school year, over seventy-six percent of the students in the county’s schools were African American; over thirteen percent were of Hispanic decent; and approximately six percent were Caucasian (Prince George’s County Public Schools Annual Report 2006). Though Umoja encourages participation from students of all races and ethnicities, currently, all participants are African American. Umoja does not have an official affiliation with the Prince George’s school system. However, the school system does recognize the program as a resource, and the group recruits from the school district and hosts its weekly training sessions in one of the county’s schools. Umoja was founded by a community activist and former County Council woman who wanted to provide guidance and support to help youth live positive lifestyles. The organization’s “Fundamental Principles” explain that “Umoja exists to re-ignite a spark in the community by motivating youth to empower themselves in their communication, leadership, and workshop development skills” (Umoja, 2005a). Umoja’s literature also asserts that it uses history to “empower youth to abstain from sex, drugs, violence, and prejudice through peer and intergenerational interaction” and to counteract the destructive forces of “modern-day slave masters” such as pre-marital sex, alcohol, drugs, violence, and racial dissension, which can hinder one’s mental, physical, and social development (Umoja, 2005c). Umoja calls this curriculum the “Modern-Day Underground Railroad Concept” which entails using an African American-centered perspective to challenge youth not to be slaves to the
aforementioned present-day temptations. The program teaches young people that though they are free from the bondages of slave masters in an historical sense, if they are not careful and thoughtful, modern forces and temptations can be just as detrimental.

Because intergenerational interaction is one of the core principles of Umoja, mentors in the form of parents, community members, and Umoja alumni interact with students and promote Umoja’s principles. Umoja literature explains, “Staffs of mentors and parents who accept that differing cultural and communication styles benefit our youth are interactive in Umoja’s process. This acknowledgement helps the youth to express themselves in a non-threatening way and fosters positive communication” (Umoja, 2005a). Umoja participants have hands-on experiences and contribute to the organization in various ways. For example, Umoja members, now alumni, authored the Umoja Pledge, the Umoja Alumni Induction Pledge, and the Commitment Contract. An alumnus also created the logo for the group. The organization also maintains a parent support group that meets monthly. The parent group aims to “teach youth the importance of seeking guidance and support,” to teach parents Umoja principles, and to keep parents abreast of issues affecting the youth (Umoja, 2005b).

Participation in Umoja is voluntary. The organization recruits by distributing advertisements to all of the county high schools, and if there is a student participant already attending the school, they sometimes make an announcement over the intercom to reach out to their peers to join. Most participants are solicited through “word-of-mouth;” students share with friends about Umoja, or parents share with co-workers. Some youth seek out the program because they are interested, and some are urged to participate by their parents. When students commit to Umoja they are expected to work towards upholding the Umoja Pledge and attend
weekly meetings in preparation for the annual conference that occurs at the end of the school year. A typical weekly, Monday night session at Umoja lasts about two hours. During this time, the youth officers lead the group in prayer, the Umoja pledge, and introductions. The officers also give the group a Black History Fact to write down in their Umoja notebooks for reference. Additionally, time is allotted for a speaker who might speak on topics such as: “Communication,” “Teen Violence,” “STDs,” “Self-Esteem,” or “Slave vs. Enslaved.” In the fall, students receive training in various social, cultural, personal, and even spiritual issues. In the spring, students use the information they learned in the fall to create workshops that they facilitate for other high school students in the county. These workshops are conducted at an annual Umoja Conference that the youth organize for their peers. Umoja students also have had opportunities to travel and represent the organization throughout the country and participate in civic, cultural, and historic events such as attending Rosa Parks’ funeral and hosting the Youth Day for the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH).

THE UMOJA BOOK CLUB

My Role as Researcher

At the first Umoja meeting of the year, I was introduced to the parents as an “Umoja alumnus,” a “mentor,” and “the coordinator of Umoja’s first book club.” After this brief introduction, I was given an opportunity to speak to the parents. I shared with them that I was a graduate of the Umoja program, and of Prince George’s County public schools, and that I was a graduate student at Penn State University. I explained to them my dissertation topic and my research interests in young adult literacies and literature and African American women’s
literature. I also added that I would be coordinating a book club that would meet on Saturdays and that I was looking for ninth and tenth grade girls in Umoja who were interested in reading and discussing young adult literature written by African American women. I told parents that I hoped they would consider giving their daughters permission to participate in the book club, and I informed them that they would have to sign a special parent consent form in order for their daughters to participate. Next, I circulated the books around the room and gave brief descriptions of the books’ plots and general issues highlighted in the books. Then, I asked parents if they had any questions about me or the book club project. Most parents were receptive to the book club project. However, parents of eleventh and twelfth grade girls were disappointed, and some said, “My daughter needs to read, too.” Unfortunately, investigating the literacy practices of eleventh and twelfth grade African American girls was outside the scope of the project, but Cheryl noted the concerns of the parents and the needs of the older teenage girls. She informed the parents that the program planned to create activities to address the needs of all of the girls later in the year. A mother who had a daughter who was fourteen raised her hand and asked if her daughter could participate since she was the same age as ninth grade girls. She explained that her daughter was repeating the eighth grade and that she really wanted her daughter to read more. Although I was seeking ninth and tenth grade girls in Umoja, after reflecting on the study’s purpose and benefits of participation, Cheryl and I decided that she could participate. I encouraged parents to read along with their daughters so that they would be aware of the types of issues their girls were reading about and potentially have conversations about these issues. I informed the parents, and later the potential participants, that I would be purchasing the books to be read for the book club and would distribute the books at least three
weeks prior to the book club meetings. I planned to purchase the books, supplies, and refreshments for all of the book club meetings. Several parents wanted to know if I would have copies for them. I informed them that I would not but that the public libraries would have copies.

After speaking to the parents, I was introduced to the youth group. My first introduction to the group was brief. Cheryl informed the youth that I was an alumnus of the program and that I would be coordinating an Umoja book club with the ninth and tenth grade girls. The eleventh and twelfth grade girls wanted to know why they could not participate, and again, Cheryl explained that there would be some activities planned for them. Towards the end of the first meeting, Cheryl helped me gather the ninth and tenth grade girls in a separate room to tell them about my research and solicit volunteers for the book club. In addition to verbally describing the book club, I also distributed a recruitment flyer that I had generated to advertise, spark interest, and inform the ninth and tenth grade girls about me and the book club (see Appendix A for Recruitment Flyer). I explained that I was a student at Penn State University working on a research project and that I was looking for ninth and tenth grade girls in Umoja who wanted to volunteer to participate in my book club study. I also explained that in the book club we were going to read three books, meet three times, one for each book, and meet for approximately 90 minutes each session. Additionally, they would also be asked to complete writing activities and participate in an individual interview with me during which we would talk about their experiences in the book club. I had the book for the first session, Sharon Flake’s *Who Am I Without Him?*, available to distribute as well as a notebook for journal writing and response activities and a pencil-pack with pens, pencils, highlighters, and page markers. I asked all of the
girls who took supplies and who were interested to sign a sign-up sheet, but I informed them that taking the supplies did not mean a commitment from them. I also informed them that it was okay for them to stop participating in the book club without any explanation from them, even after they had signed the assent form. Ten young women had gathered to hear about the book. One was in the eighth grade, five were in the ninth, and four were in the tenth. After my explanation of the book club project, the time commitment, and participation expectations, most of the girls seemed very interested in the idea of a book club. Two girls began to tell me their favorite authors and that they liked to read. I had two other students tell me that they were not interested in participating in the book club. Both said that they had too many other commitments. This left me with eight potential book club participants. I informed the group of the date and time of the first book club session, and I told them that the location would come later. Each book club session was planned to occur at a different mentor’s home in order to create the atmosphere of an informal book discussion group, rather than a classroom discussion. Since the Umoja youth group met Monday nights at a high school in the county, I wanted to separate thoughts and expectations of Monday night Umoja, or school, from Saturday book club sessions. I asked the ladies to attend the first session if they were interested and told them that Cheryl would be assisting me with the book club.

At the beginning of the year, all of the youth and parents received an Umoja calendar with all scheduled meetings and events. Because I had coordinated with Cheryl before the school year began, the dates for the book club were already on the schedule. This made it easier for parents and potential participants to see their availability on the meeting dates. The book club meetings were all scheduled on Saturdays for two-hour slots.
In order to maintain a rapport with parents, I sometimes attended the monthly parent meetings and updated the parents with general information about the book club. For instance, I circulated a newsletter for parents of book club participants that gave a description of the books we were reading and encouraged their reading of the texts (see Appendix B for Parent Newsletter).

**Participants**

The participants in this study were African American girls in the ninth or tenth grade, or age 14 or 15, participating in the Umoja Youth Empowerment Program. All ninth and tenth grade girls in Umoja did not participate, only those who volunteered and had parental consent. Out of the ten girls eligible to participate in the book club, eight expressed interest. There was one student who read the first book and attended the first book club meeting but dropped out of Umoja. Therefore, she no longer participated in the book club. This left a group of seven young women. Among this group, participation levels varied. For example, Courtney, Danielle, Bria, and Jamilah read all of the books, attended at least one session, and completed the writing exercises that I distributed to participants. Dominique and Eboni read one book and attended one session. Nakia attended a session but had not read the text. However, she was an active participant in that day’s discussion and activities. All of the young women’s responses were considered for analysis.

I did not survey the academic aptitudes of any of the participants. This book club did not aim to serve academic purposes, rather its purpose was social in nature as I sought to offer

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4 I have chosen pseudonyms for the participants to maintain confidentiality and will continue to refer to them using these names for the remainder of the dissertation.
adolescent girls a non-school related opportunity to read and discuss with peers and adults issues in, and stimulated by, young adult texts. However, I did learn about some participants’ reading practices and attitudes towards education from their talk in book club and from their responses during our one-on-one interview. One participant shared that she had an IEP for Reading and that she attended a high school that offered small classes and specialized attention in Reading. This participant did not seem discouraged by her reading abilities, however. In fact, many of her interview and book club comments were educational in nature, and her goal was to be a teacher. I also learned from the participants I interviewed that they valued being able to read well and engaging in reading practices outside of those required for school. Of the group of seven who participated, there were three girls who had parents who were married and residing together and four girls who lived with their mothers. All of the participants had siblings. The combination of the girls’ earnest educational interests and diverse personalities, perspectives, and familial experiences as well as their willingness to share, listen, and ask questions helped shape the unique space in which these girls, and their mentors, responded to issues in African American women’s YA literature within what became known as The Umoja Book Club.

**Book Club Meetings**

There were three Umoja Book Club meetings and each occurred at someone’s home. For the first session, Mrs. James, the Parent Coordinator for Umoja, volunteered her home. There were five girls in attendance at this meeting. We met downstairs in the family’s entertainment room, and we had the entire floor to ourselves. All who could sat on the couches. I took a place on the floor, and Cheryl had a seat in a chair. At this, and all other book club meetings, we had
snacks such as fruit, chips, and drinks. I told the girls that I liked to eat when I gathered with people. Most looked at me strange, at first, but I never saw one neglect the food. This meeting lasted for approximately 90 minutes. Immediately after the first session, Mrs. James informed me that one of the mothers said that she wanted to host the next book club, if possible. Cheryl and I were very surprised by the interest in the book club that the parent had taken, and we discussed the pros and cons of having the parents of a student host. We eventually decided that it was a good idea: it would help keep a family new to the Umoja program interested, and I especially appreciated the interest and support.

The second book club was held the same day and in the same location as the Umoja Young Women’s Fellowship, at the home of one of the book club participants, Danielle. The Umoja Young Women’s Fellowship was an opportunity for all of the girls in Umoja to discuss issues affecting them as young women. The day began with a group activity, and then the book club participants and I separated from the group and had our session. Cheryl floated between the Young Women’s Fellowship and the Book Club. At this session, there were four girls. Two were new to the group. One of the two new attendees had not read the book, but she participated in the discussion. We met in the family’s dining room and all took a seat around the table. This meeting lasted slightly longer than the first, two hours, and I suspect it was because, by this time, they had become more familiar with each other, and me. I also included more response activities at this session, which the girls took to and seemed to enjoy. Though it had been over a month since the last book club meeting, we had seen and talked with each other at the Umoja Monday night meetings. Also, on weeks that I did not come to town, I sent letters to the participants to help maintain their interest in book club, let them know that I was thinking about them and
appreciated their participation, and to remind them of their reading, writing exercises, and the next book club meeting (see Appendix C for Book Club Correspondence Sample).

For the third session, I especially encouraged mothers to read the book that the girls were reading, and I invited them to attend the book club with their daughters. Impending inclement weather kept most participants and their mothers away, but two mother-daughter couples came. I continued with this session in spite of the threat of inclement weather because we previously had to reschedule a book club meeting due to weather. I did not want to continue to ask families to rearrange their schedules, so we went forth. This book club was held at the home of the Assistant Director of Umoja, and this session lasted the longest—almost three hours! The agenda for this session was slightly different from the previous two book clubs. In order to not jeopardize the girls’ session, I had the group start off together with a mother-daughter trivia activity; then, the mothers and daughters separated to discuss the book. Cheryl and I worked with the girls, as usual, and Mrs. James agreed to facilitate the session with the mothers. Before the book club, I met with Mrs. James to share with her what questions and response activities Cheryl and I would do in the daughter-session, and I gave Mrs. James similar questions and activities to facilitate in the mother-session. I informed her that it was okay if the discussion was not always on “the book,” that book clubs were an opportunity for readers to share their thoughts about the book as well as make connections to their lives. After about 90 minutes of meeting alone, we joined together again, and mothers and daughters discussed the book together. I asked the mothers to attend this session and join in discussion for several reasons. I wanted to encourage parents to be aware of and take an interest in, if not already their practice, the types of information their children were being exposed to. I also wanted parents, mothers, especially to
begin to dialogue with their daughters about issues such as those depicted in the text, *Imani All Mine*.

**Book Club Pedagogy**

Acting as the facilitator provided a chance for me to be a part of the discussions, learn from the girls participating, and adopt identities outside of researcher such as that of a book club co-participant, facilitator, and mentor. Also, I was interested in the significance of a certain type of approach to book club facilitation and implementation, a culturally relevant approach, and I, as the researcher and facilitator, was most familiar with this type of approach. For this project, my idea of a culturally relevant approach to an out-of-school book club included several unique elements that related to the book club’s context and content that reflected adolescent development principles related by Fordham (1996), Kaplan (1997), and Collins (2000) and principles of culturally relevant theory as related by Ladson-Billings (1994), Howard (2001), Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002), Irvine (2002), Ware (2002): 1) the book club was community- and communally-centered. The book club meetings were out of school, located in homes of mentors or parents who had volunteered to host the book club, and the group interactions took place in cozy, homelike settings; 2) the books read for and discussed in book club were African American young adult texts, particularly those that featured African American female protagonists and were authored by African American women; 3) one of the book club’s overall aims was to offer a space that valued African American young adult girls’ ways of reading and being—their thoughts, feelings, ideas, interests, issues, and talk; and 4) the book club included discussion with and facilitation by African American adult, female mentors.
Before each book club meeting, Cheryl and I had collaborating sessions where we reviewed what elements of the text stood out to us. In these sessions, I shared discussion questions and activities that I had in mind, received feedback and suggestions from Cheryl, and developed an agenda. Even though I always brought discussion starters, questions, and response activities, the girls always shared their own thoughts and questions concerning the texts. Early on in our discussions, what the young women found significant in the texts or what the texts related to in their lives became key discussion points. Cheryl was a valuable co-facilitator because there were often times when I may have wanted to pose a question to the group but forgot or got sidetracked, and she jumped in with thought-provoking questions or comments. Also, being a mentor who had a longer relationship with the girls and was more familiar with their lives outside of book club and Umoja, she also had very good ways of helping to connect the texts and the issues highlighted in them to the young women’s lives. Additionally, as someone who spent much time with youth, especially teenage girls, Cheryl always made it a point to make sure they had a chance to adopt a facilitator stance by giving them a chance to ask us, young women mentors, any questions about ourselves or how we dealt with issues. This shift in dynamic always seemed appreciated by the girls as they jumped at the opportunity to ask things like, “What did you do when . . . ?” or “Did your mother ever . . . ?” or “Have you ever?” These types of actions helped foster reciprocity among the group so that the atmosphere did not become one where the young women were open and shared their personal knowledge, feelings, and experiences without learning from the adults or without the adults being personal and honest.

One of the difficulties for me that I noticed early on in facilitating the book club was balancing my researcher and mentor/facilitator identities. There were times when the girls made
comments or brought up issues that a distant researcher-observer might just record and analyze later, but as a mentor and facilitator I often felt a duty to respond like an adult who had the responsibility of encouraging, questioning, or sometimes even admonishing. I also witnessed Cheryl taking advantage of these “teachable moments” to truly mentor and offer the young women some guidance when needed.

**DATA COLLECTION**

In this study, I used multiple data collection methods to investigate the ways African American adolescent girls talked about AAYA texts in the context of a community-based book club. The following sections explain the data collection methods that I used to learn: 1a) What issues in African American young adult texts *Who Am I Without Him?, Like Sisters on the Homefront*, and *Imani All Mine* appear to stimulate interest and critical responses among African American female readers, and b) in what ways do African American female readers respond to issues in these texts? Additionally, I sought to uncover the ways in which African American teenage girls made use of the opportunity to discuss AAYAL in an out-of-school context, specifically a community-based book club. These collection methods included participant observation, observation and fieldnotes, recording and transcription of book club meetings, recording and transcription of one-on-one interviews, and collection and analysis of writings related to the research (Silverman, 2001; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Scholars argue that bringing together multiple sources of data helps promote rigor in research and also helps researchers produce rich, thick descriptions of participants’ lives and develop credible analyses of data (Spradley, 1980; Eder & Fingerson, 2001; Silverman, 2001; Marshall & Rossman, 2006).
Participant Observation

During the 2005-2006 school year, my role with Umoja and the book club was as a “moderate” participant observer (Spradley, 1980). Spradley (1980) explains moderate participant observation as “maintain[ing] a balance between being an insider and an outsider, between participation and observation” (p. 60). I sought “firsthand involvement in the social world chosen for [my] study,” and I wanted the opportunity “to hear, to see, and to begin to experience reality as the participants do” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p.100). In order to meet these goals, I spent a total of eight months with Umoja and the Umoja Book Club. I attended the Monday night Umoja meetings at least once a month to observe the youth group, develop a rapport and maintain contact with book club participants, and stay abreast of the youth group’s activities. After my first four months with the group, I attended these Monday meetings weekly. As an Umoja alumnus, and someone who regularly attended the Monday meetings, I was considered by the youth and youth group directors to be a “mentor.” Therefore, I participated in the meeting activities to the extent that the other mentors participated. For example, I would greet and interact with students, obtain an agenda for the night, participate in the opening prayer, listen attentively, and offer assistance with activities as needed or asked. I sometimes assisted the group by helping to facilitate a large group exercise or by working with youth in small groups. I also interacted with students, male and female, who were not participants in the book club.

Participating in and observing at the Monday meetings was vital to my integration into Umoja culture as it took time to develop a rapport with the book club girls and for them to feel comfortable interacting with me, and vice versa, and feel comfortable interacting with each other.
Because most of the book club participants were in the ninth grade, this was their first year in Umoja. So, not only did they not know me, they did not know each other. Therefore, Monday night meetings became vital for building relationships with the girls and for their peer relationships. As the young ladies and I saw more of each other outside of the book club, we became more comfortable interacting with each other within our book club circle.

In addition to participating as a mentor during the eight months that I spent with the Umoja group, I also acted as Umoja Book Club coordinator, co-facilitator, co-participant, and observer. The Umoja Book Club convened three times over the eight months I spent with the Umoja group. My primary aim during book club was to facilitate, promote, and maintain active discussion by probing for and encouraging responses in order to minimize my voice in the book club. I posed questions and response activities to the girls and participated by sharing my opinion about issues and characters in the texts. I also answered questions posed to me and gave personal examples relevant to the discussion. Co-facilitator Cheryl also participated by posing questions to the group and responding to other participants’ comments. Since my focus was on participants’ responses within the context of the book club, I did not observe participants outside of book club meetings or outside of Monday night meetings.

Field notes

Observation Journal & Reflection Journal

When observing the Monday night meetings, I took notes, which I kept in what I refer to as my observation journal. In these meetings, I was especially interested in the following:

- What events took place at tonight’s meeting?
- How many book club participants were present at tonight’s meeting?
What roles did the book club participants play in tonight’s meeting?

How did the book club participants interact with each other and older female participants in the youth group?

How did the book club participants interact with the mentors and other adults present?

How did the participants group themselves at tonight’s meeting?

What was the nature of the book club participants’ talk during tonight’s meeting?

Did the book club participants initiate any conversation, dialogue, or reference to the book club?

After each Monday meeting, I reviewed these initial observation notes as soon as possible to expand on them (Spradley, 1980) and write additional observations, questions, comments, or other details that might assist me in preparing for book club meetings and gaining insight about the participants’ personalities and ways of thinking, talking, and interacting.

Time and attention needed for book club activities only left opportunity for minimal jottings during the book club. Therefore, notation of my observations was mostly reserved until after I had returned home from the book club sessions. As soon as possible after each session, I reviewed my initial notes from the book club session and expanded on these notes (Spradley, 1980). The following questions served as a guide for my book club observations:

Who attended today’s book club?

How did the participants interact with each other?

How did the participants interact with the facilitators?

What types of responses did the girls make about the stories they read?
- In what ways did the participants respond to each other’s comments or the facilitators’ comments?
- How did the girls participate in discussion?
- What roles did the girls take on during book club?
- How did the girls situate themselves in book club, i.e. physical positioning, stance, seating arrangement?
- How did the girls seem to use stories?
- What meanings did the girls seem to make from the stories that they read?
- What circumstances or instances prompted the girls to talk or read in book club?
- How did the girls use the opportunity for discussion?
- What events took place in the book club?

In addition to noting observations in my observation journal, I also found that personal reflection was helpful, and it became significant to ongoing analysis. In a separate journal, my reflection journal, I wrote about various topics related to the research project (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Most often, I made note of my personal thoughts about a particular day’s session; the research in general; progress, struggles and successes related to the research; my relationship with participants; and patterns that I saw emerging in data. Reflection, in addition to observation, helped me to think of ways to follow-up on and build upon issues or instances from the previous session and prepare for the next book club session. These reflections and observations also helped me to prepare for individual interviews as I noted comments or discussion points that I wanted to follow-up on with participants.
Book Club Meeting Recordings

In “Interviewing Children and Adolescents” (2001), Eder and Fingerson offer a compelling argument concerning the value in being sensitive to the power imbalance that exists between adult researchers and youth participants, especially because of age and researcher/interviewer status. They suggest several methods for helping to minimize this imbalance, and among their suggestions they encourage: 1) Conducting group interviews or focus groups, which have been shown to help young people feel more relaxed and help stimulate peer interaction and conversation; 2) Flexibility, creating a natural context for group interviews or focus groups, avoiding creating classroom-like settings, and allowing participants opportunities to introduce topics and pose questions; 3) Reciprocity, giving something back to participants by way of self-disclosure, promoting self-empowerment, or action-oriented research; 4) Use of multiple methods of gathering data in order to help strengthen analysis and help reveal young people’s perceptions and views “rather than relying solely on their [researcher’s] own interpretations” (p. 189); and 5) Use of direct quotes to represent young people in their own terms. It was with these principles in mind that I coordinated this opportunity for African American female youth to engage in conversations about AAYA literature in an out-of-school book club setting.

