Interpreting Blackness: A Phenomenological Case Study of African American Young Adult Literature

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INTERPRETING BLACKNESS: 
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL CASE STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the 
Louisiana State University and 
Agricultural and Mechanical College 
in partial fulfillment of the 
requirements for the degree of 
Doctor of Philosophy 

in 
The School of Education

by
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B.A., Louisiana State University, 2010
M.Ed., Louisiana State University, 2011
Ed.S., Louisiana State University, 2013
December 2014
To the little Black girls and young Black women who still are looking for their stories between the hard and soft covers of a book, waiting for the world to read them
Acknowledgements

First, I would like to give honor to God, without whom I am nothing. I remember singing the old gospel song in church when I was little, “We've come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord; trusting in his holy word. He's never failed us yet. Oh! Can’t turn around, we've come this far by faith.” Our church always had a special way of recreating the lyrics to old spirituals. There were so many days I wanted to give up and You brought me through. The many days I found hopeless, I found comfort in your love. Though all of the hardships, strife, pain, and success, I know it is a part of a greater plan, and for this, I say, “Thank you.”

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Gabriel, my favorite older brother. It doesn't matter than you are the only one; you are the
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we got into, the headaches we gave Mom well into our adulthoods, and yet, we didn't turn out that
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Abstract

This dissertation examines how Black students formulate representation of African American in African American young adult literature. It also explores the effects of race in reference to how characters are portrayed, publishing industry practices, and how African American literature is taught in the secondary classroom. In this study, I utilized qualitative research methods, specifically, phenomenology to place meaning on any occurrences cited by the participants. Data was collected using an initial interview, and a follow up interview to help clarify data collected from participants. This dissertation argues that race and gender constructs how characters are portrayed in African American young adult literature. This dissertation also argues that how participants interpret these portrayals of race and gender will depend on prior social interaction and experiences with African American literary works. Some may argue that because African American literature does display images that are associated with African American culture, there are no disparities in the works. By challenging the portrayals of Black characters in African American young adult literature, there could be a change in how this literature is written and in how African American young adult literature is viewed within the publishing industry.
Chapter 1

Introduction: My Encounter with African American YA Lit

I first encountered young adult literature about African-American characters when I was 15 years old. *Around the Way Girls* (Hunter, Hunt, & Joseph, 2004) circulated among my group of friends, and finally one of my friends told me that I should read the book. As I read I was excited to see storylines about Black girls like me. I did not mind that the storylines looked nothing like my own life; the characters were Black and that made me happy. The storylines were about the streets and ‘hood’ life, but not as I had experienced it. I read the entire series of books but became bored with them and I decided to read books that were aimed at a more adult audience, thinking that it was the storylines of teenagers in the hood that were boring me. I took a great interest in Zane, reading erotica. I did not care about the amount of sex in the books I read, but I did enjoy the storyline of educated, Black women living independent lives in the city. I admired how the female protagonists spoke in Zane’s books because they did not involve excessive use of ebonics, so I did not have to over-think the meaning of the dialogue between and among characters. I did not think to challenge the African American Vernacular used in the text although it was not native to my geography; to me, every Black person spoke the same. Eventually my interest in African-American literature waned, though I never challenged myself as to why I no longer wanted to read books about Black people. As a college student, I still read books primarily with Black characters, but I no longer actively participated with the characters in my reading; I could not find myself within the books’ Black characters. Initially, I ignored concerns about reading only “street life” books about Black people, accepting that there was a great popularity for urban literature with depictions of gang violence, sex, and poverty. Books with young adult Black characters were not commonly published: books published about African American children, including young adults, never reached above 5 percent
of books published for children from my sophomore to senior years of high school (Horning, Lindgren, & Schliesman, 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008). Urban literature books were the first books on the bookshelves at the bookstore, so to me, that was African-American literature. I had read other books with Black characters that did not have the thematic focus of urban literature, but to me, those books were ‘old school’. I just accepted that there were certain types of books for Black people, no matter that I felt they were not real views. When I became a school librarian my views changed, thanks to some candid comments from my school’s library patrons.

**Young Adult Literary History**

Literature aimed at young readers has always reflected society’s attitudes about children. (Tunnell & Jacobs, 2013, p. 80)

The Young Adult Library Services Association considers adolescent or young adult literature as literature that is targeted toward a specific group who are either just entering preteen/teen years to those who may just be entering adulthood or their mid-twenties (Cart, 2010). Due to the difference of opinion across sociology, psychology, and education about the developmental phase and age of what constitutes a young adult, the ages for what should be considered young adult literature vary (Tomlinson & Lynch-Brown, 2007). For the purpose of this work, young adult or adolescent literature considered any writing that targets ages 11 to 24 in order to include students in the age ranges of secondary schooling (Cart, 2010). Though there has been literature dedicated for the consumption of young adults for arguably centuries, terminology specifically describing literature for young people was not created until the early 20th century (Donelson & Nilsen, 2005). Locke created the idea of ‘childhood’ in the 17th century, though the idea of ‘childhood’ was hardly recognized until well into the 20th century (Tunnell & Jacobs, 2013). Most stories for children were exemplars of what adults thought that children should know, and usually had a strong emphasis on
good vs. evil or teaching children how to become what was considered a proper, functioning adult for the children’s society and time period (Tunnel & Jacobs, 2013). Such is also a function of young adult literature for modern young adult writers (Donelson, 1980). Since stories taught good vs. evil and how one should behave in order to be a proper adult, most books contained ample amounts of religious ideology (Shadiow, 1992; Tunnel & Jacobs, 2013). Even with an exodus to the new world, children’s literature remained unchanged, again, holding true to religious ideology; consequently, good triumphing or evil remained a common motif for children’s literature well into the early parts of the 20th century (Tomlinson & Lynch-Brown, 2007).

Young adult literature spawned from various factors, the most important being the growth of high school enrollment for children (Shadiow, 1992; Tomlinson & Lynch-Brown, 2007). During the latter parts of the 19th century to the early 20th century, a great interest in educating children evolved (Lagemann, 2000), and during this time, the category of “adolescence” was created (Shadiow, 1992; Cart, 2010). Post-World War II, fewer students were required to work for their households and were encouraged to attend schooling (Rollin, 1999), though rationally, there were still more students working for their household in comparison to those who were enrolled in school (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985; Tomlinson & Lynch-Brown, 2007). A study conducted in the 1920’s determined that it was changes in economy that actually allowed more students to have the opportunity of attending secondary schooling. Rather than thinking that schooling led to higher economic standing, the belief that students needed more practical preparation for adulthood led to higher numbers (Powell, Farrar & Cohen, 1985). While one might think that the need for classical education in the early 1900’s would affect the amount of books published for young adults, the increased student body in higher schools led to a higher presence of school libraries (Tomlinson & Lynch-Brown, 2007). A larger student body led educators and those who studied children and adolescents to have greater interest in
education, causing more research about high schools, which lead to the building of more educational institutions (Lagemann, 2000). Though it was not until after the Depression Era that the increased building of high schools occurred (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985), this building led to the appearance of more libraries in secondary schools, and to a greater need for books to be given to young adults (Donelson & Nilsen, 2005). In the past century, young adult literature has enjoyed a plethora of changes due to major historical events changing the perceptions of the United States public (Shadiow, 1992; Donelson & Nilsen, 2005). Because the purpose of young adult literature evolved, plots in young adult literature changed as well. In the “coming-of-age” book, which found its original prominence in the 1940s and 1950s, the primary objective was to allow young adults to explore their thoughts and feelings on the sociological factors that surrounded them without actually living the event because they were able to see themselves in the characters of the books that they read (Donelson & Nilsen, 2005; Cart, 2010). The “coming-of-age” book is still a prominent force in young adult literature. If one looks at the popular books that have become major films, such as Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone (Rowling, 1999) or the Twilight (Meyer, 2005), the main characters were placed in situations where they were confronted with challenging their social norms as a part of their maturing during adolescence. The birth of the “coming-of-age” book allowed for a type of formula to be created, which is most associated with young adult literary works. In most young adult novels, the main character is within the age range of a young adult, from eleven years of age to the early twenties (Cart, 2010). Problems in the book are usually emblematic of problems faced by teenagers, and the thought processes of the main character reflect teenage thought, giving the reader a chance to confront the plot vicariously through the perception of a young adult (Tomlinson & Lynch-Brown, 2007, p. 4).
Bucher and Manning (2006) explained young adult literature:

It should reflect young adults’ age and development by addressing their reading abilities, thinking levels, and interest levels. It should deal with contemporary issues, problems, and experience with character to whom adolescents can relate. It should consider contemporary world perspectives including cultural, social and gender diversity; environmental issues; global politics; and international interdependence (p.9)

LaBrant (1951) explained while it is not exclusively true that people only read books about themselves, “…the young and old tend to choose literature, where they seek solutions or escape, which offers character or situation with which they can find degree of identification” (p. 135).

**African-American Young Adult Literature**

The oral tradition of African-American literature stems from the restrictions of slaves being able to read and write; the alternative was to spread traditions and stories through an oral tradition (Bigham, 2005). The few books that were for African-American children contained what many scholars thought to be stereotypical representations, so to counter this problem, Du Bois created *The Brownies Book*, a magazine featuring stories both fictional and non-fictional about Negro children (Bishop, 1982; Tolson, 2005). Unfortunately, the positive images presented in the magazine were not enough to battle the negative imagery of Black children, so in the following 20 years, a “literary crusade” called the “New Negro” offered Black children positive imagery (Tolson, 2005, p.67). Black writers, many of whom were recognizable names from the Harlem Renaissance, were driven to create books about Black children that were the counter-narrative to stereotypical literature published during the time period (Bishop, 1982). There was a charge to the combination of the Black Arts Movement and multiple studies, including that of Larrick (1965) that addressed the lack of books featuring African American child characters, and gave a stronger case for creating more books about African-American children (Tolson, 2005). It was the publication of Hamilton’s *Zeely* (1967) that was considered a turning point in redefining Black beauty, winning numerous awards--the
Newbery Medal, Edgar Allen Poe Award, National Books Award, Hans Christian Andersen Award, Boston Globe-Horn Book Awards, and MacArthur Award (Harris, 1995; Tolson, 2005).

Contemporary authors of African-American literature continue to create books that appeal to “Black” life as noted through their experience, though it is still difficult for African-African books to find publishers, exasperating the issue of the availability of books for African-American young adults. Like young adult literature that was most consumed by white populations, young adult literature had its foundations in children’s literature. It was not for many years after African-Americans found a relatively greater popularity that young adult literature for African-Americans found a space in publishing houses.

**Statement of Problem: Why African-American Young Adult Literature?**

Books and stories are the best ways to impart proper literacy skills exposing students to different cultures, and bringing students foundational knowledge of academic work (McNair & Brooks, 2012). Publishing African American literature for young adults, though the ration of works is less than that of books published about white young adults, has a deep history of imparting cultural knowledge of African Americans. At first glance, it seems that the importance of young adult literature about African Americans is singularly of importance for African Americans; however, the imparting of knowledge of the African American culture stands equally, if not more important, for those who are not African American. This study addressed the representation of Black youth in young adult literature from the perspective of Black youth.
Research Questions

Questions that informed this study. What is the “Black” experience as perceived by African American young adults? How is the “Black” experience represented in African American young adult literature? How do books for young adults explore the culture of African American? What characteristics of young adult literature are included in young adult literature, while exploring the unique nature of African American populations? How is the Black female narrative shared within African American young adult literature, in accordance with Black Feminist Thought?

Significance of Study

Studying how Black students see themselves in African American young adult literature challenged the dominant narrative portrayed about Black youth in young adult literature. The study was built on a history of debate about who can accurately depict characters in multicultural literature, with a focus on how these depictions come to light (Bishop, 2003; Woodson, 2003; Lasky, 2003; Nikola-Lisa, 2003). This study served to build upon a current field of work that studies African American children’s literature and young adult literature, in studying how Black children are able to create discourse about race, power, and representation in literature (Bishop, 1982, 2003; Harris, 1997; Möller, 2008; McNair & Brooks, 2012; McNair, 2013). This study will also inform a field of research that studies African American representation in literature for young people.

Theoretical Framework

In studies of linguistic interaction Rosenblatt (1978) created a theory of reading that deviated from the traditional stimulus-response (Sloan, 2002) model of reading. The transactional theory of reading implies that the ‘meaning’ of the text in a work, referred to as the “poem”, is created by the reader, not only the text (Rosenblatt, 1978). In this theoretical framework, the concentration lies
within the reader, not singularly with the text. When reading a work, a “transaction” takes place, where the reader interacts with the text consumed. The reader makes “meaning” of the text, through drawing on prior personal experiences (Rosenblatt, 1978, pp. 20-21). The reader’s role is not to diminish the importance of text formation and arrangement made by the author; rather, the arrangement of words serves to also contribute the meaning made by the reader. When the text is changed, a new “poem” is created, therefore creating a new “meaning” to the reader (Rosenblatt, 1978).

The idea of the transaction has pragmatic origins via Dewey (1949) who defined the instance of human behavior, “…where systems of description and naming are employed to deal with aspects and phases of action, without final attribution to ‘elements’ or other presumptively detachable ‘entities’, ‘essences’ or ‘relatives’…” (p.108). In such a transaction, the focus is not the knowledge, but the process in which the knowledge is gained (Dewey, 1949; Brinkmann, 2011). The transaction occurs on an individual basis; therefore, no person’s transaction should be identical to others because no one’s experience is identical. Treating one man’s word as the final thought or opinion of a text would violate the idea of the transaction, because no one man is considered an expert (Dewey, 1949, p. 122). Rosenblatt (1978) stated that while the reader brings previous experiences and meaning of text and words when encountering a new text, it is possible for the text to bring the reader a new experience, which changes the reader’s perception of the text, morphing their “…prior assumptions associations” (p. 11). Reading as event means that one can have an experience by consuming text because knowledge is gained during the event; therefore, one’s experience can change during the process of a reading transaction (Dewey, 1949; Rosenblatt, 1978). How one interprets a text depends on past experiences (Rosenblatt, 1978), which means the Black girls in this study interpreted text about Black people differently based on their own unique set of experiences.
Two types of reading can occur during an event. Efferent reading occurs when the reader wants to identify what he/she is taking away from the text; the reader aims to gain information about the text (Rosenblatt, 1978). The converse, aesthetic reading, occurs when, “…the reader’s attention is centered directly on what he is living through during the relationship with that particular text” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p.24), or the personal experience the reader is having while reading the text (Iser, 1978). Efferent and aesthetic reading can be independent of each other, but often, the two operate within a continuum; the reader can shift his/her attention during the consumption of text in an attempt to gather information and create meaning based on the arrangement of the text (Rosenblatt, 1978). A reader can gain information from a text while vicariously living an event through the text of a book. What makes the usage of transactional reading so pertinent to African American literature is that African Americans do not have one set of common experiences that make them African American (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012). The transactional theory of reading respects that, while there may be commonalities experienced by those of a certain culture, persons’ experiences of what they read about their culture may differ because of a unique set of prior experiences that they bring to a reading transaction (Rosenblatt, 1978).

The pragmatic roots of the transactional reading theory state that knowledge is a set of ideas, and ideas are created because they have worked (Menand, 2001). Ideas are created by a community or group of people and have been created based on a collective set of experiences (Menand, 2001). The transactional theory of reading is similar because it recognizes that a reader’s interpretation and knowledge of a text are based on a set of experiences from the reader, and the reader may accept these ideas as knowledge (Rosenblatt, 1978). In the past 100 years, African American children’s and young adult literature have held a tradition of sharing experiences and narratives of Black life.
While there is no set of rules of what makes an authentic African American experience, it is possible that transactional reading can expose some common experiences that would affect how one reads and interprets African American young adult text.

**Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race theory was an outgrowth of Critical Legal Studies, which created a discourse that exposed and challenged the inner workings of institutionalized racism within United States law (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Dixson & Lynn, 2013). Viewing racism as entrenched in United States legalities, the effects of racism trickle into all aspects of American living, including education. In this study of African American literature, Critical Race Theory challenged the appearance and perceptions of African American literature, and ultimately, African American young adult literature.

**Racism is normal.** Critical Race Theory encompasses the following set of tenants, or defined rules, that drive the discourse of critical race thought: racism is normal, interest convergence, race as a social construct, intersectionality and antiessentialism, and narratives/counterstory (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012, pp.7-10). The first tenant, that racism is normal, indicates that racism is not some random act of behavior from one person; rather, racism is engrained within our society (Ladson-Billings, 2013; Bell, 1992). Racism is not some random act of hatred; rather, it is a product of many socialized ideas (Lawrence, 1995).

**Interest convergence.** Interest convergence means that unless the idea or action is for the betterment or benefit for those in power, it is not likely to have success (Bell, 1995; Freeman, 1995;
Delgado & Stefanic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2013). Often considered the father of critical race theory, Bell is credited with the idea of interest convergence and his critique of the hallmark case *Brown vs. the Board of Education* (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012). Bell (1995) debated what happened to the state of education after the decision that “separate but equal was unconstitutional”, dissecting why it was possible that the case of *Brown vs. the Board of education* was in favor of ending segregation. Bell (1995) and Freeman (1995) contend that in using interest convergence, the interests of whites were served by changing the view of American life; communism was demonized as an attempt dissuade followers in the States. Also, to ensure that Blacks still had an interest in fighting for American causes, the veil of equality was given, and finally, the economic benefit of ending racism served to be a catalyst for a change of heart about the wrongful nature of segregation (Bell, 1995; Freeman, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2013). The “ending” of segregation and discrimination on the basis of color, sex, and religious creed has yet to serve those who are heavily marginalized, as the main beneficiaries of affirmative action are not Blacks, but white women (Ladson-Billings, 2013). Unless those in power find usefulness in an action, the idea will struggle to come to fruition. Interest convergence finds a stable home in the publishing industry, as publishers will not publish what is not beneficial to them (Young, 2006), even if it means publishing certain images of African Americans that are stereotypical or untrue.

**Race as a social construct.** The third tenant of Critical Race Theory, that race is a social construct, states that race is not identified on biological or genetic foundations, but rather how a society defines what race “is” (López, 1995). Race is a set of ideas of what a certain people may do, behave, or look like, and these ideas evolve and change over time, depending on society’s view of the race in the time period (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012) The idea that race has the ability to change, indeed, makes it a social construction. Because race is something that is created socially (Lawrence,
1995) other perverseness of exclusion also exists within the social construction of race. Whiteness as property allows whites to exclude and include what is white, leaving those who are not accepted within “whiteness” to constantly look to “whiteness” as paramount (Harris, 1995). Harris (1995) noted that by making “whiteness” property, whiteness is something that can be owned or transferred to another person, however this is not an infallible fact. Because “whiteness” has the ability to exclude and, thus, is “absolute”, those who may be partially white are not considered white (Harris, 1995; McIntosh, 2004; Fasching-Varner & Mitchell, 2013,). The rules for how “whiteness” is determined are not identical; one drop of Black blood makes a person Black but a drop of white blood does not make a person white (Harris, 1995). By keeping exclusivity of “whiteness”, demand and want for “whiteness” is inbred, keeping “whiteness” a standard of the “right” state of being (Harris, 1995). McIntosh (2004) wrote, “…a ‘white’ skin in the United States opens many doors for whites whether or not we approve of the way dominance has been conferred on us. Individual acts can palliate but cannot end, these problems, so even if one does not want to benefit from whiteness, they cannot escape their benefits” (p. 192). Regarding African American young adult literature, the ability of publishers and writers to propose and exclude what is seen as inherently “black” in literature possibly permeates to what is written and produced about African Americans in African American young adult literature (Sutton, 1994). While those who study African American children’s and young adult literature acknowledge that African American literature for children and young adults have similar thematic attributes (McNair & Brooks, 2012), authors who may want to veer away from certain images of African American life may be limited in achieving this end by those who control publishing interest.

**Intersectionality.** Intersectionality was originally a term coined by Crenshaw (1995, 2000) as a response and critique of white feminism and its exclusion of the Black female experience
because white feminism was conceived on the basis of fighting a male patriarchy, making it difficult to analyze and defend the issues surrounding Black feminism, (hooks, 1999).

Intersectionality invokes that a person may not singularly have one part of themselves that may face discrimination; a woman can Black and homosexual, making her intersection gender, race, class, and sexuality, and therefore, cannot be understood or studied through the traditional of feminism, which does not recognize intersections can change the experience of the woman (Crenshaw, 1995; 2000; King, 1995). The idea that multiple intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality was expanded by Collins (1992), who used the work of Black female intellectuals (intellectuals do not have to be related to the academy) to narrate the oppression and difference experienced by Black women (2000). Collins (2000) and Lorde (1995) recognized that within these narratives, the issues resulting from intersectionality are exposed, while espying that no Black woman’s experience is identical to that of another. Lorde, however, uses the term, intersectional; rather, she describes the principles of intersectionality. The recognition that no one person colors’ experience is identical to another conforms to the concept of antiessentialism, which contends that there is no one experience that makes a person a part of an intersection (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012). Intersections interact with each other to create a different experience for different people, and these intersections can oppress other person’s intersectionalities as well; therefore, there cannot be “one” way to be a part of an intersection (Collins, 1992; 2000; Lorde, 1995). Intersectionality operates within socially created power structures, molding and creating different experiences for different arrangements of intersectionalities (Lorde, 1995; Crenshaw, 1995, 2000; Collins, 1992, 2000; Harris, 1995; Anderson & Collins, 1998) A Black female, for example, who is a middle class lesbian will have a different experience of being a Black female than a Black female who is of the same class and heterosexual.
When studying African American young adult literature, intersectionality plays a paramount role in how authenticity is perceived because of how a person’s past social interactions shape his/her interpretation of text (Rosenblatt, 1978). Brooks (2006) cited a study in which she had urban students read a story about African Americans; because the students did not perceive the characters’ behavior to be Black, they determined that the characters in the story could not possibly be Black. The characters were indeed Black, but their intersections of being middle class people caused them to behave and conduct themselves in a different manner from what the students perceived to be Black (Brooks, 2006). Issues of intersectionality play an integral part in the interpretation of the text and establishing the authenticity of African American young adult literature.

**Counterstorytelling.** The final tenant of Critical Race theory involves the use of narrative or counterstorytelling to reveal and unearth the absurdities that lie with traditional narratives, illustrating how society may perceive a culture (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012) Counterstories are not created to be a rant complaining about mistreatment, but rather a story to reveal how discrimination operates within power structures (Solórzano & Yasso, 2002; Decuir & Dixson, 2004; Fasching-Varner, 2009; Delgado & Stefanic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2013). The narrative or counterstory in African American young adult literature historically was a way to create positive images of African American children and young adults to counteract against images that degrade African American children (Brooks & McNair, 2009). Though the counterstory may be the tradition of African American children’s literature, the tradition may not necessarily still be the charge of modern authors of these types of works; nevertheless, African American literature does remain a vital way to carry on the tradition of imparting culture and storytelling to future generations of African American children and young adults (McNair & Brooks, 2012).
Black Feminist Thought

**Resisting oppression.** The first tenant of Black feminist thought is that it must resist oppression (Collins, 2000), which is primarily done through self-definition. The Black female’s ability to define the self allows Black females to portray a different story than what may be currently considered by social constructs. Resisting oppression has become an even more difficult task over time due to new ideas of colorblindness or treating everyone the same (Collins, 2000; Rosenberg, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Because colorblindness treats everyone the same no matter the race, class, or background of any person, it conversely ignores the intersections and operation of intersectionality of each person. Colorblindness ideology stems from liberal ideology that the only way that discrimination can be ended is that everyone is treated the same (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). This becomes problematic because everyone is not the same, nor treated the same because of how intersectionality operates (Crenshaw, 1995). Since everyone is the same under colorblind ideology, the unique nature of experiences from those with intersectionalities, which usually serves to oppress, is ignored (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), often creating more problems than solutions.