Capturing participants’ conversations during book club was central to this study. I video-recorded each book club session which offered me not only an audio record of participants’ dialogue, but also a visual record of their responses and interactions. I only transcribed and analyzed the audio files of the book clubs, but the visual record proved helpful in analysis as I was able to better relive and recall book club occurrences when listening and looking at book club data and reviewing field notes. Since facilitation and engagement with participants were
my priorities at the book clubs, I was not able to perform camera features such as panning the room to capture non-verbal communication. At each session, I placed the video camera in a stable, central location in the room. Initially, the camera seemed to stand out, and some girls seemed to hold back because of its presence. By the second session, however, the participants seemed to have developed a relationship with each other, and me, and trusted me with their feelings and ideas. The presence of the camera became “normal” and something the girls were aware of, but not intimidated by. I wanted participants to be comfortable in book club, so I informed them they had the option of telling me to just record the audio, delete a certain comment or comments, or turn the camera off. No participant ever requested me to do any of these options, however. In one instance during which a participant was very interested in the camera’s presence, I aimed to make the girls feel more comfortable with it by giving them a response activity that called for them to act as reporters and interviewers. They were able to work the camera and interview each other, and they really began to “own” the camera and the act of sharing their thoughts on camera. I also explained to the girls that only I would be reviewing the videotapes. Though I anticipated that my primary analysis and sharing of findings would be related to their oral and written responses, I explained to the girls that if I used them for public educational or presentation purposes, their faces would be blurred to maintain confidentiality.

For the book club meetings, I used questions or other response activities that I had devised based on story themes or themes I had seen emerging from participants’ responses and discussion. During book club, I would sometimes modify my pre-written questions based on the discussion or allow discussions to develop and evolve based on participants’ dialogue or questions. The participants had a rapport with each other and felt comfortable telling someone to
speak up, that they had talked too much, or teasing in some other way. Sometimes, there were mumbles or overlapping talk, and Cheryl, another participant, or I might ask someone to repeat a comment or question. There were also times when a topic got several girls excited, and Cheryl and I would help facilitate so that everyone’s comments were able to be shared. At the initial and subsequent meetings, Cheryl and I reminded the girls that the book club was something special for them and that their parents would not be present or privy to our conversations, unless it was a life-changing/emergency situation. We also emphasized that our book club conversations were just between us and not the girls, or boys, in the extended Umoja program.

**Interviews**

In addition to recording book club sessions, I conducted one semi-structured interview with four of the book club participants. Though I initially planned to conduct one-on-one interviews with all of the participants, I decided only to conduct follow-up interviews with Courtney, Danielle, Bria, and Jamilah. Because the interviews served as a way for me to learn more about participants, add to the recordings, transcripts, and writings of participants, and check my preliminary analyses and interpretations of data, I believed that conducting follow-up interviews with the girls who had read all three books, completed the writing exercises, and attended at least one session would be most significant to the study and help me to compare findings across data (Purcell-Gates, 2004). The interviews also served as an opportunity for me to follow-up on comments participants had made in book club and learn more about their reading practices. I felt that conducting interviews with the most active participants would also increase

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5 See Bernard’s (2005) discussion of interview approaches in *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. 

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the likelihood of productive dialogue about book club readings, their experiences in book club, and the ways they were affected by participating in the book club. I decided to conduct interviews after all of the book club sessions were complete rather than earlier in the study so that the participants and I would have time to develop a stronger rapport. Because I wanted the interviews to be informal and wanted each participant to be comfortable during her interview, I allowed the young women to have a say in where we did our interview. One participant agreed to be interviewed at her home. We met in the basement, which we had all to ourselves, and we conversed on her family’s plush leather sofas. When setting up an interview time with the other three participants, they all expressed that they wanted their interview to be done outside of their home. They stated reasons like wanting to get out of the house and wanting to have time and space away from siblings or parents. For these three participants, I scheduled a time and day for us to talk over a meal. For each of these interviews, we met in a booth away from other customers in a restaurant. I set up my tape recorder on the table close to the participant, and our interview proceeded informally, similar to a conversation with a friend. We conversed mostly before our meals arrived in order to reduce distractions and interference on the recording.

Since I wanted to obtain comparable data, there were prompts related to the study to which I wanted each interviewee to respond. I had a list of general questions to guide interview conversations, and some of these questions included: “What made you agree to participate in the book club?,” “Did you and your mother ever discuss the books that we read or issues in the books?,” “What types of reading and writing do you do for school?,” “Do you ever read just for fun?”

I sometimes asked interviewees to elaborate on what they had written in response to a

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6 Some questions used for interviews and book club discussions were adapted from prompts used by Sutherland (2002) as explained in African American Girls Reading African American Women.
prompt I had distributed, and I sometimes referred to other previously made comments that I wanted a participant to expand upon such as “Do you remember when you said . . .?” or “What did you think when ______ mentioned ‘x’ in book club?” Our discussions were not limited to my guiding questions, however. Sometimes, participants initiated topics and brought up instances from the book club that they wanted to discuss. There were also times when participants’ responses carried us to topics that were not directly related to my research or interview questions, but I appreciated these moments because they 1) allowed the participants to have a degree of control and authority in the conversation, 2) allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the girls’ lives and perspectives, and 3) allowed me the chance to offer a piece of myself to the girls by speaking honestly about my life and experiences. Most of the young women took time to learn about me during our interviews, asking questions about college, my research, and other interests. The interviews lasted from 20 to 45 minutes, and each of them were audio-recorded and transcribed. After each interview, I wrote field notes about the girls’ demeanor, how we interacted, and other information that might not be evident from just reviewing the tapes. Their smiles and giggles as well as the sincerity and openness evident in their responses suggests an appreciation and need for one-on-one conversations with adult women about issues relevant to their lives.

The one-on-one interviews were not only significant to analysis, but they were also significant to the goals of my study. One of those goals was to document and to share adolescent girls’ voices and perspectives about issues relevant to their lives. I also aimed to document and to share their responses to African American women’s stories for young adults. I wanted to offer more than my adult analyses of issues concerning young African American women and African
American women’s YA texts. The one-on-one interviews provided me another chance to hear the girls’ voices and offered them another chance to relate their experiences so that I could better share their stories (Rogers, 1993).

I did not interview co-facilitator Cheryl, but I kept field notes on the informal conversations that I had with Cheryl throughout the study regarding topics such as her impression of the book club’s progress and her ideas of reading and response activities that might benefit the girls. Making note of and reflecting on these conversations with Cheryl was helpful in cross-checking my impressions and interpretations before, during, and after the study.

**Writing Exercises**

Additional sources of data were journal writings and other reader-response writings. All participants received a journal they could use to write responses to the stories we read. I encouraged them to think and write about things such as whether or not a story or situation seemed realistic and relevant to African American teenage girls and what they would do in a similar situation. I also encouraged them to use the journal to write questions or comments they wanted to pose at the book club meeting or to write down thoughts, ideas, feelings, or experiences they wanted to share. I hoped the journals would help participants with their reading by stimulating their thinking about issues or situations in the texts and giving them the chance to note and remember events in the stories that were significant to them. Participants were informed that only I would read their journals, and they had the choice of whether or not to share their pre-written responses in the session. Not all participants used the journals, so during book club, I gave the girls prompts or writing activities. They were able to brainstorm in their journals
or on other paper. For these activities, the girls always shared their responses with the group, so I was able to have a written and oral response to the activity. At the last book club meeting, the mother-daughter book club, I asked daughters and mothers to reflect on a question that had emerged out of my preliminary analysis of book club data. Mothers were asked to write a written response to the question(s): “What role should mothers play in helping transition their daughters into womanhood, and what do you teach your daughter about womanhood?” Daughters were asked to write a written response to the question(s): “What role should mothers play in helping transition their daughters into womanhood, and what have you learned from your mother about womanhood?” I collected all journals and in-session reflections/writings from participants for analysis and comparison with other data.

**Transcription Methods**

My primary interest in transcribing the book club recordings and interviews was to create a written account of the content of our discussions. I also wanted the transcribed accounts to convey the overall tone and flow of our exchanges. I transcribed the recordings from all three book club sessions and the recordings of all four interviews. Though I obtained video-recorded data from the book clubs, for transcription purposes, I decided only to work with the audio data from the book club recordings. Therefore, I separated the video and audio data from my book club files, which allowed me to treat each book club recording as an audio file. This approach made transcription easier, as I was able to give attention to what was audible instead of trying to capture what was visual and what was audible. This approach also gave me the option of returning to my video files for later review and analysis.
Because I was primarily interested in the what participants had to say, I used transcription conventions that were especially significant to this study. Most notations that I used were symbols I adapted from Poland (2001). I kept multiple files for each book club or interview, each representing a different stage in transcription. For example, the ORIGINAL file represents the content in its most verbatim stage. On the other hand, EDITED VERSION THREE represents the content in its most readable stage. For this more readable stage, my aim was to minimally edit content “without altering the gist of what was said” (Poland, 2001). To mark utterances such as sighs or laughs or to relate mood or tone, I used bracketed notations such as “[LAUGHS]” or “[ANGRILY].” To represent a pause or unfinished thought, I used an ellipsis ( . . . ). I used parentheses to enclose comments such as “(overlapping speech)” or (inaudible speech 1:32).” For inaudible or indecipherable comments, I listed the length of time for which the comment was unclear. Additionally, for many words and sentences, I did not attempt to standardize the language, but instead represented the sentence structure, vocabulary, or grammar in the vernacular in which it was spoken such as in the sentences: “He kept takin’ her money . . . ” or “I will help you, but later on, you gonna get a job.” I inserted punctuation such as commas, periods, question marks, and quotation marks to aid in readability with the primary objective of maintaining the integrity of the comments.

Throughout the study, I noticed that the participants, co-facilitator Cheryl, and I often used African American expressive practices in our communication with each other. In my communication, I often style-shift/code-switch7 between African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Standard American English (SAE) based on variables such as the setting, audience, and context.

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7 Poplack (2000) describes codeswitching as “the alternation between two linguistic systems in the course of speaking” (p. 264.).
my mood, and purpose for speaking. I believe that our realities, perceptions, and overall ways of being and knowing are laden with social, cultural, as well as political histories and that our language, especially, holds in it a taste of who we are and where we have come from (Bakhtin, 1981; Blake, 1997). As Richardson (2003) explains, “codeswitching is . . . a valuable resource since each language represents a way of knowing and expressing the world. Style/code switching allows Black people to move between worldviews” (p. 86). With this in mind (and heart), I choose not to limit myself to only speaking SAE because the histories and realities and Black life and culture resonate within me, and as Dalji (1998) explains, “There are certain things written and expressed better in Ebonics than English, and others that are better in English, depending on what you are trying to express” (p. 108). Employing African American expressive practices when interacting with the participants also offered us a shared way of understanding and communicating as I observed Cheryl and the girls using African American expressive practices characteristic of African American women’s literacies such as storytelling (Richardson, 2003), signifying (Morgan, 2002), and cooperative/collaborative speech (Troutman, 2001).

DATA ANALYSIS METHODS

I utilized practices that Bryman (2004) notes are key to qualitative research, in general, and that Moss (1992) and Purcell-Gates (2002) note are key to ethnographic research, especially, to help me organize and code data and uncover the ways that this group of African American adolescent girls talked about literature, and life, in a context that was outside of school. Influenced by Bryman (2004), I drew upon practices that promoted a recursive analysis of data.

This means there is “repetitive interplay between the collection and analysis of data” (Bryman, 2004, p. 399). Analysis is ongoing, and early analyses influence subsequent data collection decisions. This recursive framework helps researchers arrive at analyses that are rooted in the data (Moss, 1992; Creswell, 1998; Purcell-Gates, 2002; Bryman, 2004).

Purcell-Gates (2002) outlines several tenets that are important to a recursive analysis of ethnographic data. She contends that thoroughly and insightfully employing these practices helps ethnographic researchers arrive at meaningful interpretations of data which lead to interesting ethnographic stories that are supported by the research. This study drew upon these strategies for analysis:

- Initiating data analysis while still in the field and using preliminary analyses to aid in data collection
- Organizing and coding data in order to uncover key categories and patterns
- Looking for negative cases in data and double-checking evidence to help prevent researchers from accepting early interpretations
- Interpreting data by imposing meaning to categories and patterns
- Recognizing and sharing my subjectivities with readers
- Writing results of study and framing them in the context of relevant literature to help readers understand my interpretation of data

Throughout this study, I reflected on my research questions, and I made a practice of reviewing data as it was collected in order to take note of what themes or patterns were emerging and to prepare for subsequent meetings. I reviewed my field notes and jotted questions or comments about what I was seeing and hearing. After facilitating all of the book club sessions,
acquiring all of the written responses, and conducting the interviews, I transcribed the book club meetings and interviews.

I then read through the transcripts numerous times. Initially, I reviewed transcripts to get a sense of the data. I went line by line and listened to the tapes several times as I read. I also reflected on the sessions and interviews and wrote comments about my observations. During subsequent reviews, I began to label different elements of the texts, and I used different text fonts and colors to help me label units. For example, in interview and book club transcripts, questions were always highlighted in purple, and whenever a direct reference was made to one of the texts, this reference was highlighted in green.

After labeling, I began coding participants’ responses in search for the theme(s) or idea(s) being conveyed. Sometimes responses consisted of a few words, and other times they were as long as a paragraph or a few paragraphs. Some responses were able to be coded in more than one category. When this was the case, I used different colored pencils or fonts to label the excerpt, and I coded it accordingly. When sorting, I made several copies of the transcripts so that I was able to put excerpts in more than one category. Additionally, I examined the book club transcripts with a critical eye towards gleaning how the occasion of book club was being used. I asked questions such as, What opportunities did this book club time and space yield to readers? What meaning does this book club seem have for participants (Maxwell, 2005)?

After this broad manner of coding (Berg, 2004), I had 26 different codes, and I updated my transcript copies to include the labels and codes from these initial reviews. I then initiated a more focused review of the data and went through the colorful, extensively labeled transcripts again. I wrote marginal comments about patterns that I observed as well as concepts that I
recognized and wanted to explore further. Throughout this more focused review, I made note of dominant codes and recurring themes and developed lists to note the frequency of these codes and themes. As I got a greater sense of the data, some categories were renamed; some were combined. Some categories had sub-themes and surfaced numerous times; other themes only surfaced a few times throughout the data. To aid in my analysis, I also cut, sorted, and organized data thematically and pasted the thematically organized excerpts onto poster boards. I wrote comments and analytic memos in the margins of poster boards.

After this more focused review, I began a cycle of (re)reading, (re)organizing, (re)thinking, comparing, and describing my data. As I read, I noted how I saw data working together and made note of instances that were isolated or did not seem to connect with dominant themes/patterns that had previously emerged. I created data charts and tables that represented the major issues that stimulated discussion and the different ways that participants responded to these issues (see Figure 1 & Figure 2).

### Issues that Stimulated Responses Across Novels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Relationships w/ Mothers</th>
<th>Relationships w/ Parents</th>
<th>Relationships w/ Peer Boys</th>
<th>Girls’ Need for Support &amp; Guidance</th>
<th>Girls &amp; Self-Esteem</th>
<th>Womanhood</th>
<th>Sexuality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who Am I</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Homefront</strong></td>
<td>27</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Imani All Mine</strong></td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>63</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1
Ways Girls Responded to Issue Across Novels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analyzed Issue</th>
<th>Shared Thoughts About Issue</th>
<th>Shared Potential Solution to Issue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shared Opinion About Situation in Story (OASIS)</th>
<th>Connected Previous Knowledge to Situation in Story (to Help Group)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Subtotal**: 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Connection with Issue</th>
<th>Related Issue to Personal Experience (RIPE)</th>
<th>Shared Story About Self (Related to Issue)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shared Personal Story (to Help Group)</td>
<td>Shared Lesson Learned from Story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shared Story About Friend (Book Prompts Story About Friend)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total**: 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Connection with Character</th>
<th>Analyzed Character's Actions</th>
<th>Put Self in Character's Shoes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shared Thoughts About Ways to Help Character</td>
<td>Offered/Shared Advice to Character (and Other Girls)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total**: 8

Figure 2

Figure 1 shows the frequency of the seven primary topics that were found to stimulate discussion across the three novels, and Figure 2 is an example of the tables I created to chart the ways that participants responded to these topics. Figure 2 shows the types of responses that were found to occur in response to the topic of support and guidance in the lives of girls. These charts helped me to ask analytical questions about the data and to see more clearly the themes that had emerged and the relationships among these themes. They also helped me to write up my findings and to consider my analyses in relation to relevant theories.
SUMMARY

This chapter described the methods used in this study to explore a group of African American female readers’ ways of responding to AAYA novels. Methods common to ethnographic inquiry were used to collect and analyze data. Data collection included participant observation, field notes, interviewing, and collection of journals. Utilizing research practices described by Bryman (2004) and Purcell-Gates (2002) for coding, organizing, and comparing data helped me to construct a story about adolescent girls’ ways of thinking, talking, and writing about YA texts and YA issues that was grounded in the data that I collected.
CHAPTER THREE:
AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLS GROWING INTO WOMANHOOD IN YA FICTION:
A LITERARY ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I survey the African American women’s literary tradition in an effort to provide an historical and literary framework for some of the ways that African American women have used writing to tell their own stories, speak back to negative and exploitive depictions, and connect with other Black women. I then focus my attention on African American female writers Sharon Flake, Rita Williams-Garcia, and Connie Porter, authors who write especially for youth and young adults, and demonstrate the ways in which these writers participate in and extend the African American women’s literary tradition. Finally, I address research question 1 of this project, and I present the results of my textual analysis of selected AAYA novels. My aim is to demonstrate the potential of the authors’ writings to stimulate much needed African American female-centered discussions about adolescence, especially as relates to identity, support, and relationships.

AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN TELLING THEIR STORIES

How I got ova
How I got ova
You know my soul look back and wonder
How I got ooova

How we got ova
How we got ova
You know my soul look back and wonder
How we made it ooova

[Repeat with great passion and spirit]
As I think about Black women’s diverse expressive practices, especially their ways of capturing the struggles associated with being Black, female, and often economically exploited and their ways of sharing through stories the survival of women who have sweat, bled, cried, shouted, fought, and sometimes been silenced through rape, separation from family, and numerous other hardships and acts of discrimination, I cannot help but think about my mama’s sweet singing and the words that Mahalia Jackson sang so passionately, “How I got ova/My soul look back and wonder/How I got ooova.” I also cannot help but think about the situations that women in my family and community have endured and their intent to keep pressin’ on: to keep taking care of their families the best they can; to keep teaching, preaching, feeding, and loving folks, male, female, Black, White, or otherwise, even when their efforts seem futile. I imagine their determined ways and hearts share a kindred spirit with Black female storytellers, rhetors, and literary foremothers such as Lucy Terry, Phillis Wheatley, Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Brooks, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Childress, and Margaret Walker, who were sick and tired, yet determined, so they dared to share their stories anyway. In the eighteenth century, Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley laid the foundation for Black women poets, and in the nineteenth century, Belinda9, Elizabeth Keckley, and Harriet Jacobs cultivated what was to become a tradition, a common and committed practice on the part of Black women to share their narratives, their personal stories (Russell, 2002). African American female rhetors Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, Jarena Lee, and Anna Julia Cooper helped this African American female literacy and literary tradition to blossom through

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9 Belinda, also known as Belinda of Boston, was an enslaved African woman who submitted an autobiographical petition to the Massachusetts state legislature requesting compensation from her owner’s seized estate for her years of servitude. Her petition, published in 1787 by *The American Museum*, is considered by historians to be one of the first published female slave narratives (Gould, 2007).
their written and spoken words, and as Russell (2002) explains, the actions of these women, “their sheer strength and their desire to be heard—to be free—set a precedent for black women then, as well as now” (p. 8). More contemporary African American women writers have cultivated the foundations that have been laid, and works such as The Street (Petry, 1946), A Raisin in the Sun (Hansberry, 1959), The Black Woman (Bambara, 1970), The Bluest Eye (Morrison, 1970), Corregidora (Jones, 1975), for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf (Shange, 1975), The Color Purple (Walker, 1982), The Women of Brewster Place (Naylor, 1982), Annie John (Kincaid, 1985), Kindred (Butler, 1988), Waiting to Exhale (McMillan, 1992), Push (Sapphire, 1996), and The Coldest Winter Ever (Souljah, 1999) have helped to diversify as well as problematize notions and representations of Black female relationships, identity, and sexuality.

Black women’s early and continued creative literary and literacy practices have offered readers, and listeners, a variety of images of Black womanhood, and it is important to note that not only have Black women writers diversified the pool of images of Black life that we see, envision, and understand with their unique and individual ways of knowing and being in the world, but they have also spoken to, spoken with, and even challenged each other in their writings (Washington, 1990). African American women’s literature critic Mary Helen Washington (1990) states: “What is even more important than their creation of complex women characters is that these writers have chosen to tell their stories and to use language in certain ways, and in doing so have produced art, writerly designs (emphasis mine), which constitute a unique literary tradition” (p. 6). Washington furthers explains, “In creating these writerly designs, writers speak to other writers. They change, challenge, revise, and borrow from other
writers . . . The formal critical term for this pattern is intertextuality\textsuperscript{10}, the relationship of one text to another that eventually configures into a literary tradition” (p. 7).