**Linking Black female experiences.** This tenant holds that while Black women may have collective experience, the Black female experience should not be streamlined under essentialist thought. Collins (2000) acknowledged that Black females have similar experiences due to intersections, but there are still variances in the Black female experience. It is both the commonalities and differences that create Black feminist thought, as all Black female experiences are a part of the Black experience (Smith, 1995).

**Self-Definition.** The second tenant of Black feminist thought is the ability of the Black woman to self-define, allowing resistance to certain structures of oppression (Collins, 2000).
case of Black feminist thought, the power of self-definition allows the Black woman to create a
counter-narrative of what may be seen as normative and truth about Black females (Smith, 1995).
Collins (2000) wrote:

According to many African American women writers, no matter how oppressed an
individual woman may be, the power to save the self lies within the self. Other Black
women may associate a Black woman in this journey toward person empowerment, but the
ultimate responsibility for self-definition and self-valuation lie within the individual woman,
herself. (p. 130)

In self-definition, Black woman are able to “rearticulate” themselves to a general public, offering
varying perspectives of what is truth. Since Black female liberation was largely ignored by the racial
oppression of white feminism (hooks, 1981; 1995), it is important for Black females to define
themselves so as to not be categorized by falsehoods and misnomers.

**Dynamic and changing.** Race is considered a social construct, therefore, all theories,
research, and methodologies created in the past about race are also affects by the social construction
(Collins, 2000). United States post 9/11 sentiments characterized people from the Middle East as
religious zealots and people who are evil, but they were not always viewed in such a manner
(Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Since social constructs have the ability to evolve and change over
time based on the ideas held by the community at that time (Menand, 2001), the ideas surrounding
all social constructs, such as race and gender, also have the ability to change and evolve. Because of
this, the next tenant, the ability to evolve and change, is paramount to Black feminist thought
(Collins, 2000). Thus the ideas in Black feminist thought will, consequently, evolve over time as
well, since the ideas of race, sexuality, and gender continue to evolve; therefore, it is important that
Black feminist thought remain flexible to change (Collins, 2000).

**Maintaining projects of social justice.** That Black feminist thought should maintain its
focus on social justice is the final tenant. Without a social justice element, the aim of any movement
is doomed to fail; therefore, it is important that Black feminist thought not fall into comforts or
disagreement based on intersectionalities (The Combahee River Collective, 2000; Collins, 2000).
Social justice is created and strengthened by greater awareness and greater numbers of those
involved in social justice projects. Black women must continue to do work for social just for Black
females, offering permanence in society, if Black women are to counteract the normative ideas of
Black women (Smith, 1995)
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Introduction

…literature courses fail to reflect a global awareness of even awareness of cultural diversities with the United States. When one examines the American literature as it is taught to adolescents, many of the minorities are seen to be either ignored or misrepresented. (Lenz, & Mahood, 1980, p.256)

This literature review focused on African American literature, and how the history of young adult and adult and children’s African American literature influenced the creation and dissemination of African American young adult literature. It also analyzed whether the African Americans’ images portrayed in young adult literature are descriptive of and accurate about the culture, allowing the reader to encounter previous stereotypes that were present in African American literature, and how these stereotypes, if any, are still portrayed. Finally, this literature review engaged the ever-present debate of who can or should write about the African American culture.

The Purpose of African American Young Adult Literature

Historically, stories about African Americans were novels that served to interest and entertain those who were able to read and write in the 19th century, and who typically were not people of color. African American writers knew of the difficulties surrounding publishers who wanted to choose the subject matter to be published (Young, 2006). In literature from the 1800s, Blacks were shown to be ignorant, lazy, with an affinity for chicken and watermelon, were often accompanied by exaggerated features such as dark skin, bulging eyes, and large lips, and the usage of racial slander such as “nigger” or any relation to monkeys was not uncommon (Logan, 1965). Such stereotypes persevered into the following century, creating a need for action from African American writers.
Multiculturalism: Multicultural Education

To discuss African American young adult literature, a type of multicultural literature, the discussion of multicultural education and the usage of these texts in classrooms must be framed. The original purpose of schooling was to educate students on how to operate in society after they leave school; schools became a place for students to become assimilated into American society (Rasool & Curtis, 2000), under the assumption that all students will finish high school. Multicultural education found its prominence in the 1960s as a response to a higher discourse of racial relations (Lee, 2003). Multicultural education has a different aim in how students are educated about American society. Rasool and Curtis (2000) defined multicultural education:

Multicultural education is a multidisciplinary educational program that provides multiple learning environments matching the academic, social and linguistic needs of students… Through this process, the program should help students learn to respect and appreciate cultural diversity, overcome ethnocentric attitudes, and understand the sociohistorical, economic, and psychological factors that produced the contemporary condition of ethnic polarization, inequality, and alienation. (p. 11)

Multicultural education has faced many problems based on teachers’ and curricula planners’ discomfort of addressing race and ethnicity. The colorblind mentality of seeing everyone as equal (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012) is a much easier way to encounter an uncomfortable history and the past of the United State of America.

Nieto (2004) wrote the following about what has occurred history as a result of not considering the history of students as a part of curriculum:

As a result of dismissing and denying our history, the rich experiences of millions of our students and of their parents, grandparents and neighbors have been lost. Rather than using students’ experience as a foundation curriculum and pedagogy have been based on the myth of a painless and smooth assimilation. (p. xxvi)

An example of this denial of history happened recently occurred in Colorado schools. Advanced Placement U.S History students argued that they enjoyed hearing more than the typically
monolithic heroic history of the United States of America (Tumulty & Layon, 2014). Debates ensued when the College Board, the company responsible for setting curriculum standards for AP coursework, changed the standards of the U. S. History. The change, however, caused conservatives to argue that the new curriculum was unpatriotic and anti-American (Sreenivasan, 2014). In response, a school board member in the Jefferson County school district, a suburb of Denver, Colorado, proposed change to the school curriculum of U.S. History. The school board member proposed the U.S. history curriculum changes should, “…promote citizenship, patriotism, essentials and benefits of the free enterprise system, respect for authority and respect for individual rights…” and the course should not, “…encourage or condone civil disorder, social strife or disregard of the law…” (Sreenivasan, 2014). In reaction to the negative language used in the proposal, the Jefferson County School Board voted to dropped what they deemed to be the most controversial language in the proposal, but this has done little to calm the tension between the students and the district’s board members (Sreenivasan, 2014) Students argued that if they allowed the censorship of one subject, they would open Pandora’s box on all coursework in the district, and argued with the board that “American was founded on what you are trying to prevent” (Tumly & Layton, 2014). One teacher against any measures that changed the College Board’s curricula suggestions challenged them “to dig deeper into the role of religion, geography and ideology surrounding history and add other voices or perspectives that might not be as familiar”, as students who take AP US history are usually well aware of popular historical figures in United States History (Deam, 2014). This debate recently led College Board to threaten the district that not following the standards delineated for Advanced Placement course would cause the district to lose its accrediability for their Advanced Placement coursework (Tumulty & Layton, 2014).
Teacher Stephanie Rossi succinctly explained the purpose of having a curriculum that does not just teach American heroes:

I don't think of history as positive or negative. I think of it as a story. And within that story there are successes and failures, tragedies and moments of great brilliance…I feel very strongly that I have to let my students come to their own understanding, their own conclusions. (Deam, 2014)

The controversy surrounding these changes in the US History curriculum are but one known current instance of school curricula denying certain populations a chance to voice in what is taught in schools. This level of censorship only serves to privilege one side of a narrative, without letting students hold open discourse about what they are being taught, which strips students of practicing their own intellectual freedom. One example of how educational settings have become more proactive to introducing students to intellectual freedom is through Banned Books Week, a weeklong celebration of books that have been challenged or deem inappropriate for library collections (Gill, 2005). It is, however, difficult for students to have a discourse about difficult topics that happen within both dominant and marginal populations, especially if curricula are slanted to a certain viewpoint.

Another resistance to multicultural education may be the inability for a teacher to be able to address race. Biases that teachers have about students may be traced back to their teacher preparation programs (Delpit, 1995), but there is a responsibility for the teacher to educate him/her self and be able to discuss race openly in the classroom setting, despite any lack of previous training. Because of a lack of training, some teachers are often afraid to venture into uncharted territory, which could possibly backfire (Bolgatz, 2005).

While not the panacea for all problems in American education, multicultural education has the ability to challenge the dominant narrative in regards to race, sex, ethnicity, and gender, while
creating discourse about “power and privilege in society” (Nieto, 2004). Similarly, Larrick (1965) attested that the creation and publication of more books including people of color can disrupt the narrative of what is normal, normal being white children having all the stories in the classroom; so stands the aim of multicultural education. (Larrick, 1965) shared that books featuring children of color are not only for children of color, but also for white children to diminish any superiority to people of color. Multicultural education is of for all children to learn about difference, not only to create a space for those outside of dominant white culture (Nieto, 2004), as well as bringing equality to children from all backgrounds in educational and learning settings (Banks, 2004). Additionally, multicultural literature should allow students to engage in discourse about culture outside their own (Dresang, 2013). Bolgatz (2005) recalled an instance where she encountered her students’ biases when teaching World History at a mostly white, middle class school. Bolgatz (2005) recalled students’ negative words as “exotic and “weird” to describe those from outside their race, and “The students acted as if their experience as white, middle class people living in the United States should be the standard by which to judge others---often disapprovingly” (p.12-13).

This reaction of white students viewing themselves in a dominant aspect is not too different from that of the students in Dressel’s (2005) study, who determined that those who were non-white where not American in the same manner as themselves; the students who has this remark were white and middle class.

Another problem that arises for teachers who must employ multicultural education practices is that they do not always know the student population. Such teachers may hold stereotypical or essentialist ideas of their students (Nieto, 2004). Delpit (1995) explained that the lack of teachers’ understanding for cultures outside their own and premade ideas of children from certain cultures are products of the teachers’ previous experiences and from what is learned in teacher preparation.
programs. It is important to understand that these assumptions are not only an issue of white teachers, but can be held by non-white teachers as well. Nieto (2004) shared that being from a non-white background does not guarantee an all-encompassing understanding of all culture, and therefore, a non-biased view of students. Critical Race Theory cites that due to normality of race and race being socially constructed, it is possible for all people to hold certain racial ideas that are essentialist and constructed by society (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012). Lawrence (1995) conveyed that all Americans share a similarity in belonging in American society, therefore, “we are all racist.” If this is so, all teachers are racist in some aspect and all teachers are susceptible to prior notions about their students that could present themselves in teaching multicultural education.

Despite these difficulties, teachers hold a pivotal role in multicultural education, which in turn, causes teachers to hold a pivotal role in sharing, reading, and discussing African American young adult literature with students. Student instruction should be customized, based on the needs of the students, discussing the factors of “race, sex, ethnicity” as well as “class and sexual orientation (Rasool & Curtis, 2000, p. 11). The needs of the students should drive the instruction and discussion of multicultural text, leaving the teacher to be familiar with, but not the expert holding all of the knowledge (Delpit, 2012). This does not mean that students should be held to different standards of achievement; rather, students should be held to similar levels of accountability that they would have outside of multicultural education. Teachers must discuss how factors of domination have caused polarization of certain populations in American society (Rasool & Curtis, 2000).

African American Literature in School Curricula

In the earlier moments of the Civil Rights movement, Black children saw that there were little to no books about them, and even fewer being used in the classroom, which was a major
criticism of schools in 1965 New York (Larrick, 1965). Student populations for Black children increased, yet the only literature to which children were exposed were stories of white children. The publication of Larrick’s article resulted in a greater push to have more multicultural literature due to the discussion of racial relations (Lee, 2003). For African American children, the selections of books have multiplied since 1965, but the exposures of these books are not so obvious (Brooks & McNair, 2009). The small number of books about African American Children published each year compounds the issue of book exposure. The number of books about African Americans for young adult literature is even less than what is published for children (Horning, Lindgren, & Schliesman, 2014), leaving secondary schools to struggle even more to find novel selections for library and curricula use. Even the textbook, the centerpiece of literature in schooling, still focuses on a monolithic story of Eurocentric values (McCarthy, 1998). Children’s misconceptions of cultures outside their own are not surprising because in a reading transaction, a person accesses prior knowledge and prior experience and interjects them into interpretation (Rosenblatt, 1978), making it even more important to have culturally authentic literature available for young adults to read.

**The Need and Purpose of African American Literature: What African American Lit Can Do**

Du Bois publications of *The Brownies Book* was intended as an outlet for African American children to see positive and uplifting images of themselves in literature (Bishop, 1982; Harris, 1995, Brooks & McNair, 2009). It was a perfect strategy, as literature and literacy are the way to preserve and spread the culture of a community (Brooks & McNair, 2009). African American literature can also serve as a counter narrative of what society defines and prescribes about African Americans populations by offering a more honest representation of Black children and young adults (Hughes-Hasell, 2013). For the purpose of this work, African American literature is any literature with an African American protagonist, though there are those who would edit this statement because they
consider African American literature to be about African Americans and written by African Americans (Bishop, 2007; Brooks & McNair, 2009; McNair, 2013). Since multicultural literature, including African American young adult literature, is not exclusively for the consumption of Black people (Larrick, 1964; Bishop, 1982; Nieto, 1992; Dresell, 2005; Doll & Garrison, 2013), African American young adult literature also has the power to share a narrative with those from outside the culture. Nikola-Lisa (2003) suggested that multicultural literature is not solely for children or young adults, but more beneficial for adults because adults are the ones who carry around the most what McNair (2013) deems as “racial baggage”.

**Encountering Racism**

Besides creating discourse about the unique nature of all cultures, multicultural literature can also open difficult topics like racism to a discourse with children and young adults. Book discussions and reading groups can serve as a way for children and young adults to encounter how racism and perspective of different cultures operate within literature, and ultimately, within their society. Möller (2008) studied how meaning was created within an after school reading group of three African-American girls and one biracial white/Hispanic girl, all of whom were under the age of ten. Möller (2008) used a book discussion to have the young ladies discuss literature, but also talked about instances of inequality that they notice in their lives. The young ladies were able to draw inferences from their personal lives after reading the literature given by the teacher. In one instance, Tamika, one of the girls, recalled how the Black Barbie dolls ads in catalogues were always smaller than those of white Barbie dolls. Tamika also noted that she thought that the Black Barbie doll looked exactly like the white Barbie doll only darker, and she found this problematic (Möller, 2008). Tamika’s noting that there was not a difference in the Barbie dolls was also her recognition that certain standards of beauty that were Eurocentric, a socialized idea of racism that white is beautiful
(Harris, 1995). Collins (2000) would consider Tamika an intellectual, as she had a narrative story that she shared about her experience as a Black female child. This emphasizes the importance of having literature that represents African Americans in young adult literature; such texts increase the need for discussion and debate by their presence.

**The Need to Open Cultural Horizons**

At first view, some would think that the purpose of African American young adult literature is to give African American preteens and teenagers a chance to see themselves within books that they read, though it is actually beneficial for those outside of African American culture to see images of Black children in books as well (Larrick, 1965, Bishop, 1982). Given, it is good for children and young adults alike to read literature about characters that look like them, sharing similar cultural experiences with them; it boosts self-esteem and pride within one’s identity (McNair, 2013). There is a case for children who are not African American or from a certain culture to read books that are not about their own culture.

Larrick (1965) shared her concerns about white children’s lack of exposure to books about African Americans, which consequently led to the discovery that during the 1960’s, post integration, that there were few books about African Americans.

…the impact of all-White books upon 39,600,000 white children is probably worse. Although his light skin makes him one of the world’s minorities, the White child learns from his books that he is the kingfish. There seems little chance of developing the humility so urgently needed for the world cooperation, instead of world conflict, as long as our children are brought up on gentle doses of racism through their books. (Larrick, 1965, p.65) It is possible that even though a teacher has a strong intent to expose students to a different culture through literature, the stereotypes and ideas that the student have internalized from their socialization may still pervade in their understanding of the literature Dressel (2005). Rosenblatt’s (1978) transactional reading theory was enacted in Dressel (2005) as reasoning for the context of meaning
to be considered when teaching students multicultural readings. Even though the teacher may teach the proper ideas and knowledge of certain culture, transactional ideology states that students will understand this new knowledge through their own lens and prior experiences (Rosenblatt, 1978); therefore, it is paramount that the social context for what is taught is given to students when teaching multicultural texts. Lack of context only serves to force students to draw on their prior experience, which completely nullifies the purpose of giving students new perspectives through literature; even with proper context, students will still struggle to formulate new ideas of a culture that is not their own (Dressel, 2005).

Dressel (2005) chronicled and experimented with a student body composed predominantly of white students learning about other cultures in a multicultural unit. At the end of the unit, students indicated that they enjoyed reading the books, but little had changed in their views of the culture they studied. Page (1980) found that students who have read books about Black people have been enjoyed them, but the experience did little to erase previous ideas of Black people.

About 60 percent of students indicated that they did not see Korean and Chinese Americans as being “American” like them; the same sentiment was expressed about Latino and African-Americans (Dressel, 2005). Bolgastz (2005) garnered similar results when reading multicultural works in her classroom; students still exoticized cultures that were not their own. Implications from this study showed that unless literature is thoughtfully chosen and students are given a solid context about those from different cultures and ethnicities, they were likely to formulate meaning from their prior experiences (Rosenblatt, 1978). Prior experiences often come from parents, who may perpetuate their views of nondominant cultures learned from society and their parents; since these ideas are held by a group, they become knowledge to the students (Dewey, 1949).
Even books that accurately represent a culture could be misunderstood based on prior thoughts and ideas. In reference to teaching literature with racial themes, Dilg (1999) wrote:

To approach effectively these works of literature, the issues they focus on, and the dynamics they trigger among students requires not only grounding in the literature of multiple cultures, but a knowledge of history, political science, sociology, anthropology, psychology, group dynamics and conflict management—a breadth and depth of background many of us in my generation lack, even after we have gone through well-respected undergraduate and graduate programs in liberal arts. (p.7)

Teachers, in short, must go beyond the education attained during their years as a student, and research with great vigor the sociological aspects of race, gender, and class.

**The Outsider /Insider Argument**

When exploring the issue of representation and authenticity, one must take into account the unique nature of the culture being discussed, especially since within a multicultural group there are even more subgroups that define themselves differently within the multicultural group (McCarthy, 1998). It is difficult to understand and comprehend the functions of a culture outside one’s own without immersing the self in the culture (Sutton, 1994). Because of the sensitivity necessary in writing about minority cultures, there is an intense debate about who can and should write about a culture, particularly if a writer is not from the culture. White authors still account for writing at least 25 percent of children’s books made for African American and students, and less than 3 percent of the books published for children featured African American main characters (Horning, K. T., Lindgren, M. V., & Schliesman, M, 2014). There are those who strongly disagree that those outside of a culture should not write about it without some prior study of the culture (Woodson, 2003).

Henderson (2005) cited a few different authors who have written outside their culture. She stated that if she only wrote about her own experiences, her authorial freedoms would be limited, stating that she “…grew up in shopping malls and dreaming about rock and roll and Jack Kennedy and his New Frontier…I have written about that already and life is too short to tell the same story
Lasky (2003) noted a similar view equating the limitation of whom and about what she can write as a form of censorship. She does concede that though the best stories are told from someone from the inside, a great artist, even one writing about a culture that is not his/her own, can depict a culture just as well. A book that is poorly written by someone within a culture is not better than a book that is written well by someone outside of their own culture because the ability of a true artist transcends those features of a predisposed culture and ethnicity (Lasky, 2003).

Nikola-Lisa (2003) shared that writing outside of his culture helped him to confront uncomfortable events from his past life with his friends from multicultural backgrounds, such as torturing unarmed Mexican children in his hometown with rocks. Nikola-Lisa (2003) also recalled he almost said “nigger” in front of a Black friend because he jokingly recited the rhyme “Eeny Meeny Miney Moe”, which originally had the racial slur ‘nigger’ in the rhyme; he promptly lost his Black friend who heard his remarks. After living said events, Nikola-Lisa (2003) decided to write to liberate other Americans from racist ideas, though racist ideas may never be dismantled (Bell, 1992). African Americans also cite writing about multicultural populations to liberate from a common narrative (Bishop, 1982). Unlike many authors who write outside of their own culture on the grounds of creative freedoms, Nikola-Lisa (2003) used writing to encounter his past, and to narrate against racism from others; writing about multicultural people served as a type of therapy that helped him encounter the racism narratives he encountered in his youth. The intent of the author is to create a counterstory from the views of someone from outside the dominant culture in order to counter the majority narrative (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Some authors have experienced success in writing outside of their own culture, lending a stronger argument of not having stories of a culture only shared by those within it. Moreillon (2003) told the story of when she was discouraged to write an illustrated poem about a local Native American tribe; nevertheless, she wrote the poem with the help
and guidance of people from the native tribe. When she shared the book with the tribe, they agreed to help her create the story, which lead to a book that successfully depicted the tribe’s traditions and culture.

African Americans and other minorities have expressed differing views pertaining to the argument of authors writing outside of their culture. Authors such as Woodson hold that there are problems writing about any culture, as an insider or outsider (Henderson, 2005). Woodson (2003) recalled a situation where she met a white author who wrote a story about a “family of color”; the author told Woodson that the story was based on a family of color who worked for her family. Woodson (2003) shared her concerns that a person who wants to write about a culture that is not his/her own should at least live with or socialize within the home-space of a family from the outside culture. Conversely, author Myers affirmed that it does not necessarily matter if a person is of the culture in which they decide to writer, as long as they do thorough research about the culture (Sutton, 1994). Myers concluded that the depiction of the culture may not be 100 percent, but the majority of the experience could be captured through careful crafting and research, thus authors should not limit their writings to their own culture on the basis of creative freedom (Sutton, 1994). Many authors of historical fiction write outside their experience, however it is not likely that most of them lived within the time period about which they write; and yet, they still write the stories. McMillan (1990) wrote:

For many of us, writing is our reaction to injustices, absurdities, and beauty. It is our way of registering our complaints or affirmations. The best are not didactic. They do not scream out “message,” nor are they abstraction. Our stories are our personal response. What we want to specify. What we see. What we feel. Our wide-angle lens—our close up look. And even if the story doesn’t pinpoint the solution to the answer, it is the exploration itself that is often worth the trip (xxii).

McMillian’s (1990) view of writing as an insider supported the idea of using African American literature as a way to create a counterstory or narrative, as the story of African Americans is
recreated from the ideas of the dominant culture (Ladson, Billings, 2013). Similarly, Bishop (1982) asserted that writers are “a witness” to their culture’s experience, not only retelling what they have lived, but also reporting the experiences of their lives to others who are also within the culture. Bishop (1982) conveyed, “The writer-witness translate and transforms reality and then hold the result up for other witnesses to confirm” (p.79). African Americans may share similar experiences, but because of different intersections within the race, a person with a different arrangement of intersections could have a completely different narrative than a person with the same set of intersections with one variance (Lorde, 1995; Crenshaw, 1995; 2000; Collins, 1992, 2000; Harris, 1995; Anderson & Collins, 1998).