Over the past thirty years, critics and theorists in the field of African American women’s literature have given increasing attention to African American women authors’ “writerly designs,” as scholars have sought to establish that a unique Black women’s writing tradition exists, recover Black women’s texts, and articulate ways in which Black women’s texts might be examined so that Black women’s struggles and experiences, multiple identities, and ways of telling stories are valued (Bell, Parker, & Guy-Sheftall, 1979; Walker, 1983; Bethal, 1982; Andrews, 1988; Gates, Jr., 1988; Wall, 1989; Washington, 1990; Beaulieu, 1999). Some scholars have suggested using a Black feminist perspective to analyze and critique Black women writers’ works, and there has been much discussion among critics in the field regarding what elements define Black feminist literary criticism as well as the benefits, limitations, and politics of using this approach to read and critique Black women’s literature (B. Smith, 1977/2000; McDowell, 1980/2000; Carby, 1987/2000; Christian, 1987/2000; Awkward, 1988/2000; V. Smith, 1989/2000). In a contemporary discussion of Black feminist literary criticism, Hinton (2004) argues that any critic, regardless of gender or ethnicity, can analyze any work using a Black feminist approach. In “Sturdy Black Bridges’: Discussing Race, Class, and Gender,” Hinton outlines several underlying tenets of Black feminist literary criticism, and she demonstrates how Black feminist readings of Black women’s texts helped to deepen her students’ understandings of Black women writers’ experiences and “writerly designs” and also challenge and enrich their knowledge and understanding of Black women’s experiences in general. She describes a Black

\textsuperscript{10} See also Snead (1984), Gates, Jr. (1988), and Bell (1987 & 2004) for a critical discussion of Black texts and intertextuality.
feminist reading as one that entails carefully “analyze[ing] depictions of marginalized people who”:

1) Redefine, revise, reverse, and resist stereotypes, beauty standards, notions of motherhood, womanhood, education, and epistemology;

2) Exercise subjectivity and voice by telling their own stories;

3) Recognize the intersectionality of race, class, and gender, as marginalized people are often multiply oppressed;

4) Find strength in community, sisterhood, and brotherhood through an understanding of the importance of relationships; and

5) Advocate social action and political intent in an effort to improve social conditions (p. 61)

Using a critical approach to analyze Black women’s texts is both useful and necessary. As Bethal (1982) explains, and I concur, “there is a separable and identifiable tradition of Black women writers, simultaneously existing within and independent of the American, Afro-American, and American female literary traditions” (p. 178). “Black feminist literary criticism,” Bethal asserts, “offers a framework for identifying the common socio-aesthetic problems of authors who attempt to fashion a literature of cultural identity in the midst of racial/sexual oppression. It incorporates a political analysis that enables us to comprehend and appreciate the incredible achievement [of] Black women” (p. 178). In a broad sense, Black feminist literary criticism challenges readers to view critically the literary outputs of Black women and recognize historical and present-day gender, race, and socio-economic oppressions that have challenged Black women’s lives and experiences. More specifically, I propose, literary criticism that employs a Black feminist framework challenges and assists readers in thinking critically about the ways in which Black women have used writing as a means and opportunity to create and participate in a space where they can combat and resist negative images (Bell, Parker, & Guy-
Sheftall, 1979; Bethal, 1982; Washington, 1990; Pough, 2004), reshape those images using a Black female perspective (Bell, Parker, & Guy-Sheftall, 1979), validate Black women’s varied life experiences and ways of being and knowing, and work through and “question themselves about what it means to be both Black and woman in the larger U.S. public sphere” (Pough, 2004).

Black women’s creative and distinct ways of telling their stories have charted a tradition that has laid the foundation for the writings of African American female YA literature authors, and Black feminist literary criticism has offered scholars relevant and diverse ways of analyzing African American women writers’ literary products. In the next section, I discuss the literary practices and products of contemporary YA literature authors Sharon Flake, Rita Williams-Garcia, and Connie Porter.

**AAYA Literature Writers: Black-Educationist-Activist Authors**

Contemporary YA literature authors Sharon Flake, Rita Williams-Garcia, and Connie Porter have a special way of dealing with issues relevant to young readers, especially African American girls. An examination of book reviews, interview responses, and biographical information about these women revealed powerful information about not only the value that they place on the work that they do as authors, but also the commitment that they have to tell stories, stimulate conversations, and provoke action concerning real issues affecting African American youth and families. Also gleaned from this examination was the ways these authors function as activists, or advocates, for youth. They use literature as a medium to explore critical social and cultural issues relevant to African American girls. Their use of literature to highlight African
American girls’ experiences demonstrates an interest in and commitment to providing young adult readers with relevant and realistic stories about African American girls and their experiences.

Flake explains the importance of speaking back to negative images and giving families and communities hope through stories:

I feel so strongly about telling the experiences of African-Americans because I think some people still see us in stereotypical ways. They equate the inner city with crime, violence, unwed mothers, and uncontrollable black boys. They don’t see that inner city mothers also cook and care for their kids and take pride in their neighborhoods. They don’t seem to see the many young black kids who, although under enormous social disadvantages, still choose the right path. (Hyperion, 2003)

Similarly, Williams-Garcia conveys a calling to promote literacy and tell stories that young people want to read. She explains, “Writing stories for young people is my passion and my mission. Teens will read. They hunger for stories that engage them and reflect their images and experiences” (Williams-Garcia, 2007). In Imani All Mine (1999), Porter courageously undertook writing the story of an inner-city, African American girl who was determined to survive through academic, familial, and personal struggles, including rape, pregnancy, stereotypes, and prejudices. Both Flake’s Who Am I Without Him? (2004) and Williams-Garcia’s Like Sisters on the Homefront (1995) have won Coretta Scott King Honors, and Porter’s 1999 novel Imani All Mine is a Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA) Honor Book.
I analyzed select works by these authors in an effort to demonstrate how they educate and advocate through their young adult stories. In my view, these authors function as educators as they employ strategies that coincide with those used by exceptional teachers of African American children. Through their stories, these authors demonstrate an ethic of caring; promote a communally-centered atmosphere; make learning entertaining, interesting, engaging, and relevant; and validate and extend students’ literacy and cultural identities (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Howard, 2001; Irvine, 2002; Ware, 2002). Also, because of the socially and culturally relevant themes that these women address, I argue that they function as the “socially responsible othermothers” that they depict in some of their stories (Collins, 2000). In viewing these authors’ writing as “community work” (Collins, 2000), we are challenged to move beyond accepting these texts as simply didactic in nature to receiving them as the life-informing and life-transforming tools that they are (Coles, 1989; McGinley & Kambrelis, 1996; Meier, 1998, and others). I do not argue that all young adult or adult texts written by African American women embody these attributes or can be viewed this manner, but I do suggest that the texts included in this study are worth considering using this point of view.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS METHODS

Using a Black feminist lens, I conducted a close reading of Sharon Flake’s short story collection *Who Am I Without Him?* (2004), Rita Williams-Garcia’s texts *Blue Tights* (1988) and *Like Sisters on the Homefront* (1995), and Connie Porter’s *Imani All Mine* (1999). These authors and texts were chosen because a preliminary investigation revealed that these works featured contemporary, realistic stories about African American adolescent girls, and the authors
wrote from an insider’s perspective\textsuperscript{11} (Boston & Baxley, 2007). These works, excluding Blue Tights, were also the texts that participants and I read for our book club meetings. The purpose of my textual evaluation was to identify key issues significant to African American female adolescence addressed in their works. In my analysis, three prominent themes emerged: coming-of-age, mother(ing)hood, and support & guidance for girls.

**ISSUES IN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN’S YA FICTION**

**Mother(ing)hood**

Scholars have noted the complexities surrounding Black womanhood, motherhood, and mother-daughter relationships and have demonstrated that real-life and fictionally depicted Black mother-daughter relationships can be imbued with love, togetherness, and respect as well as hurt and conflict (Ladner, 1971; Wade-Gayles, 1984; Collins, 1991; Joseph, 1991). In this section, I problematize Black mothering and motherhood and evaluate the ways in which Black female characters’ ways of mothering shape their daughters’ adolescent experiences.

In Mother Daughter Revolution: From Good Girls to Great Women (1994), Debold, Wilson, and Malave describe the political nature of mother-daughter relationships in the United States and argue that mothers have the power to shape their relationships with their daughters in positive ways. One of the core elements of these authors’ discussion is the view that mother-daughter relationships should be reciprocal. Just as daughters have much to gain from mothers about womanhood, motherhood, love, voice, and standing strong in the face of patriarchal oppression, mothers also have much to learn from daughters about life, friendship, resiliency,

\textsuperscript{11} African American women writing about experiences of African American girls & women and issues affecting African American girls & women.
faith, and survival. They suggest that mothers can nurture and strengthen bonds with their daughters when they 1) recognize and understand the political context in which mother-daughter relationships exist; 2) communicate with daughters about living and thriving within patriarchal culture; 3) move beyond their personal pains and admit to daughters their own struggles and place them in the context of their own lives and within their generation of women; and 4) listen, validate, and respond to daughters’ concerns and experiences in gentle ways. Finally, they suggest that mothers should adopt the practice of “truth telling . . . speaking from experience—this happened to me—rather than from opinion” (p. 172).

Though Debold, Wilson, and Malave (1994) recognize the influences of patriarchal culture on women’s experiences and mother-daughter relationships in a broad sense, an examination of African American women’s and girls’ familial experiences necessitates greater consideration of how political, sociohistorical, economic and other influences affect African American familial relationships. Scholars who analyze African American women’s and girls’ relationships from a Black feminist perspective argue that cultural differences and intersecting racial, gender, and class oppressions should be considered as people theorize about African American women and girls because these influences have and continue to affect Black womanhood and girlhood, including Black mothering practices and mother-daughter relationships (Ladner, 1971; Wade-Gayles, 1984; Collins, 1991; Crew, 1994; Groves, 1996; Paul, 1999).

In “The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-Daughter Relationships (1991),” Collins explains that “Eurocentric” views of motherhood are not easily transferable to Black families (p. 43). She states that although the cult of true womanhood,
which confines women’s activities to childbearing, childrearing, husband nurturing, and housecleaning, has been held as the ideal for White women, there are several reasons that have made this ideal unrealistic for African American families. She argues:

Racial oppression has denied Black families sufficient resources to support private, nuclear family households. Second, strict sex-role segregation, with separate male and female spheres of influence within the family, has been less commonly found in African-American families than in White middle-class ones. Finally, the assumption that motherhood and economic dependency on men are linked and that to be a “good” mother one must stay home, making motherhood a full-time “occupation,” is similarly uncharacteristic of African-American families. (pp. 43-44)

Collins contends that examining Black motherhood through an Afrocentric lens is useful because Eurocentric perspectives have often undermined and misunderstood Black women’s experiences. She uses research on families in African societies to make connections to mothering practices among Black women, and she offers four themes that characterize motherhood from an Afrocentric perspective that can be used to better understand the roles of mothers in Black families and communities. She suggests, 1) mothering is a collective task, hence the existence of “‘othermothers,’ women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities” (p. 47); 2) women providing economically is normal and most often necessary because “the majority of African-American women [have] to work and [cannot] afford the luxury of motherhood as a noneconomically productive, female ‘occupation’” (p. 49); 3) mothering is a form of social activism, and Black women have seen the community as an extended family (p. 49); and 4)
motherhood is seen as a symbol of power as many Black women promote self-reliance and independence, rather than passivity, through their community nurturing (p. 51).

Like Collins, Gloria Wade-Gayles (1984) argues that multiple oppressions affect Black women’s childrearing practices and frustrate the approaches that Black mothers use to raise their children, daughters especially. Similar to real-life mothers, Wade-Gayles notes that “mothers in Black women’s fiction are strong and devoted, but they are rarely affectionate” (p. 10). She cites Silla and Selina’s relationship in Brown Girl, Brownstones (Marshall, 1959) and Eva and Hannah’s relationship in Sula (Morrison, 1973) as examples of mother-daughter relationships in Black women’s fiction whose spirit of conflict is so ripe that it is difficult for readers to recognize any indication of love and endearment for each other. However, maternal acts of protection, providing, and self-sacrifice make evident the love that mothers such as these have for their children. For example, without hesitation, Eva sacrifices herself and jumps from her bedroom window to save her daughter Hannah when she sees her burning down below, “Eva knew there was time for nothing in this world other than the time it took to get there and cover her daughter’s body with her own” (p. 75). Wade-Gayles asserts that daughters must focus on and value words other than “I love you” and actions other than hugs and kisses from mothers who sometimes find themselves overwhelmed or unaccustomed to displaying physical affection. She also charges that the “exigencies of racism and poverty in white America are sometimes so devastating that the mothers have neither time nor patience for affection” (p. 10). Similarly, Collins suggests that knowledge of the struggles in store for Black women, especially Black women with limited education, prompts Black women to mother with survival as the priority, which often comes at the cost of “emotional destruction” (1991, p. 53). In The Dear One (2004),
by AAYAL writer Jacqueline Woodson, single mother Catherine explains to her daughter Afeni not to measure her love just by time spent together or those three little words, I love you. Catherine firmly explains the presence of love in her providing for Afeni: “Don’t you ever let me hear you say I don’t love you, because if I’m not showing it with words, I’m showing it with actions! I love you is in every meal you eat, every piece of clothing you wear, and every clean sheet you sleep on!” (p. 78).

In *Imani All Mine, Blue Tights, and Like Sisters on the Homefront*, Porter and Williams-Garcia make evident the tensions and bonds that exist between Black mothers and their daughters, the struggles that Black mothers face as they seek to nurture, educate, protect, and provide for their daughters, and the struggles that Black adolescent girls face as they negotiate Black girlhood, daughterhood, and sometimes motherhood. Though adolescence is generally perceived as a period when youth become distant and rebel, Cauce et al. (1996) argue that “childhood as a protected developmental period during which children mature and explore the world is not the reality for many African American girls. From an early age many African American girls, especially those living in urban settings, face a world filled with ‘adult’ decisions and danger” (p. 105). Early in their teenage years, female protagonists Tasha, Gayle, and Joyce all experience being sexually exploited by men in their lives and neighborhoods; they encounter teachers who undervalue their physical and intellectual worth and capabilities; and Tasha and Gayle emerge into motherhood before they reach age sixteen. Also, the bond between them and their mothers begins to change form and weaken. Part of coming of age for these young, Black female characters is learning how to battle through these difficult situations (Kaplan, 1997).
Throughout *Blue Tights*, fifteen-year-old Joyce longs for the days when she and her mother Minnie were like sisters, when they had girl-talks about boys and braided each other’s hair, when they endured and laughed together at life’s not-so-funny moments. Those mother-daughter bonding days lasted too shortly for Joyce who, at fifteen, “felt a tremendous ache to tell Mama things. Just things. But Mama wasn’t there. Not like sisters. Not no more” (p. 22). Like Joyce, Tasha (*Imani All Mine*) reminisces about being able to lay in her mother’s lap and be comforted by her mother’s words and touch. She recalls:

> Mama would be sitting in a lawn chair and I’d sit on the porch right by her and rest my head in her lap. Every time, she would do the same thing. Run her hand over my sweaty head while the rain fell quiet on the porch roof. She would say the same thing, too. Girl, you been out running all day, now you playing the baby. I ain’t do nothing but smile, and never move. Mama never made me move. . . . I ran to Mama so she could do the same old things. Rub my head. Say I be playing the baby. And she did them things that day. For the last time. (p. 107)

Although Tasha and Joyce are both at an age and time in their lives when they are much in need of attention and affection from their mothers, they must rely on memories and the hope of their mothers’ kind words and understanding to comfort them. Instead of support or encouragement for Tasha, Earlene informs Tasha that she is “grown” now that she has become a mother. Even though Tasha is fifteen and lives with her mother, Earlene has made it clear to Tasha that she is on her own as a parent. Tasha explains, “Mama say I’m grown now because I got Imani. She say Imani all mine” (p. 1). Tasha embraces her role, responsibility, and new identity as a mother, “I know she all mine, and I like it just like that, not having to share my baby with no one” (p. 1).
But she also realizes that she still needs mothering, too. Tasha admits to herself, “Maybe I am getting too grown to want to sleep with Mama. But like a baby, I still have this smallness to my mind. I don’t need her hands to convince me the world I can’t see from under my blanket is real. I need her hands to do more than her words. Convince me the world I see outside it—ain’t” (p. 115).

Earlene’s hostile attitude towards Tasha, especially after Tasha’s pregnancy, reflects some of the ideas about mothering that Wade-Gayles and Collins discuss. Earlene dropped out of high school in the tenth grade, and she is currently unemployed and on welfare. She is frustrated by her knowledge and first-hand experience of having to survive as a single mother with limited formal education. This frustration is often conveyed to Tasha through harsh words and coldness. It is not until late in the novel that Earlene finally reveals the root of her frustration to Tasha:

I never told you why I dropped out of school. Shame. Do you know what it’s like to feel shame like that? So much you can’t tell nobody? Not your mama. Not your sister. Not your friend. Nobody. What was I going to tell them? I was sick and tired of feeling stupid every goddamn day of my life. Feeling like I failed. Then I had you, and I ain’t feel like that no more. Finally, I had did something right (p. 140).

Unbeknownst to Earlene, Tasha *is* able to relate to her mother’s shame because it is the same shame that she quietly endures as a result of being raped. It is unfortunate that Earlene’s personal experiences, her frustration and knowledge of what is in store for Tasha, and her unspoken disappointment in her daughter has left Tasha at the brunt of mean comments and in a painful situation without the consolation of her mother. Earlene assumes Tasha has been sleeping around and has “thrown away her life” (p. 10), but Tasha never is able to bring herself
to tell her mother that she was raped one summer evening when she went to the skating rink. This rape resulted in Tasha’s pregnancy with Imani. Earlene and Tasha’s relationship is shaped and defined by silences and pains such as these, and Earlene’s words and actions convey to Tasha that conflict and hurt are a normal part of life, motherhood especially: “Mama laugh at me. That’s part of being a mama, she say. Pain. Sometimes you got to do things to your children they don’t like. Things that hurt them if it’s good for them. I say, I ain’t never going to hurt my child for nothing. Mama say, You don’t know what the hell you talking about” (p. 62-63).

Earlene uses words to pay back Tasha for disappointing her. Tasha reveals:

I want her to give me some credit about how I take care of my baby. To have her say, Imani sure do look pretty today. You sure combed her hair real neat. Got it all greased up and shining. You sure keep her clothes clean. You sure keep her smelling clean and fresh like a baby should be. You sure is a good mother. I can’t stand it when Mama pick pick pick. Sometimes I feel like I’m some kind of scab she trying to peel away. (pp. 63-64)

With her disdain, Earlene undermines Tasha’s voice as a mother and as a daughter, but Tasha eventually gains support from others and learns to encourage herself and lean on faith seen (Imani) and unseen (God) to comfort her.

Ruby’s words and actions in *Homefront* also reveal the consequences of mothers’ fears and anxieties about growing up Black and female and raising Black daughters. Gayle is an outspoken teen with a sassy mouth, but similar to Tasha, “Gayle had no say” with her mother (p. 19). Ruby lacks faith in her daughter and often makes decisions for her. After Gayle gets pregnant a second time, Ruby makes plans to send Gayle down South to live with family. Before she carries Gayle off to the abortion clinic, she informs her:
“I gave you your one mistake,” she said. “Thought you’d learn something.”

“Where we going?”

“Women’s Clinic.”

“For what?” Gayle asked.

“Don’t be cute. Cute got you where you at.”

“S’pose I want to keep it. It’s mines.”

“As long as you fourteen and in my house, you mines,” Mama said. “Only one woman in my house. I say what goes on in my four walls—and I’m not having it. What you think I’m running? Does my door say South Jamaica Welfare Hotel? No. Do you see Hoe House on my mailbox. No . . .”

Gayle giggled, then laughed out loud. “See, Mama. You be pissing me off and making me laugh at the same time.”

Mama kept her pace. “Laugh now,” she said. “The joke won’t be on me and it damn sure won’t be on you. Not while I’m living.” (pp. 3-4)

Although Ruby and her daughter are both mothers and Gayle has been doing womanly things, Ruby reminds her daughter that she is the only woman and that, at fourteen, Gayle is still a child. Gayle, however, associates womanhood with sexual experience, and Gayle, having been pregnant twice, enthusiastically claims her woman-identity. Gayle also associates womanhood with showing little or no emotion and tellin’ it like it is. One day, Gayle scolds her cousin Cookie, “Stop crying, Cuz. You know I can’t stand all that boo-hooing . . . I’ve been toughing it out since day one and my eyes are still dry. Know why? ‘Cause I’m a woman. Can’t be crying about every little heartbreak” (p.144, italics mine). Ruby’s drastic abortion and relocation plan
for Gayle is her attempt to save her daughter from the struggles of inner-city, single, teenage Black motherhood with two children.

Ruby, known to family down South as Ruth Bell, is a widowed mother of two, and she is the sole economic provider for her family. She is not a central figure in this story, however, and after the first three chapters we get no more direct quotations from Ruby, only brief mentions of her when Gayle thinks, or laughs, about what her mother would say. As the sole provider, Ruby is away from home working much of the time. For Black mothers, Hinton-Johnson (2004) explains, “work outside the home is an expression of love their families, particularly their children, not negligence (p. 48),” and for Ruby, like other single mothers, this type of expression does not come without a price. The physical distance between Gayle and her mother is as great as the emotional distance between them. There is a large gap in their communication and knowledge of each other which accounts for this lack of closeness and bonding. The silences between Gayle and her mother run so deep that after Gayle receives an abortion, Gayle and her mother barely say a complete sentence to each other as they wait for a ride home. Mother, unwilling to give her daughter space and daughter, unwilling to request it of her mother. Neither willing to be vulnerable: “Mama said the cab would be there any minute, but that was all she said. They looked off in opposite directions as they waited. Mama wouldn’t give Gayle room to vent her feelings about her ordeal and Gayle wasn’t about to volunteer the details of her pains” (p. 9).

Joyce, too, is reluctant to share her feelings with her mother. Having been left to be cared for by her aunt much of her life, she assumes her mother does not have time to deal with her concerns. She figures:
There was no way she could talk to her mama—even though Mama said “you can tell me anything.” Mama had already been a woman at fifteen, had her own baby, dealt with men—not boyfriends—but men . . . Besides, Mama was too tired to talk after a day of wrestling down sick folks at Jamaica Hospital. Even though Moms never came out and said it, all of Joyce’s secrets would be foolishness in Mama’s eyes. (pp. 10-11)

Indeed, it is actually Minnie’s personal experiences that make her very aware of the feelings and struggles that Joyce faces in her adolescence and cause her to deal with Joyce using great caution and even skepticism. When Minnie sees Joyce walking with J’had, she immediately begins to reflect on her own coming-of-age experiences and to loathe the feelings and realities her daughter is about face:

Without warning she flamed into rage. A rage brought on by fear and knowing. The kind that consumed her when her ten-year-old girl was sent home from school with her first sanitary napkin. The kind that made Minnie slap Joyce when she accused the stepdaddy of looking at her all funny. Seeing them together, all slow and in the dark, ground into her womb. Even in the dark she knew that boy was tall and handsome and stirring feelings between her baby’s legs and she hated him. That boy. Hated that boy for taking her baby. Hated that boy for making her little girl a woman. (pp. 85-86)

The silence gets broken between Minnie and Joyce when Minnie consoles her daughter after she is rejected by J’had. Joyce gets consumed by her body’s budding sexuality, and she turns to J’had to fulfill her growing need for love and affection. As a Muslim, J’had does not want to touch a woman unless he is married to her. When he and Joyce begin to fall into temptation, he runs away, leaving Joyce to recover alone from their intense moment. When
Joyce arrives home, she and her mother have a talk, not just mother-to-daughter, but woman-to-woman. They learn a lot from and about each other. Joyce explains to her mother:

“We didn’t do nothing . . . I wanted him but he didn’t want me.” Joyce started crying.

“Are you crazy, girl?” Mama’s lips trembled long after she finished screaming.

“I just needed him so bad, Mama. I needed him to love me.”

“You have love right here, baby,” Minnie said. “Don’t I feed you? Put a roof over your head? Scrimp and put up with trash on the job so you can go to any college you want?

That’s all for you.” (p. 113)

Like many African American mothers, Minnie finds herself explaining to Joyce that working and providing food, clothing, and shelter for her family is showing love, but Joyce, like Hannah (Sula) and Afeni (Dear One), also needed her mother’s time, affection, and attention. She especially needed her mother’s words to affirm her beauty and identity as a young Black girl: “If you loved me you wouldn’t have left me with Aunt Em all those years. That crazy old witch. Making me feel ‘shamed of my tail and making me get down on my knees and pray every time a man looked at me. You wouldn’t have left me with her if you loved me” (p. 114). Joyce believes that her mother can’t relate to her longings for love and companionship, but Minnie lets her daughter know that although it is a different time, from a mother’s view, some things don’t change:

“Things ain’t the same like when you was my age,” Joyce countered, turning her mother off. That was then.

“What’s different? I needed loving. So Eddie gave me all the so-called love I needed. And there I was giving up a precious part of me to some jive high-school dude who
didn’t know what gold he had. Didn’t know and didn’t want to know. I cried every night.”

“We always go looking for someone to love us. We forget to love ourselves first,”
Minnie imparted from her personal scriptures, According to All Mothers.

“But Mama, it be so lonely.”

“I know baby. But sometimes, alone is better.” (pp. 114-116)

After this talk and connection with her mother, Joyce comes into herself. In a sense, it serves as Joyce’s rite of passage. In some instances, it is African American young people’s experience with racism that robs them of their innocence and jolts them into adult awareness of life and circumstances. In Homefront and Imani, Gayle and Tasha grow into womanhood through their experiences as teenage mothers. In Blue Tights, we see the shades of innocence ripped away from Joyce as she comes to know about “womanly things.” Joyce does not experience teenage motherhood or sexual intercourse, but it is her growing sexuality, curiosity, and interest in boys that leads her into intimate thoughts and situations. Minnie’s sense of these thoughts and experiences, and her concern for her daughter, lead her to probe Joyce and initiate a conversation with her. In this moment of “truth-telling” (hooks, 1993; Debold, Wilson, & Malave, 1994; Ward, 1996) and transparency, Minnie is able to apologize to Joyce for telling her that she ruined her life and recognize the real source of her pain—wanting to be and feel loved. Minnie does not make Joyce feel ashamed of her body, her thoughts, feelings, and sexuality as her sister Em does. Instead, as Minnie cleanses her woman-child in a vinegar bath after being

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12 See Audre Lorde’s (1982) Zami: A New Spelling of My Name. Lorde talks about experiences with racism in her Catholic school upbringing that her mother tried to prepare her for. In one instance, Lorde ran for class president among her white classmates. She lost. When her mother saw her tears and heard her dismay, her mother lashed back with a few slaps and a harsh warning: “Child . . . just do what is for you to do and let the rest take care of themselves” (p. 65).
out with J’had and coming in from the rain, Minnie teaches her daughter about womanhood—to love her body, her mind, and her whole self. Minnie sees herself in Joyce, and she sees the woman in Joyce peaking out. She admits to herself that she is frightened by this, but her strength and willingness to be open with her daughter allows Joyce to gain a new outlook on life, her family, and her self. Joyce emerges from this talk with the courage to walk out on a boy she once liked for disrespecting her, and she is able to say with confidence, “He’s not the prize. I’m the prize” (p. 135). She also rejoices in maturing in her thinking. While holding her teenage friend Gayle’s baby she thinks about “how she prayed to be full with J’had’s child only weeks ago. She laughed at herself for being so stupid and felt a little sad for Gayle, who might never know better” (p. 130). The opening of the lines of communication between Joyce and her mother increased Joyce’s self-confidence, improved her self-esteem and self-perception, and reshaped her worldview. Minnie and Joyce’s relationship was not perfect, and their truth telling moment did not come without struggle. Debold, Wilson, and Malave (1994) assert that these moments of truth are necessary and that mothers and daughters must communicate and begin to push through personal pain to get to collective healing.

Knowing the personal, social, emotional, educational, and socio-economic challenges that accompany Black womanhood as well as the parenting challenges that accompany single motherhood, Earlene, Ruby, and Minnie were determined to protect their daughters from youthful decisions that could take them a lifetime to recover from. Wade-Gayles (1984) explains that from the outside, these mothers’ approaches may, at times, seem “suffocatingly protective and domineering precisely because they are determined to mold their daughters into whole and self-actualizing persons in a society that devalues Black women” (p. 12). She urges that we “see
them [Black mothers] first as persons with dreams and needs no less important than ours, and then as mothers who sacrificed their dreams in order to put our hands on the pulse of freedom and self-hood” (p. 12).

Some studies report that Black girls are better able to cope with coming-of-age issues and struggles than White or Latina girls and have credited their success to family support (Debold, Wilson, and Malave, 1994; Orenstein, 2000). However, as these stories demonstrate, we must consider that some girls find themselves turning to mothers who know all too well the cruel jokes that life sometimes plays on Black women, and these mothers’ efforts to love and protect their daughters translate into “rage” (Groves, 1996; hooks, 1993; Lorde, 1982). This “rage,” Debold and others caution, represents “a mother’s fear for her daughter [that] simultaneously binds the daughter to the mother and prevents both from living as whole people” (1994, p. 145). The consequences of mothers’ fear, silence, and loss or suppression of voice are demonstrated in Tasha and Earlene’s relationship. Tasha and her mother share experiences of teenage pregnancy, single motherhood, feelings of isolation, anger, disappointment, depression, and wanting to feel and be loved, yet Earlene’s wounds prevent her from helping to make her daughter whole again, which, in turn, prevents Earlene from healing, as well. Tasha lacks inner peace as she carries around a secret from her mother, and she intends to make up a happy story to tell her daughter, which will continue the tradition of silence about the truth. In Homefront, not only does Gayle never receive license to voice her thoughts, hurts, insecurities, and desires to her mother, but she also lacks knowledge of her close and extended family history. Gayle has never heard her parents’ love story, and Ruby has never shared her talents or interests with her daughter. Her Aunt Virginia is surprised by this discovery, “Sweetie pie . . . I get the feeling you don’t know
your mother” (p. 117). Wade-Gayles encourages us to consider that mothers are people with strengths, weaknesses, and hurts like everyone else. While this is true, we must also consider the consequences of homeplaces, especially female-headed homeplaces, that do not offer adolescent girls a nurturing space for them to shape their identities and for their voices to sound, develop, and thrive. We must also recognize the impact of affection and support that is only implied and never outspoken. We can neither deny nor ignore the negative effects that mothering without laughter, smiles, kind words, and warm embraces has on daughters. In *Sisters of the Yam*, hooks (1993) reflects upon her upbringing and the emotional impact of her mother’s fiery tongue. She writes:

Understanding [her] hardships made the constant harsh humiliating way she often spoke to us make sense. I find it easy to forgive that harshness, but I now can also honestly name that it was hurting, that it did not make me or my siblings feel securely loved. Indeed, I always felt that not behaving appropriately meant that one risked wrath and punishment, and more frighteningly, the loss of love. (p. 38)

Daughters need mothers’ honest and sincere revelations about life; their affection, guidance, and discipline; their acceptance of their uniqueness and understanding of their personal and social struggles; as well as mothers’ encouragement to discover their voices and reach deep within themselves and find their life’s passions and pursue them. Along these lines, Ward (2007) contends that “Black women’s power lies in their ability to encourage their daughters to use their social knowledge to calculate their strengths and weaknesses and to deal with the limitations they face” (p. 252). Instead of “tongues of fire” truth telling, which can be harsh, spirit-breaking, and

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13 Pastor et al. (1996) describe homeplaces as “a safe space where one can weave whole cloth from the fragments of social critique and sweet dreams” (p. 15).
may “prevent the development of a secure identity, impair a child’s ability to form and sustain satisfying relationships with others, and discourage her belief in her own ability to effect change” (1996, pp. 94-95; hooks, 1993), a critical need, Ward explains, is “Liberatory Truth Telling . . . talking to our girls about their racial and gendered realities” (2007, p. 257; hooks, 1993). Ward declares that “providing the support [girls] need to read, name, effectively oppose, and ultimately replace the ‘injuries of the isms’ requires adult participation and thoughtful and loving patience.” She insists, and I concur, that “We owe this to our girls. We owe it to ourselves” (pp. 257-258).

**Coming-of-Age**

Coming-of-age is one of the most prevalent themes in young adult fiction. In the African American women’s literary tradition, stories for young adult as well as adult audiences have characterized not only the physical, emotional, and social changes associated with adolescent maturation, but most especially the gender, racial, and economic realities that often complicate the adolescent period for Black females (Jacobs, 1861/2002; Marshall, 1959; Morrison, 1970; Guy, 1973; Morrison, 1973; Childress, 1982; Kincaid, 1985; Souljah, 1999; and many others). Several studies have highlighted Black girls’ resiliency during adolescence and their tendency to have more positive self-regard and to cope better with coming-of-age issues during adolescence than White or Latina girls (AAUW, 1991; Debold, Wilson, and Malave, 1994; Orenstein, 2000). However, a more critical analysis of Black girls’ adolescent experiences will reveal that while Black girls may have learned coping strategies for dealing with certain issues, they are not immune to identity, self-esteem, weight, or other coming-of-age struggles.
Through their YA stories, Flake, Williams-Garcia, and Porter speak back to reports that suggest that Black girls are protected from certain identity or body image issues. They make evident in their stories the complex struggles that Black adolescent girls endure on various levels, including body image dissatisfaction, tensions within familial and social relationships, sexual exploitation, and educational and economic inequalities, and they demonstrate that these issues weigh heavily on the minds, bodies, and spirits of Black adolescent women. Their YA stories demonstrate that Black girls’ and Black women’s verbal and non-verbal self-confidences should not be mistaken for an innate “superstrong Black woman” ability to survive hardship and oppression, but rather they may represent a learned ability to cope with racial, gender, and social adversities (Hesse-Biber, Howling, Leavy, & Lovejoy, 2004).

In the following discussion, I explore the ways in which young, Black female characters in selected young adult novels negotiate Black girlhood. I describe the personal and social encounters that characters experience that shape their identities and worldviews, self-images and perceptions, standards of beauty and body images, and relationships with boys and other girls. Similar to the lived experiences of African American teenage girls, some of the characters in these stories learn to resist internalizing damaging messages regarding race, gender, class, sexuality, and body image, yet there are others who lack the much needed support of caring adults and peers to aid them in their triumph over these issues.

Ladner (1971), Cauce et al. (1996), and Kaplan (1997) assert that Black youth are often socialized as adults much earlier than their White counterparts, making the adolescent period a short-lived time in their young lives. In regards to Black female youth, Collins (2000) argues

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14 See Wallace (1979) and Collins (2000) for a discussion of controlling images and stereotypes of Black women.
that this early socialization is the result of intersecting oppressions that have fueled controlling images of Black women and have therefore tainted and dominated U.S. society’s view of and interactions with U.S. Black women. Ladner (1971) contends that the affect of controlling images, stereotypes, and intersecting gender, sexual, race, and economic oppressions on adolescent Black girls is that “the standard conception of the ‘protected, carefree, and non-responsible’ child has never been possible for the majority of Black children” (p. 47). She further explains that “at the age when girls outside this [Black] community are playing with dolls and engaging in all of those activities which reflect childhood, girls within its borders are often unable to experience this complete cycle. The societal canon of ‘childhood’ is often unobserved to varying degrees because it is a luxury which many parents cannot afford” (p. 51).

For Blue Tights’ fifteen-year-old Joyce, self-definition and maintaining a positive sense of self is a daily struggle. Throughout her preadolescent and adolescent years, Joyce’s body is the center of everyone’s attention, and she has to contend with stereotypes and expectations about her gender, body, and sexuality in her home, her school, and in her neighborhood. Her Aunt Em makes her “feel ashamed of her body;” her teacher, Ms. Sobol, suggests that she has too much body; and the men on the corner want to take advantage her body. Enduring the gaze and jeers of men in her neighborhood becomes an everyday occurrence for Joyce, and she eventually comes to “pay no attention to the usual comments from men waiting on the sidewalk for some young thing to trot by. She didn’t jump back and get even when they yelled, “Gat damn, baby! Are they real?” or “Good golly, girl, tear the house down!” By the time she was twelve she knew her first name was either Good Golly or Stack Attack” (p. 47). Joyce is also highly sexualized and stigmatized by her peers, and she is known by them not for her high grades but
for her “big butt.” Girls and boys assume that Joyce is “easy” and experienced sexually because of her shapely body. Emerson (2002) notes the “outsider status” that Black girls are often relegated to as a result of racist controlling images. As she explains:

Black girls, due to the nature of the sexualized racism that serves as the foundation of the controlling images of the Black womanhood, may possibly occupy an outsider status when it comes to dominant notions of feminine identity and sexuality. The racialized nature of the sexist expectations of femininity seem to create a paradox, a contradiction for young Black girls in which they are expected to live up to those images, yet are constantly derided for being ‘inherently’ racially inferior to White women and girls. (pp. 89-90)

In response to Joyce’s experiences with strangers’ and peers’ sexual insults, her Aunt Em “used to make her pray to be a nice girl. Men don’t say that to holy and sanctified girls” (p. 47). By strangers and family, she is treated as being responsible for her physical features and therefore deserving of the negative and unwanted attention, exploitation, and violation rendered to her.

The attention called to Joyce’s body is reminiscent of that given to the “Hottentot Venus” in the nineteenth century. Both Joyce and the “Hottentot Venus” are publicly ridiculed and belittled, and their shapely bodies gazed upon by men and women. Their bodies are treated as unnatural and “exotic,” and they are made objects of people’s affection and disdain. Joyce is treated as less than a young woman because to men, her physical features convey not a young woman to be loved and respected, but rather a sexual object to be used for one’s own

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15 A popular nineteenth century French exhibit of Sarah Bartmann, an African woman, was publicly displayed for view because of what Europeans described as her “primitive” physical features, especially her genitalia and her buttocks. This exhibition was also known as the “Hottentot Venus” (Gilman, 1992).
gratification. When she looks for a job at a department store, she approaches a male security
guard for directions. Joyce does not receive a professional reply, but rather a sexual invitation:
“‘I’m looking for a job.’ ‘You can work for me,’ he said, scoping her up and down . . . ‘Just tell
me where Personnel is.’ ‘Third floor, baby’” (p. 37).

Joyce’s mother, Minnie, appeals to Joyce to change the image she conveys by altering her
dress and sense of style. Though Joyce wishes for nicer clothes, she rejects her mother’s
criticisms. Minnie remarks:

You know, Joyce, none of these boys will give you the proper time of day if you don’t
take better care of yourself. Joyce got offended immediately and stopped herself just
short of sucking her teeth. You fifteen years old and always in them dern sneakers and
that ragamuffin sweatshirt. You’s too womanly to be dressing like some wild junior high
school ditty-bop. That was fine last year, but you’re in high school. A middle-class high
school. You should be more ladylike. Do something neat with that hair. Can’t even see
your face. (pp. 44-45)

Minnie’s disapproval makes Joyce feel isolated in her struggle, “Mama was on their side. What
did she know about boys staring at her booty all day long?” (p. 45). Ironically, Minnie cites
attention from boys as one of the “benefits” of Joyce’s body image enhancement, but, with little
primping and fashion, Joyce already attracts much unwanted and unhealthy attention from boys
and men.

Though Joyce recognizes Black girls’ and women’s diverse physical attributes, the
rejection by peers and the negative attention to Joyce’s body eventually takes a toll on her. In
response to her White dance teacher’s remarks about her body shape and form, Joyce wonders,
“What’s wrong with white people, anyway? Don’t they know that this is just how black folks are made? How come she don’t see nothing wrong with any of these no-tail, no-hips, no-nothing nons? Just me? (italics original, p. 29). In spite of her self-confidence, “I’m sorry. But God made me a real woman (p. 4),” she begins to struggle with accepting and embracing her physical features. She begins to overlook her personal ideas of beauty and starts giving credence to other people’s definitions. As a result, she misses seeing her own beauty: “Joyce . . . couldn’t be forced to look at herself in the mirror. Even in class, she gazed at the floor to avoid the confrontation between herself and her face. She was terrified of seeing what everyone laughed at” (p. 32).

While Joyce, a dancer like her mother, is ridiculed in her school ballet class for her “big butt” and her “distracting” bodily features (p. 4), when she stumbles upon an African dance class in her community where women have complexions, shapes, and sizes like hers, she is able to free herself from other people’s standards and expectations and is able to grow in spirit and in self-esteem as a dancer and as a young, Black female. The Afrocentric environment of the Kuji Je Tea Ujana Dance Ensemble, which means “pride in youth” (p. 95), provides the culturally-relevant space that Joyce had been lacking to nurture her evolving Black female identity and affirm her bodily features and the way that she feels about those features. “Joyce made notes on every other female. She watched them dancing with vigor and grace, uninhibited breasts and buttocks jiggling to the demands of the movements. Their shapes and sizes had such as variety that she lost her uniqueness in the studio. She was just another dancer” (p. 60). In this environment, she is not only taught discipline as a dancer, but she is also taught how to cultivate moves that come naturally for talented, young Joyce, “Joyce heard the drum within her and
stirred a mighty passion of feet and hips and head” (p. 121). Through the cultural environment of the dance class, and eventually through the reaffirmations of her mother, Joyce begins to stand firm on her own definition of beauty, and her self-worth is renewed. Hesse-Biber et al. (2004) argue that racial identity affirmation and positive discussions about body image from mothers play a critical role in cultivating a healthy sense of self among African American girls. As they explain:

These factors in turn serve to protect African American women from developing serious body image concerns because these factors influence them to reject White standards of weight and beauty. For African American girls, mothers become particularly salient in that they are often the root of perpetuating racial identity, self-esteem, and non-internalization. The mothers of the African American girls in our study taught their daughters to be proud of their culture and their heritage. They taught them to be confident in themselves as women . . . And perhaps most importantly they taught them to be comfortable with their body size. (p. 72)

With support from family and community, Joyce comes to value and embrace the “prize” that she sees in the mirror (p. 135).

Unfortunately, lack of familial, community, and peer support make it especially difficult for some girls to emerge from the adolescent years having developed a healthy and positive sense of their self-worth and beauty. An example of the social and emotional trauma that can result from unforgiving beauty standards can be found in a short story titled “The Ugly One” from Sharon Flake’s Who Am I Without Him? Asia Calloway, a freshman in high school, is labeled “the ugly one” by her peers. In this instance, it is not Asia’s skin color, hair, or weight that make
her stand out, but the beauty standards in her teenage world call for someone who does not have bumps on her face. Asia suffers from a skin condition, and as a result, is treated as an outcast among her peers. Because Asia is not accepted as beautiful by her peers, she is treated as “other” and therefore falls victim to name calling, shoves, and other crude actions. Though she sometimes fights back physically to combat the verbal assaults from peers, this approach usually backfires as she is quickly seen by adults around her as the source of her own problem. Asia’s alternate approach to dealing with her peers is to try to be invisible in school. She has a 3.98 grade point average, but she does not speak in class. Her self-description: “I am just a regular girl. Not too tall. Not too short. Not fat, or skinny, or nothing. If it wasn’t for my face, people would not even remember my name. But this thing—this face—gets me noticed everywhere I go. And all I want to be is invisible—to curl up like a dot at the end of a sentence and disappear” (p. 51).

The label “ugly” is a term accepted and used by others against Asia. She is labeled as unbeautiful, ugly, by her peers as well as her family members. Her younger brother tries to console her but just reifies her otherness. Barley, age nine, instructs, “Just ‘cause you ugly, don’t mean you can’t have friends” (p. 55). Her grandmother “encourages” her to think of herself as like “the ugly duckling,” “one day [you] will grow up and be beautiful . . . but she don’t tell me what to do now, while I’m still ugly, and all by myself” (p. 50). Asia is expected to do the work of making others abandon their discriminatory actions and beliefs and adopt new notions of beauty, but Asia eventually begins to internalize the “ugly” label and barely notices her own beauty. Because peer friendships are not seen as an option for her, she turns to fantasy and pretends to befriend a male model in a magazine. Protected by the walls of her bedroom, Asia
feels free to share her hurt. In Asia’s pretend world, the Jamaican male model affirms her beauty. Dressed in her best dress for him, she expresses her discontent with her face, and he consoles her with, “In here you are the most beautiful girl in the world. The love of my life” (p. 57). Ramon, the magazine model, then comforts her and shares his disdain for the word “ugly.” He explains, “In here, you belong to me. And I won’t let anybody hurt you . . . or be mean to you. Or say that word I hate” (p. 57). Ladner (1971) asserts that it is within one’s peer group that girls begin to define various elements of their identities, including what it means to be feminine, attractive, and what it means to be a woman. Asia’s self-acceptance and self-definition is troubled by her struggle to gain acceptance and achieve a peer standard of beauty that loathes physical characteristics that appear out of the norm. Peer rejection isolates Asia to the point of make believe friendships and puts her at great emotional risk.

In “Get Real!: Cultural Relevance and Resistance to the Mediated Feminine Ideal,” Duke (2002) discusses the ways African American and European American girls in her study interpreted teenage magazine images and ideals. She notes that while African American girls read the magazines, they did not accept the beauty ideals prescribed by them. Unlike Asia’s experience, she reports that the African American girls in her study did not “find the unrealistic nature of the text particularly pleasurable as fantasy material . . . [they] compared the fictional work to their real-world experience and not only denied the veracity of the ideal but preferred their reality to it” (p. 223). Asia’s story underscores the diversity in African American adolescent female experiences and challenges readers to consider the oppressive nature of beauty standards and the social and emotional consequences connected to not only perpetuating beauty ideals but also internalizing and striving towards them.
In *Imani All Mine* (Porter, 1999), Tasha reveals her growing into womanhood struggles and shares her spiritual journey towards a self-definition of beauty, womanhood, and motherhood. Although Tasha is a mother, she is also at the tender age of fifteen, and she voices still wanting and needing direction and affection from her mother (p. 47 & p. 115). Like many of the other teenage girls in the novels in this study, Tasha and her mother Earlene are mostly out-of-relationship with one another (Crew, 1994). There are no exchanges of hugs or kisses, smiles or laughs, or even kind words, and Tasha narrates the novel through the voice of a young, teenage woman who is in need of companionship, support, understanding, and love. Without her mother or any other cultural resource to nurture a sense of pride in personal beauty, race, or culture, she often finds herself scanning the colorful pages of *Seventeen* magazine in hopes of finding words or faces that seem to relate to her struggles. Finding none, she mostly settles on imagining that she is living the good life portrayed by the thin bodies and smiling, youthful faces. Unlike the high-fashion, picture-perfect world of *Seventeen* magazine, Tasha’s everyday life is filled with the challenges of mother-daughter relations, the responsibilities of motherhood, the pressures of school life, the risks of living in an impoverished, urban environment, and the emotional trauma of surviving rape.