Black authors have commonly shared that they write to further a history for children of color that they may not gain by reading books where the main characters are white (Bishop, 1982). This could become problematic because what is written from one author’s view can be seen as the singular experience of those in the entire race or ethnicity, rather than accepting that this is only one piece of what could be experienced by those in the culture (Bishop, 1982). hooks (1994) recalled many occasions where her works written were representative of Black women, though ironically, they were not considered literature for a general audience, unlike the works of white women which were considered for a general audience. Regardless of who tells the story, if one wants to write about a culture, that author should be well versed in the language of the culture, as well as the family and community dynamics (Woodson, 2003). If an author does not gain an inside perspective of the culture, the story may be lost to readers from that culture, no matter how well written. It should not matter who writes the story, as long as research is done and the intentions behind writing the story are good. African American children’s book illustrator Pickney admitted that he does not writes books simply because he is an African American; he conducts extensive research about those
from his culture to gain a stronger perspective beyond what is his own (Henderson, 2005). No matter the cultural background of the author, authors are responsible for research about the culture to depict the story correctly, and therefore allowing the audience to draw upon similar experiences. If the purpose of multicultural literature is to create change and create insights into the “human experience” then the writer needs to “…depict characters who reflect a culture’s values, beliefs, customs and world view” (Henderson, 2005, p. 275).

The Difficulty in Publishing African American Young Adult Literature

The themes on which Negro writers naturally write best, with deepest knowledge and clearest understanding, are precisely the themes most editors do not want treated. These are themes which white readers are tired of or do not wish to hear. . . . White Americans are willing to read about Negroes, but they prefer to read about Negroes who are fools, clowns, prostitutes, or at any rate, in despair, and contemplating suicide. Other sorts of Negroes do not interest them because, as they say, they are “just like white folks.” But their interest in white folks, we notice, continues. This is a real and tremendous handicap. It is analogous to the handicap of all writers on unpopular themes, but it bears hardest on young Negroes because its bar is broader and more inclusive. It puts a premium on one kind of sadistic subject. (Du Bois, 1927, p. 276)

Traditionally, African Americans who wrote for their population of children and young adults had a history of creating narratives and stories that portrayed positive images of African Americans, and those magazines and books were published by persons of color. In an interview, Myers lamented that the publishing industry has not allowed African American authors to discard the mold of portraying drug, violence, and poverty as the only “Black” experience, though he does not have issue with these images (Sutton, 1994).
Myers conveyed that Black authors often are not able to write outside of the “Black” experience:

…I keep challenging people to name five books over the last 20 years by blacks that are on non-black subjects. So when you have a black writer who says, “I’ve got this great idea about space monkeys that talk,” he or she is turned down. And what they are allowed to write about very often reflects the editor’s opinion…So, what I’m suggesting is that when a black person approaches a publishers, the ideas that are accepted are normally one that the editor can see as recognizably black. (Sutton, 1994, p.27)

Bishop (1982) explained that authors like Zora Neal Hurston and Paul Laurence Dunbar found that images of Blacks with the issue of how Blackness is represented ubiquitously constrained what they could write and publish; literature about minority populations did not sell if the minority stereotypes were not present. White publishing houses did not take too much interest in books about multicultural populations until factors such as integration, along with research studies exposing the lack of literature about minority populations that writing books about African Americans from African American authors, became more acceptable in a predominantly white publishing industry (Bishop, 1982; Young, 2006). This publishing industry, which typically is not composed of people of African American decent (Young, 2006), acted as, “…gatekeepers of the kinds of stories and images representative of African Americans” (Henderson, 2005, p.269). Even so, the number of books about Black characters in ratio to books about white characters in both children’s and young adult literature is still greatly disproportionate, and in favor of more books about white characters being published (Horning, Lindgren, & Schliesman, 2014). This disproportion of African American books for children and young adults, many of which are written by non African Americans, deserves some critical conversations about how many and who writes books about African Americans (Thompson, 2013). In the books that are published, the “Black” experience is typically represented portraying “blackness” in one manner to a white audience (Young, 2006).
Even today, the textbook publishing industry for grade schools has yet to publish outside of a Eurocentric narrative for books (McCarthy, 1998).

Hamilton articulated similar issues of Black writers frequently unable to have the freedom to be able to write outside of their own experience:

…it is very difficult when you’re a black writer to write outside of the black experience. People don’t allow it; critics often won’t allow it. If I would do a book that didn’t have blacks, people would say, “Oh, what is Virginia Hamilton doing?” Yet, a white writer can write about anything... I feel the limitation.” (Rochman, 1992, p. 1021).

hooks (1999) shared a similar opinion based on her experiences as a writer who is both Black and female. It is difficult for those outside the dominant culture to be seen as writers of that culture, while a white author can write a work that is considered made for all audiences. hooks (1999) shared:

Nowadays, it is often assumed that if a black woman writer of nonfiction concentrates on black experience and/or race, she is only writing for black female readers. Of course, the irony is that white women can concentrate solely on white experience and/or race and she will be perceived as writing a book for a general audience. (p. 146)

Graham echoed a similar sentiment: “My personal problem with publishers has been the difference between my image and theirs” (Commire, 1971, p. 122). Graham contended that publishers have deemed his African American characters to be too white, but he believed that people are people, no what matter color. While creating books that appeal to a greater audience, authors should be careful not to lose the cultural aspects of the characters in books because offering these cultural insights allows people from all cultures to see the world is bigger than their own view of life (Highwater, 1978). The difficulty of this issue of minority authors being unable to write outside of what publishers think of their culture is that publishers allow white authors to publish works about communities other than their own. Moreillon (2003) verbalized that her ethnicity was not questioned when, as a white woman, she wrote about a Native American tribe; when the publisher
called into question some of the content about the tribe, no criticism was made to make the story more representative of the culture. This creates doubt about the truthfulness of representations as read by young adult audiences when publishers have the power to negotiate what is written in books about minorities; thus publishers have the power to represent in books the perceptions of what they think is inherently Black. Lawrence (1995) wrote:

Americans share a common historical and cultural heritage in which racism has played and still plays a dominant role. Because of that shared experience, we also inevitably share many ideas, attitudes, and beliefs that attach significance to an individual’s race and induce negative feelings and opinions about nonwhites. To the extent that this cultural belief system has influences all of us, we are all racists. At the same time, most of us are unaware of our racist. At the same time, most of us are unaware of our racists. We do not recognize that what in which our cultural experience has influences our beliefs about race or the occasion on which those belies affects our actions (p. 237).

If we are all racist based on how we are raised to see different cultures, then it would be difficult for those who are editors and publishers to escape this reality because of how they were socialized in American society (Lawrence, 1995). Their ideas of how a race is to be represented does affect what they will allow to be published within literature (Rosenblatt, 1978), including and impacting African American young adult literature.

**Whitewashing: Deception on Book Covers**

The idea of books that feature no African Americans on the cover is not shocking considering Larrick’s (1965) was published in the 1960’s. Perhaps it is more troubling that in modern publishing this issue has resurfaced. Less than 5 years ago the publishing industry came under fire for “whitewashing” the covers of poplar young adult literature books (Schutte, 2012). Whitewashing is the act of placing white models on the cover of a book when the character described
within the text is a person of color or a person with the features of a person of color, making this issue common but not exclusive to African American young adult literature (Thea, 2010; Schutte, 2012). The most notable example, *Liar* (Larbalestier, 2009), published by Bloombury Press, became the object of scrutiny when the advanced copy of the book featured a white model on the cover. In the book, the character is described as a Black female with natural hair (Shutte, 2012), but the cover was whitewashed. When there was a backlash from fans about the model used on the preprint cover, Bloombury Press changed the ethnicity of the model on the cover for the formal release the novel (Shutte, 2012). It was only because of outrage from readers and those who would by the books that the cover was changed, as it served in the interest of sales for the company, evoking interest convergence (Bell, 1995). Also, this incident shows that racism is not an act of blatant hatred. According to Lawrence (1995), all Americans share some experiences being Americans, and in being Americans, we all share some cultural beliefs that contribute to racism because of preconceived notions and perceptions. It is possible the editors of the books decided to not to represent the protagonist of the story in the cover art because the editors of the book might have wanted the cover to depict a likeness of whom they perceived were the primary readers of the text (Lawrence, 1995). There is no notation that the cover was an accidental print or that the change was based on moral ground to properly depict the character.

**What’s Being Sold: Street Literature’s Rise**

In considering who buys young adult literature, discussion must turn to what is being sold as young adult literature about Black people. One popular genre of African American literature is “Street Literature” or “Street Lit”. Street literature highlights the lives of marginalized populations who live in urban environments. Normally, the heroes and heroines in these stories live in poor neighborhoods, filled with violence, drugs, and other difficulties that plague the ghettoized culture
in the United States. Morris (2011) indicated, “Street lit not only illustrates the dramatic impact of living as a marginalized American, but the authors also communicate gendered paradigms of womanhood and manhood, as characters try to reason the intense relationships illustrated within their fictionalized world” (p. 21). Street literature for young adults follows similar rules of young adult literature, as the main characters encounter some difficulties in their journey, which, in the end, allows them to evolve into the adult world (Donelson & Nilsen, 2005). How the youth in street literature achieve this evolution varies from young adult literature about white populations. The realization of the journey and the lives depicted in urban literature is greatly popular among urban youth in libraries. Many librarians have used street literature to engage and draw their students into reading books in the libraries (Morris, Hughes-Hassell, Agosto, & Cottman, 2006). Librarians have applauded the ability of street literature to draw in urban audiences, and find that street literature does for urban teens what mainstream, more popular and recognized young adult literature does for young adult populations. For Morris (2011):

…street lit allows teen urban readers the benefit of recognizing their world in literature in order to validate their own lives. There is a connection between the worlds depicted in street lit and the worlds that inner-city teens navigate daily. Inner-city teens experience unique obstacles within their communities. (p. 27)

The combination of urban, gritty storylines mixes with the objectives of allowing readers to see themselves, therefore vicariously growing up with the characters in the book; street literature appeals to urban readers in ways that may past publications of African American literature did not or that is completely ignored within young adult literature that focus on characters from culture. Norris (2014) shares similar sentiments, citing that from observation, street literature has grabbed the attention of young adults that normally would no read, as seen by pre-service teacher observations.
Not everyone is a fan of street literature, as Chiles (2006) cited that the street literature that he has encountered is nothing short of pornographic. In an opinion piece in the *New York Times*, Chiles (2006) wrote that street literature is nothing less than degradation to African American literary heroes of the past, often featuring scandalous book covers with half-naked women. Noting that the greatest audiences of street literature are females, Chiles (2006) questioned what message street literature sends to the African American audience. There is also a concern of what images are shown to African Americans based on ideas of African Americans living a poverty-ridden life (Thomas, 2013), despite the authenticity of the subject. Chiles (2006) also observed that street literature titles take visual precedence over other African American authors, implying that street literature is the only African American literature, clearly an opinion that Chiles openly repudiated. Chiles (2006) blamed the publishing industry for creating a monolithic view of African American life:

I realize that publishing is a business, but publishers also have a responsibility to balance street lit with more quality writing. After all, how are we going to explain ourselves to the next generation of writers and readers who will wonder why they have so little to read of import and value produced in the early 21st century, why their founts of inspiration are so parched?

Chiles received harsh criticism for demeaning street literature, as many librarians saw it as an attack on a prominent genre that has brought more patrons into urban libraries. Fialkoff (2006) countered Chiles’s contempt of the “lurid” covers on street literature by sharing that covers outside of street literature have scandalous covers. Street literature is read large numbers by teens and adults, and the storylines of books that are not considered street literature often carry the same amount of violence (Fialkoff, 2006). Librarians who have used street literature to attract urban students think that Chiles’ opinion was overstated, and that librarians should stay in the business of providing their patrons with the type of literature they find interesting.
One critique of street literature may also create a market for Black people. While many argue that street literature gives a voice to inner city urban youth, hooks (1994) did not support the mass marketing of the poor, underclass of African Americans. Collins (2009) commented:

Today, the depiction of young, Black people in popular culture is another growing important component of lockdown. In this context, watching African American youth perform so-called Black within popular culture venues…helps manufacture ideas about social blackness that in turn stimulate consumerism (p.146).

This need to perform Blackness as determined by the media tends to alienate Blacks who do not fit the mold, in particular those Blacks who are not a part of the working class. The image that Blackness has to be someone from the working class, is actually an essentialist idea of what a black person is that is perpetuated by all races, including Black people (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012). This is reflective of Lawrence (1995) who believed that we all internalize racism in formats of how we were taught race by American society.

There is a market for reading about poor black youth in a certain way, as seen by the popularity of street literature, and it is not to say that the storyline of poor Black youth is inauthentic (McCarthy, 1998). As aforementioned, only certain narratives of African American youth are accepted by publishers as their authentic view of Blackness (Sutton, 1994; Young, 2006). This view is then visited upon the consumers of African American young adult literature. Whether street literature changes the Black people’s idea of how they should enact their Blackness has yet to be proven. I have had students who were encouraged by their friends to read more street literature in order to be more “Black”. Thomas (2013) discussed the same issue of what happens to the psyche of African American young adults when all they ever see is stories of themselves as poor or slaves. The question is raised if they will enact their Blackness based on these narratives.
Who Reads YA Literature?

Young adult literature is designed for people aged 11-19 (Cart, 2010). Though young adult literature is written for young adults, a number of adults read young adult literature, too. Due to a strong popularity of young adult literature in movies, more adults are reading young adult literature. Graham (2014) condemned the number of adults who read young adult literature. A 2012 survey showed that adults over the age of 18 purchased over 55 percent of young adult books (Graham, 2014). In accounting for this number, Cart (2010) found that, according to YALSA, the age of the young adult reader is flexible, often covering ages 11-19. Graham (2014) highlighted that 28 percent of buyers of young adult book sales are adults aged 30 to 44. This could be the result of parents buying a book for their teenagers, but it very well could be adults who enjoy reading young adult literature. Asher (1992) imparted that adults typically choose books that appeal to attitudes they currently hold and the sociological themes addressed in young adult literature may appeal to adults. Graham (2014) contends that adults should be embarrassed to read young adult literature.

Hefley’s (2014) response to Scott’s (2014) article about the death of American adulthood, Hefly refuted Graham’s (2014) critique of adults reading young adult literature:

*Hunger Games* is a novel about a world where annual human sacrifices are chosen by lottery. These sacrifices are then set to entertain the rest of the world with the children's bloody and violent deaths …The stories of YA are now as Adult as you can find anywhere else. They have female high-school students having sex (no losing their virginity) to their English teacher (Teach Me). They have story lines which deal with causal sex parties, theft, prostitution, drugs, drug dealing, dropping out, pregnancy, VD, violence and murder (Gossip Girls Series).

Adults have deemed the content and themes in young adult literature to carry adult themes. The litany of books that are often challenged and removed from shelves of school shelves are evidence that there are other adults who do not think the material in young adult literature is age appropriate. The judgment of age-appropriate material is, however, a subjective opinion.
The overwhelming opinion of this critique of adults reading literature intended for young adults was that no one should judge adults for what they read. In an informal survey, I asked peers in their mid 20s to early 30s if they thought there was a problem with adults reading young adult literature. Few of my colleagues had an issue with adults reading young adult literature, but those who did were vocal that adults should eventually leave the teen reading to teens. This did not include adult librarians who work with teen readers or students who fall in the young adult range since reading young adult literature is a part of their responsibilities. Scott (2014) made light of Graham’s outcry, further pushing the ideas that the adults who were offended are more childish, “Instead, these readers were furious. The sentiment on Twitter could be summarized as ‘Don’t tell me what to do!’ as if Graham were a bossy, uncomprehending parent warning the kids away from sugary snacks toward more nutritious, chewier stuff”. Scott (2014) also wrote a critique of the American adult not wanting to grow up, making a connection between adults reading young adult literature and adults not wanting to grow older.

What does this mean for young adult publishing? The change of demographic that buys the books could drive publishers to create themes to appease this audience, and audiences that are not a part of what is considered young adults. It is possible that the adult themes found in young adult literature are simply reflective of its readers, whether this makes adults uncomfortable or not. Experiencing adult-like themes is a major component of young adult literature (Cart, 2010), so it should not be surprising that this is where authors of young adult literature find their niche. Consequently these adult motifs may attract older readers, no matter how elementary the conversations may appear to adults.
Graham (2014) denoted dissatisfaction that adults may choose to read young adult literature for the sake of reminiscing about their teen years; perhaps the plot lines really are complex enough to hold the attention of adults. Whatever the reason, there are adults who have found a keen interest in young adult literature.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The over-all question of social-sciences...come readily to the mind that has firm hold of the orienting conception of social science as the study of biography, history, and of the problems of their intersection within the social structure. To study these problems, to realize the human variety, requires that our work be continuously and closely related to the level of historical reality—and to the meaning of their reality for individual men and women. (Mills, 1959, p. 134)

Study Design

The use of qualitative research offers the ability to collect, dissect, and create narratives that often cannot be found within using numbers to gain data. Daly (2007) described qualitative research as both science and art, though more focus is on the scientific aspect (p. 1). Though in both qualitative and quantitative research the researcher plays a strict role of interpreter, those who do qualitative research place a stronger emphasis on the response of participants, letting the responses of the participants directs and inform the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). There is no doubt that those who perform qualitative research and those who perform quantitative research have the same aim, to collect and interpret data; however, different methods, tools, and viewpoints are used for the interpretation process. Because of this, five major differences separate qualitative and quantitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005): positivism vs. postpositivism, acceptance of postmodern sensibilities, capturing the individual point of view, examining the constraint of everyday life, and securing rich descriptions (p. 11-12). The differences between qualitative and quantitative research ultimately allows the researcher to choose which is more adequate for a research project.

Qualitative research fits the study of gathering the sentiment about African American young adult literature from young adults; the true richness and perspective of the researchers of African American young adult literature is best served by not only focusing on numbers and statistics of participants. Certainly a numerical study could be done where students are given a survey and polled about their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with current Black young adult literature; the numbers
could be interpreted and measured against student reading levels and the study would still be valid. There are, however, details about African American young adult literature, such as cultural subject matter, that contribute to a perceived level of authenticity of young adult literature centered around African Americans that would largely be ignore by a study that focused on numbers. Collins (1990, 2000) viewed Black females as intellectuals who contributed the larger narrative of Black female life as it appeared in literature, media and music. Intellectuals do not have to be academics, just those with a story about African American female life as experienced by a Black female (Collins, 1992, 2010). Young Black adult females are seen as intellectuals on subject matter that focuses on African American life, making them experts in determining authenticity in novels about African Americans in literature. The flexibility of qualitative research practices allows the research to modify and customize questions for participants as the study is conducted (Daly, 2007; Freeman & Mathison, 2009). Because the experiences of no two African American females are the same because of other intersections that the females also have ((Lorde, 1995; Crenshaw, 1995; 2000, Collins, 1992, 2000; Harris, 1995; Anderson & Collins, 1998), it is important the research design asking about the authenticity of the “Black” experience be flexible enough not to standardize answers in narrow groups.

When one conducts qualitative research, it is inevitable that data is analyzed through a certain lens or worldview held by the researcher. Creswell (2014) delineated four worldviews, which Guba (1990) labeled paradigms, and called them, “a basic set of beliefs that guide action” (p. 17). Critical race theory drives the majority of the research and literature concerning the topic of exposure and representation of African American young adult literature in this study.

Qualitative researchers must maintain theoretical sensitivity, allowing the researcher to identify important aspect of collected data. Using theoretical sensitivity, the researcher understands
prior theories, concepts and ideas that may play a role in analyzing qualitative data (Daly, 2007). While analyzing qualitative data, qualitative researchers also discuss their role in the study, a concept called reflexivity. In this process, the researcher will, “…reflect on their own biases, values, and assumptions and actively write them into their research” (Creswell, 2005, p. 50). This process can include discussing personal experiences or how the researcher collaborated with the participant during the research process; this can also be a written discourse of how the researcher’s experiences and background can affect the conclusions drawn from the study (Creswell, 2005).

**Epistemological Worldview**

**Interobjectivity.** In this study, my epistemological world view is interobjectivity, focusing on poststructuralist ideals. Critical race theory is poststructural in nature, as it aims to create discourse about language (Davis, 2004). Davis (2004) further defines poststructuralism as:

…an interpretive practice used to study the usually not-noticed aspects of language, images, and practices and that is intended to support new understanding of how meaning is always enabled and constrained by one’s ability to perceive (or not perceive) such aspects (Davis, 2004, p. 125).

A goal of this study was to create discussion about what African American young adult literature represented to a population of adults who completed high school, with an understanding that students only a few years younger could have vastly differing views based on their experiences. Since poststructuralism is not an outright rebuttal of the idea in structuralism, I placed values on Rosenblatt’s (1978) theory of transactionalism, although Rosenblatt fits more aptly under structuralism, which focuses on constructivism. In structuralism, knowledge is thought to be gained through unconscious means, and that any other knowledge is a summation of all unconscious knowledge (Davis, 2004). Building upon this idea, poststructuralism is less concerned with how
individuals shaped their knowledge, rather “…how understanding of the world are shaped for individuals…how individuals own identities are shaped” (Davis, 2004, p. 139). This study aimed to deconstruct and reexamine what the literary texts have said to the participants and the researcher in the past, how race was constructed and displayed, how class was constructed and displayed. The goal was to see how individuals shaped their own realities, but also there was a focus on how participants’ past experiences could have shaped their thoughts and identities, and therefore, how they interpret literature (Rosenblatt, 1978). For instance, the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1995; Collins, 2000) of the female participants was considered when interpreting the thoughts of the participants’ data, as it was possible that their intersectionality shaped their thoughts and narratives of how Black people and Black females are portrayed in African American young adult literature. I sought to learn how power structures intertwined to create meaning in the lives of the participants. I also wanted to learn how the lives and opinions of the participants varied from the dominant narrative or normality, normality being a white, middle class, married white male (Davis, 2004 p. 141, 2004). As the researcher and one who shared similar attributes of the participants, I encountered how my own knowledge was shaped from my past experiences.

**Constructivism and Dewey’s Pragmatism.** Constructivist search for “constructs” or ideas held and created by society (Slife & Williams, 1995). Slife & Williams (1995) used personality as an example of a construct, as it differs in meaning in Western and Eastern thought. Western thought says personality is a set of traits and attributes, no matter the setting of the person; conversely, Eastern thought identifies people with their current situation, meaning traits can change within different settings. Thus social constructs are more easily understood within the society that created them. Social constructivists do not believe that understanding comes only from a person’s mind; rather, it is created by an idea within a culture, involving rationale from a group of minds (Slife &
Williams, 1995; Creswell, 2014). This rational is what makes the social constructivist a view one of qualitative research. It does not assume that knowing can “...occur simply through sensory experiences, such as observations or experimental data, nor through logical reasoning…” (Slife & Williams, 1995, p. 82). Qualitative researchers opt to use instruments that test for the constructs and thoughts of a group of people, for which this construct would be understood. Those who hold the social constructivism view must understand that if social reality is constructed, the view held by one person in a society may not be that of others in the group, limiting the validation of claims (Slife & Williams, 1995). Additionally, social constructivism is limited to a certain society, and may not offer a real world view according to natural sciences. This is expected since social research is not a part of natural sciences.

Pragmatism in this study attempted to broaden the horizon of ideas that may be found in data. In Dewey’s practice of pragmatism, knowledge is constructed through ideas; ideas are created by a community and can only be an idea if the concept works within the community (Menand, 2001). If this is so, there is a possibility that what African American females perceive as authentic may be perceived as knowledge and truth; it could also vary by each participant due to different intersections (Crenshaw, 1995). I wanted to find these perceptions from the participants’ lived experiences, and thus this study was approached from a phenomenological approach.

**Phenomenology: Interpreting the Experience of African American Youth**

Researchers who use phenomenology in their research, “…attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p.34). Edmond Husserl, the founding father of phenomenology, first explored the phenomenological approach as a method that explores the world through the lens of the participant in research (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). Phenomenological philosophy has its roots in European
philosophical traditions, as Hurseel aimed to create a basis for human knowledge, which was a goal of Descartes; the similarities end there (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Ehrich, 2003). Because it is not dualistic, phenomenology refutes Descartes’ dualism of mind and body, which says there is a difference between “private experience” and objects in the world, meaning real objects exist independently of the conscious mind (Descartes, 1998). Phenomenological thought varies from Descartes because it does not separate appearance from reality, whereas Descartes (1998) strictly suggested that objects exist independently of human thought and meaning. Phenomenology holds that objects exist because humans attribute meaning to them (Ehrich, 2003).