Tasha is violated several times within the novel, physically, socially, and emotionally, and she is constantly confronted with other people’s ideas about her beauty. These confrontations, mostly negative, seem to fuel her low self-esteem and her own negative views about her body image and physical appearance. Tasha attributes her loneliness to her weight and appearance and cites loneliness and a longing to be and feel loved as the reason why she is so naïve when it comes to dealing with boys. Throughout the novel, Tasha’s violations are framed in the context
of her body image and weight. For instance, when she is raped, her assailant demands, “Now shut up, you fat bitch (emphasis mine), and take down your fucking pants” (p. 51). With regret, she reflects back on the incident, “Thinking he really liked me. As fat as I am. As black as I am. As much as my body look like it ain’t never supposed to be loved by no boy. Touched by no boy” (p. 49). Feeling foolish and rejected, Tasha begins to adopt responsibility for this physical violation reasoning that she is undesirable and therefore should have been skeptical of a male’s advances. Sadker & Sadker (1995) note the sometimes detrimental effect of the antithetical perceptions that girls and boys embody regarding gender and sexuality. These perceptions, they assert, play a key role in girls’ and boys’ interactions with other, views of each other, and their views of themselves.

As girls move into adolescence, being popular with boys becomes overwhelmingly important, the key to social success. They look to males for esteem, hoping to see approval and affirmation in their eyes. But if the [negative] attitudes expressed in the male stories of gender changing are any measure, girls are seeking comfort in a carnival mirror, one sending back an image so grotesque and misshapen that its distortion is startling. (pp. 84-85)

In a social and emotional sense, Tasha feels violated and disrespected when she attends a doctor’s appointment for a check-up. The doctor and Earlene begin to rob Tasha of her voice when they have a discussion about Tasha with disregard for her emotional and psychological well-being.

Your weight is up, she say. It’s not healthy to weigh so much. Don’t you exercise? I be tired, I say, which is the truth. You a young girl, she tell me. You shouldn’t be tired. You
tired because you overweight. She say she run five miles everyday. All the while she say these things, she didn’t even look at me. She didn’t even look at me when she ask, Why you have a baby so young? I swear I felt like jumping off that table and smacking her. Ain’t none of her business why I have a baby. Mama say, That’s what I want to know. The doctor looked at her and they started talking about me like I wasn’t even there. (p. 21)

Tasha remains invisible and just another teenage mama in the doctor’s eyes until Earlene shares Tasha’s high grades in school and Tasha shares her plans to be a pediatric nurse, “Mama say . . . Tasha a smart girl. Get all A’s. Really? The doctor ask. That’s the first time she act like she was interested in me, like I was more than some fat-ass dumb ugly black girl” (p. 22). Younger (2003) criticizes young adult novels for the ways female characters who are not the ideal size are objectified and “othered.” She argues that even in an effort to diversify the images that young adults encounter in texts, young adult novel authors reify stereotypes of heavy and thin young women. She asserts:

In a revealing intersection of sexuality and body image, heavy characters are all represented as sexually promiscuous, passive, and powerless, while thin characters appear responsible and powerful. Promiscuous sexual activity, criticized and vilified, is linked to a character’s weight. These associations of weight with sexuality serve a dual purpose in Young Adult texts; they reinforce negative ideas about body image and signal the reader to read a fat character as sexually suspect. (emphasis mine, p. 47)

Suspicion turns into desire when Tasha’s schoolmate, Peanut, begins to take interest in her. Tasha’s first offer of praise related to her body is from Peanut, but she doubts his sincerity
and rejects his advances, “I like you, he say. No, you don’t, I say. I’m fat. No, you ain’t, Peanut say. You big. Thick. My mama like that. That’s the way I like girls to be. I start laughing. What’s so funny? Peanut say. I’m for real” (p. 30). Peanut begins to set a new standard for Tasha, and instead of “fat,” or “black,” or “dumb,” she’s now thick and desirable. He doesn’t mind her stretch marks or her huge breasts. He begins to offer Tasha a new way of viewing herself, as a woman. In her mother’s eyes, motherhood made you grown, but to Peanut, grown was having orgasmic sex. With his soft touches and affirming words, Tasha accepts Peanut’s view, not her mother’s.

I ain’t no girl no more. Not because Mama say I grown, not because Imani made me grown. Peanut did. I became a woman that last night he was over. Peanut just kept pushing in and out of me and each time he did, I breathed inside of him and he breathed inside of me . . . You know what this mean, don’t you, Tasha? No, I say. Peanut say, Tonight, I made you a woman. I wasn’t ready for Peanut telling me that. I ask, For real? He say, Yeah, for real. (pp. 146-147)

Tasha’s sexual experience with Peanut redefines for Tasha what beauty is and what womanhood is. She discards how others have defined her to this point and embraces Peanut’s sexualized idea of womanhood. Peanut has not only embraced what others have discarded, but he has also called beautiful what others have seen as fat and ugly. Although Peanut’s view of Tasha defines a new standard of beauty for Tasha, she still struggles emotionally and spiritually because it is not a perception and definition of beauty that she created for herself. It is still a label granted to her by someone else. According to Younger (2003), as a “thick” girl, Tasha’s agency throughout the novel is constantly undermined by what others do, think, and say about her. However, in the
midst of wrestling with relationship, standards of beauty, and self-esteem challenges, Tasha is faith-driven in her quest to overcome other people’s standards and perceptions of beauty and define it for herself.

At the end of the novel, Tasha experiences a spiritual and emotional cleansing as the women of the church surround and comfort her, and it is the power of their touch that grants relief and helps release Tasha from the bondage of ideals, expectations, and definitions set by others. Staples (2005) notes the significant role that spirituality plays in Black girls and women championing internal conflicts as well as external pressures. She writes that:

Amid awesome societal pressures induced by racism, sexism, and maltreatment, numerous African American women manage to maintain incredible successes as mothers, friends, sisters, daughters, and professionals. This success is often due to spirituality—a cultural anchor of Black femininity that so many African America women subscribe to. Recognition of the Higher Power and submission to the Love and Peace that can exist in our hearts and minds according to our own beliefs, choices, and subsequent actions, empowers many African American women as they construct their femininity. Over thousands of years, spiritual beliefs have been show to influence African American women’s understandings of forgiveness, liberation hope, justice, salvation, they meaning and purpose of life, and responses to oppression. (p. 5)

Tasha seeks refuge after her daughter Imani is gunned down in a drive-by. She finds herself at church, and through laying of the hands the women of the church offer Tasha the sincere, unconditional love that she has been thirsting for throughout the novel.
I ain’t see Eboni or Miss Lovey. I wanted them to come to me. To save me from what I was feeling . . . That old woman ain’t let me loose, and I was starting to feel like I ain’t want her to . . . I wanted her there. Wanted her to hold me right where I was. I needed her hands on me. Needed that circle of people that had formed around me. Laying they hands on me . . . I was filled. And them people helped me up. Helped me rise and walk. Like I was walking on water. Like Jesus touched my hand. Like I have a faith that’s all mine.

(pp. 210-212)

Though Tasha has lost her faith (Imani) in a physical sense, the community of women comfort her in a way that helps her to “find the blessing” in her loss, her hurt, and her pain. She emerges from this collective healing experience as a young woman who is confident, self-aware, and who has defined a faith, a freedom, and a Black feminine identity that is all her own. This Black feminine identity that she comes to define is “something that is emergent, resulting, and effectual—a kind of response to life’s work . . . It is assembled and organized according to the determination of the girl-to-woman human who [has cultivated] her self and her world” (Staples, 2005, p. 6). With great faith, Tasha integrates her Black feminine identity “with the world’s harsh reality, melding a distinctive feature of womanhood that should not be underestimated” (p. 6).

Spirituality and peer relationships play a key role in two cousins’ emergence into young womanhood in Rita Williams-Garcia’s *Like Sisters on the Homefront*. At first, cousins Gayle and Cookie appear to be from two different worlds—Gayle, a sassy, fourteen-year-old teenage

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16 “Finding the Blessing” is the title of a poem written by a teenaged girl named Niki in the movie “Holiday Heart” (Townsend, 2000). In the poem, Niki writes about maintaining faith in the midst of struggles. Cheryl West wrote the screenplay, which she adapted from her stage play entitled “Holiday Heart.”
mother from the North, and Cookie, a sixteen-year-old devout Christian from the South. However, as they share their personal and family stories, they learn to cherish familial relationships and family history. Their bonding also leads them to an increased awareness of self and teaches them to value each other’s unique Black feminine identities.

Displaced and feeling misunderstood, Gayle is certain at first that her kneesock-wearing cousin will not be able to relate to her. Cookie remains smiley-faced and pleasant towards her younger cousin and new housemate. Being close in age, it would seem that Gayle and Cookie would relate well to each other, but the contrast in their sexual attitudes and worldviews stifles bonding opportunities. For example, in an afternoon hairstyling and girl talk session, the differences in their opinions are made apparent:

Cookie replied with air about her, “I won’t go out with anyone who won’t meet Mommy and Daddy. Besides,” she said, admiring her new hairstyle, pulling her bangs more front than side, “I love when Daddy puts terror in their hearts.”

“But they won’t make a move.”

“Exactly,” Cookie said, beaming.

Gayle swept Cookie’s bangs off of her face. “Cuz, look in my eyes and tell me you don’t want that boy to touch you.”

Cookie raised her chin. “That’s not on my mind.”

“It’s on mine. I misses Troy. I could use some good sex, way yawl got me slaving. Shoot. I need to feel good,” she said.
Gayle’s free and unrepentant talk of sex stifled the sisterhood trying to grow between them. Cookie sat tense, unable to offer that little sound, that um-hm girlfriends feed each other. (pp. 109-110)

Their differing views of girlhood and womanhood are the source of much of their disagreements with each other. Gayle has a carefree attitude about sexuality and sexual activity, and Cookie is modest and reserved (in Gayle’s view naïve) when it comes to discussing sexuality and interest and boys. Cookie is also confident that her Christian values will help her withstand temptations and remain pure until marriage. Without having a personal spiritual standard on which to base her actions and thoughts, Gayle is unable to relate to Cookie’s approach to making life decisions. She explains to Gayle, “Look, Cousin. I know you don’t understand how I feel—you not being saved.” “Scuse my unsaved ass.” “See what I mean? Now, if you were saved you’d know I’m fighting a war inside. You’d know why I can’t just let go” (p. 124). Doswell, Kouyate, & Taylor (2003) argue that having a spiritual basis from which to base personal decisions and actions can help young people resist destructive lifestyles, early sexual behaviors, in particular. They assert, “a girl who exhibits spirituality will be a girl in touch with herself and her community and a girl able to self-regulate in the presence of peer pressure, temptations, and unwise choices” (pp. 195-196). Ladner (1971) notes that it is within the peer group that girls discuss and formulate their identities about femininity and sexuality, but while Gayle aims to create an atmosphere of sharing desires and testing out ideas with Cookie, Cookie relies on her Christian principles to help define her feminine identity. In contrast to Gayle, Cookie also values her mother’s actions and opinion as an example of womanhood and Christian living, and when Cookie turns to her
mother for advice about boys and her budding sexuality, Gayle does not understand or agree with her decision.

“See, Cookie, you get me sick. Why you gotta drag your mother in on this?”

“Mama’s okay,” Cookie assured her. “I can tell her anything.”

“You believe that?” Cookie nodded.

“Talk to me,” Gayle pleaded. “I’ll tell you what you need to know.”

“Mama will help me think things out.”

“Think things out? You need to stop thinking so hard and go while it’s flowing.”

That’s why Cookie could never be down like a home-girl. Instead of being tight with Gayle, Cookie let people come between them. First it was the Lord. Then Stacey. And when they talked about sex, something Gayle could contribute her full knowledge to, Cookie went running to her mother, of all people. (pp. 125 & 128)

Though they continue to differ about coming-of-age issues throughout the novel, they eventually begin to influence each other and function as the friend for which each is hoping. In another girl talk scene, growth in their relationship is made evident by their ability to joke with each other. Gayle begins to trash talk Cookie, and Cookie returns the favor by signifying on Gayle. Gayle gets excited about Cookie’s response and takes the remark as a sign of progress in their relationship.

“So? When Stiff Wood gets here, what yawl gon’ do? Look at your baby pictures and play checkers on the porch? I saw that on a movie ‘bout some old folks home.”

“Haw, haw. Very funny,” Cookie said. “But you won’t find my belly sticking out because some guy kissed me. I’m no fool.”
Gayle almost choked laughing. They were friends again. “Cuz! You snapped back!”

“That’s right,” Cookie said. “So don’t mess with me.” (p. 112)

By the end of the novel, Gayle’s peer pressure weighs on Cookie and challenges her faith, but Gayle’s reaction to Cookie’s rebellion reveals the affect of her cousin’s Christian influence. When Cookie attempts to defy her parents, Gayle pleads to her cousin, “You s’posed to be saved, Cookie! I know you hear me” (p. 163). In spite of their conflicts, Cookie and Gayle develop a relationship that helps to shape their evolving definitions of womanhood and of self, and they also develop a friendship in which they support each other, depend on each other, and hold each other accountable in the midst of their adolescent growing pains.

“Cuz. Let me save you. Just let me save you.” Gayle’s mouth opened. She tried to say it again—“Let me save you”—but could only mouth it. Something choked her, deep in her throat. It choked and choked and choked, then broke through. Tears. Down her eyes, her nose, her mouth. A mess. Just a mess. She couldn’t stop crying.

The car door opened and she fell in alongside Cookie. They sat and cried and cried hot tears long before either could speak.

“Let me save you, Cuz,” Gayle said. “Just let me save you.”


“Yawl,” Gayle sobbed. “All yawl.” (p. 164)

Support and Guidance for Girls

One of the most compelling themes that emerged from my reading of the selected AAYA fiction was what I describe as support and guidance for girls. In this section, I focus on the ways
othermothers, mentors, and other adults nurture the lives of Black female characters. I evaluate the significance of the presence, or absence, of adults who intentionally support and purposefully aid Black adolescent female characters in wrestling with internal conflicts, making healthy personal and social decisions, championing issues with self-esteem and identity, and finding one’s voice.

Outside of peers, adult women most often assume the role of confidant, mentor, or role model in adolescent girls’ lives. Historically, African American communities have relied on the support of women-centered networks to aid families in the nurturing of their youth. These women-centered networks often consist of blood relatives, “othermothers” (Collins, 2000), or “fictive kin” (Stack, 1974) who assist biological mothers in caring for their children. Although variations in the racial, economic, and social oppressions that African Americans endure have strained “cooperative approaches” and have affected the resources the Black communities rely upon for collective survival (Collins, 2000, p. 181), othermothers remain vital to sustaining the physical and emotional well-being of Black sons and daughters. Women-centered networks are especially important because “othermothers can be key not only in supporting children but also in helping bloodmothers who, for whatever reason, lack the preparation or desire for motherhood” (p. 180). In selected contemporary YA texts, othermothers—teachers, mothers of friends, neighbors, and aunts—seem to play a key role in the lives of young female characters, and the adolescent daughters in these stories are able to depend on the affirming words, hugs, and even quality time of women in their families and communities to support them in their young adult struggles.
In “Black Teenage Mothers and Their Daughters,” Kaplan (1996) argues that contrary to popular myths and opinions, Black women do not condone the pregnancies of their teenage daughters. Her study illuminates the strain in mother-daughter relationships that often occurs when teenage daughters become mothers, and her research revealed several reasons for greater conflict between teen mothers and their mothers. Her findings were that 1) adults mothers believed that their daughters’ teen motherhood “failed to adhere to the gendered norms about girls’ sexual behavior” (p. 432); 2) the teen mothers expected to be forgiven and “felt that their mothers were obligated to care for them (p. 432); and that 3) the loss of important relationships between friends and the children’s fathers, all while learning how to be mothers, were “abandonments that caused teen mothers to turn to their mothers for increased emotional and financial support, only to find both unavailable” (p. 432). Additionally, adult mothers reported that their daughters’ teenage motherhood was in conflict with their beliefs about marriage and motherhood and caused them to be “at risk both economically and morally” (p. 432).

As discussed in the previous section, these realistic tensions are also evident in the relationships between teenage mothers and their mothers in Homefront and Imani All Mine. Though the presence was not overwhelming, the girls in these novels have women around them who are vital resources and who are significant to their growth as care-givers and role models for their children and to their personal development as young women. Kaplan (1996) asserts that “when adolescence is skipped, as it is for teenage mothers, girls may not learn how to develop their confidence and independence” (p. 441). Emotional support for teenage mothers, then, is crucial.
Without guidance from her mother, *Imani All Mine’s* Tasha relies heavily upon her child care teacher Mrs. Poole for direction in raising Imani. One day after class, Tasha reveals to Mrs. Poole that she did not know the dangers of shaking a baby, and one time, she shook Imani out of frustration. Tasha feels horrible about the incident, and even after she reveals her mistake, Mrs. Poole is able to respond with understanding. Mrs. Poole affirms, “I know you respect your child. I seen you with her. You take good care of her, Tasha. You a good mother” (p. 71). The understanding, encouragement, and praise that Tasha had been longing for finally comes, not from her mother, but from Mrs. Poole. Tasha rejoices to herself: “I almost fell out my seat. Mrs. Poole say it! I’m a good mama! Her saying that felt better than if Mr. Toliver had marked all my papers a 100” (p. 71). Mrs. Poole tells Tasha, “Every parent need some help, especially a single parent. You girls is under pressure. Talk with your mama when you feeling frustrated. When you need help. Or you can talk to me if you want. Mrs. Poole say. And I was thinking, Yeah, right! Like I’m a-come to you like you a what? A friend? My mama?” (p. 71). Although Tasha does not view Mrs. Poole as an othermother, Mrs. Poole does act as an “othermother” towards Tasha, as well as the other young mothers in the class. Her students depend on her guidance on how to be a good mother. Tasha reports that she does not like Mrs. Poole, “Her breath stink, flat out (p. 4),” but it is Mrs. Poole’s words that she constantly replays in her head when she goes through her daily routines with Imani. Mrs. Poole also works to instill values in the young women that she teaches so that they can be good role models for their children. Tasha recalls: “Let me tell you, ladies, Mrs. Poole say. You must respect your children. It’s they right to be respected. They birthright. You have to set the example and teach them what respect is by being
respectful yourself . . . Sometime Mrs. Poole be making good sense, the kind of sense you know be right” (p. 19).

Tasha also receives support and affection from her Aunt Mavis. When her Aunt Mavis comes to visit, Tasha spends quality time with her cooking in the kitchen, something her mother would never let her do. Aunt Mavis esteems Tasha and lets her enjoy the power of her touch, as well:

Aunt Mavis let me grate cheese for the macaroni and cheese while she put on the greens to cook. She say, You know, Tasha, I like being here with you. With me? I say. Yeah, with you, she say. You lucky you got a girl. I always wanted me a girl to share pretty things with. She stopped pushing the greens down in the pot and come right up to me and give me a hug. I just stood there with a piece of cheese in one hand until she lets me go. (p. 75)

Tasha’s greatest affirmation comes from the healing words and hands of her friend Eboni’s mother, Miss Lovey. Miss Lovey exemplifies the ethic of caring and community service that Collins says has been common of Black women in African American communities. In addition to Eboni, Miss Lovey also takes care of two foster children. When talking about Miss Lovey, Tasha always has positive words to say and paints a warm picture. When Tasha visits Eboni after school, sometimes Miss Lovey rocks Imani and gives Tasha a break. Tasha sneaks and watches Miss Lovey love on the “state kids” and Imani at the same time, patting them to sleep and letting them benefit from the power of her touch. It is Miss Lovey’s touch that helps bring Tasha to her healing, as well. After Tasha misses days from school because she has seen the boy who raped her in the cafeteria, Miss Lovey has a talk with Tasha. Eboni has already shared Tasha’s
situation with her mother, and Miss Lovey tells Tasha that she should tell her mother. However, she does not pressure her to do so. Miss Lovey also urges Tasha not to let the boy who raped her keep her from getting her education, and she gives a name to the violation that Tasha experienced, rape, a word that Tasha had never used or admitted before. Miss Lovey also uses her hands to console Tasha, a healing that Tasha had never received before. She gives Tasha license to hurt as well as the woman-to-woman power of relationship and connection that Tasha needed to begin to heal, survive, and live through her experience. Miss Lovey replaces what was taken away from Tasha on that dark night in the trees with all that her name suggests, love, and she uses her whole self to help make Tasha whole again. The following passage indicates the other mother-to-daughter healing that takes place in Miss Lovey’s kitchen.

You know, Miss Lovey say, I been meaning to talk to you . . . Miss Lovey put one of her hands on top of one of mines. I know you’re scared of that boy who raped you. I looked down at the table. That was the first time that word had been said. Miss Lovey said it again. She say, I believe he did rape you. I ain’t say nothing. Miss Lovey reached over with her other hand and started rubbing my back. Round and round in circles like you rub a baby back to get them to sleep. Like I rub Imani. She say, It’s all right to talk to me about it. She moved up close to me and put my head down on her shoulder and kept rubbing my back with her hand all warm. Pulling me back from inside myself. She was pulling me back every time she made a circle. Made a circle. Made a circle. It was like she was looking for the place I was. Reaching down inside that cold dark with her warm hand. Picking me up from that ground. Pulling me out into the world where I opened my eyes into the soft light. (p. 58)
As Marshall (1992) explains, othermothers act as “bridges between biological mothers and daughters,” and this type of “laying of the hands” acts as a bond between women that feeds one’s psychological and physical being (p. 97). It nourishes one’s mental and physical need to know that she is cared about. Miss Lovey carries out many of the tasks that Tasha wishes her mother would, and she gives Tasha the physical embrace she has longed for from her mother. Crew (1994) asserts that othermothers “substitute for a lack and absence that is missing to the daughter from her maternal mother. Without the boundaries of the confines of the maternal, these othermothers nurture, train, and provide practical support to young women” (p. 93).

In *Homefront*, Gayle’s women-community increases from just her mother to include women in her extended family when she moves down South. Gayle’s aunt and her great-grandmother help transform her worldview and nurture Gayle into self-awareness and self-love. From the moment she arrives at the Gates Family Plantation in Georgia, Gayle’s Aunt Virginia, also her mother’s childhood friend, begins to adopt the role of othermother to Gayle. Gayle, however, tries to keep a safe distance from her new Southern family, and when her aunt Virginia tells Gayle that she can refer to her as “Auntie” instead of “Miss Aunt Virginia,” Gayle settles on “Miss Auntie” and “Miss Great” for her great-grandmother. Immediately, Virginia begins to nurture her niece in the ways expected of a Christian woman and First Lady of a church. Reminiscent of the Titus chapter two

17 woman, Aunt Virginia instructs Gayle on her roles and responsibilities. Sweetly, Virginia explains:

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17 Titus 2:3-5, “Similarly, teach the older women to live in a way that honors God. They must not slander others or be heavy drinkers. Instead, they should teach others what is good. These older women must train the younger women to love their husbands and their children, to live wisely and be pure, to work in their homes, to do good, and to be submissive to their husbands. Then they will not bring shame on the word of God” (BibleGateway, New Living Translation).
“Everyone has a job,” her aunt began. “Yours will be helping with the housework and caring for Great when Cookie is out. We are always in motion—be it for school, work, the church, or the community. We’re always moving and doing.” . . . “You see, we don’t have the kind of goings on you’re used to. We’re a family. Everyone’s actions impact on everyone else.” (p. 36)

Aunt Virginia begins to shape Gayle’s thinking and doing by teaching her the significance of her role in the household and the value of her role as mother to her son, Jose (called Emanuel by everyone but Gayle). Throughout Gayle’s stay, she learns from her aunt the hard work required of women taking care of their children, pursuing their education, and taking care of their family and community. She explains to Gayle:

“If you decide to go to school come fall, you’ll make baby-sitting arrangements with someone in the church.”

“Whatchoo mean if I decide? I don’t have to go to school? You not making me?” Miss Auntie caroled just as nicely, “You have enough education in your lap. If you don’t want to be bothered with school, no sense sending you out there for trouble.”

“Oh, snap! I can’t wait to tell Mama I ain’t going to school. She’ll flip. She’s always on me for schooling and doing homework and being somebody.”

“Why, Miss Gayle, you are somebody. You’re Emanuel’s mother (emphasis mine). As for homework, you’ll have plenty, so you need not concern yourself about school if you are not inclined.” (pp. 36-37)

Gayle’s aunt insists that mothering is not a pastime but a full-time job that requires much “homework,” and out-of-home work, as well. Presenting Gayle with school education as an
option and not a requirement lays the foundation for Gayle to begin to think about her choices, responsibilities, and actions, as well as the consequences of her actions.

Aunt Virginia also introduces Gayle to the “mother-community” that Joseph (1991) asserts is often lacking among young adult mothers. Gayle’s family and church community are a mother-resource, and Gayle is able to experience this firsthand one Sunday morning. When Jose gets lively in church, an usher quickly comes and swoops him away without warning, and she takes him to the nursery. When Gayle protests, her aunt replies, “He’ll be fine . . . He can play, get fed and changed. Now hush” (p. 81).

Even though from Cookie’s perspective, her mother does not “just take to mothering” like some women do because she “likes thinking too much to have kids running around every which way” (p. 59), Virginia’s nurturing of Jose (aka Emanuel) and her gentle moments of disciplining and teaching Gayle make evident the responsibility that she has undertaken to be a mother-model for Gayle. When Gayle calls her son stupid, Aunt Virginia comes running and toting wisdom:

“Did I hear right? Did you call this sweet little angel stupid? We don’t allow such a word in our house, let alone on a baby. He’ll grow up stupid because you told him he was stupid . . . “Emanuel, sweetheart,” she said, knowing full well his name was Jose, “you hungry, baby?” He stopped fussing the minute she opened her mouth. “Auntie will feed you.” . . . Not only had Miss Auntie undone her mothering, but she had managed to soothe her baby with her lilting voice. Gayle watched her son drool at the sight of Miss Auntie’s mouth oozing honey as though that were food enough. (pp. 57-58)

Aunt Virginia acts as the type of othermother that Troester (1991) describes in her essay “Turbulence and Tenderness.” Gayle’s aunt is “gentle and affectionate” where Ruby, Gayle’s
bloodmother, is “stern and demanding” (p. 163). Virginia’s Christian principles underlie her approach to mothering Cookie and to othermothering Gayle. Her affection towards Gayle does not come from touch or embrace, but it comes from words and actions. She shows her support and love by talking to Gayle, teaching her lessons, and by affirming her self-worth through encouragement. The narrator depicts Virginia as a kind and virtuous woman whose words and spirit make her difficult to combat. When Gayle complains about carrying her heavy son, Virginia promotes another way of thinking:

“He’s gotten so big with yawl feeding him everything in creation. He don’t walk and I ain’t got no stroller. Carrying kids around is backbreaking work.”

“Carrying them is easy. Raising them is backbreaking joy,” Aunt Virginia rejoined lyrically.

It would be easier if Miss Auntie would kick up a storm or had a big old ugly mouth like Mama. Mama could holler! Miss Auntie’s voice dipped, making it hard to stop listening to her magic even when she was getting you sick. (p. 96)

Towards the novel’s end, Virginia supports Gayle after Great shares with her the long-awaited family history. Feeling unworthy of “the telling,” Gayle questions why Great told her. She wonders aloud, “Why’d she do that. She knew I’m no genius” (p. 157). Aunt Virginia quickly follows up Gayle’s self-doubt with assuring and encouraging words:

“If all you remember is how valuable our family history is, then you’ve got it all. It’ll come out when you’re ready, sweetie. You’ll do just fine.”

“Miss Auntie, you always saying that.”
“That’s because I know you, Miss Gayle. You have good sense, like Great. It will all come together when you finish growing. Now, have some faith. Put some in God, some in yourself, and some in the people who love you. Give yourself a chance. You’ll do just fine” (p. 158)

Unlike Virginia’s modest conversations with Gayle, Great always “tells it like it is.” Great is quite witty in her old age and has some tricks, too. She sometimes fakes sleep to not have to deal with her granddaughter Cookie, but Great is very real with Gayle. When they first meet, Great immediately senses her own feistiness in her great-granddaughter and establishes a rapport with Gayle by joking with her: “Great pursed her lips like she had to spit. ‘Something ugly as you otta be sweet.’ ‘Granny, is you trying to break on me?’” (p. 50). Great also shares family recipes and secrets with Gayle, something she used to do with Gayle’s mother when she was younger. She even convinces Gayle that she is capable of executing a family liquor recipe, something her mother Ruby had done, as well. Great teaches Gayle her family history and urges Gayle to get the wisdom of her elders while she can. Great tells Gayle, “‘Ain’t been no making family recipe since Ruthie. We made it in secret, you know.’ ‘Now you want me to make it? . . . What I know ‘bout cooking up wine?’ ‘Best get this wisdom while I got it. I’mo pass it down like Mammy Gates passed it on to me’” (p. 52). She eventually passes on the family history to her Gayle before she dies. Like Virginia, Great also uses words to affirm Gayle. When Gayle continues to doubt she has the woman-sense to carry out the recipe that Great wants, Great tells her to just use the sense that she has to make the right decision. Great trusts Gayle’s woman-sense, and this trust helps Gayle to carry out Great’s request, “‘How’ll I know when the recipe’s ready?’ ‘It’ll ferment. Change colors. I’ll take some on the first change. Won’t last for the
second.’ ‘How’ll I know the first change?’ ‘Got eyes, ain’t you?’” (p. 74). Through their othermothering, Aunt Virginia and Great immerse Gayle in the folkways of her people, and they pass on a rich history to Gayle, oral, written, and tangible. Gayle’s son sleeps in a crib and uses a blanket that has been passed down through generations, she hears stories from Great about the powerful men in the family, and her hands work the same procedures that her mother performed when she made a long-time family recipe for Great. Great also prophesies that Gayle’s son will carry on the family heritage and become a great preacher someday. Virginia and Great use their wisdom, knowledge, and an underlying ethic of caring to offer the woman-community that Ruby hoped Gayle would benefit from by sending her to be with woman-kin down South. Through a woman-to-woman, elder-youth relationship, Gayle gains a sense of family and self that becomes key to her identity as a mother and to her overall development as a young woman.

Though there is much research to support the significant roles that women can and do play in nurturing the lives of adolescent girls (Hudley, 1992; Leadbeater & Way, 1996; Paul, 2003; Leadbeater & Way, 2007; Ward, 2007), an often neglected topic in discussions of adult-youth relationships, especially between ethnic minority girls, is the significant role that men can and should play in the lives of girls (Chadiha & Danziger, 1995; Way & Stauber, 1996; Baghban, 2001; Howard, Lefever, Borkowski, & Whitman, 2006). In the Flake, Porter, and Williams-Garcia texts examined in this study, girls’ relationships with their fathers or other adult male figures is not a central topic. However, it does emerge as an issue in *Imani All Mine, Blue Tights, Homefront,* and *Who Am I Without Him?*

In “A Letter for My Daughter,” from Flake’s short story collection *Who Am I Without Him?*, an absent father reaches out to his daughter in a letter that he writes to her, hoping to leave
her with some of the guidance and wisdom that a father is expected to provide for his daughter. This nameless father realizes that when he dies, he has no home, car, or fortune to leave behind for his daughter, so he decides to offer the only thing of value that he can—knowledge, “not the stuff you get from schoolbooks or National Geographic on TV. Street stuff. Boy Stuff.

Knowledge that your momma coulda used to take a different route through life” (pp. 212-213).

Readers do not learn his daughter Alicia’s perspective on the absence of her father in her life, but we are able to view her through father’s eyes as “a tall, smart, big-boned queen—living in the jungle, fighting off tigers” (p. 211). Though not as valuable, nurturing, and strengthening as an established and ongoing relationship, Alicia’s father makes it a point to finally reach out to her and teach her some things about life. Nameless Daddy teaches his daughter to value people’s character, not their coolness. He explains:

There’s some strong, but good boys out there . . . And when the good one’s come . . . don’t be sticking up your nose and saying how you know he ain’t the one ‘cause he act silly, can’t dance, or don’t hang with the cool kids at school. Baby girl, when you measuring a boy, a man, you better use a different kind of stick—not just one that tells you how popular he is. But one that can poke around his insides and see what’s in his heart, his head, and his habits. (pp. 163-164)

He also reminds his daughter to be strong-willed and determined, yet willing to move forward and learn from unwise choices. In nameless Daddy’s tenth lesson, he states to Alicia:

If you forget who you is, and end up with a knuckleheaded boy, don’t think you obligated to stay put. You got feet, don’t you? And a mind, right? So correct the situation. Be gone. Remember, a strong girl knows when she gone up the wrong street, and she ain’t
ashamed to back out, make a U-turn, and start again. Your momma taught me that. It took her way too long, but she saved herself and you in the end. You gotta do that sometimes. (pp. 167-168)

Daddy ends his letter by sharing the words with Alicia that some parents have found difficult to say in the selected works in this study, “Daddy loves you . . . the first man who ever loved you” (p. 168). This nameless father’s guidance is important for his daughter’s life, but it is unfortunate that so much time passed before it occurred. Readers do not learn whether Alicia was receptive to his attempts at reconciliation and relationship, but it is apparent that she is not alone in her struggle.

Like Alicia, YA novel characters Tasha (Imani All Mine), Joyce (Blue Tights), and Gayle (Homefront) also come-of-age without their father, and so do many other African American youth in cities across the United States. Tasha recalls the stories (lies) her mother told her about her father and his absence, and she reflects on the pain that she feels because of it. She resorted to creating stories about her father to mask the hurt and void in her life. She explains:

Mama has always told me that my daddy dead, but Aunt Mavis told me when I was little that far as she knew, he wasn’t. Him and Mama never married and broke up when I was a baby . . . I ain’t know nothing about that when I was a little girl, so I made up a story about my daddy. About him loving me. About him being tall and dark like trees. Big trees, and loving me so much that when he close his eyes, he still can see me. Even though he never do see me for real and I don’t know why. (pp. 105-106)

Without her father in her life, Joyce turned to an older man in her neighborhood for love and attention, and often sacrificed her self-worth for his pocket change and a moment of his time.
Even though he said he’d be there in five minutes, she caught irritation in his voice. He might not give her ten dollars this time. She might have to let him touch her. That was cool. She could handle it . . . He bought her two hamburgers and gave her ten dollars . . . He used his hands a lot when he talked, always slapping her knee, shoulder, or, sometimes, thigh . . . Knowing better didn’t count for much. Right now, Sam was the best friend she had ever had. Someone to talk to. (p. 5)

Gayle found little support from her Uncle Luther who made a hobby of being tight-lipped, stern, and cold towards Gayle, hardly making any effort at showing affection towards Gayle or establishing a relationship with her. When they first meet, the narrator notes that her uncle “stated as though it caused him immense pain, ‘I’m your Uncle Luther. This is my wife, Virginia, our daughter, Constance.’ She heard him perfectly, for his meaning rose above his creeping bellow. The skyscraping woman wasn’t her aunt. This big-boned girl wasn’t her cousin. They were his family. His” (p. 25).

Theorists note that “paternal relationships are important to a young woman’s development in terms of her own self-identity and heterosexual relationships” (Chadiha & Danziger, 1995, p. 98), but healthy relationships with male role models and mentors are lacking in these stories as well as in the lives of adolescent girls. Some daughters receive little or no emotional and physical support from their fathers or other male role models, so they must contend with the challenge of forging their adolescent identities in the midst of this void. On the other hand, Baghban (2001) points out that the involvement of African American fathers in YA literature is as diverse as the experiences and involvement of fathers in the lives of real teenage girls and boys where fathers range from being “physically present” or “occasionally present” to
“suddenly present” or “never present,” but “at the core . . . they care about their children. However, they care in very different ways” (p. 242).

In *Whatever Happened to Daddy’s Little Girl?* (2000), Jonetta Rose Barras relates her personal struggles as well as the struggles of other women dealing with “Fatherless Woman Syndrome,” and she gives insight as to how daughters can cope with their fathers’ absence, whether it be a result of death, divorce, or abandonment. As she explains, “The most important lesson for the fatherless daughter is learning how to love herself. If all symptoms of the Fatherless Woman Syndrome are ignited by one infectious germ—believing ourselves unlovable and unworthy of love—then eliminating that destructive element in our thinking begins to guarantee a more wholesome and healthy life” (pp. 237-238). The diverse and ever-changing dynamics of African American communities make crucial the need for mentors, role models, youth pastors, teachers, social workers and other adults to advocate on young people’s behalf, and these fiction and non-fiction stories make clear daughters’ need for fathers, mothers, extended kin, and “fictive kin” to thoroughly nourish the physical, emotional, and spiritual hungers that linger in their adolescent lives.

**SUMMARY**

Chapter three highlighted the literacy practices and literary traditions that African American women have used to resist dominant forces and speak in their own ways about social, political, racial, cultural, gender, economic, and personal issues. This chapter also discussed the value of Black feminist literary criticism and used this critical lens to analyze select works by African American female YA literature authors Connie Porter, Sharon Flake, and Rita Williams-
Garcia. A close reading of their selected works revealed three primary themes related to African American female adolescence: coming-of-age, mother(ing)hood, and support and guidance for girls. These authors’ stories depicted African American female adolescence in diverse, engaging, and real ways. They did not reify stereotypes of working-class, single Black mothers or urban Black teenage girls, but they demonstrated the pluralities of Black female coming-of-age, teenage motherhood, and mother-daughter relationships. Their stories depicted diverse Black female adolescent experiences, and their characters were aware of their physical environments, their families’ economic status, and the implications of being a young, Black girl from the hood. From these stories, readers learn some of the struggles that Black girls encounter and how they maneuver and survive in their environments.

In Pough’s *Check It While I Wreck It*, she explains the difference between stories about inner-city women that stereotype Black females and stories that offer full and complex depictions of Black women’s experiences. She asserts that writers who do the latter are able to use public spaces to “disrupt dominant masculine discourses, break into the public sphere and in some way impact or influence the U.S. imaginary” (p. 76). These YA literature writers disrupt what is expected of a typical adolescent novel, and they educate readers and advocate on behalf of youth by using literature to challenge readers to critique the ways in which physical environments, socio-economic status, and education impact one’s choices and outcomes. Young readers, especially, are challenged to think about how racial, gender, class, and social oppressions affect Black families, particularly Black girls and women. This chapter demonstrated how these authors, in the spirit of their literary foremothers and fellow Black women writers, used African
American YA fiction as a tool to tell Black girls’ and women’s stories and to challenge the ways we view Black teenage girls.
CHAPTER FOUR

“MOMMY COMMERE. YA HEARD DIS?”:

DAUGHTERS MAKING SENSE OF/WITH YA LITERATURE

Rosenblatt (1968, 1978) characterizes reading as a transaction, a back and forth, between reader(s) and text(s). Opposed to considering reading as “receiving meaning in texts,” this transactional view “regard[s] reading as the creation, in concert with texts, of personally significant experiences and meanings” (Wilhelm, 2008, p. 24). She asserts that with each experience with a text, new meanings will emerge: “Even if the reader immediately rereads the same text, a new relationship exists, because the reader has changed, now bringing her memory of the first encounter with that text and perhaps new preoccupations” (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. x). In Wilhelm’s You Gotta Be the Book! (1997/2008), he draws on Rosenblatt’s transactional theory as well as his years of classroom teaching, reflexive thinking, journaling, observing, documenting, and discussing with students their reading practices to uncover the various ways adolescents read. Wilhelm’s research gleaned 10 dimensions of response that adolescent readers drew upon as they transacted with texts, and he describes these dimensions in the context of three categories: evocative, connective, and reflective. The evocative dimensions classify transactions that point to an interest in the story and the characters. The connective dimensions describe ways that readers connect personally with characters and begin to extend their thinking, talking, writing, and relating beyond the world of the story. Finally, the reflective dimensions point to readers’ ways of evaluating the significance of the author and text.

In this chapter, I combine the Black feminist theoretical lens that undergirds this project with Wilhelm’s reader-response framework to analyze the ways the young ladies of the Umoja
book club “changed their own words” about literature, life, and themselves. The following sections address research questions two and three of this project and present findings that reveal a) the issues in AAYA texts that stimulated discussion, b) the ways African American female adolescent readers responded to these issues, and c) the ways that these readers made use of the out-of-school context in which we discussed literature. The chapter is organized thematically according to the most popular topics in the book club: relationships with mothers, relationships with boys, and support and guidance in the lives of girls. In these thematic sections, I analyze how the girls took up these issues and how they utilized the texts. This chapter also reveals the purposes for which the girls used the opportunity to discuss these issues.

Who Am I Without Her?: Book Club Conversations about Daughters and the Women in Their Lives

Bria: “That mother was crazy.”

Group responds: “Yes.”

Melvette: “Which mother was crazy?”

Bria: “The mother who kicked her daughter out. But, see, her problem was, she favored her son too much, and she was like, ‘Okay Imma do everything for my son,’ and she didn’t care nuttin’ about her daughter.”

Cheryl: “What do you think about the fact that she was like, ‘You’re going to get an abortion?’”

Nakia: “You don’t do that [get an abortion]. If you went out and did what you did, then you have to pay for the consequences. Sometimes the consequences may be bad,
sometimes it could be a blessing at the same time.”

**Bria:** “I think, with her mother, I think if you’re gonna make a child do somethin’, you need to tell them a reason. And that’s one thing I’ve been tryin’ to get across to my motha. She needed to tell her ‘why’ because she didn’t even understand what was even happening.”

The experiences of daughters and mothers in- and out-of-relationship with each other is a topic that resonates deeply with the girls in the book club. Here, Bria criticizes the character Ruby from *Homefront* for her approaches to disciplining with her daughter Gayle. She describes Ruby as “crazy,” and the other girls agree with this assessment. Although Ruby is not physically present throughout the novel, discussion of her character is dominant throughout this book club meeting. Ruby is especially criticized by the girls for her lack of communication with her daughter about serious issues, namely sexuality, abortion, and the risks and possibilities associated with sexual activity. In this exchange, Bria not only evaluates Ruby’s actions, but she also identifies with a critical issue in Ruby and Gayle’s situation that the girls bring to light throughout their conversations, the lack of communication between mothers and daughters.

Analyses, personal connections, and reflections such as these permeate our discussions as the girls seek to better understand their lived experiences as well as the fictionalized mother-daughter relationships. The girls extract meaning from and construct meaning with texts in compelling ways as they draw upon their personal, social, and cultural ways of knowing and being and use the stories and their characters as a springboard from which to launch their criticisms, testimonies, and solutions for daughters and mothers.
For book club participant Nakia, asserting her personal beliefs about social and familial issues and relating her personal experiences to the text is essential to making the story come alive for her (Wilhelm, 1997/2008). The following is an example of her taking a *connective* stance. She relates her personal experiences to the text, and she shares a story about herself and her cousin to help support her argument about the importance of open communication between mothers and daughters.

**Nakia**: “Like, I’m not sayin’ my motha was encouraging me to have, um, sex, but she said, ‘Well, what I can say is, I can tell you not to do it,’ she said, ‘but you have your own mind-set.’ She said, ‘I’m just sayin’ not to do it.’ Like, I know my cousin, wit’ her motha, when her motha, my cousin, her motha didn’t know whether or not she was havin’ sex. She said, ‘Well, if you are, just tell me so I can get you on birth control pills and take you through the steps of what to do and what not to do and how to carry it.’ She said, ‘I can’t tell you no and yes, if you have your own mentality.’ She said, ‘But what I can tell you is what to look out for and what not to do and stuff like dat.’ She said, ‘Maybe if I tell you the consequences, that you’ll listen.’ She said, ‘But I know if I tell you yes or no, you not goin’ listen.’ And, my cousin, she took the advice.”

Here, Nakia draws on the culture of honesty generated by her peers. She identifies with Gayle as a daughter whose mother takes the “just don’t do it approach.” Yet, she is careful not to have her mother confused with the “crazy” mother in the text. She tries to share her mother’s direct words, rather than paraphrasing them for the group. Additionally, she contrasts Gayle’s and her personal situation with her cousin’s and demonstrates the significance of a mother sharing
advice, not just giving directives. This more explanatory and advisory approach, Nakia explains, was well received by her cousin and made a difference in her decisions about sex.

Throughout our discussions, Nakia is confident in her beliefs, and she seems comfortable sharing her thoughts and critiques about the actions of characters and the situations the arise in the text. Although Nakia says that she had not read *Homefront*, her outspoken stance demonstrates her interest in the story and the issues brought to light by it. In the following example, Nakia takes an *evocative* stance and moves from identifying with an issue and sharing a related personal experience to “becoming” a character and taking on the role of Gayle’s mother.

**Nakia:** “Now, see, if I was a mother of her, I would say, ‘Okay, you decided to do this. I will help you, but later on, you gonna get a job.’”

**Cheryl:** “You would help her after the first one?”

**Nakia:** “I would help her.”

**Cheryl:** “She was thirteen. She came home the first time pregnant, and you helpin’ her wit the first baby . . .”

Bria, Jamilah and Danielle talk simultaneously about adoption as an option.