According to Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997), the phenomenological approach allows participants to be co-researchers by offering their subjective views of an experience. The participants’ description of their experience within a certain context is not separate from the experience; it is the same thing, as context helps to create the experience. For this study to gather young adult Black females’ interpretation of the literature, one must recognize that the reader’s interpretations were based on their own prior experience in and from their cultural backgrounds and their interactions with the literature. This aligns with Rosenblatt (1978) acknowledgement that each person interprets text based on his/her set of experiences; experiences are formulated based on a person’s place in society and intersections (Crenshaw, 1995). Two students could view differently the representation of their culture in the books because of their own social backgrounds and upbringing. Each judgment of African American literary representation is subjective.

The phenomenological approach also serves to challenge the researcher’s preconceived notions about the research. Colaizzi’s (1973) idea of individual phenomenological reflection (IPR) is encouraged so that the researcher’s experiences can be “bracketed” or placed aside while reading the experiences of the participants, and so that the researcher’s point of view is not imposed upon the
findings. During “bracketing” the researcher takes care to completely keep in mind personal
subjectivity, so that these ideas do not appear the in the results (Colaizzi, 1973). It is nearly
impossible to remain unbiased while interpreting the experience of others, but having attention
brought to the idea does allow the researcher to be able to control some bias when analyzing the data
(O’Donoghue & Punch, 2003, p. 49).

The primary tools of phenomenological studies are interviews, as interviews capture the
reality of the participant or what the participant is willing to share with the researcher. Multiple
interviews may be conducted with the same participant, or multiple interviews may be conducted
with a set of people who are experiencing the same phenomenon, and where emphasis is placed on
the “mundane” “taken-for-granted” experience of everyday life, with a focus on how participants use
“everyday language” to describe their world (Daly, 2007) The phenomenological approach as it
applies to research within education is simple; record the experiences of those with an open mind
and allow subjectivity (van Manen, 1990). In this view, knowledge gained from this approach is
interpretivist, which Guba (1990) described:

…comprises the reconstruction of intersubjective meaning, the interpretive understanding of
the meaning humans construct in a given context and how these meaning interrelate to form
a whole. Any given interperative reconstruction is idiographic time- and place-bound,
multiple reconstructions are pluralistic, divergent, even to conflictual (p.235)
Similarly, van Manen (1990) stated that the researcher should use personal experience as a
starting point because this could inform the occurrence of the phenomena, acknowledging personal
experiences and experiences of the researchers as a strength. With the idea that objects have meaning
attributed to them, the etymological source of words should be traced to learn the origin of the word
and its original meaning. Locating idiomatic phrases, phrases created by a community that have
meaning, could point to “interpretive significance” of a word, furthering the fact that words have
meaning based on words created by society (van Manen, 1990; Rosenblatt, 1978). Dewey’s theory
of the transaction is also solidified by van Manen (1990) as Dewey was a pragmatist and asserted that knowledge is created through ideas, and in order for an idea to be created, it must work within that group (Menand, 2001). van Manen (1990) suggested that finding experimental descriptions from other studies similar to that research can help with constructing meaning using other sources, again building on the idea that knowledge is created by groups; like most qualitative methods, phenomenology finds patterns in responses from participants.

Lastly, consulting other phenomenological literature about similar topics can also be used as data (van Manen, 1990). One notices that these sets of suggestions depart from the traditional view of only using interviews to gather the experiences of others, and recommend that data from other experiences can be combined with new-found data. Observation is also allowed to inform the researcher of human experiences. Phenomenology studies should include thematic analysis when analyzing collected data, which is in the tradition of interpretive phenomenological studies (van Manen, 1990). Themes in existential phenomenology include “lived space”, “lived body” and “lived human” (Tuohy, Dowling, Murphy & Sixsmith, 2013, p.19). “Lived space” means that the space in which we are in, whether it be the home, work, or another place, affects us. “Lived time” refers to how time feels, other than the time shown on a clock. “Lived time” can seem faster when one is enjoying oneself or seem lethargic when one is bored. Understanding can only be done if time is taken into consideration because it affects the way we perceive and are influenced, affecting how we make meaning. “Lived body” refers to the fact that we are always in our body and the manner in which we, “…reveal and conceal things about ourselves consciously and unconsciously…” depends on who we meet. “Lived human relation” explains human interaction, including how a community experiences the world (Tuohy, Dowling, Murphy & Sixsmith, 2013, p.19). In Giorgi’s (1985) view the researcher played the role of interpreter synthesizing meanings into general structures, then
compared these meanings to each other, diverging from van Manen slightly as van Manen does not require the researcher to create meaning in accordance with psychological terminology (Ehrich, 2003). According to Giorgi, the use of data from other studies in not included in these suggestions, nor is reading like studies to inform the researcher of what “meanings” could occur (Ehrich, 2003).

In this study, meaning varied from each participant, but through synthesizing or coding the data, “meaning” was compared to each other to create a “human experience”, though each “human experience” may have had slight variations, although data should be a collective representation (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994). The participants’ “lived body relation” was examined from because how they constructed their communities depended upon their past interactions with those from their community. Because phenomenological studies construct the meaning of individual experiences, the primary instrument of choice is the interview, which was used in this study. Students were asked a series of questions, and each response was broken into small pieces of meaning as deemed by the researcher (Ehrich, 2003). Care was taken to analyze each participant’s interview segments to not only understand the private meaning on their experience, but what their experience denotes to the whole of their world, in this case, ethnic and racial community (Slife & Williams, 1995).

**Sampling**

The researcher purposefully selected the participants in this study. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) state, “…many postpositivist, constructionist, and critical theory qualitative researchers employ theoretical or purposive, and not random, sampling models. They seek out groups, settings, and individuals where and for whom the processes being studied are most likely to occur,” (p. 370). Participants in this study had a certain set of attributes as outlined in the “participant selection” study, which forced me to think critically about my population and who would be used (Silverman, 2005). As with most traditional qualitative research practice, purposeful sampling was used to find
participants who had experienced with the phenomena that was being tested (Daly, 2007); as the researcher I was most concerned with the participants’ ability to understand and disseminate information about the experience (Daly, 2007). I did not ask participants to enlist more participants to be a part of the study, as I had a suitable sample size for a case study. A total of four participants were selected for the study, all African American and self-defined as African American/Black and female.

**Data Collection**

Data was collected using interviews as the qualitative tool. An interview protocol was selected as the tool of choice for data collection because it offered the researcher the ability, “…to view a person in relation to history of her time and to examine how she is influenced by various social, religious, political, and economic currents” (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975, p. 7). Playing on one of the greatest strengths of qualitative research, the ability to gather in depth, rich data, and individual interviews allowed the researcher to give the interviewee undivided attention and to openly discuss sensitive topics without judgment from peers (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). Since the type of research drives the type of interview conducted (Daly, 2007), and because of the sensitive nature of questions asked in the study in reference to race and gender, a personal interview was conducted with each participant, except for the siblings who wanted to interview together.

Since the participant and the qualitative method drive the interview, it was important that questions asked in the phenomenological interview caused the participant to give first person descriptions in their own vernacular, not to conform to premade theoretical hypothesis (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997) In creating their meaning of representation in young adult literature, the participants were able to draw upon the factors that influenced their idea of how their culture should be represented in young adult text.
Data was collected at the homes of participants except for Sarai, whose interview took place in her educational environment during lunch. Dewey believed that educational studies should take place in a “naturalistic setting”. Participants were given pseudonyms for data reporting purposes to ensure their privacy. According to Creswell (2005), students are a vulnerable population, thus maintaining the anonymity and privacy of all participants was of utmost importance. Participants were asked not to discuss the study outside of the confines of the other participants.

**Participant Selection**

Participants chosen for this study were African American teenagers ranging in age from 16 to 21 years old. The most commonly cited age range for young adult literature defined by YALSA is age 11-19; however, there is flexibility in with this range that includes ages 11-24 (Cart, 2010). Any students much older than the target population may present conflicting and potentially erroneous information because they are too far removed from the population. A second reasoning for this particular age range is younger participants may not have a solid experience with young adult literature; therefore, they may not be able to answer the questions with the depth necessary for this study.

A convenience sampling was used to select participants in the study. As a school librarian, I am aware of which students are avid readers, and it is avid readers who are best able to answer questions about a body of literature. Initially, this study was to include 3 participants, but the opportunity arose to interview sisters who were both in the young adult age range. The data was richer as the interplay between two female siblings offered the chance for differing and sometimes views of African American young adult literature from two females with different personalities, and therefore some differing sets of experiences.
Students were not selected based on their reading ability because the project sought to find the representation of their respective communities; even if students do not read much they still may have encountered African American literature from which they can construct their version of representation. Additionally, students with lower reading levels reveal a different meaning and experience of African American representation based on the books they read, and this view is valuable to the study.

Participants were females of African American descent and no more than one year removed from the age range audience of young adult literature. All had to be avid readers and have read at least one African American young adult literary work to assure familiarity with the topic of African American representation in young adult literature. I assessed the attributes as the researcher and per my experiences and observations of students on my school’s campus. Criteria for those asked to participate the in the study were based in the theory established in the introduction (Silverman, 2005). The theory that informed this study were the transactional theory of reading (Rosenblatt, 1978), Critical Race theory and Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000).

**Participants**

The following are brief biographical sketches of the participants.

Paige was a recent graduate of one of the oldest urban high schools in Magnolia. She was from a middle class family with married parents, and described herself as an avid reader. She grew up in an urban city for the majority of her life, and only attended urban schools. Paige was quiet and reserved, and a talented writer.
Ami was the younger sister of Lucy and one of four siblings. She recently graduated from the same school as Paige and Lucy. She came from a working-class family, and her mother was the primary custodial parent. Ami was an avid fan of anime, Japanese cartoons created for all ages. Ami lived in rural areas in her state before moving to Magnolia with her family.

Lucy was the oldest person interviewed in the study, and the elder sister of Ami. While she was not the oldest in her family, she was easily the most outspoken. Like Ami, Lucy was an avid fan of anime and manga, and frequently attended conventions that catered to this interest. Where Lucy and graduated are the same as her younger sister Ami.

Deleon, the researcher for this project, was a 25-year-old African American female. I attended school in Magnolia, but spent most of my weekends and holidays with my grandparents who lived 90 miles to the west of Magnolia. I grew up in a working class family, with my mother as my primary custodial parent. I attended public school my entire life as a magnet and gifted student. I taught classroom English and since leaving the classroom, I have been a high school librarian primarily in urban public schools in the urban district schools I attended as a grade school student.

Data Collection

Daly (2007) described the purpose of phenomenology and studying the family as the families can represent a unique meaning, so the goal of studying family is to understand the “individual and collective experience of this unique meaning called family” (p. 99). If one considers the Black female community to be a family in the sense that it is a group or unit, the fact that students are individuals of a bigger community must be considered. Data collected in this study was transcribed from the interviews and responses recorded during a focus group session.
The collected data was analyzed either through the phenomenological stance or collecting data and breaking it down into smaller pieces of meaning as made by the researcher. Data was then grouped by common “meanings”, especially as similar phrases used by the participants emerged.

**Data Analysis: Coding**

After the interviews were transcribed, an open coding process was used to highlight thematic terminology that appeared most frequently in interviews. The terms were highlighted using markers, and then placed into categories that demonstrated the constructs and themes formulated by the participant responses. Themes are explained and analyzed in the following chapters.

**Researcher Subjectivity**

Though I considered myself removed from the intended audience of young adult literature, I remember vividly my own interactions with representation of African American females in young adult literature. Also as a librarian, I have a viewpoint of books selected for my library’s collection. I have read a number of the popular books for young adult African American females, and I have found that the representation of Black females is not always accurate based on my constructed meaning. My prior experiences did and do inform my subjectivity, and while I cannot completely shelter the data from my subjectivity, I actively searched for the moments that my subjectivity appeared (Peshkin, 1988). Peshkin (1988) described this process of the subjective ‘I’:

I decided that in subsequent studies I would actively seek out my subjectivity. I did not want to happen upon it accidentally as I was writing up the data. I wanted to be aware of it in process, mindful of its enabling and disabling potential while the data were still coming in, not after the fact. (p.18)

Based on my intersectional experience, I found a litany of stereotypes about Black females and their societal interactions in the form of media outside of literature. Since I have lived my own version of the “Black” experience, and since there is no one “Black” experience due to
intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2000, 1995), my views of representation weighted on how I analyzed the study participants’ meaning of young adult literature. Because I have had an experience with young adult literature both as a teenager and young adult, my experience informed my ideas of Black representation and have created my viewpoint of the representation shown in young adult novels for African American. It is because of this I worked to bracket my ideas during the interview processes, remaining mindful through personal reflection of what my ideas were in reference to the research topic (Colaizzi, 1973). I also regarded my position as a Black female as a strength; it could allow the participants to be more open to me as a person sharing at least two of their intersections, and creating a possible perceived safe space (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000). Behar (1993) mused, “We ask for revelations from others, but we reveal little or nothing of ourselves; we make others vulnerable, but we ourselves remain invulnerable” (p. 273). I understood this invulnerability to ensure that the participants were the voice of the research, but my subjectivity served as strength in this study when I interpreted what the participants shared about African American culture. Since phenomenology was the accurate method for this study, I should note that phenomenological analysis is based heavily on the how the researcher creates meaning for participants (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994). I was careful not to let my subjectivity overtake the responses of the participants as such is a possible risk of using the phenomenology method (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). My role in this study was to be an interpreter, a translator, so I was careful to keep honest and true to my participants’ data without overtly inserting my own views into the data. I also wanted to make my own experience and subjectivity apparent to the readers of this document. I included my personal experience with African American young adult literature to give a glimpse into my subjectivity about this topic, and how it affected my interpretation of what the participants disseminated to me, the researcher.
Chapter 4: Counterstory

The following is a counterstory created by the author of this dissertation. A counterstory is a fictional story used to expose the operations of race within a dominant narrative. (Solórzano & Yasso, 2002; Decuir & Dixson, 2004; Fasching-Varner, 2009; Delgado & Stefanic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2013). The counterstory is as follows:

Faith More was a 14-year-old teenage girl going to school in an urban city. Faith’s family was upper-middle class but not rich; Faith hardly ever had to desire anything that was not given to her by her parents, if they deemed it valuable. Her parents were careful that they did not spoil Faith, but they wanted Faith to have more than they had growing up. Faith’s parents came from humble backgrounds. As the first to be college educated in their families, Faith’s parents understood the value of a solid education. They worked hard to support their educational endeavors, and both graduated at the top of their classes in both high school and college. Their education brought them many successes in their careers; Faith’s parents believed that without education, they would not have the careers they did have.

Because of this, the Mores took great care in selecting the best schools for Faith to attend. The first step in sending Faith to the best schools started with finding a good neighborhood for Faith to call home. They settled in a small suburb outside of Camellia City in a neighborhood that offered the comfort, safety, and community feeling of a small town, yet the convenience and opportunity of a city. There, she met all of her friends, who also attended community schools of the best caliber. To Faith’s parents, it was a win-win situation to give their daughter the best chance at having the lives they often struggled to create for themselves. It is here that Faith’s story begins.

Young, smart, pretty, and incredibly naïve, Faith began her freshman year of high school at Charity High School. Faith always loved to read books, as her parents read to her on a regular basis
from her birth. The first stop on Faith’s first day of school was the school library. Shyly, she walked up to a teacher she recognized from school orientation.

“Excuse me, where is the library?”

The young looking female teacher who wore glasses, was tall, thin, and brown skinned, smiled at her and pointed toward an opening down the hall. “It is that way,” the teacher replied.

“Thank you, Ms…?”

“I’m Miss Hope. I’m one of the school librarians. You can follow me if you’d like.”

Once they arrived, Faith’s eyed grew large at the sheer amount of books in the library. Miss Hope smiled again.

“It is big, I know. I have to shelve the books,” Miss Hope chortled. “You can check out anything you want, as much as you want…except for reference.”

“Right, because reference books are reserved for library usage only, like encyclopedias.”

“That’s correct. You are quite bright. Well., I’ll be at my desk. Look around and see if there’s anything you like.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Faith said with a nod and she perused the collection.

Her choices for the day included a book about vampires and another about witchcraft, both fiction books that were on best-sellers’ lists; what thrilled her more was that the characters on the covers looked like her.

Happy with her selection, Faith happily walked to the circulation desk to checkout her books for the day. During the day’s classes, Faith could barely pay attention to her teachers, as she
kept sneaking out her books from the library to read during class. After all, the only activity for the first day of school involved introductions and as far as Faith was concerned, if she was able to introduce herself in four other classes, she had her scripts down pat for the remaining three.

Days passed and Faith made sure to visit the library every morning to see what other books there were offered in the library’s collection. Science fiction, fantasy, fiction, non-fiction— the choices for a young person seemed endless, and Faith vowed to read them all. When she returned a book, she held a long discussion about the difficult topics approached in the books with Miss Hope, who was more than happy to have someone with whom to share her thoughts and knowledge about the books. They would often had debates about what the author was trying to achieve in the text, but they respected each other’s arguments.

One day during a class library visit, Faith searched for books to read. Looking for a little guidance, she walked toward the circulation desk, but did not see Mrs. Hope. The other school librarian, Mrs. Coon, was present, so Faith decided to ask her where to locate more authors who wrote fantasy novels. Mrs. Coon smiled at Faith, acknowledging that Faith was in line, but Mrs. Coon continued helping another student in front of Faith. Once Faith reached the front desk, Faith inquired, “Do you know another author who writes fantasy books like the one from the Teen Fantasy series?”

“Hmmm, I do know what kind of books a girl like you would like.”

“You do? Great! Which book is it?”

“Have you read any books from the Cool School Series?”

“I don’t think I have.”
“It is really popular amount students from your population. I’m sure you’ll enjoy reading them.”

Faith took the book into her hands, and wrinkled her face at the image on the cover. It was of a young lady with her hands on her hips in shorts above her knee and a formfitting top.

“Are you sure about…?”

“Of course I am. The girls at this school love this series. I’m sure you will, too.”

“It is not even on my reading level...”

“That’s okay,” Mrs. Coon rebutted, “You are allowed to read some books that are below your level, as long as the books you read average close to your reading level.”

“But I’m an English Honors student. I’m not sure my teacher will accept this.”

“Oh, you’re an honors student? I couldn’t tell. I see you like everyone else” Mrs. Coon smiled.

“How could you not tell? My teacher only teaches honors classes?”

“Oh, well, read the book anyway. It should be easy points for you. I’ve seen you in here every morning. You are quite the avid reader.”

Faith’s only Black friend from childhood, Reina Marie, appeared beside her. Reina Marie was on a student scholarship and her family was not nearly as affluent as Faith’s.

“Girl, just check the book out. I love that series. It is one of those drama books. It is a book about Black people, REAL Black people. Get the book. Let’s go.”
Faith handed the book back to Mrs. Coon to check out. She stuffed the book into her backpack and shuffled quickly to catch up with her class, which was leaving the library in order to return to class.

“Reina Marie, I think Mrs. Coon might be racist on the slick.”

“How can be racist against you? She’s Black, too. You’re worried because she gave you a book about Black people. She did you a favor. Stop trippin’.”

Faith completed her homework when she arrived home. She needed points for a school reading program in order to make good grades in English class, so she opened the book she checked out from school earlier in the day. The first paragraph read:

I sat in the bathroom tryin’ to fix my makeup. I knew that LaToya and her group of witches would be jealous the moment I walked down the hallway. I’m light-skinned with long curly hair, a small waist with a curvy behind. The summer was good to me in growth, though I still didn’t have a big chest like my main girl, Kala. All the dudes at my school would stare when I walked down the hallway. My mama never had to put perm in my head because I got good hair from my daddy, which always made other girls hate me. I brush my waist length hair into a neat ponytail, with two tendrils hanging out to show off my curl pattern. I made sure to highlight my light green eyes with dark shadow. I topped off my look with a thin layer of lip gloss to show off the lusciousness of my lips. Once I was satisfied that my face was beat and my hair was right, I left the bathroom, smoothing out my shirt, strutting down the hallway. Not everyone at Cool School could handle my swagger.

The passage confounded Faith; she did not have any idea what the book was talking about. The young lady was not like her at all. Faith had natural shoulder-length hair, her tendrils were tightly curled, she had never won makeup, and fitted clothing was never a part of her closet or
dresser drawer. Her eyes were brown, and she barely had any curves to call her own because she inherited an athletic build. Faith was intrigued. She remembered Reina Marie’s words that the book was about Black people, real Black people. She often was called an OREO cookie by other Black students at her school. She learned nothing less than truth from books her entire life, or at least this is what her teachers told her.

“Maybe I have been doing this Black thing wrong the whole time” Faith thought. She quickly shook the idea from her head, and continued to read the book. A voracious reader, she completed the entire book that night.

When Faith visited the library the next morning, Mrs. Coon gave her another book about African Americans, also low level and worth less reading points than books on her level. Initially, Faith balked at the content, which was something she shared with Reina Marie.

“Reina Marie, I’m not so sure I really like this Cool School Series. It is the only thing Mrs. Coon will let me check out of the library, and she rarely lets me talk to Mrs. Hope. Mrs. Hope is always so busy”

“What’s wrong with the Cool School series?”

Remembering that her friend was less fortunate than herself, Faith chose her words carefully, afraid she might offend Reina Marie.

“I just don’t think it is really all about Black people.”

“What are you talking about? Those kids in that book are exactly like me.”

“So you got pregnant, watched somebody commit murder and are now running away from somebody who’s plotting your murder?” Faith asked sarcastically.
“Well, NO, but it could happen because I’m a real Black person.”

Faith rolled her eyes.

“Oh, just because you are a boogie boo Black person with rich parents doesn’t mean Black people have real problems.”

“But I have tan skin. My hair is nappy. My parents are Black! How am I not Black?”

“Because you’re not. I mean, I guess you are a Black person, but there’s nothing really Black about you. I guess you are just lucky to have it so good. I wish my parents would buy me what my heart desired all the time.”

“But mine don’t.”

“Yeah, but you never have to work for anything. You always have the newest phones.”

“You don’t work either.” Faith replied exasperated.

“Yeah, cause my parents say I’m smart and need to focus on my books. You know what, forget it. What does it matter what stupid books you read. Just get the points for your grade get over it. All that matters is that you are reading. Who cares about the content? You’ll still be reading about old, dead white men in class. At least there are some books about US in the library.”

“Faith,” Reina Marie paused, “Nobody is quite like you, dear. See you tomorrow.”

Faith walked silently with her friend until they reached the doorway of Reina Marie’s home and parted ways. Along the remainder of her walk, Faith thought about what Reina Marie said about her not really being a Black person. She looked around her, how the cleanliness of the street
improved the closer she arrived to her home; then she noticed the street lights flickered on. Faith increased her pace to make it home before dark, knowing that the street she was on was not where she wanted to be outside after dark.

Faith continued reading the books she checked out from the library, rethinking over and over in her head how the people in the books were Blacker than she was. Then she thought about Reina Marie reminding her of her wealth, and how that somehow made her less Black. Then and there, Faith decided that she would become a Blacker person for her own good, and the Cool School series would help her do it.

Faith completed the entire Cool School series, but barely noticed changes in herself. Her clothes became more form fitting, her name brand choices increased, and she almost always insisted that she have a perm. Shocked by this request, Mrs. More conceded; she allowed Faith to have a sew-in weave to protect her natural hair.

“Ma, all the girls in school wear their hair down their back. Everyone I see has lace fronts, at least. Why can’t I?

“Because sew-ins are expensive, that’s why?”

“Reina Marie and her people are on food stamps, and her mom gets her sew-ins. We have the cash. Can I perm my hair then?

“NO. You can have a sew-in, because your own hair is beautiful. You are not perming it. That’s a permanent change for a temporary want. Do you want to do this because of that boy I’ve seen you talking to at school?”

“Whut? Naw, you trippin’. Tyriq is just a friend.”
“I’m trippin’?”

“Trippin’, you know, overreacting?”

“I figured. Well, he’s a friend that needs to pull his pants up” Mrs. More scoffed.

“Ma, I got this. I know what I’m doing. I’m not a little girl anymore.”

Mrs. More grew exasperated at the argument. “If you say so, Faith, if you say so. I’ll make a hair appointment for you for Friday. What are you doing in the kitchen? Making your famous spaghetti and meatballs?”

“Naw, I’m making Chicken and Waffles. I read this dude makes them and makes a grip at a restaurant doing it. I want to sell stuff out of my booksack to make a little extra cash. I want to sell candy and sandwiches. Don’t you know that most of the kids at school don’t eat the school’s lunch, but will pay people to give them junk food all day? I live super close to a grocery store, while most of them live nowhere near one. It is easy for me to get materials for food. Imagine how much money I could make.”

“You are not selling anything out of your booksack, Faith Lynn!”

“Ma, chill. It is not a big deal.”

“And what do you need the extra cash for” Faith mother responded angrily?”

“It is nothing major. I’m just saving up some cash.”

“Faith, I mean it, if I hear about you selling anything at school, it is gonna be you and me”

“Fine, ma, I won’t” Faith lied. The idea of getting her hands on that latest red bottom pumps swirled in her mind. Tyrese would never be able to resist her in them. She could never really sell
too much stuff at school because that would ruin her reputation as a certified diva, but she knew she could not make her mother buy her the clothes she craved to wear.

The weeks passed, and Faith gathered enough funds to buy a new stash of clothing, with name brands sprinkled across her body, advertising the luxury of the clothing. She sashayed down the hallway in her jeans, huggin’ every curve that she did not know she once had, her midriff top baring just enough skin to let even the most God-fearing eyes travels down her chocolate mocha colored skin. Her new sewn in extensions looked natural, as her hair cascaded in big loose curls, accentuating the curvature of her back. She walked up to the schools’ most popular young man, Tyrese, with all of the confidence in the world, certain that he would take her out now.

“Hi, Tyrese,” she said as seductively as she could muster.

Tyrese turned around, slightly nervous. The young lady he was talking to looked at Faith with a frown.

“Uh, who are you?”

Faith laughed, “Don’t be silly. You know exactly who I am.”

Tyrese laughed a deep chuckle.

“Naw, shawty, I don’t. This right here, this is my girl.”

“Your girl? She’s just some trick. You know I’m better.” Faith was sure aggressive speech would get her somewhere in this situation.

“I know nothing about you. You just some ho with tight clothes looking for attention from a dude like me. You can step, though.”
With that, Tyrese walked away from Faith, with his girlfriend. After a pause, Faith spoke, angry, red-faced and quivering voice.

“But you said we had something special.”

“Like I said, I don’t even know you.”

As they walked away, Faith heard Tyrese’s girlfriend yelling something at him about cheating and being with another hoochie.

Faith yelled down the hall, “That’s why I didn’t want to be with a weak dude like you, no way.”

Reina Marie walked up to Faith, who stood in the hallway, red faced and breathing heavily.

“You know,” Reina Marie joked, “I wanted him to be my boyfriend, too. He’s perfect chocolate skin, teeth whiter than snot, and tall. If it makes you feel better, he turned me down, too. You didn’t really think that sleeping with him would get him to pay you more attention.”

“Maybe” Faith said through tight lips.”

“Tsk, tsk, where would you get an idea like that? Anyway, I gotta get to class. I’ll see you at lunch and you can tell me all about it.”

Embarrassed, Faith sulked toward her first hour class, trying to banish the images of her first time being with Tyrese. She reached a level of composure until she heard her named called on the intercom to report to the office. A student had contracted food poisoning from the cakes and sandwiches Faith pandered from her knapsack. The administration followed the trail to Faith selling illegal goods for profit. Since none of the profits benefited the school, the school notified Faith that
she was being recommended for expulsion, and therefore would have to attend a more “urban”
school in a neighborhood a few miles away.

Faith was befuddled. “I don’t understand. This is not how this is supposed to go.”

Mr. Fair, Faith’s assistant principal, gave Faith a strange look. “This isn’t how what is supposed to
go?”

“Nothing,” Faith mumbled. At her last comment, Faith noticed a book from the Cool School series
on Mr. Fair’s desk. She found that strange, since Mr. Fair, was, well, very fair, and had light, white
skin.

“I didn’t know you liked the Cool School series, Mr. Fair.”

“Hmm, oh yes. I find it quite intriguing. It is so realistic to the struggles of urban students. I
feel it brings me some level of enlightenment about the lives of our urban students who
attend on scholarship. I find their experience in these books to be riveting. Funny thing,
Mrs. Coon isn’t a big fan of them. I don’t know why. You would think a woman of her
background would appreciate such literature. After all, this semester, she has the highest
points achieved from students by any librarian in the Great Readers program, most of them
scored by you. Which is why I’m so surprised that such a scholarly student such as you is
getting into this kind of trouble. I guess all urban students have their issues.”

“Urban? I grew up in the suburbs, a street away from your house.”

“Oh, right. Anyway, call your mother. We’ll have to notify her of this situation. I’m sure
this will break her heart. She’s such a lovely woman, so strong without your father at home.
I’m sure she did the best she could to raise you, even without a male figure around “
“My father is never missing. My father is a medical doctor with strange hours. My parents
are married and have been for over 20 years.”

“Oh, right again. Anyway, call your mother. I’ve decided I won’t expel you. Your grades
and testing scores are impeccable. Maybe I should be more understanding to your situation
and give you another chance, but your parents must know about the trouble you have made
for the school.”

Faith did not understand. This is how the girls in the books acted. They dressed this way,
they were assertive with men, and they were always about the hustle. If this is how Black women
were in books and on TV, what did she do wrong? Mrs. Coon always suggested Faith read these
books, but she did not like them, either. The girls from the Cool School series were right. Life on
the streets is sweet, if you are able. But if you are not strong enough, they will chew you up and spit
you out.
Chapter 5: Findings

Paige

Reading Habits. Since reading habits play a pivotal role in how a person interprets text, questions were asked to ascertain how much reading the participant had done and does currently. When asked how she was exposed to reading, Paige said the following:

I was always exposed to reading, because you know, my mother being a speech pathologist, she like me to read, you know, and maybe… 8, 9 ish, so yeah. Okay, so reading wasn’t my biggest thing, it was really gradual. Like around 11th grade is when I started to get into real novels, like the series Twilight, like…Ernest Gaines, that’s when I really started being interested in reading.

Paige added that, she reads more now that she is older and that she does not necessarily have a preference for what she reads. She even said that she feels, “…abnormal when I don’t read.” Because of this, Paige did not often let much get in the way of maintaining her reading habits, and was the only participant in the study to cite that not much, despite having a job, gets in the way of her reading during her free time. As an avid reader in her teenage years, Paige created a strong basis for how she interpreted and created meaning with a text, and her prior personal experiences and socialization also affected how she interpreted text (Rosenblatt, 1978). Because of this, Paige expressed a unique reasoning for reading street literature as she recalled her experience with Black narratives in young adult literature.

Remembering the Black Narrative. When asked to recall African American literature from her experience, Paige remembered reading Ernest Gaines during her high school years. She recalled reading mostly historical materials about African Americans, “like by Maya Angelou, you know, Martin Luther King, you know people in history, not really people recent at all.” When asked if she could recall any African American literature with primarily Black characters, her recall was
limited as well, like the others interviewed. She said “I have to say I haven’t really read any
[African American young adult literature] that actually have an African American primary
character…except for Bluford.”

Paige referenced the Bluford Series (2013), a popular book series about Bluford High, a
fictional high school based in a neighborhood in an urban setting. The Bluford Series (2013) is
described as books that are “…short (less than 200 pages) and written in a highly readable style.”
Reviewed in a national reading journal and praised by students and teachers nationwide, the
(2013) would be considered HI-LO (high interest, low level) books made for reluctant readers
(Maughan, 2012). Other series similar to the Bluford series have enjoyed similar popularity among
readers who want to read “street literature”, though the makers of the Bluford series (2013) do not
categorize their series as urban or street literature; rather academics have assigned this
classification.

Though Paige had her own version of the Black narrative, she reached out to African
American literature to seek another version of what “Black living” was. She cited that she thought
that African American literature was realistic to an experience, just not her own. On this topic, she
stated

Well, I mean, so people are that way, like Bluford High, some people are that way, some
African American live that kind of life, but as for me, I can’t really relate because I wasn’t, I
wasn’t really…I wasn’t really raised that way, I haven’t really…I can’t really relate to those
books, which is why I was so interested in them because I wasn’t really exposed to that kind
of living, so yeah…

Her interest in the Bluford series was based on being able to learn more about other people’s Black
experience that was different from her own, which is the life of a middle class African American
female.
**Representation and Black Feminist Thought.** Because the narrative of the Black female is so entrenched with perceptions of African Americans in general, Paige was asked to recall how she felt when reading African American young adult literature. The intent was to make a connection between the perceptions of African Americans and how this transferred to how she felt Black females were portrayed in African American young adult literature.

Well, African American young adult literature, most of them are urban, it is not really, it is really stereotyped to me, African American literature nowadays cause it is always somewhere in the projects or a rural area, and that’s how I think about it and it is mostly slave times.

On the topic of whether or not African American young adult literature was realistic in portraying the lives of African Americans, Paige addressed common themes among the older participants of the study, the topics of poverty and “the hood”.

I think that only one way of life [is shown] when it comes to African Americans. Like, even though you see different people on TV like Barack Obama, it really doesn’t show that. It shows mostly poverty, I mean, there’s nothing wrong with that if you live that kind of life, but that’s all you ever see, mostly the negative.

Paige talked about the perceptions of African Americans as they appear in media by explaining the idea of what the hood is, careful to mention that the hood is not always a bad thing. The “hood” was seen as primarily as a bad thing in the media.

Paige commented that there are differences in how females were portrayed in young adult literature, and she was asked to elaborate upon racial line how females were portrayed. Paige said that she felt that the females in young adult literature that are not African American can be written as characters that are not driven and independent, but recently, female characters in young adult literature have been portrayed in certain ways, depending on their race.

Paige: You know, the Bluford girls are a certain kind of way
Deleon: What kind of way?
Paige: You know, tight shirts, tights pants, tight shorts…not really driven
Deleon: Ok?
Paige: You know, the girls like Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* and other girls in young adult literature aren’t like the Bluford girls. They are empowered, and the Bluford girls aren’t really shown that way

**Two Sisters: Ami and Lucy**

**Reading Habits.** Ami and Lucy were exposed to reading at a young age. When asked about their reading habits and what could possibly interfere with their reading habits, they shared similar responses.

Ami: Yeah. My mom and my dad encouraged me to read almost every day when I started in kindergarten. So I was ahead of my class during that time.

Lucy: And then me…Mom kinda read to me sometimes and then after a while I would pick up a book and start reading.

Their conversation about how they were exposed to reading summates their parent’s involvement in their reading habits:

Ami: Oh well, I was like four or five when this happened because when we were in daycare. I liked books and I would read then my mom would tell me to read, she would read to me, my dad would read to me, he always encouraged me to read a lot.

Lucy: Yeah, we would go to Books-a- Million all the time when we lived in Water Lily.¹

Their interaction about reading showed that Ami and Lucy had proactive African American parents, who created and solidified positive reading habits in their children. Their parents exposed them to literature, which combined with lived experiences helped to create their basis for how literature was interpreted (Rosenblatt, 1978).

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¹ Name of town changed to maintain anonymity of the location of participants
Both Ami and Lucy admitted that they wished they had more time to read now that they were no longer in grade schools, but the daily hassles of work, running errands, and home responsibilities often prevented them from reading as much in their free time as much as they wanted. Ami shared, “All I know is I read slightly more than I used to,” referring to her reading habits as an adult. Lucy added another layer by mentioning she could not seem to find books that “grab her” and capture and hold her interest in the storyline of the book. Lucy had no one type of book that she preferred to read, but she knew when a book grabbed her attention.

**Remembering the Black Narrative.** When asked to recall books about African Americans that they read during their secondary school experiences, Ami mentioned specific books that she read in class, although she was not able to completely remember the names of the books or the title. Ami says the following:

Um, there was this one book that involves this tribe in Africa, I know one of the characters was named Okonkwo. It pretty much talks about ancient tribes and uh, Africa before colonization. I can remember the author that wrote it came to our school… I was in the 10th grade when this happened. I can’t remember the name, but it was actually a really good book. And like, the experiences that happen, it talks about differentials it had and all that stuff, and like at the end, the main character, Okonkwo, um, he actually killed himself.

The book that Ami recalled, *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe, 1994), is a tale about Okonkwo, a man who lives in colonial Nigeria. In the storyline, Okonkwo struggles to prove his masculinity and his power to keep tribe’s peoples and traditions safe from the colonizing Europeans. At the end of the novel, Okonkwo commits suicide, permanently excluding him from his own people, as those who commit suicide are not allowed to be buried with the rest of the tribesmen because suicide is considered cowardly and disgraceful (Achebe, 1958). The excited nature in which she recalled the book indicated that some element, whether an historical element or something in the text that she found to be relatable, had an impact on Ami.
Lucy recalled reading mostly poetry by notable African American poets like Maya Angelou. She remembered also reading about Fredrick Douglas and a story that focused on the hip hop group “A Tribe Call Quest”, all books she read in high school. She did not recall anything from middle school or the subject matter of the poems she read during her high school tutelage.

The stories about African Americans that Ami and Lucy recalled had an impact on their perspective of the stories and the artist; unlike their descriptions of most young adult literature, there was no mention that any of the poems or stories perpetuating stereotypes. None of the poems or the stories, with exception of the story about “A Tribe called Quest”, were written before the birth of either of the sisters or were written about subject matter that occurred before the birth of either sister.

**Representation and Black Feminist Thought.** Collins (2000) dedicated an entire chapter of her work *Black Feminist Thought* to highlighting what stereotypes of perceived commonalities might be found about Black women in socialized thought. In this study, emphasis was given to the perception of the Black female in African American young adult literature, with a heavy focus on what are the pervasive stereotypes about the Black community and African Americans. Rosenblatt (1978) wrote that a person’s prior experiences about an object, whether through personal experience or through literature, impacts how a person reads and interprets a piece of literature. Because of this, participants who brought up “the hood of ghetto” were asked about their idea of what constitutes such. Ami said,

I’ll give you my definition. My definition of ghetto is when someone does something rather tacky or rude and it is like a term that you weren’t raised right or could have been raised better. The hood is kinda like a stereotypically naming oh a black neighborhood. I don’t know. Ghetto can be a bad representation of people on general cause ghetto goes throughout the entire spectrum, and the hood can be a bad representation of a black neighborhood cause not all of them are bad, it is just the select few that people focus on.
Lucy said, “The hood is really known as an area that’s mostly Black. You only hear about the hood when talking about white people or any other ethnicity. The hood can be a good or bad thing.”

Ami’s and Lucy’s summation of what ghetto or hood is affects their reading and interpretation of African American young adult literature, especially street literature. Ami and Lucy asserted how they felt about negative African Americans stereotypes that appear in media and in books, with some stereotypes referring to what is seen about African American females, or a one-sided view of African Americans.

Ami and Lucy approached many difficult topics about race with humor.

Ami: I mean if you want to throw out the negative stuff, it is apparently that all Black people live in the hood, that we speak ebonics, and that we have 15 kids running barefoot around a small shack, and we lack intelligence, and we are very ghetto with lots of kids, and we have golds and we eat fried chicken and watermelon.

Lucy: Oh my god, which is ironic, because I hate watermelon.

Ami: I love it.

Lucy: I hate it.

Ami: I love watermelon; I’ll play on my stereotype.

Lucy: It takes like chunky water. I don’t like it.

Ami: I like chunky water.

When asked to describe their perceptions of white females in young adult literature versus Black females in African American literature, Ami and Lucy conveyed they were not completely sure of what to answer. When asked about the perception of white women in young adult literature, Ami replied she thought white females in young adult literature were, “…in suburbs or small neighborhoods, and some that I have read, they are misfits and they don’t know their way. They have to go on this big adventure. They have to rebel against their parents.” In agreement, Lucy added:
They are usually angsty and moody, kind of annoying, usually live with one parent in a neighborhood of some kind, or something supernatural is thrown in. What catches me the most is that they are extremely indecisive about what they want to do with their lives.

When Lucy referenced that white characters in young adult literature typically are indecisive, she was not too far removed from one of the characteristics in young adult literature, the coming-of-age characteristic, though this characteristic is not defined as being exclusive to one genre (Cart, 2010).

Regarding what others see of Black women when reading African American young adult literature, Ami and Lucy addressed issues dealing with perceptions of Black females. Ami answered what one can learn from African American literature, and Lucy chimed in, again using humor to address this topic.

Ami: That you can really put your mind to that there are more, there’s more than one path and sometimes the path you choose isn’t the best path and that you don’t need no man.

Lucy: (sarcastically) Yeah, that’s exactly the case. You’re a strong independent woman; you don’t need no man (laughter).

Ami: Yeah (laughter) That’s right, you don’t need no man.

(Laughter)

Lucy: You don’t need no man.

Ami: Yeah. I see that a lot, you don’t need no man. It is kinda funny.

Lucy: “Single mothers, I don’t need no man, yet you have 3 kids.

Ami: You have a football team worth the kids.

Lucy: You don’t need no man and you have a football teams’ worth the children.

This discussion of the Black female falls into the idea of the welfare mother, while touching on issues concerning Black female sexuality and perceived Black female hypersexuality (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994). Without consciously thinking about it, Ami and Lucy revealed a prevalent narrative of Black female life and sexual politics concerning the number of children birthed, yet the overarching need to be independent of male power, the image of the Black female matriarch
(Collins, 2000). Ami and Lucy also alluded to the image of the welfare queen, who, like the matriarch, does not enlist the help of a man to raise her children; rather, she uses government assistance to aid her quest. Her children are still raised by her without a father, but she lives in greater amounts of poverty (Collins, 2000).

After describing these images, Ami and Lucy mentioned their perceptions of African Americans and the potential that African American literature and young adult literature has to differ from the current racialized narrative of Black life, and consequently, Black female life.

Ami: We have a rich background. We’re not just friend chicken and watermelon. We are a people that have done a lot in the past 100 years.

Lucy: We actually invented most things that we use today, the history books don’t tell you that. You have to look that up yourself to get that. Like those video game cartridges.

Ami: No joke.

Lucy: Yeah, that’s… that’s pretty much what they can find out. That Black people aren’t just a whole bunch of ghetto people, that we are intelligent, that we have a rich culture and history, that we, we can, we are better, we are more than just people that live in ghettoes.

Ami: We are more than people that live in broken down neighborhoods, that are loud and obnoxious, that are just really violent and sings. That’s not us. Some people maybe, it is those tacky that we don’t like to speak of. Kinda like how most people in the Middle East don’t claim the terrorist.”

**Sarai**

**Reading History.** Sarai was candid in her responses about her reading history. She stated that her earliest memory of reading took place at her school.

When I came to this school was in Kindergarten, and my Kindergarten teacher she used to always make us read books and write things, so when I used to read books, I used to love to read them cause they so fun to me.

Though Sarai said that she read a plethora of books at home, her earliest memory of reading was at school, placing a large emphasis on the importance of books selection for schools. The school that
Sarai attended did not have a formal library, but teachers were diligent in creating classroom libraries, which were considered effective for working in schools that may not have room or funds to create a formal school library (Pytash, 2012). Sarai cited her earliest reading memory at school, making the selection, and the collection development of books at schools, the formal library and classroom libraries, an important topic.

When asked what prevented her from reading, Sarai’s answer was similar to that of other participants, citing that school work was an obstacle to reading in free time. What made Sarai’s response unique was that she thought about free time in the sense of extra time at school and time at home. This was evident when Sarai responded to the question of how often she was able to read. She said, “When I finish my work,” in reference to finishing her school work.

Another unique property of Sarai’s response was that reading in her free time was selecting books that she wanted to read, not assigned academically by a teacher; this is similar to responses from the other participants in the study, as they cited school work as something that prevented them from reading “freely”. Sarai envisioned reading after she completed her classroom work as a privilege, therefore something enjoyable and fun.

**Remembering the Black Narrative.** Sarai was the youngest in the study, the youngest age at which one could consider pre-teen/young adult age level, therefore it was believed that she would not be able to cite the number of books about African American young adult literature as the older participants, who were legally adults. When Sarai was asked about what young adult literature, or what I as the researcher would consider a borderline book (could be a book for both children and young adults), she was unable to cite many books. She said, “Um, hmm, I’ve read a lot of fiction books. I’ve read some fiction books about Black people. Martin Luther King is the only one…” She
cited that she had not read any of the currently popular African American books series, such as Kimani Tru, Bluford, or Drama High books.

**Representation and Black Feminist Thought.** Sarai’s most candid responses were elicited when talking about representation of African Americans, specifically African American females. Like other participants, Sarai did not see herself as being like the characters from African American literature (referenced as stories for the sake of clarity). She said, “We’re different… Cause in some books, um, some book the Black people are slaves, so now it is like the race… like then, Black and white didn’t connect, but now since Martin Luther King made his speech, they connect.”

From this part of her story, Sarai separated herself from African Americans who are represented in some narratives as slaves, but did not recall the stories of African American characters who were not historical characters. However, this changed when Sarai disseminated her similarities to African American females:

….I kinda think they act like us because sometimes the woman always gotta do something for the man and now, the woman do something for the man so, all the books were reading last year, I forgot the book we were reading, but the woman, I forgot all about it until I said something about the woman doing something for the man. The woman who is married to the man, all the girls have to do something for the man so that the men can keep the woman safe.

While the researcher has not found what book Sarai cited, the theme of women taking care of men for the sake of their own safety is a common theme in African American literature. Paige cited a similar idea when she said that she felt that the females in the Bluford series (2013) were “not that empowered.”

Sarai demonstrated a side of the African American narrative that does not see systematic racism, or does not believe that racism is the big issue it has been in the past. In reference to what other Black kids would learn when reading current African American young adult literature, she
said, “I think they learn why we are, I think they learn why everything is so different now than what it was like back then.” To Sarai, African American students learn history about why things were unfair for African Americans in the past, but these problems are not as severe in the present day.

Her viewpoint differed from the other participants, who cited that they saw a representational issue, almost always a stereotypical representation, of African Americans in young adult literature, whether exclusive to African America young adult literature or young adult literature in general.

Sarai’s response was indicative of her experiences, a combination of social situations and literature, molding her view of how she interpreted literature (Rosenblatt, 1978), although her views were different from the older participants.

**Deleon: Encountering My Story**

**Reading Habits.** My earliest memory of reading occurred at home when I was three. My mother used to read to me every night before I went to sleep. At my house, we read a variety of books about a variety of topics, but the most memorable books were *Good Night, Moon* (Brown, 1984), *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1987), and *There Was an Old Woman Who Swallowed a Fly* (Adams, 1990). I often grabbed three books for my mother to read to me before my 8 o’clock bedtime. I never knew how tired she was, but she always read in a meaningful and entertaining voice; I could not help but want for her to read more to me. Negotiations took place, and she would read me two books if I had my pajamas on in time for bed. I have lost count of how many times I got in trouble for stealing the household flashlight and reading under the covers after my bedtime.