**Jamilah:** “Don’t kill the baby.”

**Nakia:** “She could get child support.”

**Bria:** “My motha done gone through so much tryin’ a get child support. That don’t do nuthin’. She’s . . . it’s been I don’t know how many years. She still don’t get it. My fatha don’t care.”

**Nakia:** “My father just started paying a few years ago.”

**Cheryl:** “Okay, so you understand and know that child support is not a definite
or a given . . . and WIC can run out.”

**Nakia**: “As a child, I’d rather my father spend time with me.”

**Cheryl**: “Yeah, but time, sweetheart don’t clothe you, nor does it feed you.”

Effortlessly, Nakia moves from speaking as character Ruby, a mother, to speaking from her personal perspective as a daughter. She connects real-world options and possibilities to the circumstances in the text. Though Nakia begins to role-play, Bria’s and co-facilitator Cheryl’s knowledge and experiences seem to prevent them from believing in the promise of Nakia’s approach to dealing with the situation. However, when Cheryl challenges Nakia, she does not hesitate to use her identity, knowledge, and personal experience as a daughter to support her point-of-view. Although Nakia goes back and forth connecting personally and imagining characters’ life possibilities, her responses consistently speak to the importance of open communication between mothers and daughters.

Nakia is not the only participant who weaves in and out of roles and reading strategies. The girls’ lived experiences as daughters seem to be key in their thinking and their dialogue. As they share their views about the actions and decisions of the teenage daughters in the texts, they have in mind their personal standards and the principles that help them to use good judgement and make healthy choices.

**Melvette**: “What holds you back?”

**Nakia**: “Okay, respect for myself and my mother. I’m not sayin’ I haven’t messed up, but I have respect. I haven’t messed up in that way . . . I might get a lil’ talkative. Like, I might . . .”

**Cheryl**: “Talk back.”
Nakia: “Yes.”

Cheryl: “I see that you have a mouth.”

Nakia: “But my mom puts me in check real quick.”

Bria: “For me, it’s like, I don’t do certain stuff because I look at my friend. I look at the people I used to hang around in middle school. I see them at [High School X], and then I hear, ‘Have you heard about such and such? Oh yeah, she a ho. They be like, Bria, how you doin’?’ And it’s like, they can’t say none of dat stuff about me. And it’s like, I feel good. Dey be like, ‘Oh, Bria doin’ good. She doin’ dis and doin’ dat.’ Even though I may go over my little trials, but they can’t say bad stuff about me. And, I’m gettin’ betta grades than all of ‘em. So . . .”

Melvette: “She holdin’ it down. Dat’s why.”

Jamilah: “I don’t know. I could talk to my motha, but, yet she still put a fear in me to where I don’t want to do those things, but yet I could still talk to her. So, I’m like, ‘What my motha say?’ And all that. And, it’s basically the fear, or of me just not wantin’ to do it if it’s not necessary. If it’s no meanin’, like, why I’m doin’ it. Just ‘cause I wanted to.

Cheryl asks Danielle: “Why you don’t go wit’ da urges?”

Danielle: “’Cause I’m scared of my motha. She crazy.”

We all laugh.

Though the tensions between mothers and daughters is a significant issue to the girls, they are able to still find humor in their life experiences. The girls know their lives and mother-daughter relationships are not perfect, but they distinguish their experiences from the relationships that
they sometimes consider to be “dysfunctional” in the texts. These types of character-to-life distinctions are a common element of the girls’ conversations about the texts as well as their conversations about girls they encounter in the media and in their families, schools, and communities.

It is from their personal knowledge and experiences that they come to discuss ways to help not only the fictional characters in the stories but also real-life daughters and mothers. When the girls participate in an activity where they pretend to dialogue with mothers Ruby and Earlene, they connect with the mothers by offering suggestions and seek to understand them by asking questions. In the following example, they reflect on Ruby and her actions as a mother.

**Bria:** “Know where your daughter is. Teach her about life issues. Love her. And, know the boys that she talks to. And, tell your son get off the sofa.”

**Jamilah:** “These are some questions that I have to ask Gayle’s mother: ‘Why didn’t you give Gayle the attention that you gave your older son? Why did you really send Gayle to Georgia? You should know the people that Gayle hang out with. And, got a compromise here, why didn’t you share wit’ her your singin’ abilities that you did have? You should have open communication wit’ your daughter.’”

**Danielle:** “If I had a moment with her mother I would ask, ‘If Gayle was behaving the way she was because of the absence of love, then why would you ship her down South to make things worse? Um, why did you favor the son more than Gayle? Why was she different? Why didn’t you set boundaries, or why didn’t you enforce them? Are you proud of your accomplishments? If you could change one thing about your motherhood with Gayle, would you? What
would you do? The last one is: you need to know how to show more love and affection.”

Time with daughters, communication with daughters, affection towards daughters, and equal treatment of daughters are recurring themes in the girls’ comments about characters as well as their testimonies about their own experiences. And it is the devaluing of these issues that seems to frustrate the girls when talking about the texts and girls’ real experiences.

Courtney and Danielle use a reflective lens as they try to understand the significance of Earlene and Tasha’s relationship in *Imani All Mine*. Danielle goes back and forth analyzing Earlene and Tasha. Finally, she puts herself in Tasha’s shoes and concludes what she would do in the situation.

**Courtney**: “I wanna know does her mom just talk to her that way just because she feels like it, or does she have a purpose for not tellin’ her daughter some things. It seems like she’s kinda evil like ever since she had the child. It seem like she’s been kinda distressed or somethin’ like dat. I wanna know did somethin’ happen to her when she was young that makes her like, tough on Tasha.”

**Danielle**: “I wanna know why Tasha didn’t tell her mother that she was raped and that she wasn’t like fast. That’s what her mother was thinking. I was like mad that she didn’t say anything.”

**Melvette**: “When somethin’ like, you know, that serious and detrimental happens to you, you need to tell.”

**Courtney**: “But like, I think she might have not told her because she probably just felt like it was her fault. ‘If you wasn’t so fast or whatever you might not have been
Danielle: “Me, if I was raped, I would not tell my mother. But, if she sittin’ there callin’ me fast anyway, you might as well tell her because she goin’ say the same thang.”

Courtney: “I would. I definitely would ‘cause my mom, she would probably go crazy, but not because of me, because I was raped.”

Melvette to Danielle: “But that wouldn’t be your fault, like, why wouldn’t you tell her? You feel like, she would be judgmental? You feel like you did somethin’, or you would be ashamed?”

Danielle: “I would be ashamed.”

Melvette: “So, you would let that keep you from tellin’ your mother?”

Danielle: “I would be afraid of like, hurtin’ her. Like, this is what I did.”

Melvette: “You mean, if you had sex willingly, or if you were raped?”

Danielle: “If I was raped.”

Cheryl: “Dat’s deep Danielle. I’m tryin’ to process this. Let me process this. Give me a minute.

By putting herself in Tasha’s world, Danielle realizes the difficulty of having to relate to a mother like Earlene. In the girls’ eyes, Earlene is “judgmental,” “selfish,” “mean and bitter,” didn’t “listen,” and does not “give [Tasha] advice.” In Danielle’s view, these attributes are a hard battle to contend with. She wonders, “How you sit there and cuss at somebody then all of a sudden wanna give them advice. I wouldn’t listen to her either.” Danielle’s declaration that she would not tell her mother if she were raped concerns both co-facilitator Cheryl and me, and we talk seriously with the girls about dealing with a situation like that. Although Danielle had just
read the story and seen the potential consequences of a girl her age not telling her mother about a rape, she seems to empathize and relate personally to Tasha enough to believe that she wouldn’t tell her mother either. Danielle’s response underscores the detrimental effects of mother-daughter relationships with strained communication and confirms the need for women and spaces that welcome girls’ concerns (hooks, 1990; Leadbeater & Way, 1996; Collins, 2000).

Throughout the book club meetings, Danielle reveals her own struggles with communicating with her mother and admits keeping silent about concerns in her life because of her mother’s judgments and criticisms. Danielle explains,

It’s like, my mother has a hard time distinguishing like to be a mother or a friend. It’s like, either, she feels like she’s goin’ be a mother or a friend . . . And it’s like, most of the time, she’s just a mother. I really don’t talk to her. Like, she’s not my best friend, but when I have to tell her somethin’, I mean, she’ll listen. But sometimes, she’ll judge me so that makes me not wanna tell her, and I won’t.

As the girls make connections with the texts and express frustration in dealing with similar experiences, they, in some ways, treat the texts as instruction manuals, not just for girls such as themselves, but for their mothers. They recognize the ability of the texts to convey the feelings and thoughts that they often try to express to their mothers and grandmothers. *Homefront,* especially, becomes recognized by the girls for highlighting the need for communication and sincere engagement between daughters and mothers. “I think it’s a good book because it’s a good story to tell you why you should have good communication,” Jamilah shares. Nakia, too, values the novel’s lessons for mothers, and she uses the text as a companion to help justify and support her critique of the women in her lives.
Nakia: “I mean, even though I haven’t read it, I like it because I think it would be a lesson to parents and teens. This is the type of book that, if I was to read it ‘Ooo, mommy commere. Ya heard dis? Okay.”

The girls and I laugh.

Nakia: I love my mom dearly, but she has a communication problem. I don’t even care if I do most of the talking, just engage . . . Yeah, but, if your little friends call you, you can talk. Why can’t you talk to me? . . . It’s sad that it takes a book, a book, a little book, it looks like a hundred and sixty-five pages, to tell you how to raise your child. If you wanna know how to raise your child, ask your child. I’m tellin’ my mom right now, tell me you love me every now and then. Give me a hug. Grandma, you, too. You know, just communicate.”

From the first session to the last, the girls’ conversations emphasize the communication disconnects that complicate the bonds between daughters and mothers, and they use their texts and their testimonies to demonstrate the seriousness of the social, personal, and familial issues affecting adolescent girls. In addition to making connections between the literature and their lives, they recognize in their analyses the experiences of girls in their families, schools, and communities. They draw upon their personal pools of knowledge and experience and pour into the lives of each other as they think independently and collaboratively about ways to solve the life puzzles affecting adolescent and adult women’s fictional and non-fictional lives.
Who Am I Without Him?: Book Club Conversations about Daughters and the Boys in Their Lives

Relationships with boys is the second most popular topic among the girls. They judge the accuracy of the representations in the stories and evaluate how well the texts portray dating issues. They also speak personally about how they negotiate relationships with male peers, and they recall the roles that their parents play in their romantic decisions and behaviors. Additionally, the girls make note of the different levels of relationship that exist between adolescent girls and guys, and they bring attention to the role that self-esteem plays in girls’ dating behaviors and relationship choices.

The short story collection Who Am I Without Him? sparks the most discussion about adolescent relationships. A great portion of the girls’ time is spent comparing their experiences to those of the characters. There are also times when the group notes that there are stories to which they could not relate or consider to be realistic. The following is an example of readers adopting a reflective stance (Wilhelm, 1997/2008) and critiquing Flake’s representations.

**Courtney:** “Well, I wouldn’t say all of the stories, but most of the stories I’ve noticed something that’s happened like that, either at my school or by a story that somebody else has told me. So, yeah, I think that most of the stories in there are pretty realistic to stuff that happens.”

**Danielle:** “Some parts. Some I had to think about . . . I could find, like, a piece of each story that I could [relate to], but like some of them was a lil’ out there.”

**Dominique:** “I couldn’t relate to the ‘Hunting for Boys’ one ‘cause I couldn’t see that truly happenin’ bout the Pastor sayin’ . . . ‘Cause I have friends who are Pastor’s kids, and
they can do things. They can’t, I mean, their parents don’t tell them that ‘they can’t wear tank tops; they can’t wear make-up and stuff; they can’t go out. So, I was like, there’s no life there, and then when they was like, they can’t go to a school dance because they can’t meet boys or somethin’. Well, if that’s the case, ‘How did your parents get together then?’”

Wilhelm (2008) describes this type of interrogative reading as “recognizing reading as a transaction” (p. 108). The girls reveal their consciousness that the text is constructed by an author, an adult, and they draw on their knowledge and experience bases to critique the author’s textual choices. Dominique contrasts the author’s depictions with the experiences of her friends who have had similar situations. Danielle describes some of the stories as being a little “out there,” but she clings to pieces in the stories that resonate with her and her experiences and consciously discards those elements that do not seem relevant or realistic.

The short story “So I Ain’t No Good Girl” stimulates talk about self-esteem and domestic violence. Book club participant Eboni shares her unawareness of physical violence and emotional abuse in teen relationships. In the following, she condemns the abuse in the story, and begins to relate to the female character in the story by proclaiming how she would respond in the situation.

**Eboni:** “I ain’t know that a girl would let a boy like, take over her like that, not like take over her, but like do the things he did and she still like him.”

**Dominique:** “This girl was so in love with her boyfriend, but her boyfriend ain’t never go to school; he kept takin’ her money; and even though they were standin’ at the bus stop one time and her boyfriend started to talk to this other girl and mess with her, and
she just let him do it right in front of her face and she didn't say anything. And, the boy told her that ‘I still love you’ and stuff, but she still just let him do it.

**Melvette:** “What surprised you about that?”

**Eboni:** “Because, she let him do that in her face.”

**Melvette:** “How do you deal with that? If a guy is treatin’ you bad, what ways do you think she could've got out of that?”

**Eboni:** “Well, I would’ve got out of it ‘cause I woulda went to him in her face; I would’ve been like, ‘Don’t me and you go togetha?’ or somethin’ like that.”

As we discuss this story, Dominique summarizes the story and then centers focus on the young character’s background. She brings to light for her peers how the character’s familial and social experiences potentially influenced her relationship behaviors. She notes, “Cause she’s used to seein’ it, so I guess that’s the only way she think. If her mother was like that and she mother still with that man, I guess, since her mother kept gettin’ beat, then that’s the only way she could stay with him. She just took it.” This type of character analysis is common in our discussions and often led to the girls making personal connections with the issues and characters.

As the group discusses “So I Ain’t No Good Girl,” they connect what they observed in the stories with their romantic relationship beliefs and discuss the things that are important to them in their relationships with boys. As a collective, the girls construct rules for engagement in girl-boy relationships. Evident in their talk is their value for respect and how it is displayed in relationships.

**Danielle:** “Just don’t treat me like you treat some of your other friends, or something like that.”
Courtney: “That was my number one, too. Like, I think a boy should know that sex isn’t the only thing that should be in a relationship, and knowing that I want more to a boy than just that.”

Eboni: “Well, mine respect . . . a boy shouldn't be um, like, huggin’ girls in your face; he shouldn't be hittin’ you or nothin’ like dat.”

Dominique: “I’d say the same things. Don’t put me on a level with your friends, your other friends.”

Jamilah: “I put respect, too, and I put that because don't try to use me or whatever, don't call me names and stuff.”

In addition to being connected by their valuing of this attribute, respect, they are also connected by their experiences with parents when it comes to relationships with boys. Some admit to putting up a fight for autonomy and considering their parents’ behaviors “extreme.” Others are more compromising, but they all lament their parents’ behaviors and their interference with their relationships.

Jamilah explains, “Well, I know that that person should just meet my motha ‘cause some way, some how, my motha will find out. No matter who it is, so, it really don’t even matter, wastin’ all dat time tryin’a not let her know.” Danielle shares her efforts to be upfront with her parents about her interest in boys, but she also explains her frustration in using this approach: “My parents are over protective. She will go to like the highest extreme to find out who I’m talkin’ to. It’s just really embarrassing. ‘It’s not that I was goin’ go behind your back, if you would just let me come to you, at first.’ Then, my father, he just stereotypes boys. He just looks at them and be like, ‘No.’ So it’s, now I just don’t really go anywhere anymore.”
In another instance, Eboni identifies with her peers’ failed efforts to work with her parents, but she brings to light another approach to dealing with parents. At first, she generalizes her example, but eventually, she interjects herself in the example and tells her own story. Eboni states, “Most girls don’t, like, bring the, let the boy come get them, they meet them somewhere.” “What’s that about” I ask? Eboni explains:

Basically because your mother probably be like, I mean, not sayin’ like my motha, but probably mostly everybody motha be like, ‘You goin’ on a date wit’ somebody?’ You know how parents is, they like, ‘Oh, you goin’ on a date wit’ somebody you don’t even know?’ A girl might really like dat boy, so they goin find a way to get to the movies or somethin’ wit that boy.

She continues,

I know y’all probably like, thinkin’ like, ‘They lie to they motha, and stuff like dat, but if we tell our motha, our, it like, if we say somethin’, you'll, I, I mean, my motha be like, ‘Oh, he did dat. Dat like, make it worse; that’s why some of us lie because if you try, if you even try to like give her a lil’, like, ‘I was talkin’ to dis boy in school,’ like dat, she’d be like, ‘What, you was talkin?’ And, then she’ll be like, ‘Oh, since she be talkin’ to him in school, she probably talkin’ to him any . . . That’s how my motha think . . . That’s how they like, my motha think, she’ll be like, ‘[makes a gesture].’ And like, if I look at a boy she’ll like have somethin' to say dat’s why you'll know you can't be able to tell her nuffin’ if you even look at somebody. I know what she thinkin’, but she not goin’ say it out loud . . . And all my motha goin’ think about is somethin’ goin’ on ‘cause she know how dese boys is.
Eboni is forthcoming with the group about her dishonesty with her mother, but beneath the surface of this revelation, her comments provide a cautionary reminder of the behaviors that sometimes begin to take shape in girls who find themselves unheard and misunderstood by the adults in their lives. Her comments highlight her view of how parents react to their daughters’ budding relationships and romantic interests and the conflicts and behaviors that can ensue as result of these reactions. In response to Eboni’s comments, the other girls echo Eboni’s desire to have her knowledge, experience, and individuality recognized and validated by her parents. They maintain that even with their parents’ knowledge and life experiences, they hope not to be judged on their siblings’ mistakes, other young people’s negative choices, or their parents’ past bad decisions. Cheryl and I challenge the girls to reconsider their parents’ perspectives. We also challenge them to think about the life principles they learned in Umoja and to use these principles to help them resist making unwise choices and practicing deceitful behaviors.

Though conflicts around relationship issues are a source of frustration for the girls, there are some who also recognize and point out the ways girls get hurt emotionally, and sometimes physically, when trying to navigate relationship waters on their own. When discussing *Homefront*, the girls bring up Gayle’s struggle to maintain a relationship with an older guy she had sex with.

**Bria:** “She thought wit’ that boy, she thought, okay, ‘We goin’ have a family and stuff.’ Because, that’s why she was callin’ and like, ‘Oh my gosh, he’s gonna be upset that we’re not gonna have it.’”

**Jamilah:** “Yeah, and she was worried about him and what he thought about the baby.”

**Melvette:** “But was he worried about her though?”
Bria: “He wouldn't even come to the phone.”

In Nakia’s view, this relational disconnect is not just the result of Gayle’s naivete, premature sexual activity, or lack of relationship role models, but it is especially a result of Gayle not knowing her partner as well as she thought. Employing a reflective stance, Nakia connects a story that she read previously to her discussion of Homefront to help demonstrate her point.

Bria: “She [Gayle] was acquainted with him, but she didn’t know him.”

Jamilah: “Yeah.”

Nakia: “Like, Gayle probably thought she knew Jose, but she really didn’t. Like, it’s a story dat I read in English: It was a wizard dat came to a husband and wife. He said, ‘I will give you a million dollars if you just kill somebody.’ So, the wife wanted to do it, but the husband didn’t. The husband was like, ‘No, I’m not doin’ dat.’ So, later on, the wife went behind the husband’s back, and said, ‘Okay, I wanna kill somebody I don't know.’ And he said, ‘Okay, your wishes have been granted.’ The next day her husband was dead . . .” [There is a silence in the room.] “She really didn't know her husband like she thought she did.”

Everyone simultaneously: “Ooohh.”

Nakia: “You get it? She killed her husband. She got the million dollars, but she lost the love of her life.”

At first, Nakia’s reference puzzles the group, but with her explanation, we realize that Nakia has very well connected and expanded the story at hand to another literary experience. Her retelling sets the tone for reflective thinking and stimulates conversations about Gayle’s life choices and consequences, in particular, and teen girls’ self-esteem and sexuality struggles, in general.
In these book club conversations, the girls interrogate the AAYA texts and contrast the textual representations with their lived experiences. They use the book club as an opportunity to make and share meaning with peers, and through their recalling of other relevant fictional tales and their retelling of personal stories, they create their own YA texts. They co-construct a framework for negotiating relationships with male peers and voice their beliefs about self-esteem and self-assertion in male-female relationships. They also share their struggles to establish relationships with male peers while negotiating their parents’ rules and behaviors. While the YA texts serve to initiate discussion, the girls’ conversations are dominated by their personal testimonies of efforts to reconcile autonomy and respect for parental rules with their increasing interest in romantic relationships and their need for realistic advice about dealing with these relationships.

**Who Am I Without Them?: Book Club Conversations about Support and Guidance in Daughters’ Lives**

In addition to recalling their relationship experiences with boys and emphasizing the need for attention, affection, and conversations from mothers to daughters about sexuality, self-esteem, and relationships, the girls spend a significant amount of time pointing out the need for a network of caring adults to support girls as they journey through adolescence and transition into womanhood. In their conversations, they discuss the paths that girls sometimes find themselves walking, and they recount the difficulties that trouble adolescent waters.

While discussing *Homefront*, Bria and Nakia candidly share their thoughts about adolescent girls’ struggles, particularly regarding relationships with boys and sex. Bria
comments, “I think that so many girls fall into love in cracks. Like, you have a boyfriend. You really think you love him. You have sex with him. Then, after that, you break up with him. You have another boyfriend. You have sex wit’ him. Then, you break up wit’ him, and then you have another boyfriend. And then you have sex, and this is all in one year. So, now everybody’s like, okay she’s a . . .”

Nakia interrupts, “Well, you don’t need to have sex with everybody that smile at you. If that's the case, you might as well have sex wit’ her, her, her, me, her, this, I mean. . . ‘Ooo, he smiled at me.’ ‘No!’”

Bria confirms, “Girls fall into the cracks.”

Bria’s and Nakia’s observations allude to girls’ relationship and sexual identity struggles and the behavior patterns that sometimes develop when girls do not have the support needed to help them make and follow through with positive choices. Their thoughts confirm Sullivan’s assertions about the transformative possibilities of adult women’s relationships with adolescent girls. Sullivan (1996) maintains that caring adult women, acting as muses in the lives of adolescent girls, have the potential to stand in the gaps and provide the bridge of support that girls need to cope with and heal from the elements that threaten an emotionally, spiritually, and physically healthy emergence into womanhood.

Though the girls chastise the characters and their peers because of the decisions they make, they also recognize what they are feeling and consider how those feelings affect their choices and actions.