Most of the books I read had animals as main characters, so it did not warrant too much racial discussion. I was only a child, so to me, it did not matter. Every other week on Saturday, my mother drove us to the local book store and allow us, my brother and me, to pick out one book each to read. Two sets of skinny little legs took off running through the bookstore, like selecting a book
was a race. It may not have been a race, but it certainly was the highlight of the week. My mother would purchase the books of our choice with the remains of her paycheck, buy a book for herself, and we would go home beaming with pride about our purchases.

When I began school, my favorite time of the day, other than recess, was story time, a comforting moment when my fellow classmates and I would gather on the classroom’s carpet and listen to our teacher read stories in her most entertaining voice. Visiting the library was a special treat, as I tried to check out as many books as my hands and arms could hold, even though the librarian reminded us there was a limit on books we could take home at one time. I perused the walls in the library, anxious to find the next novel series to embrace and through which to live vicariously. In elementary school, I excelled in the Accelerated Reader program that showcased my reading abilities, and my teachers took notice. They always told my mother what an avid reader I was even when I was supposed to be paying attention to my lessons in class. Later I learned that my mother suffered from the same issue in her schooling.

In the summertime, I lived with my grandmother, who believed that reading was fundamental. During our summer visits, she enrolled all of her grandchildren in the town local reading program that was sponsored by the town library. She took great pride in reminding my elder brother and me that our mother always won the reading contest for the most read books in a summer, and we were going to do no less. While most kids played Nintendo, we read books on a back deck, and later, wrote book reports about those books. Our cousins joined us on most occasions, and the privilege of playing video games only came after my grandmother was satisfied that we had read enough for the day. At the end of the summer when the book tallies were counted, my cousins and I always won prizes for being such avid readers.
When I discovered my love of reading that I decided that I wanted to be an English teacher; what else was a person who loved books so much supposed to do?

As I matured, my interest in adult reads grew, and I wanted to separate myself from my classmates and read books that my mother read. This included a heavy mix of historical fiction romance novels, of which I did not quite understand the content, but reading about castles long ago and a strong heroine being courted by a handsome male had me hooked. I anxiously waited for my mother to complete her book so that I might read it after her. She found that letting me read her books was innocent, since I did not understand the real meaning of the sexual content, especially at the age of 9. Sometimes I read books with Black characters on the covers, looking at their hair and comparing it to my own. My mother always told me it was all beautiful, no matter what. I looked at their skins tones, and my mother reminded me once more that the tone of my skin did not matter; I was still beautiful, just like the girls in the books. The majority of novels I read no longer had animals on the covers, but rather had humans, and all the faces of these humans were white with straight hair. I knew what beautiful looked like, no matter what my mother said.

When I was a young adult, books and I were inseparable. Everything about books appealed to me: the magical stories, the escapism from my personal life, the promise that my life could end in a happily ever after, reading was all I ever craved. During my teen years I faced my greatest hardships. By fourteen, I experienced my first heartbreak. By fifteen I lost my maternal grandparents who, along with my mother, were most instrumental in raising me. My mother struggled as a divorcée to keep things in order, and she struggled with the loss of her parents. To me, the world looked completely bleak. I was living a very “teenage life,” so reading was my only escape from my personal struggles.
Reading for the sake of escapism and to encounter my own struggles helped me to encounter my life with a little more ease, one of the functions of young adult literature (Tomlinson & Lynch-Brown, 2007; Cart, 2010).

When I was 15, I was introduced to young adult literature featuring Black primary characters. While it brought me great joy to finally be able to read books about other Black girls my age, my conflicts with the stories eventually surfaced. While I enjoyed reading the books about Black girls, they were not a part of the Accelerated Reader program at my school, which meant I read African American literature and another book that was more on my reading level, usually starring old white men or women in Victorian times. My ability to relate to the latter was nil, and I hated having to read them, which concurrently affected my grade. Today, the majority of books that are similar to the books about African Americans that I read in the past are available in reading programs. Typically, they are pegged at lower reading levels than other popular books in the young adult literature genre, causing those who choose African American street literature to read books at a perceived lower reading level. Morrison (1992) cited that the devaluation of African American literature is something she has personally experienced; she cited that she has met people who practically brag that they have never read an African American literary work.

My other issue with African American literature was that I lost interest in the characters. I did not know that it was the street literature genre in which I lost interest, and I was not so keen that the protagonists of the books were usually light-skinned with light colored eyes and they always lived in ghettoes of some sort. Their lives were either filled with great loss due to violence or the protagonists were sexually promiscuous teenagers who were not too short of being what one might consider prostitutes. Everything in life was about getting more money. The antithesis of street lit was books about Black girls living a holy and clean life for God, saving themselves for marriage.
and citations of the Bible on every other page. Given the choice, I chose the books about the hood.

It was fun at first, and like Paige, I wanted to read about this life in the hood because I no longer lived in a “bad neighborhood”. Eventually those books became tiresome. I did not understand that what I was reading was a part of the “street literature” genre. I only thought that all books about Black teens took place in the hood, so I tired of reading about “the hood”. This may have been more of an issue with how the authors represented characters in the street literature, and less to do with the subject matter. Actually the issue was that my intersections as a working-class Black teen girl caused me to no longer see myself in the stories I read about Blacks in African American teens. Intersectionality always plays a pivotal role in how one is perceived and how one perceives the world, as different intersections serve to interact and oppress other intersections (Crenshaw, 1994). In my later teens, I took more of an interest fantasy literature, which historically, does not have many characters of Black descent (Harris, 1997); consequently I read less African American literature. Even today, most Black characters in science fiction young adult literature have supporting roles or the books are in a dystopian society where race is not an issue.

**Remembering the Black Narrative.** The first book about African Americans I recall reading was *The Snowy Day* (Keats, 1962). I knew that there were books about kids that looked like me, but as a child that did not matter to me; it only became an issue in my teen years. Most books that I read featured animals, rather than humans, so books maintains racial ambiguity to me. During the summers, my grandmother and my mother picked certain Black books for my brother and me to read and about which to write a book report. I recall reading *A Lesson Before Dying* (Gaines, 1993), and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976) At home, I read the *Around the Way Girls* series, and some more mature books by Zane that were not aimed toward teenagers. In my school’s library, there were not too many African American books that held my interest. If they
were there, reading them was pointless because they did not count toward my Accelerated Reader points. The reading level was either too low or there was no quiz for me to take in the program. This left room for me to encounter African American literature. In middle school, my class read *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* (Curtis, 1995), and in my freshman year of high school, my class read *The Autobiography of Mrs. Jane Pittman* (Gaines, 1971). While I believed these books to be classics, I was annoyed that most books that we read about Black people dealt with segregation or slavery. It was not that I did not like discussing these topics or that these topics made me uncomfortable; I just found them to be mundane and bland. There was not a really deep discussion about segregation or slavery after reading these books, which made reading them a moot point to me.

The rest of my memory of reading African American young adult literature or stories that were selected for young adult curriculum came in the form of poetry. In my freshman year of high school, I first heard Langston Hughes, in my sophomore year a few more poems by African Americans. My junior year, American Literature class yielded the most African American literature, but this was only during the discussion of the Harlem Renaissance. My class read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Hurston, 1937), where the focus was more on the setup of the book’s plot than themes dealing with race and feminism. I remember the excitement that I felt to finally be reading works about Black people instead of reading the languorous stories/poems and sage advice of old white men. Instead, I would be reading about the struggles of African Americans during a time of Jim Crow laws. One class assignment was to research a poet from the Harlem Renaissance in groups and talk about his/her most notable works. Since my class was mostly made up of white or Asian students, the talk of race once again fell flat. Relative to the books and stories about white people, the number of Black works I read in my secondary schooling was minimal, but, seemingly,
more than the participants in this study. In the state where I gained my grade school education, teachers had a little more autonomy to select the novels that they wanted to read, but the state’s curriculum also included suggestions of what short stories, poems, and novels could be read in the classroom. When I was in high school, there was little mention of African American stories and works, explicitly, except for the Harlem Renaissance (Louisiana Department of Education, 2008).

My definition of African American literature changed over time. Changed once I entered college. To me, African American literature was literature about Black people, and I assumed that only Black people wrote about themselves. Considering the works and books through which I was exposed to African American literature, this was a fair assumption, especially since I did not have exposure to *Little Black Sambo* (Bannerman, 1900), a book about African Americans that was not written by a Black author.

**Representation and Black Feminist Thought.** If I asked my young adult self how females were portrayed in African American young adult literature, I would have immediately commented that all the Black girls were always shown being overtly sexual. In any book I read with African American females, other than Mrs. Jane Pittman, there was a Black female expressing herself consistently in a sexual manner. In the books I read in my free time, young girls were described as having curvaceous bodies, “large asses” and “round breasts”. It was all about the body and skin color. It only took one look in the mirror to see that I did not fit the archetype of the females in these books, as I was equipped with a pair of long, skinny legs, a small chest, and skin that landed in the middle of the color spectrum between light skinned and dark skin.

I read street literature books, although I did not identify the African American books I read as street literature and I understood that many of the characters, although not all, were extremely
vapid, self-centered females who were always trying to find a way to escape poverty. While I understood not wanting to be destitute, I did not understand why it was so important to become rich in these books. I was not rich and I lead a perfectly joyful childhood and young adulthood. My grandmother grew up poor, my mother grew up poor. I was not different, and I saw happiness and satisfaction in all three of us. hooks (1994) talked African Americans being uncomfortable with being from less privileged backgrounds, citing that it is oppressive power that shames African Americans into thinking that they cannot live a happy life being from a working class or poor background. This imagery is salient within African American literature and, in turn, African American young adult literature, as it is a reality that constructs the lives of African Americans.

Why did it matter if I had the latest name brand clothing on my body or had a large amount of money to escape the reality of my life? From my current perspective, I can answer these questions, but as a teenager, things like money and clothing did not consume me as much as it did the characters in the books I read.

To me, the Black female narrative in the books I read played on what I considered to be stereotypes, but also showed the great strength of African American females to be able to push through issues of poverty and become “better people”. My idea of stereotypes was formulated during my youth through social interactions. I was told what was ghetto and classless by my family and by educated Black people. It was through these socializations that I created my own prior knowledge of what was ghetto or taboo in society, what was not becoming of a Black young lady, what was considered to be an ignorant Black person. These ideas influenced my perceptions of the female in these stories (Rosenblatt, 1978). Not all of the stories I read had happy endings, especially those with females whose sole purpose was to have financial gain though illegal activities, despite having a greater purpose for wanting more money. My main take-away from African American
young adult literature novels that I read in my free time was that I did not want to be like the girls in these books. They fit the controlling images of Black female, mammies, matriarchs, welfare mothers, and most commonly, jezebels (Collins, 2000). The one I was most afraid of becoming was the jezebel because there were few happy endings for the Black females who were portrayed as sexually promiscuous and deviant; again, I insist that not all females in these books were portrayed in such a manner, but a vast majority were. To me, these books were not representations of the Black female life as Collins (2000) described as being all important for self-definition, but rather, warnings for how society treats women who deviate too far from the standardized norm of a “good, Christian woman”.

**Discussion: Defining African American Literature**

The range of answers given by the participants indicated that even though all participants were African Americans/Black, there still was not a unified idea of what African American literature is. All participants defined African American literature as literature about Black people in some format. The definition of African American literature was that this type of literature is about African American subjects, including Black characters, and written by African Americans (Bishop, 1982; Brooks & McNair, 2009) While there are partial similarities between the ideas of Brooks and McNair (2013) and the participants of this study, there was no mention that a work should be written by African Americans to constitute it as African American literature. In my history of reading African American young adult literature, my definition was that of Brooks and McNair (2009) and Bishop (1982), as I was under the assumption that African American literature would only be written by African Americans. I did not think that anyone but Black people would write about Black people, thinking about the disconnect that those from outside the Black culture would have writing about a culture that was not their own. I held this belief until I became a librarian and I
discovered that books that African American students at my own school found to be “legit” did not fit the definition African American literature.

For instance, the popular the Bluford series (2013) that Paige mentioned would probably shock most African American students in that half of the books in the series are written by a white male who lives in a suburban neighborhood in New Jersey, and who has never lived the life of which he writes in his books (Campbell, 2011). Because I wanted to reveal that books that African American children found to not be “representative” of their lives were not always written by African Americans, I did not pursue this definition further with participants until after the study was completed. Then the participants revamped their definitions of what they thought was African American young adult literature, citing ideas similar to my own. Their curiosity deferred to my experiences and they asked, “Why would someone other than a Black person want to write about African Americans?” and “What would they [those outside of African American culture] know?” Then they shared that they saw nothing wrong with non Blacks writing about Black people, but saw the importance of the writer understanding Black people. The participants struggled with the idea of what African American literature was, like many other scholars.

This question of who can write African American literature continues to be a heated debate among authors and academics. Those who write literature for African American children and young adult populations see themselves as carrying on a story or narrative about the life and culture of Black people, writing as witnesses of their lives (Bishop, 1982). A similar idea of writing about one’s life as an expert, intellectual, and witness exist in writing narratives about Black female life (Collins, 2000). Though I typically call those who are not white, outsiders or from the non-dominant culture, Harris (2003) did not use this terminology as it implies a lesser position. African Americans are from parallel cultures (Harris, 2003). Those from parallel cultures vie to share
knowledge from a history that has only lived by those within that culture to those from to all cultures, but find greater accuracy from those write about their own culture. Killens (1972) wrote:

In this telling of stories from within one’s culture along with the fight to desegregate the schools, we must desegregate the entire cultural statement of American; we must desegregate the minds of the American people. If we merely succeed on desegregating the school buildings, we may very well find that we have won the battle and lost the war. Integration brings the day after the minds of the American people are desegregated. This the great challenge to all American writers, but especially to the black writer. Who will tell the real story of America if the black writer doesn’t? (p. 388).

As the researcher in the study, I have indicated that I believe that African American literature is literature about African Americans written by African Americans. This definition leaves little classification for books that seemingly contain themes about Black life but are not written by African Americans. In her interview, Paige mentioned the wildly popular series Bluford series, popular with students in my own school district as well. Often students boast how they have completed all eighteen books in the series. Langan, the author, admitted that he was not Black, yet had a particular set of experiences that allowed him to write books about African Americans (Campbell, 2011). His idea of his entire series came from seeing that students he met had no desire to read; he decided to create stories about topics that would be interesting to these students, where a correct moral choice is made within the storyline in books that have a readability for middle and high school students who are struggling to read, and at an affordable price (Campbell, 2011). The idea was pitched to Langan’s uncle, the owner of Townsend Press, and since the publishing of series, the books have achieved great success.

On the topic of white authors writing works about those from parallel cultures, Seto (2003) voiced, “Beyond the issue of personal gain, what better way to control the images of ‘otherness’ than to define the cultural discourse by representing everyone yourself and silencing those who
demand the right to represent themselves?”(p.94). I would not say that a person who writes about those from parallel cultures is committing a heinous act, although I admit that my subjectivity towards the topic causes me to be suspicious of a person who writes what thematically is considered street literature about African Americans and Latinos, yet is neither. It is questionable that the author knows those from the parallel cultural community with each other, inside and outside of the private sphere. Woodson (2003) recalled a situation where she met a white author who wrote a book about a Black family; when asked how she knew about the Black family, the author replied that the family worked for her own. Woodson (2003) questioned the legitimacy of this story:

This family has stepped inside this woman’s kitchen, but she had not been inside theirs. And having not sat down to their table, how could she possibly know the language and the experiences and the feelings there? How could she know who they were when the tool their outside cloths off at the end of the day and moved from their outside language to the language they shared with family and close friends? How could she know what made them laugh from deep within themselves—a laughter that is not revealed in a bosses kitchen—and what made them cry—the stomach-wrenching wails one hides from the outside world? (p.43).

Authors from parallel cultures (Bishop, 1982), like Woodson (2003), question the need of those who are not from parallel cultures to write said stories. Most arguments lay within an author’s ability to have creative license about what is written. The general consensus is that to write about a parallel culture, one must at least have some set of experiences that are from the parallel culture (Myers, 1995; Woodson, 2003; Lasky, 2003).

When questioned about the usage of edgy covers on the books from the Bluford series, Langan said that a different approach has to be taken to gain a different result:

If walking around with a book gets you beat up because you’re trying to act White, having a book with a kid holding a gun on the cover will not get that response. We break some rules, and we do that in order to allow students to more easily access the story. (Campbell, 2011)
Never in my experience, or those of the participants, or from observing students interacting in the school in which I have worked, have students expressed that they cannot read or have been judged on a book because of a cover. Students have expressed that their friends encourage them to read more books in the African American section of the library as a way to read more books about “real” life about “real” Black people, as if this Black student was not a “real” Black person. Such behavior stems from a preconceived idea of how students from parallel cultural will interact with each other based on a set of rules of how that culture is supposed to behave. These rules are set by society and can be changed over time (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012). Perhaps Langan saw students judged by the covers of the books they carried; he may have assumed that this had happened. There is no proof mentioned in the literature. What is certain is that Langan’s stories, works students consider to be African American literature based on content, do not fit the mold of African American literature. Should the definition of African American literature change, or should the classification of literature written by those not from within a parallel culture be given a different classification? Langan’s ability to publish so any books is indicative of a publishing industry that is open to publishing books about parallel cultures, even when the author is not of the parallel culture.

Hamilton spoke to this when she discussed the issue of African American authors’ ability to publish books that are not about Black characters; “White writers can write about anything” (Rochman, 1992, p. 1021). Myers mentioned that when he approached publishers to write a book that was not about Black youth, he was often rebutted (Sutton, 1994). Even more importantly, Myers said that editors often have the last say in what is published; the ideas that are accepted by the editor are typically ideas that the editor and publisher view as
what is Black (Sutton, 1994). As defined by the study participants, the ideas and plotlines in books like the Bluford series and other popular African American literature are recognizably Black to editors, and therefore acceptable to publish. Langan said that the stories he writes are about Black and Latino youth, and the publishing success of the books, shows that his publisher found these to be acceptable images of African American and Latino youth (Campbell, 2011).

There is a level of interest convergence in these practices, in that text about African Americans have a certain type of plotline to be published. Interest convergence is the idea that a racial injustice will not be corrected unless it is in the benefit of those in power (Bell, 1995). Ladson-Billings (2013) simplified the concept: “…interest convergence is about alignment, not altruism” (p. 38.) Additionally, publishing industries have the ability to exclude text they deem to not be authentic or beneficial to their sales. The ability to exclude what is considered Black comes from the ability to exclude. This ability to exclude creates property, and therefore, formulates and creates what is not a part of that property (Harris, 1995). The ability to say what Black is comes from whiteness as property, which creates a set of norms of what is “whiteness.” If a text that is supposed to be about Black people does not fit the mold of Blackness, if it intrudes upon one of the property that is considered white, it cannot be seen as Black.

It is in this limitation that African American literature struggles not only to tell the story of multiple aspects of what “Black” life is, but it limits the ability of these books to be seen as authentic African American literature. This is not to say that someone from outside a parallel culture cannot successfully create a text about those from a parallel culture without damaging the authenticity of the plotline. There are authors who have written text
about African Americans who have created meaningful texts that have been received well by the youth of this group, and the authors are not Black. Myers indicated there is a chance, however, that authors who write about a culture other than their own will inadvertently miss aspects and minor details (Sutton, 1994). It is important that a person who wants to write about a parallel culture of which he/she is not a part do extensive cultural research to avoid writing and creating stereotypes. Woodson (2003) created stories and texts about those who are not of her culture but to do this and do it well, she took herself to the experience of those whom she writes, while questioning why she as a Black woman is writing the story (p. 37). In this, she has woven her experiences of being a Black woman with the experiences of the character, in hopes that story will “ring true” (p. 37).

Harris (1997) states there are recurring themes and characteristics that define African American literature: human history, family, beauty, and friendships. Seemingly, if these themes appear in African American literature, the works can be considered African American literature, despite the racial makeup of the author. These recognizable themes can be recognized by readers from the African American culture, and also be shared with those who are not a part of Black culture.
Chapter 6: We Need More

While no participants voiced the need for more African American literature, participants’ inability to cite memorable or even generic books created about African American young shows that the numbers of publishes African American literature are still low and that African American literature lacks visibility. Participants in this study were, in fact, most concerned about how Black people were represented in African American literature. Less than five percent of children’s books are written about African American characters (Horning, K. T., Lindgren, M. V., & Schliesman, M, 2014), and this percentage does not exclude the books that are not written by African American authors, and thus the numbers would dwindle even further. Ami cited her enjoyment of the novel *Things Fall Apart* (Acebe, 1994) as well as Gaines’ novel, *A Lesson Before Dying* (Gaines, 1993). Though *Things Fall Apart* is literature about people of color based in colonial Nigeria, and not written about American life, Ami was able to relate to the characters and the storyline of the books. *Things Fall Apart* remains an integral part of the high school curriculum in the home state of all students who were interviewed. It serves as one the few examples of literature about Black people, but it stands as a book about the disenfranchisement of Africans and the issues caused by Anglo Saxon interference, and portrays the weakness of African characters, especially regarding their Anglo Saxon interactions. The main character, Okonkwo commits suicide because of the pressures created by a colonized Nigeria.

None of the books mentioned in the interviews were novels written about topic or subjects within the lifetime of interviewees, except for the Bluford series. Students whom I inform about the racial background of the primarily authors of the Bluford series are shocked to learn that the authors of a popular books series are white, however are not deterred from reading the books, as they are high interest reads, and require fewer literacy skills to interpret than other young adult literature.
The books serve their purpose; they are a high interest, low level read, making them an easy choice for students who do not want to muddle themselves in books that are too difficult to understand, therefore, more difficult to pass a comprehension examination.

Perhaps the most startling finding of these students is that all participants struggled to name authors or creators of African American young adult literature. This was partially expected given the statistics from the previous year that shows that African American children’s literature makes up about three percent total of books published for these groups (Horning, K. T., Lindgren, M. V., & Schliesman, M, 2014). The lack of books published about African Americans has historically been an issue; in 1975, over eighty-six percent of books published for children featured white characters (Bishop, 1982). In 1988, less than one percent of books published for children were written by or illustrated by African Americans (Hudson, 1997). Little growth in the number of published books that were written by or published by African Americans has happened over the past twenty-six years, further showing that there is a lack of African American literature to read or from which to choose.

All participants indicated a strong tie to school being a reason for their reading habits, as school played a large part in the amount of books the participants read in the past. If students were not able to find African American young adult literature for any ages in the library, classroom curricula stands to be the greatest chance for students to be exposed to readings. This exposes two problems; first, there is a deficit in African American literature, even in an educational environment that touts itself as multicultural, and second, African American literature is not that memorable or recognizable to its readers.
A Call to Publishers

The issue regarding the publishing of African American young adult literature is two-fold: accuracy and numbers. As mentioned earlier in the chapter and in the literature, the numbers are not apparent, even sixty years post desegregation in the United States of America. Young (2006) reflected on the effect that a primarily white publishing industry has on works published about African Americans, explaining that the white publishing industry inherently operates from a social made power structure, which displays a larger issue of culture ignorance on behalf of those in power. Young (2006) expressed this sentiment:

The predominantly white publishing industry reflects and often reinforces the racial divide that has always defined American society, representing “blackness” as a one-dimensional cultural experience. Minority texts are edited, produced, and advertised as representing the “particular” black experience to a “universal,” implicitly white audience (although itself ethnically constructed audience. The American publishing industry, that is, has historically inscribed a mythologized version of the “black experience” onto all works marked by race… (p. 4).

The ongoing issue of certain images of African Americans prevails because of how editors in predominantly white publishing houses imagine Black life to be, and how editors in publishing house imagine how Black life should be displayed in order to garner the interest of its audience. The less the images in books are appealing to predominantly white audiences, the less likely it is that a book will be published because premade ideas of how each race acts and behaves is socially predetermined (Du Bois, 1927). While there are less Black publishing houses than white publishing houses, most major publishing houses do have imprints, specific company names within publishing houses. These imprints specialize in creating African American literature, and often, African American literature for children and young adults. Young adult African American literature is often patterned after the adult version of African American literature. In my experience as a librarian, it is the imprint names that students easily recognize when asking for African American literature,
followed by specific series names, then author names. Students identify what type of genre of book they can read based on a company name, though the students whom I have served do not refer to the books as “Street Lit”. In most cases, they are usually referred to as “drama books”, “Black books”, or “books with violence in them”.

**Too Much of a One-Sided Story**

During the interviews, participants were asked if they thought that young adult literature was representative. The oldest participants vehemently voiced their disdain of African American young adult literature because it fell into a niche. Without any reserve, Paige said that today’s young adult literature was too stereotypical, highlighting that most young adult literature pandered toward African American young adults was only about “hood life”. When I looked up from my notes at her after she made this statement, she replied that there was nothing wrong with living such a life, but it is not the story of all African Americans, and on a personal level, not her story.

Ami and Lucy, the two sisters who are two years apart in age, were the most vocal about the topic of representation. Ami found that African American books were not representative of African Americans, and not her experience of African Americans, and only served to show what she considered to be a negative aspect of African American life… poverty, violence, crime. When asked what those who read African American young adult literature might learn, Ami replied that they could learn about the struggle of African Americans by reading these books, and learn about overcoming difficult times.

Three of the four participants used the terms “hood” or “ghetto” to describe the stories and images purported by young adult African American literature, and though they did not always disparage living in poverty, they were certain to note that not all Black people lived in severe
poverty and this caused a disconnect between them and the literature. Paige, who came from a middle class family, shared that certain young adult literature books like the Bluford series (2013) caught her attention because of their display of themes of people living “hood” lives, something she did not understand.

The youngest participant, Sarai took the idea of being asked what young adult books portrayed in a different manner. Her idea of young adult African American literature centered on biographies, not fiction, so to her, African American literature was a story of history; she highlighted her memory of reading the story of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and she vaguely remembered reading other books with African American characters in her free time at home. Her most vivid memory was reading the biographical text about Martin Luther King, Jr., which is likely as he is a popular children’s book topic.

Lucy, Ami, and Paige all shared that they did not think there was anything wrong with the way that those who are deemed to live in the “hood” lived their lives. On the contrary, they believed that there was much to be learned from Black people, whether they are poor or more affluent. Paige shared that the reason she read street literature was to learn about this type of life because she did not have this experience, yet she was annoyed that this was the only type of life depicted about Black people in young adult literature. Ami and Lucy agreed that they did not see anything wrong with living in the hood, but the stereotyping and negativity about the perceptions of the hood in literature was problematic to them. Lucy mentioned that not everyone who lives in the hood is bad, yet she understood that there are negative connotations connected to the representation of “hood life”.
Sarai did not mention that books about Black people could be one-sided or stereotypical, which meant several theories were at play. First, transactional reading played a part in determining each participant’s ideas of what “Black representation is” based on a series of ideas about Black life they each acquired throughout their lifetimes (Rosenblatt, 1978). The older participants mentioned that they thought that many African American young adult literary works sought to typify Black people, based on a set of ideals that Black life is only surrounded by poverty, hopelessness, and a multitude of unwed mothers; they viewed these images as stereotypical. They also mentioned that they did not see an issue with living in the “hood”; rather society deemed this a problem, hence the participants said that Black young adult literature was negatively stereotyped. Their thematic perception that African Americans were sometimes negatively represented in young adult literature was also created by a series of prior experiences, both personally molded by society and as found in literary works (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Ami, Lucy, and Paige also expressed that they saw stereotyping to be prominent in African American literary works for young adults; they thought that Black life was being pigeonholed. The participants expressing that they felt there were stereotypes show their idea departs from certain views of African American life; there is no “one” essential way to live the Black experience (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012). Often these older participants echoed, “Not all Back people are that way.” The red herring appeared with the youngest participant who did agree that her life was not like that of the Black people she read about in books, but there was no mention of the presence of stereotypes. Sarai said that she was not like the African American in books that she read because they were slaves, and she was not because she was born in the modern era of the United States. Again, the way that Sarai interpreted the text she read, where slavery is bad and things were much
better, affected her view of what is deemed to be untrue about Black representation in books (Rosenblatt, 1978).

One may think that the negative representation of African Americans is in no way as severe as it was over a century ago; this thought must be critiqued as what race “is” is constantly evolving and changing (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012). What might have been seen previously as negatively representative of a race might not be seen as not racist; the ideas of what “is” evolves, therefore, what can be determined as racist concurrently evolves (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012). A century ago, a large number of books ensuing the idea of poverty-stricken urban Black youth might not have been deemed problematic; the study participants never said they saw anything wrong with this image either. They did emphasize that this lopsided view of African American life was not completely representative of “Blackness”, therefore deeming African American young adult literature as not as representative and accurate as it could be.

Street literature as a genre is legitimate. Readers of street literature recognize the genre as something “real” to them, stories usually about marginalized people who live in what mainstream America would deem “rough neighborhoods (Morris, 2011). Similarly, Coates (2006) defined street literature as

Like gangsta rap, street lit often has thieves, pushers and prostitutes as protagonists. And like gangsta rap in its heyday, street lit is hot business. In an industry that considers sales of 20,000 copies of a typical novel a success, gritty street-lit authors like K’wan are routinely doubling that number (p.75).

Street literature has found great popularity with its themes and because of this, street literature has forged a solid place in African American young adult literature. Street literature allows readers who live in urban settings to experience elements indicative to young adult literature within the context of urban neighborhoods, while also allowing for the unique issues surrounding
those who live in urban settings (Morris, 2011). Morris (2011) explained how characters are portrayed as wearing and valuing brands in street literature:

Name brand clothing labels, cars, and accessories are detailed in the stories to create a clear picture of what characters are wearing and driving. Amid the chaos of abuse, violence, and hustling, the characters are portrayed as looking very expensive (p. 22).

While street literature across all age ranges, including young adult literature, is enjoying great success in publishing and sales, not everyone is keen on its subject content. Chiles (2006) wrote a piece about his dislike of the street literature he found at a book store. After viewing the bookshelves, he cited his disgust at what he saw:

On shelf after shelf, in bookcase after bookcase, all that I could see was lurid book jackets displaying all forms of brown flesh, usually half-naked and in some erotic pose, often accompanied by guns and other symbols of criminal life. I felt as if I was walking into a pornography shop, except in this case the smut is being produced by and for my people, and it is called "literature." (Chiles, 2006)

Chiles (2006) continued to argue that street literature is nothing short of pornographic, with little added literary value to the African American literary collective:

As I stood there in Borders, I had two sensations: I was ashamed and mortified to see my books sitting on the same shelves as these titles; and secondly, as someone who makes a living as a writer I felt I had no way to compete with these purveyors of crassness. That leaves me wondering where we - writers, publishers, readers, the black community - go from here. Is street fiction some passing fad, or does it represent our future? It is depressing that this noble profession, one that I aspired to as a child from the moment I first cracked open James Baldwin and Gabriel García Márquez about 30 years ago, has been reduced by the greed of the publishing industry and the ways of the American marketplace to a tasteless collection of pornography.

This point has since been countered by librarians who argue that it is more important that patrons are reading instead of judging what they are reading (Fialkoff, 2006).

The participants and I agreed that it is not the content of street literature that causes concern; rather, it seems that street literature is the only literature published for Black young adults and the
only books labeled as African American young adult literature. Street literature as a genre is fine. Street literature accepted as the only representative of African American young adult literature is not fine, as it gives a lopsided view of African American young adult literature. Though African Americans may share a similar set of experiences, there are books available that negate a partisan view that all Black life is the same (Harris, 1997). The essentialist nature of only showing one version of African American life is refuted by Critical Race Theory, as Critical Race Theory states that there is not one way to be of a “race”; rather, the idea and attributes of a race are constantly changing (Deglado and Stefanic, 2012). At this junction, the participants of the study found their personal conflicts with African American young adult literature.

All participants voiced a disparity between their lives and the themes that they found appearing frequently in novels for African American youth. Paige shared:

…most of them are urban…it is really stereotyped to me, African American literature nowadays, cause it is always somewhere in the projects or a rural area, and that’s how I think about it… and it is mostly slave times.

Paige was not the only participant to distance her personal life from African American literature on the basis of slavery as a primary subject. Sarai shared that she is not like the characters in Black books because they were about slaves, and since “…Martin Luther King made his speech…”, in reference to the civil rights movement, the lives of racial disparities between Black and white is not an issue.

To understand Paige’s idea of stereotypes, it is important to remember that even though stereotypes may be positive or negative, stereotypes are still a form of representation. hooks (1995) declared:

Stereotypes, however inaccurate, are one form of representation. Like fictions, they are created to serve as substitutions, standing in for what is real. They are there to not tell is like
is but to invite and encourage pretense. They are a fantasy, a projection onto the Other that makes them less threatening. Stereotypes abound when there is distance. They are an invention, a pretense that know when the steps that would make real knowing possible cannot be taken or are not allowed (p. 38)

Stereotypes allow for difference, making about whom the story is written less threatening to the dominant narrative.

On the subject of how African Americans are represented in American literature, not limited to African Americans, Morrison (1992) shared how she came to see how what she called Africanism is displayed in American literary works. In her explanation, she reached a point that explained that American literature cannot exist without the African presence, though at a point, she did not notice the presence of African characters. She cited, “What became transparent were the self-evident ways that Americans choose to talk about themselves though and within a sometime allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, always choked representation of an Africanist presences” (p.17).

Similarly I argue that Black literature cannot exist outside of whiteness, as the power structure that exists within racial division inevitably controls what is displayed and shown within African American literature. Whiteness, based on its ability to be property and its ability to include and exclude, defines Blackness (Harris, 1995; Fasching-Varner & Mitchell, 2013). Not only is it profitable to create a neat package of what the “Black experience” is in books based on what is popularly seen in society and media as inherently “Black life”, but it continues to perpetuate a system of power, exercised by the editors that control what is written and sold about books that are racially driven.

Hudson (1997) suggested that publishers have a great power in being able to represent multicultural text accurately, “without resorting to either propaganda or pabulum…” and these texts
could display “authentic cultural substance which should form the basis of truly multicultural literature…” (p. 231). The publishing industry operates outside of demand, so for authentic multicultural literature to exist, there has to be a greater demand for it, a greater demand for numbers, and a greater demand for accuracy. While there is an ongoing debate about who should write about certain cultures, and whether a person outside of a culture should write about a culture, there is a general consensus that as long as a person experiences a culture, he/she can write about it accurately. A person should either have lived the life of what they write about or be immersed among people who are from that culture (Henderson, 2005). Many prolific and popular African American children’s and young adult literary authors have shared that publishers have often not accepted their manuscripts about African American lives because it did not fit the mold that publishers sought (Sutton, 1994; Nikola-Lisa, 2003, Henderson, 2005, Donelson & Nilsen, 2005). There is also the rebuttal that people of color should write about themselves as a chance to share their story (Bishop, 1982; Woodson, 2003). This “idea” of what Black life is needs to evolve in order for publishers to accept and create more African American literature; however, an interest in the multiple narratives of Black life must be created in the public, as publishers operate under interest convergence. It is not likely that a publishing company will change its narrative of African American life unless it is beneficial to them. Unless it is beneficial to those in power, the change will not occur (Bell, 1995).

**A Call to Curricula Writers**

Harris (1997) addressed the important and pertinent point that we as educators and activist cannot simply blame the publishing industry for the lack of representation for African Americans in children’s literature. The lack of representation, consequently, is even more pertinent to African
American young adult literature, as African American children’s literature has more exposure than African American young adult literature.

Increasing the consumption of multicultural literature, and more specifically African American literature, must occur to allow the representation of the stories of the oppressed or less visible cultures. Black children and young adults need to see themselves represented and have their stories told, to garner and keep their interest in their reading and educational endeavors (Brooks and McNair, 2009). As a librarian, I find this a common narrative. Students have complained that what is taught in their class has nothing to do with their lives, and to them this validates their disinterest and misbehaviors. The main benefit of multicultural literature, and by virtue of inclusion African American literature, is that it can create a space for those outside of the dominant culture, while educating those of the dominant culture who might have skewed ideas of cultures that are different from their own.

The cumulative message for the children, mainly white and middle class, who see their own reflections exclusively, is that they are inherently superior, that their culture and way of life is the norm, and that people and cultures different from them and there are quaint and exotic at best, and deviant and inferior at worst (Bishop, 1994, p.xiv). Bishop (1994) echoed ideas similar to Larrick (1965) who also thought that white children would see their lives as the dominant culture as the socialized norm, and that children from other cultures should be more like them, even though they were not the majority in the world in comparison to people of color. Offering multicultural literature young adult literature to students in secondary education grades could serve to enlighten and create discussion about those who are not a part of the dominant culture in the United States of America (Webster, 2002); African American literature is a subculture of multicultural literature, so the same applies. According to the participants in this study, schooling played a vital part in their exposure to literature; therefore, curriculums that do not
feature African American literature has the potential to leave a group of students feeling excluded, while increasing the power of oppression from the dominant culture.

**Engaging Students Through Multicultural (African American) Literature**

The participants’ responses indicated that students did not have much exposure to multicultural text, which is surprising given the popularity of educational pundits who emphasize all students are equal, and therefore multicultural education is key to keeping equality in education and in schools. “Multicultural” is not a new educational term, but it is used loosely as a trendy term that appears in the written philosophy portion of teacher job applications. The term is intended to show that one is not racist, that one wants to teach equality, that one is a teacher who philosophically respects and cares about all cultures of students encountered (Banks, 2004). Multicultural literature and multicultural education correlate and coexist. Nieto (1992) described multicultural education as

…a process of comprehensive schools reform and basic education for all students. It challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender, among others) that students, their communities, and teacher represent. Multicultural education permeates the curriculum and instructional strategies used in schools, as well as the interactions among teachers, students and parents, and the very way that schools conceptualize the nature the nature of teaching and learning. Because it uses critical pedagogy as its underlying philosophy and focuses on knowledge, reflection, and action (praxis) as the basis for social change, multicultural education furthers the democratic principle of social justice. (p. 208)

Multiculturalism is designed to encounter the difficult topics that some may deem inappropriate for students at a certain age, in which, the new debate becomes when the actual “appreciate” time to discuss multicultural issue arise. It is because multiculturalism, therefore multicultural literature, can bring about such a dramatic change in thought that is not always greatly received by teachers; the fear of having an uncontrolled classroom because of the notions that discussing issues of gender, race, and class often makes teaching multiculturalism undesirable to
teachers who have learned to teach in one standardized manner (hooks, 1994). It is in this
discomfort that true learning for both the teacher and students takes place because “multiculturalism
compels educators to recognize the narrow boundaries that have shaped the way knowledge is
shared in the classroom. It “forces us all to recognize out complicity in accepting and perpetuating
biases of any kind” (hooks, 1994, p. 44).

Neito (1992) echoed the sentiments of Larrick (1965) and Dressel (2005) that
multiculturalism, ergo, multicultural literature, is not singularly an issue of only representing
oppressed populations; rather it functions to bring knowledge to children of all races and
backgrounds, reversing the idea that one is more superior to others. The point of reading according
to Lazere (1987) is it:

…helps the readers to unify and make connections in their experience; to follow an extend
line of thought through propositional thematic and symbolic development, to engage in
mature moral reasoning and to form judgments of quality and taste; to be attuned to
skepticism and irony; and to be perceptive of ambiguity and meaning. (p.2)

Multicultural literature, and African American literature as a format of multicultural
literature, teaches students to recognize, discuss and respect difference in all students (Bishop,
1997). As schools segregating along the line of race and class, multicultural literature serves to
offer rarely given exposure of other cultural in the way that reading literature in school can (Bishop,
1997). In offering this literature to students, the aim of balance remains important; if students only
sees themselves in literature, their lives appear to the norm, when on the other end of the spectrum,
students who see little of themselves or misrepresented versions of themselves in literature are at
risk of devaluing themselves (Larrick, 1965; Bishop, 1997). Offering multicultural literature in the
classroom warrants a discussion from students on topics that may have not been explored
previously because of their acclimation to the dominant culture. Given that schools and education
reformists often cite that schools need to engage and promote critical thinking among students, it would seem that trying a variety of books in the literary settings would be common sense. According to the participants and personal experience as both a student and an educator, little has been done to make multicultural literature inclusive in curriculum.; a stronger tie to “American classic” reigns supreme.

Delpit (2012) cited a Learning 24/7 study that found that only five percent of the 1500 classes observed in the study used academic dialogue. Classes that lack academic discussion fall flat because students are forced to encounter themes in literary works with little guidance (Delpit, 2012). This makes the material less meaningful, therefore, less likely to stay with students on an intellectual level. In a classroom observation by Delpit (2012), students discussed the main character of Monster (Myers, 1999), and debated whether the incarcerated character really was a monster. While many of the students said that the main character was not monster, rather a victim of unfortunate circumstances, one student stayed quiet. When asked to share his thoughts, the student said:

Well, I think he is a monster, because my mother was drug addict when I was seven years old and I was poor. I decided to go to friends’ mother and other relatives for help. I made the decisions that I could be different. It is all about the choice you make. (Delpit, 2012, p.132)

Such examples of classroom discussions as this one, where the students expressed their views about Monster (Myers, 1999), shows the power that multicultural literature, and in this case, African American young adult literature, can have on classroom discussion and students’ ability to relate to the text. When reading any literature the teacher must understand the need for students to have the chance and to encounter and discuss a text, and clarify topics read and discussed within the book (Gerlach, 1992). To facilitate discussion of
literature, “The teacher must allow discussion of oppression to be become a part of language and literature instruction” (Delpit, 1995, p. 165). Teachers become ‘cultural mediators’ providing students the chance to have discourse about cultures where the students encounter other cultures and, “…avoid, perpetuating prejudices, stereotypes, and racism” (Gay, 2000, p. 43). The ability to encounter literature about diverse populations, therefore, speaking to the issue of domination, lies precariously on the ability of the teacher to no longer treat students as passive learners, as what Freire (1993) called the “banking method” of education, where students are passive learners who only consume knowledge. In this method, “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing…” as “Projecting an absolute ignorance onto other, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education as a process of inquiry” (Freire, 1993, p. 53). In contrast, learners who encounter multicultural literature should not be reduced to knowledge receptacles, which would stifle discussion of how people outside of the dominant culture, white, Christian, heterosexual males, operate within society.

The study participants did not say that they felt other students were better than them because of what teachers chose to teach in the classroom, but the fact that students were not able to readily recall African American literature shows supremacy of white literature in curriculum. Multiculturalism and multicultural literature can reverse this type of supremacy. It may never completely reverse the ideas that people hold about the cultures of people outside of their own, but multicultural literature does, metaphorically, rattle the cages of existing power structures in American grade school curriculum.
Teaching Multicultural Literature

African American young adult literature, like all multicultural literature, requires that teachers have solid background knowledge of the content written in the books, especially a solid background knowledge of the cultural aspects of content included in books. Harris (1997) offered this advice about teaching books about Black children:

The literature offers untold opportunities to entertain, inspire, challenge and inform readers. Special training is not required be it can be approached. This is not to suggest that some background knowledge is not necessary for understanding some of the information. (p. 51)

When a teacher does not have a solid cultural background of the content in multicultural literature, the appropriate preteaching does not take place, leaving students more at risk for solidifying their preconceived and socialize notions of the culture (Dressel, 2005). Students in Dressel’s (2005) study were exposed to multicultural literature, but when asked what they thought about the new cultures of which they gained new information, the students (majority white) in vast numbers said that they still held they prior beliefs about cultures outside of their own. Indians were still drawn with feathers in their hair, and students overwhelmingly agreed or could not solidly determine that those who were not white were not “really Americans” like they were (Dressel, 2005). The proper usage and teaching of multicultural literature, and, in turn African American literature, could serve to widen students’ perspectives about African American culture. If Black students are able to read and understand books from dominant culture, as they have been required to do for years, students from the dominant culture should be able to read and understand books from outside their culture, with proper guidance and direction from an adult or educational professional (Harris, 1997). Again, it is important that teachers, “…can discuss openly the injustices of allowing certain people to succeed, based not upon merit but upon which family they were born into, upon which discourse they has access to as children” (Delpit, 1995, p. 165).
Despite that fact that street literature is arguably the most popular genre in African American young adult literature, it is not the only genre available for classrooms to read. For a teacher to teach multiculturally, and in reference in this research, African American literature, teachers must revert from their education of teaching literature in a standardized way with little interaction from students. Pinar (2012) says, “Literacy is in fact another form of ignorance unless what one reads is significant. Students’ interests and teacher’s knowledge and judgment converge in determining, in any given situation, what knowledge is of most worth (p.22). Teachers should learn to not assume the role as expert in order to allow students the ability to drive the knowledge of culture based on personal experiences, in the classroom, as it is both student and teacher knowledge together that create valuable learning.

Another issue related to teaching multicultural text is reversing the teacher’s idea that all students were created equal. Racism and oppression are entrenched deeply into American culture and even controls law, which in turn, affects education (Bell, 1995). If a teacher subscribes to colorblind mentality, where one treats people of all cultures and backgrounds the same, it may be difficult to recognize who the disenfranchised students are (Ullucci & Battey, 2011). Consequently, colorblindness, though created by liberal thought as a way to create equality, ignores a person’s differences and intersections. In turn, ignoring these intersections silences the way a person is received by society on the basis on their differences from the oppressed (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012). In fact, not recognizing difference in the racial makeup of a person, color-blind ideology, “…legitimizes and thereby, maintains the social, economic, and political advantages that white hold over other Americans” (Gotanda, 1995, p. 257). Teachers may believe that they are making their lessons relevant to their audiences, but what happens when a student attends a school where he/she is the race in the majority, as was the case of all of the participants who attended schools where the
majority of the student population was Black? Does a teacher still perceive these students still as
disenfranchised? A true understanding of the term “multicultural” would say, “Yes”, but often
teachers are not knowledgeable of the way they perceive their students.

To teach African American literature, or any format of multicultural literature, teachers
should be prepared to encounter the politics of domination is the educational settings (hooks, 1994).
hooks (1994) emphasized the importance of teachers needing to let go of affirmation from students
who may not always embrace the content, and that diverse literature is not effective if the literature
is “tokenized” or simply included in studies without encountering race, class, and gender. All
multicultural literature needs a background basis before being taught in order to prevent students
creating more bias (Webster, 2002; Dressel, 2005).