Bria: “And Gayle felt unloved, too.”

Melvette: How could her mother have shown her love?
Nakia: “Give her a hug every now and then . . . Trust me, if children, especially girls, if they don’t get affection, they goin’ get it somewhere else, whether it’s a girl, boy, goat, dog.”

Everyone laughs.

Nakia: “It seems like she didn’t tell her the pros and the cons of havin’ sex.”

It is Gayle’s single, teenage motherhood and strained relationship with her mother that prompts the girls to consider the people in their lives who have given them guidance, especially on dealing with boys and relationships. Some point to the guidance of parents, others mention siblings and friends.

Danielle: “I have a lot of girl-friends, and I have a lot of boy-friends, too, and when I talk to some of my male friends, I have some that are really . . . they like to dog girls. They’re jokin’ with their friends when they’re talkin’ to me, and they just like to tell what the girl did to them and how they reacted too, and, it’s like they’re laughin’. They’re callin’ them, like, hos and stuff like that, and they’ll look and be like, ‘Don’t ever be that person.’”

Courtney: “My mother, she told me how she doesn’t want me to make some of the mistakes she made when she was younger, and my brother, who’s about to be thirty, he tells me how he used to act in high school and how he doesn’t want me to act. He doesn’t want me to be in the relationships that he was in, or whatever, and how he wants some of the boys to treat me and everything . . . And, some of the relationships I’ve seen my friends in.”
Jamilah: “I learn from my cousins ‘cause I have a lotta, lot of boy cousins, and so by me being used to hangin’ round wit’ them and they talkin’ to me and the way I see them with they girls or whatever. Used to hangin’ out wit boys at school, too, and so, like, they tell me stuff, and all that. They tell me what to look out for and all that.

The girls identify their cousins, brothers, mothers, friends, and sisters as personal resources they see lacking in the lives of the characters and other teens. These resources seem to set the girls apart from the characters and their peers, yet their responses make clear that they are not immune to these sexuality, relationship, and personal struggles that plague the lives of fictional and non-fictional daughters.

As the girls consider the personal guidance that they receive, some girls also reflect on the ways they lend support. For example, when the group discusses *Who Am I Without Him?*, Jamilah recalls the support she offered to a friend from school who is struggling with her relationship with her boyfriend. Jamilah explains,

I’m in that situation, well, not me personally, but my friend. She, this boy, they supposed to be goin’ together, but he steady goin’ up, kissin’ other girls in front of her face and all that. And then he end up comin’ ova there, ‘Hey baby, what’s up,’ and she just like, ‘He everything.’ He is not everything. It’s sad. Me and my other friends, we try to tell her, but she just, won’t listen.

Even though the girls express frustration in giving advice or support friends who do not heed their warnings, they maintain that girls need a network of peers, family, and mentors in their lives. While discussing the supportive roles they sometimes play among friends and family, as readers, they begin to take on a supportive stance and offer themselves as the network of peers...
that *Homefront*'s Gayle needed to support her in the midst of her identity and sexuality struggles. They not only offer suggestions to Gayle, but they also question her about her decisions and challenge her to be accountable and self-reflective. When the girls question Gayle’s decisions, they are often conflicted in their efforts to hold her accountable because they recognize her mother’s accountability, as well.

**Jamilah**: “Why did you have sex? What was the point? Did you get any fulfillment out of it? Are you happy with yourself? Is it, do you think that it’s cute to have babies? And, did you even know if Jose’s father really cared about you? What did your friends think? Did they think you was cute? That’s all.

**Danielle**: “Okay. If I had to ask her a question, the first one I would ask is: If you were getting the love and attention from your family, would you still have sex? The second was: have you ever thought about how your trifling acts have affected your family? And,”

**Nakia** responds: “That’s a good one.”

**Danielle** continues: “If you had a chance to start over, would you change? Um, have you ever thought about the consequences of your actions? And, I would tell her how just irresponsible and trifling she is, but it’s not a hundred percent her fault.”

Bria offers Gayle advice out of the context of her spiritual beliefs, and like Gayle’s cousin Cookie, Bria challenges Gayle to consider not only the personal and physical significances of sex, but also the spiritual.

**Bria**: “The things that I would ask her is: What does sex mean to
you? Do you think any of the men that you have sex with actually respect you?

Do you respect yourself? Do you actually know what respect means? If you do
know what respect means then you should try to respect yourself a little bit
better. And also, when you have sex with somebody, you give a piece of your
soul out to them, and if you keep on givin’ out pieces you ain’t goin’ have nothin’
left.”

Nakia interjects: “That’s why it’s called soulmats.”

Bria agrees and continues: “God created sex. When you have sex with
somebody, them two people become one and that’s what’s made for a husband
and wife.”

Nakia: “My question is: What made you have sex at a young age? Demand attention
from your mom; don’t demand it from anybody else? Notice that if you exploit yourself
people are not going to respect you. Hang around more positive people, and why didn’t
you think about the consequences of having sex?

These conversations underscore the need for real-life discussions about the issues
affecting teenage girls, and they demonstrate the value that the girls placed on the role of family
and friends in adolescents’ lives. The girls reflect on the questions, decisions, and temptations
that challenge characters, and with personal, social, spiritual, and moral eyes they seek to
understand their fictional peers and envision solutions for girls grappling with relationship,
sexual identity, and self-esteem issues. Peer relationships, affection from caregivers, family
members, or other role models, and open communication about sexuality and relationships with
boys are key, they argue, to teen girls’ healthy development.
BOOK CLUB AS HOMEPLACE

The girls used the Umoja book club not only as a space to discuss issues that arose in the texts, but especially as a space to speak on behalf of themselves and other teenaged daughters about these personal, familial, and social issues. They shared their frustrations and personal testimonies, and they sometimes became the voice of daughters who struggled with issues in the texts. In a particular instance, Bria reminded everyone how *Homefront*’s character Gayle felt. She was sexually active and had the attention of boys, but still, “Gayle felt unloved” said Bria.

The girls also used the book club as a space to reflect on their principles and beliefs and as a space to problem solve and challenge their peers, parents, and families to learn from past and present experiences, to dialogue about issues, and to consider the implications of one’s decisions. Bria drew on her spiritual beliefs to help her make meaning with the stories, and as Nakia made sense of her fictional peers’ life experiences, she argued the importance of affection and support from families, mothers especially, in helping girls to cope with and learn from their choices. Nakia asserted, “Give her [Gayle] a hug every now and then . . . Trust me, if children, especially girls, if they don’t get affection, they goin’ get it somewhere else, whether it’s a girl, boy, goat, dog.” The girls read, reflected on, and discussed their connections with, and critiques of, African American YA literature in a space that was outside a context of “questions or requirements” (Rosenblatt, 2005) and within a context of safe spaces and relationships (Rosenblatt, 2005; Groves, 1996; Pastor, 1996).

According to hooks (1990), Sullivan (1996), and Collins (2000), girls’ and women’s relationships thrive off of opportunities to listen to, speak with, and learn from each other. These opportunities, Richardson (2003) and Pough (2004) note, are often characterized by the literacies
that African American girls and women draw upon as they express themselves in personally, socially, and culturally significant ways. The girls made the Umoja book club a “home,” not in a traditional sense, but in the sense of a nurturing place where they were able to, with peers and understanding adults, freely voice and weave together their ideas about literature and life (Pastor, 1996).
CHAPTER FIVE:

REFLECTIONS, SUGGESTIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Reflections: Making Sense of/with Findings

Black women writers have intrigued me ever since I can remember. When I was a little girl in elementary school, my mother, a poet, introduced me to poet and children’s book author Eloise Greenfield. In the pages of her books I saw my relatives, my friends, and myself. She validated my dark skin, my Afro-puffs, and playtime with my cousins. Even as a school-aged girl, I knew this Black female author was someone to be treasured. I was so thankful for Greenfield, a woman who was Black like me, had an Afro like me, and loved her some Black folks--just like me.

This project was an opportunity for me to see the treasures other Black female readers took from Black women’s YA texts. The texts I selected for the book club featured Black female protagonists and told diverse stories of Black female adolescent experiences. I anticipated this book club would stimulate a literary awakening similar to mine. I hoped to show teenage girls there are rewards of reading outside of those traditionally emphasized in school, and there are personal and social benefits to be gained from leisure reading and book discussion. Exactly what those benefits were remained to be seen.

As evidenced by the participants’ responses, the girls did find value in the texts, and they did not approach their readings uncritically. Even in the space of a community-based book club, the girls used a critical reading lens to make sense of the stories. I learned during my interviews with some of the girls that leisure reading was a normal occurrence. The book club, however, added another dimension to their reading experience. As Courtney explained, “just because
you’re reading it doesn’t mean that you fully understand it. And like, everybody always had
questions and stuff to ask. So, I think that it helps a lot, too, cause like, it was reading, but it was
a lot more fun discussing it with everybody’s opinions.”

Our group reading experiences also seemed to validate the girls’ personal knowledge and
literacies as revealed by Danielle’s impromptu recitation of her favorite piece, “Our Deepest
Fear18.” She wowed the mentors and her peers during our last session when she recited this well-
known excerpt in response to an exercise that asked her to brainstorm a relevant book topic that
would appeal to her peers. We all listened as she encouraged us with the words, “Our deepest
fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is
our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, ‘Who am I to be brilliant,
gorgeous, talented, and fabulous?’ Actually, who are you not to be? . . .”

This study confirms the significance of exposure to texts that characterize realistic
struggles and victories in socially- and culturally-relevant ways. The girls’ exposure to the
contemporary fiction by authors Porter, Flake, and Williams-Garcia, described in Chapter Three
as Black-educationist-activist authors, stimulated response practices that paralleled the
educationist-activist sentiments of the writers. The social, personal, and familial issues
highlighted in the texts, relationships with mothers, relationships with boys, and support and
guidance for girls, resonated with the girls to the extent that a significant portion of their
responses focused on thinking of ways to aid teen girls and families struggling with issues.
Throughout our meetings the girls consistently 1) analyzed: critiqued the stories, characters,
topics, and sometimes authors, and shared their perspectives, 2) testified: drew upon and

18 “Our Deepest Fear” is a excerpt from Marianne Williamson’s book A Return to Love. It is sometimes
mistakenly attributed to Nelson Mandela.
connected their life experiences to the texts and characters, and 3) problem solved: brainstormed ways to help fictional and non-fictional mothers and adolescent girls work through personal and relationship issues. For participant Jamilah, her socially conscious worldview extended beyond the space of the book club. In an interview, Jamilah suggested that a future book club program include an activism component that offered opportunities for participants to mentor younger girls dealing with coming-of-age issues like those highlighted in the stories.

This study also demonstrates the value in community-based resources and their ability to meet young people’s literacy needs. The Umoja book club provided a much needed space for adolescent girls to engage in critical discussions about life with peers and mentors. The girls’ independent and collaborative analyzing, testifying, and problem solving point to the personal and social significance of the texts and the book club for the girls. The sense of social consciousness and activism that was cultivated through our readings and discussions highlights the value in affirming spaces and points to a need for these types of spaces in and out of school.

Suggestions for Future Research

The goal of this project was to 1) call for more efforts on behalf of programs that serve youth outside of school to make literature engaging, relevant, and transformational for the lives of adolescents, 2) offer an example of a way for out-of-school programs to address African American adolescent girls’ coming-of-age needs in a culturally-responsive way, and to 3) call for our traditional institutions to recognize the ability of out-of-school programs to support and extend literacy efforts. This study gave license to a small group of teenage girls to reflect on and talk about their life experiences and frustrations, to learn from each other and mentors, and to
brainstorm ways to address adolescent girls’ need for affection, support, guidance, and understanding. This project adds to the foundation of research that explores ways of taking advantage of the transformative power of literature, especially as it relates to young people.

The small sample of texts used for analysis and book club discussion and the small sample of participants limit this study’s generalizability. This study is also limited by the short-term operation of the book club and the restricted book club schedule. Our book club met approximately every other month, and I saw the girls twice a month outside of our book club. This left a gap in time and in relationship between our book club meetings. The meetings were spaced out this way to accommodate the youth program’s existing weekly schedule. A future book club program with Umoja, or another community-based group, might be enhanced by functioning during the summer. This would allow more students to participate, more frequent meetings, and more time for relationships to evolve. It would also help minimize conflicts with the youth program’s schedule and with students’ personal schedules.

It would be worthwhile for an extension of this study to include parents in the reading of YA literature and explore how discussions centered around literature might help mediate parent-child relationship struggles. Mother-daughter relationships were the most popular topic in book club discussions. Community-based programs could be a useful resource in helping to strengthen relationships and communication between youth and their parents.

As I analyzed transcripts and writings, I wondered about the (her)stories, or cultural texts, that the girls were telling about themselves as they talked about the fictional girls their age. Blake (1997) contends that with our expressions and interactions we create cultural texts that “release scents of gender, race, and class” and reflect our “particular aspirations, struggles, and
realities” (pp. 108-109). These texts, Blake explains, are identities that are brought to bear when we read and interpret texts and make connections with texts. It would be interesting for future research to explore the role young adult texts play in stimulating adolescent readers’ narratives. What types of narratives do young readers birth as they read young adult literature?

Among African American adolescent male readers, future studies might consider the question above and also investigate the types of discussions African American males have about culturally- and socially-relevant texts in out-of-school spaces. Further research might also investigate the qualities of African American YA texts featuring Black male protagonists and explore their relationship to African American literary traditions.

As a classroom- or community-based inquiry, teachers might offer students the opportunity to choose literature and facilitate book clubs. Teachers could explore students’ textual choices and ways of facilitating and responding. How do peer-led book clubs influence adolescents’ transactions with literature? How do students respond to peer-chosen versus teacher-chosen texts?

Along theoretical lines, future literary analyses might explore the Black feminist literary qualities of more contemporary AAYA literature by Black women and contrast the ways themes are characterized in contemporary versus past generations of AAYA literature. In what ways are contemporary AAYA texts dealing with themes traditionally known to dominate Black women’s AAYA literature? What social, cultural, or political shifts might account for differences present and what social, cultural, or political circumstances might account for continuities?
Culturally Relevant Pedagogies in Out-of-School Zones: Implications for Practice

Daughters Reading and Responding to African American Young Adult Literature sought to reach beyond the academic task of analyzing and theorizing about literature to integrating the social and cultural themes explored by AAYA literature authors into a culturally-relevant framework for students giving them the opportunity to read, write, and discuss literature that “affirms who they are” (Harris, 1990, p. 553) and conveying to them the value of literature outside the classroom and within their lives. As Chapter One demonstrates, the need for safe, positive, and academically, socially, and culturally enriching out-of-school spaces is great. Eidman-Aadahl (2002) and Hull and Schultz (2002) challenge literacy theorists not to stop at theorizing but to reach out in conversation and in practice to the myriad of community-based organizations across the nation to capitalize on our passion, experience, knowledge, and understanding and to create the engaging literacy environments that we all strive for.

As communities, youth programs, and schools work diligently to responsibly and critically engage today’s technology-driven generation, this study allows us to see how African American adolescent girls drew upon culturally-, socially-, and gender-specific literacies as they interpreted texts and allows us to see, in practice, diverse ways of affirming those literacies, cultivating their worldviews, and seizing their time, attention, and interests. By first acknowledging young people’s multiple literacies, racial, gender, and economic challenges, and their diverse development needs, those of us interested in supporting young people’s literacy development can address their circumstances with better judgment and confidence. We must investigate the qualities of spaces that provide positive adult mentorship and welcome and nurture adolescent voices. Then we must create and recreate environments that are safe,
nurturing, and fulfilling for young people. By recognizing and implementing effective classroom
and community-based practices, we can begin to carve out homeplaces in spaces familiar and
unfamiliar to young people--living rooms, classrooms, libraries, and boardrooms. The
possibilities are endless. It is my hope that community-based leaders and classroom teachers
find this research relevant to their literacy work.
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Hi Ladies!

Thanks for agreeing to participate in the Umoja Book Club. I’m looking forward to chatting with everyone and listening to your ideas and responses about the books. As you already know, our first book to read is *Who Am I Without Him?* by Sharon Flake.

As you read, think about whether the stories are realistic, if things like that really happen to teenage girls. Also, think about how you would have, or already have, dealt with situations like those in the stories. Or, think about what you would tell a friend who was going through something like the experiences in the short stories. Use your journal to think about these questions or write down questions you have about the book. You can also write down any questions or comments you want to pose at the book club session, or write down thoughts, ideas, feelings, or experiences you want to share. Only I will read your journals, and it will be up to you how much or how little you want to share with the group.

😊 Remember, The books are yours to keep, so don’t be afraid to highlight, take notes, and/or use your stickies!

Here is my contact information. Feel free to call me if you have any questions, comments or concerns. My cell number is (301) 555-5555, and my e-mail address is melvette@yahoo.com. Our first book club meeting will be at Mrs. James’ house on Saturday, October 29, 2005, from 2-4 p.m. Details will come later about coordinating transportation.

Sincerely,

*Melvette*
Greetings Parents!  I would like to thank you for allowing your daughter to participate in the Umoja Book Club. I am Melvette Davis, the Book Club coordinator, and I am a Ph.D. candidate in English at Penn State University. My research area is African American young adult literature, and I am facilitating the Umoja Book Club in order to learn how young people think, talk, and write about young adult literature. Over the next several months, the book club will meet, and your daughters will share their thoughts and reactions to the young adult texts they’ve been assigned to read. I encourage you to read along with us and to have conversations with your daughters about these books and the issues highlighted in them.

The first book that we’ll read in the book club is by a woman named Sharon Flake, and the book is titled *Who Am I Without Him?: Stories about Girls and the Boys in Their Lives*. This is a book of short stories that touch on issues such as self-esteem, domestic violence, peer relationships, and parent-child relationships. These stories are very engaging because they are humorous and realistic, and they capture the overall joys and tensions that one experiences during adolescence.

For the second book club session, the girls will choose what book they want to read, and they will be able to choose between two books by author Rita Williams-Garcia. The books are *Like Sisters on the Homefront* and *Blue Tights*. In *Like Sisters on the Homefront*, fourteen-year-old Gayle lives in the city and has her attention on her friends and on guys. Frustrated by Gayle’s second pregnancy and Gayle’s lack of focus, Gayle’s mother makes her get an abortion and sends her to family in Georgia, hoping the change of venue and lifestyle will do her some good. In this book, Rita Williams-Garcia depicts teens who wrestle with sexuality, responsibility, and independence, and she demonstrates how important it is to have a strong, supportive family. *Blue Tights* tells the story of a teenage girl named Joyce who is a dancer. She is always trying to fit-in, especially with the boys and with her dance classes. This is a very entertaining story about Joyce’s experiences with life and with learning about herself as a young woman. *Blue Tights* highlights themes such as self-esteem, body image, mother-daughter relationships, and appreciation of one’s culture.

The last book that we will read is by Connie Porter, and the book is titled *Imani All Mine*. *Imani All Mine* is about a fifteen-year-old girl named Tasha who is assaulted and becomes pregnant. She struggles to be a mother at fifteen when she is still a child. With little emotional, financial, and physical support from her mother, Tasha must find her way through motherhood. Although Tasha sometimes becomes frustrated with her mother and Imani, throughout the story Tasha grows in faith and understanding because of her strong will. While I encourage parents to read along with us for all of the books, I especially would like for parents to read this book. It shows how devastating tensions between mothers and daughters can sometimes be. At times, the situations in this story are disheartening, but the events that Connie Porter depicts are an unfortunately reality for some young people.

Again, thank you for your support, and I look forward to working with your family this year in Umoja. If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me at (301) 555-555; melvette@yahoo.com.
Hey Ladies!

It was great to see you again this weekend at the first book club session. We missed those of you who couldn’t make it, and we hope to see you at the next session which is scheduled for December 10, 2005.

The next book that we will read is Like Sisters on the Homefront by Rita Williams-Garcia. The books are on order, and I will distribute them in a couple of weeks.

For now, I would like for you to spend some time writing in your journals. Over the next week, write a book review for the book Who Am I Without Him? by Sharon Flake. A book review is a brief explanation about a book and the things you enjoyed and disliked about it.

In your journal, at the top of the page where you write your book review, be sure to write the words Book Review for Who Am I Without Him by Sharon Flake, so that I will know it’s your book review. In your review, explain what the book is about. Then tell about one part that you liked and one part you didn’t like. Lastly, write about at least one thing you learned from reading the book and what you think other girls your age might learn from reading the book.

Another thing that I want you to write down in your journals is any questions or concerns that you would like for me or Cheryl to address. We’ll write back to you in your journal. One of the purposes of the book club, and Umoja, is to give you an opportunity to express yourself and ask questions of women who’ve gone through things that you may be experiencing or things you have questions about. We are here to learn from each other, so let us know how we can “Help a Sistah Out!”

As always, feel free to call me or e-mail me if you have any questions, comments, or concerns. My cell number is (301) 555-5555, and my e-mail address is melvette@yahoo.com.

Until next time,

Melvette
Vita

MELVETTE MELVIN DAVIS

EDUCATION
• PhD, English, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, 2009
  Specialization(s): African American language and literature; language and literacy education
• MA, English, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, 2004
• BA, English education, graduated with highest honors, Bennett College, Greensboro, NC, 2002

TEACHING EXPERIENCE
• Writing Center Tutor, Center for Excellence in Writing, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, Fall 2005, Spring 2005, Fall 2004
• Rhetoric and Composition Instructor, Composition Program, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, Fall 2003, Fall 2002, Summer 2002

ADDITIONAL PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE
• Co-editor, Mis-education of the Negro (1933) Study Guide, 2008
• Martin Luther King, Jr. Scholars Internship, U.S. Department of Education, 2004

PRESENTATION EXPERIENCE
• Diversifying the Canon Panel
  College English Association Middle Atlantic Group Conference (CEA-MAG), Montgomery College, Rockville, MD, March 2006
  Paper title, “‘Finding the Blessing’: Growing into Womanhood in African American Young Adult Fiction”
• African American Women Writers (Re)Visioning Womanhood and Community Panel
  African American Novel Conference, Penn State University, University Park, PA, April 2005
  Paper title, “‘Herstories’: African American Women Children’s Literature Authors”
• African American Children’s Literature Exhibit
  Diversity Studies Room, Pattee Library, The Pennsylvania State University, January 2004
  Exhibit title, “Literacy, Achievement, and African American Children’s Literature”

AWARDS
• Social Science Research Council (SSRC) Dissertation Completion Grant, 2008
• Phi Delta Kappa International, American University Chapter, Outstanding New Educator Award, 2008
• Barksdale Turner Scholarship in African American Literature, 2005
• Cultivating New Voices among Scholars of Color Grant, 2004
• Scholars for the Dream Award, 2004

PROFESSIONAL CERTIFICATION
State of Maryland Teaching Certification, English, grades 7-12

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS
• National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)
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