In reference to the older participants’ school curriculum and Sarai’s newer curriculum, there
is still a deficit of representation from multicultural books, especially books about African
American populations. Recall Morrison’s (1992) argument that there are academics and others who
do not value African American literature and almost take pride in not reading it. Perhaps these
sentiments are still apparent in the minds other those who write curriculums; perhaps it is ignorance
on behalf of those who write curriculum. Whatever the reason, the inclusion of African American
young adult literature is crucial to offering representation for those audiences who are oppressed,
and crucial in teaching those from the dominant culture about who people are different from them
and their families, and to dispel ideas that white children are the kingfish in the world (Larrick,
1963). Landt (2011) wrote:

Feelings of marginalization, invisibility, and rejection can occur when students do not see
self reflected in what they read; therefore, teachers need to be cognizant of providing
students with abundant occasions for reading selections that mirror their families and their
cultural experiences. It is imperative that all students find themselves in the literature they encounter within the school day. (p.3)

It does not take special training to teach about other cultures if you are not from the culture, but it does require “…intellectual openness and curiosity” (Harris, 1997, p.51). A curriculum does not always meet the needs by adding multicultural literature to the classroom, often burdening teachers even more than their current demands (Spears-Bunton, 1998; Landt, 2011). Harris (1997) suggested that teachers create literary centers or do daily read alouds to generate interest in children. I contend that teachers and librarians on the secondary level should use similar methods. Classroom libraries in the past have served to be effective ways to disseminate multicultural and African American literature to students. In this role, the teacher is the facilitator of the text that is read in the classroom, and students select books in the library, allowing for a greater student ownership in the literary process (Jones, 2006). Creating a classroom library could be positive decision, allowing African American students to bring texts featuring characters that look and speak like them into the classroom setting. It is important that students have an interest in literature, otherwise, they might not think to ask or question teachers and librarian about certain books. Harris (1992) claimed:

I became convinced that the literacy achievement of African-American children would improve if they could see themselves and their experience, history and culture reflected in the books they read. I still hold firmly to the belief. I want children to discover African American literature and the literature of other people of color in a systematic fashion. I want it to become an integral component of schooling. (p. xvi)

It is not the students, rather, the curricula, that has yet to mold itself to the education of students of color through changing the mindsets of the teachers who teach African American children and young adults (Delpit, 1995). African American literature effect a different perspective in storytelling from a cultural viewpoint, by displaying the ways in African Americans and African American children share stories; therefore, the importance of bringing this perspective to curricula planners, teacher and librarians has never been greater. It is only through self-definition and the
sharing of Black narratives in curricula that ideas about parallel cultures be shared among children of color and those who are not.
Chapter 7: Continuing Our Narrative

For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporar­ily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and time. I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives here. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices (Lorde, 1984, p. 112)

Lorde (1984; 1995) was one of the first Black feminists to embark upon the idea of intersectionality, where multiple intersections or parts of oneself are oppressed, and also serve to oppress other intersections (Crenshaw, 2000). From Collins’ (2000) ideas that there can be multiple aspects about a person that can receive discrimination, Black Feminist Thought was born, a work that explores how Black women are viewed by the dominant society, why Black women are viewed in such a way, and what Black woman can do to change the dominant culture’s narrative. The need for a works that define issues of Black women went unnoticed because of the positions as writers would write about feminist topics and not mention their position (class or race) from which they would write (hooks, 1994). This study interviewed all Black females, and posed questions not only of how African Americans were viewed in young adult literature, but of how Black females were portrayed in African American young adult literature and other literary works. Because of each of my participant’s set of intersections, I expected the results to vary more than they did, but the only variance in answers depended upon the intersection of age. The belief that there are people who are more oppressed based on their intersections only serves to divide those in a common welfare more (Collins, 2009). It is more beneficial to analyze and discuss how different intersections interact with each other, creating unique spaces for Black female narratives.

The most powerful tool in combating oppressive images of Black women is to create other images through self-definition (Collins, 2000). African American authors often stand as storytellers
of their culture, which is a format of self-definition (Bishop, 1982). McNair and Brooks (2012) analyzed what is valuable to African American girls in transitional chapter books, written about African Americans by African Americans. Transitional books are available to age ranges of children who are elementary to early secondary ages, and these stories can be used to combat negative images about Black females (McNair & Brooks, 2012).

Since all books analyzed in this study were by African American writers, the likelihood of there being negative images was reduced. One of the main themes in these transitional books was friendship (McNair & Brooks, 2012), which is not that different from books about a slightly older audience of Black young adults. The theme of morality is also prevalent in transitional books (McNair & Brooks, 2012), with the theme of “fitting in” the most common theme across multiple genres and cultural representations of young adult literature. Some of these themes are present in African American young adult literature, but the positive behaviors of the Black girls in the transitional books featured in this study were all viewed by the study participants in African American young adult literature, though some of the values of the girls in the transitional books were identified by the participants as visible in African American young adult literature. Reading books similar to the transitional chapter books of this study contained themes identifiable across cultural lines; they contained content indicative of the African American community, but they were completely readable and understandable by those outside of the African American culture. Analyzing books (McNair & Brooks, 2012) to reach across multiple cultures serves the purpose of writing a narrative of African American girlhood and life, while being relatable cross-culturally. Bishop (1982) cited:

A good story, well written and enriched with the specific details of living that make a cultural group distinctive will naturally touch on the human universal extant with that
cultural group. Such a good story will be accessible readers both inside and outside the
group depicted. (p. 73)

The participants in the study expressed that they believed that Black women in books that
they read valued little that was not of monetary value or familial ties. Participants expressed a litany
of issues they thought existed about Black females in African American young adult literature.
Lucy and Ami joked about if there are ever any Black people in dominant culture young adult
literature, and if they did appear, they always had a side role. A recent example of this appeared in
The Hunger Games (Collins, 2008), where Rue, a black female, did not hold the dominant narrative
of the plotline. Rue was certainly instrumental in promoting the plot in the entire Hunger Game
series, even in death, but not once did she take the spotlight from Katniss, a situation noticed by
Ami and Lucy. Morrison (1992) spoke to this when she declared that without African Americans to
help define the main characters of American literary works, these literary works would not have existed.

Paige also mentioned The Hunger Games, probably because of the popularity of the text’s
movie at the time of the interview. Paige shared that she wished that the females in the African
American literary works were not constantly victimized by circumstance, that they were stronger.
She recalled the independence and strength of Katniss Everdeen in The Hunger Games (Collins,
2008) in comparison to the females in the series of books she read. Katniss did not behave in overt
sexual manners, she was fairly independent, and yet was surrounded by as much violence as Black
females in African American young adult literature. Paige explained that Katniss did not exhibit
weakness in the face of adversity, and Paige thought that many of the females in African American
young adult literature were portrayed as weak or accepting of what society dealt to them. The
young women in the African American literature about whom Paige read did not struggle or fight to
break the mold of their surroundings.
Paige also spoke of the Black females in the books that she read that fit the oppressive image of the jezebel, a wanton woman who breaks the mold of women being sexual passive and men being sexually active (Collins, 2000). The image of the jezebel allows the Black female to be labeled sexually deviant (Omolade, 1995). In this, white males who embraced the patriarchy were able to sexually express themselves at the expense of Black women, while allowing white women to maintain the image of purity, valued by white society (Jordan, 1968). A white male was “…free to maintain his public hated of racial mixing while privately expressing his desire for black bodies,” (Omolade, 1995, p. 364). There are different types of jezebels in the Black community frequently labeled “hoochies” which also come in varieties. Paige suggested that the books she read too often featured the “hoochie mama”, a sexually deviant Black woman connected to poverty, whose sole purpose was to give men pleasure (Colllins, 2000). According to Paige, the “hoochie mama” in African American young adult literature was portrayed as confident and bossy or as a shy girl who wanted to garner the attention of a young man, so she used sex as her currency. If the “hoochie mama” exists in a story, she cannot be imagined without a hypermasculine male, and it is within these images of insatiable sexual appetites that the binary of normal and deviance can be established (Collins, 2000). The problem with the “hoochie mama” image is that it degrades Black females to the status of animals, things to be propertied and owned. It also leads to a skewed view of the violence that happens to Black women, as Black women will be seen by society in courts as promiscuous beings, almost justifying sexual assault and rape (Crenshaw, 1995; Giddings, 1995). Given that courts will often cite the sexual history of a rape victim, it is much harder to defend the image of a woman that is already seen as an over-sexualized object. The “hoochie mama” image also makes it more difficult for Black females to be taken seriously in their personal and professional lives.
It must be taken into account that the females whom Paige referenced were main characters in street literature, which often features the plots of females who take on “masculine” personalities in a show of strength. The image of the jezebel in this genre may be purposeful. Ami and Lucy spoke of the jezebel, but the oppressive image they described most aptly when talking about African American female depictions was that of the matriarch. The matriarch is a mother to all, whether the children are hers biologically or not (Collins, 2000). Ami and Lucy referenced women with an inordinate number of children who do not need the assistance of a man to help in raising their children. Collins (2000) wrote:

…not only does the image of the Black matriarch seek to regulate Black women’s behavior, it also seems designed to influence white women’s gendered identities…the Black matriarch serves as a powerful symbol for both Black and white women of what can go wrong if white patriarchal power is challenged. Aggressive, assertive women are penalized---they are abandoned by their men, end up impoverished and are stigmatized as being unfeminine (pp. 84-85).

If these images of Black women are used to control and oppress Black females, the question arises of why they appear in African American young adult literature. Although not wanting to censor any author’s story, I strongly believe authors can write about what pleases them as a part of intellectual freedom. Intellectual freedom is the main argument for those who are outsiders of culture writing about the culture in which they do not belong (Lasky, 2003). If these are the images of Black females that those who read African American females are encountering, however, one has to question what those who read African American young adult literature are learning subconsciously from authors who are Black and otherwise.

Delpit (2012) explained that the most access that students may have to exploring other cultures may be through literature in the classroom. It does not take too much searching through media, both televised, printed, and interest, to see the images of oppression for Black women
splayed in headlines and programming. Black women are shown enacting the forms of oppressive images- mammy, matriarch, welfare mother, and jezebel- and only discourse about these images will challenge them (hooks, 1994, 1999; Collins, 2000). Because of this, it is even more important to provide classroom literature that refutes these images of Black women, and that Black women are “witnesses” to their story (Bishop, 1982). It is inevitable that these images will appear in African American literature, and thus African American young adult literature, because of the stereotypes engrained in African American culture. These images are not necessarily seen as problematic, and it could be debated that they are not all negative, depending upon the Black person who is asked. Some would say that the images are a reality of Black life, therefore, the representation of these images in main media and literature are accurate despite the effect possible on Black children when only reading about themselves as slaves or in poverty (McCarthy, 1998). The study participants refuted the idea that these are the only accurate representations of Black women, as this is not how they see themselves, and they are certainly intellectuals and storytellers of African American culture (Collins, 2000). They are a part of the grander narrative as experts of their own lives. It stands, where are the books that represent the lives of these Black intellectuals? None of the participants, or I, believed that eliminating the images of Black people and Black females would help in the grander scheme of Black female representation; these images are a part of Black culture. The participants who did discuss representation as problematic shared that they did not see a problem with living in the “ghetto” or being in poverty. Actually they all agreed that there are some positive narratives that can come from the stories of those who live in “the hood”; withstanding, they did share that they wished that not all images of Black people and Black females came from the perspective of those that live in the hood, which is an encountering of the negative stereotypes associated with living in the “hood”. hooks (1994) talked about the shame associated
with living in poverty, and how, in her experience of teaching university students in a predominantly white institution, very few Black students who lived in poverty or working-class homes ever admitted it. There is a shame among Black people that being poor cannot lead to happiness, which may explain the association of negativity and the hood to Black people who live in the “hood”.

Black Female Gendered Norms

Sarai interpreted differently the question of how she is similar to Black women in the books that she reads than the other participants. Although I did not expect the youngest participant to touch on issues of gendered norms, Sarai said that the Black females are like us, us being a reference to us both being Black females. She said:

I kinda think they act like us because sometimes the woman always gotta do something for the man and now, the woman do something for the man so, all the books were reading… last year, I forgot the book we were reading, but the woman… I forgot all about it until I said something about the woman doing something for the man. The woman who is married to the man, all the girls have to do something for the man so that the men can keep the woman safe.

This idea that Black women have to provide for a man in order to gain protection from the man spoke to me as a researcher. Often I questioned why Black women of my mother’s generation were so faithful to men, even when they knew the man was cheating, or why women remarried after they lost a husband; my mother’s answer was simple…Black men offered protection to women. A black woman who lived on her own was constantly in danger of being raped, robbed or harassed, and not in reference to Black men. My mother shared with me that Black women who were independent of husbands were targets of white males (Jordan, 1968). I thought I would never have to worry about being a single female, since in my time period, being a single female was slightly more acceptable.
Sarai’s comment speaks to a history of independent Black women, and it appeared this narrative is true even for the generation younger than me.

Collins (2000) spoke to the dynamic relationship between Black men and Black women. One of the most salient issues revolves around Black male desire, where Black males value white females more than those females who are of semblance to them (Beale, 2005). Unlike Black men who are more open to marrying and valuing relationships with whatever race of women (Beale, 1995), Black women are always hopeful to one day marry a “…good Black man, while others may try their best to be the best mothers they know how to be” (Collins, 2000, p.174). In turn, in Black society, it is acceptable for a woman to be single because of the scarcity of “good Black men”. The fear of being a woman who is single and without a man is a considered a result of standards set by white men in order to control white women (hooks, 1994; Collins, 2000). The single woman without a husband, the matriarch, who takes care of finances, children and household without the assistance of a man, is portrayed negatively by white male culture in order to keep the idea of working as a good idea to white women, which, in turn, gives white women less incentive to marry (Collins, 2000). The image of the Black female matriarch is seen in a negative light because it goes against the dominant narrative of a white patriarchal household. Any challenge to white patriarchy is seen as a threat, and therefore, must be made inferior not to change or ruin the interest of white males (Beale, 1995; La Rue, 1995). hooks (1994) shared a similar view, that there is an importance placed upon Black women not being single because of a need to be equitable to the dominant culture. The reason that there is a negative stigma placed on Black women households where the father is not present lies in the need to standardize and to control the images that Black women share with their female counterparts of other races. The standardization of the patriarchy is harmful to children of single parent homes as it brings them shame, while also giving thoughts of
disenfranchisement to teachers about those students. In contrast to the negative images that surround single motherhood, there should be a celebration of single mothers, rather than a shaming, from both outside the Black community and within the Black community, as reaching for the norm to be like white middle class families will not bring Black families any more respect (hooks, 1994; Beale, 1995). This need to imitate the white patriarchal prototype has, until recently, served to silence the narratives of Black females who are single parents, offering no spaces for Black women of this background or who is living this narrative now to have a voice in feminist thought (Collins, 2000).

So, what does Sarai’s statement say about the current standing of Black females? First, a tradition continues that Black women cannot survive without Black men, so Black men must be attended to at all cost, or there is a risk of losing protection. Protection, in this case can take on many meanings. Protection could mean saving the females in the family from being taken advantage at the hands of other men. Protection could also mean protection from the stigma of the matriarch image, protection from the stigma of living a single parent, matriarchal home, even if this image of the single mother has been accepted more throughout the Black community (Collins, 2000). The refusal of a patriarchal house is not to disassemble the instruction of marriage, but rather, to allow a voice for those who do not come from a home where a man raised them. Whether accepted by the dominant narrative, this narrative is still a narrative of Black females, yet, literature still perpetuates this norm. In fairness, there are also many Black books that highlight women as single mothers but there is not a halo around the head of these women. They are often shown as working many jobs and struggling to raise their children, who in turn, struggle to be ideal citizens based on what the normative ideal citizen in relation to patriarchy (hooks, 1999; Collins, 2000).
Chapter 8: Conclusion

The following text is an excerpt from the counterstory in Chapter 4. The succeeding section offers analysis of the story, with a focus on the following text.

Faith took the book into her hands, and wrinkled her face at the image on the cover. It was of a young lady with her hands on her hips in shorts above her knee and a formfitting top.

“Are you sure about…?”

“Of course I am. The girls at this school love this series. I’m sure you will, too.”

“It is not even on my reading level...”

“That’s ok,” Mrs. Coon rebutted, “You are allowed to read some books that are below your level, as long as the books you read average close to your reading level.”

“But I’m an English Honors student. I’m not sure my teacher will accept this.”

“Oh, you’re an honor’s student? I couldn’t tell. I see you like everyone else” Mrs. Coon smiled.

“How could you not tell? My teacher only teaches honors classes?”

“Oh, well, read the book anyway. It should be easy points for you. I’ve seen you in here every morning. You are quite the avid reader.”

Faith’s only Black friend from childhood, Reina Marie, appeared beside her. Reina Marie was a student on scholarship, from a family not nearly as affluent as Faith’s.
“Girl, just check the book out. I love that series. It is one of those drama books. It is a book about Black people, REAL Black people. Get the book. Let’s go.”

Faith handed the book back to Mrs. Coon to check out. She stuffed the book into her backpack and shuffled quickly to catch up with her class, which was leaving the library in order to return to class.

“How can be racist against you? She’s Black, too. You’re worried because she gave you a book about Black people. She did you a favor. Stop trippin’.”

Faith arrived home, completed her homework. Knowing that she needed points for a school reading program to make good grades in English class, she opened the book she checked out from school earlier in the day. The first paragraph read:

I sat in the bathroom tryin’ to fix my makeup. I knew that LaToya and her group of witches would be jealous the moment I walked down the hallway. I’m light-skinned with long curly hair, a small waist with a curvy behind. The summer was good to me in growth, though I still didn’t have a big chest like my main girl, Kala. All the dudes at my school would stare when I walked down the hallway. My mama never had to put perm in my head because I got good hair from my daddy, which always made other girls hate me. I brush my waist length hair into a neat ponytail, with two tendrils hanging out to show off my curl pattern. I made sure to highlight my light green eyes with dark shadow. I topped off my look with a thin layer of lip gloss to show off the lusciousness of my lips. Once I was satisfied that my face was beat and my hair was right, I left the bathroom, smoothing out my shirt, strutting down the hallway. Not everyone at Cool school could handle my swagger.
The passage confounded Faith; she did not have any idea what the book was talking about. The young lady was not like her at all. Faith had natural shoulder-length hair, her tendrils were tightly curled, she had never wore makeup, and fitted clothing was never a part of her closet or dresser drawer. Her eyes were brown, and she barely had any curves to call her on because she inherited an athletic build. Faith became intrigued. She remembered Reina Marie’s words that the book was about Black people, real Black people. She often was called an OREO cookie by other Black students at her school. She learned nothing less than truth from books her entire life, or at least, that is what her teachers told her.

“Maybe I have been doing this Black thing wrong the whole time” Faith thought. She quickly shook the idea from her head, but continued to read the book. As a voracious reader, Faith completed the entire book for the night was finished.

Upon visiting the library again in the morning, Mrs. Coon gave Faith another book, about African Americans, low level, and less reading points than books on her level. Initially, Faith still balked at the content, which was something she shared with Reina Marie…

“I didn’t know you liked the Cool School series, Mr. Fair.”

“Hmm, oh yes. I find it quite intriguing. It is so realistic to the struggles of urban students. I feel it brings me some level of enlightenment about the lives of our urban students who attend on scholarship. I find their experience in these books to be riveting. Funny thing, Mrs. Coon isn’t a big fan of them. I don’t know why. You would think a woman of her background would appreciate such literature. After all, this semester, she has the highest points achieved from students by any librarian in the Great Readers program, most of them scored by you. Which is why I’m so surprised, such a scholarly student such
as yourself getting into this kind of trouble is strange. I guess all urban students have their issues.’’

“Urban? I grew up in the suburbs, a street away from your house.”

“Oh, right. Anyway, call your mother. We’ll have to notify her of this situation. I’m sure this will break her heart. She’s such a lovely woman, so strong without your father at home. I’m sure she did the best she could to raise you, even without a male figure around “

“My father is never missing. My father is a medical doctor with strange hours. My parents are married and have been for over 20 years.”

“Oh, right again. Anyway, call your mother. I’ve decided I won’t expel you. Your grades and testing scores are impeccable. Maybe I should be more understanding to your situation and give you another chance, but your parents must know about the trouble you have made for the school.”

Faith did not understand. This is how the girls in the books acted. They dressed this way, they were assertive with men, and they were always about a hustle. If this is how Black women were in books and on TV, what did she do wrong? Well you know what they say about these streets. Mrs. Coon always suggested I read these books, but she did not like them, either. I guess the girls from the Cool School series were right. Life of the streets is sweet, if you are able. But if you are not strong enough, they will chew you up and spit you out.

Analyzing the Story

The use of counter-storytelling not only gives a voice to those populations that are rarely heard, rather, it reveals the absurdities that take place in the systematic power structure of race
(Solórzano & Yasso, 2002; Decuir & Dixson, 2004; Fasching-Varner, 2009; Delgado & Stefanic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2013). In revealing these absurdities, the normalized behavior and language of a dominant white culture is challenged. In the revelation of normalized behaviors, counterstorytelling creates a discourse about what we may deem to natural and routine in our society, when in fact, the actions only serve to strengthen make routine a matrix of domination (Andersen & Collins, 1998) Counter-storytelling lacks effect if the story told does not address issues centered around the tenants of Critical Race Theory (Faching-Varner, 2009, Ladson-Billings, 2013); however, analyzing and “unpacking” the stories based on tenants of Critical Race Theory is one way to resolve problems of a counter-story (Fasching-Varner, 2009).

In the counterstory, Faith is portrayed as a Black female teenager who lives in the suburbs of her city. Faith is a part of a growing population of teen African Americans who live in the suburbs with their working or middle class parents. Her intersection of being Black, female, and middle class offers her a unique set of experiences based on how society perceives her and how other people’s intersection intersect with hers (Andersen & Collins, 1998; Crenshaw; 1995). Each character’s role in the counterstory is depicted in Table 1.

The reader can see how Faith’s intersections interact with those of her best friend, Reina Marie. Faith and Reina Marie share intersections of being Black, female, and heterosexual, but they are divided by class lines. Reina Marie lives in a less “safe” neighborhood than Faith, and Reina often cites that she is a “real” Black person, closely playing as Faith’s foil based on their differences in personality and class. Reina Marie’s intersection of being of a lower economic class than her friend gives her the idea that she is somehow more authentically Black than Faith, underscoring the idea that Black who are middle class or above are imitating whiteness (Collins, 2009).
TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element from Story</th>
<th>Actual Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faith More</td>
<td>Young, Black female, upper-middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reina Marie</td>
<td>Young, Black female, working class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Hope</td>
<td>Librarian/Educator who encourages multicultural reading based on student needs/wants; explains context of multicultural works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Coon</td>
<td>Librarian/Educator who does not stop to explain/talk context about multicultural literature; essentialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Fair</td>
<td>Educator who is out of touch with multicultural populations/colorblind; essentialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. and Mrs. More</td>
<td>Faith’s upper-middle class parents; represent parents who were less affluent during their youth but educated themselves in order to raise their fiscal potential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cool School Series</td>
<td>Popular urban literature book series; often has lower reading levels in standardized reading programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Readers Program</td>
<td>Standardized reading program that gauges student achievement based on pre-screen reading levels and amount of points achieved from set goals in program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The reader can see how Faith’s intersections interact with those of her best friend, Reina Marie. Faith and Reina Marie share intersections of being Black, female, and heterosexual, but they are divided by class lines. Reina Marie lives in a less “safe” neighborhood than Faith, and Reina often cites that she is a “real” Black person, closely playing as Faith’s foil based on their differences in personality and class. Reina Marie’s intersection of being of a lower economic class than her friend gives her the idea that she is somehow more authentically Black than Faith, underscoring the idea that Black who are middle class or above are imitating whiteness (Collins, 2009).

Mrs. Coon, who also happens to be an African American, is the librarian who pushes Faith to only read street literature as Mrs. Coon assumes a Black teen, like Faith, would enjoy the books from the Cool School series. Mrs. Coon never takes the time to ask Faith about her interests and,
instead, assumes that Faith must like books like the Cool School series because she is Black. Even when Faith voices her initial dislike of reading a book that is below her reading level, Mrs. Coon is unable to see past her preconceived notions of Faith’s race and gender, causing Mrs. Coon to practice essentialism. Since race is a normalized, salient function of society, it is difficult for Faith to prove to Reina Marie that Mrs. Coon’s actions are racially motivated. Certain sets of ideas and norms follow Black females because race is socialized ideas (Ladson-Billings, 2013), and Mrs. Coon, like Mr. Fair and Reina Marie, see them as the normal.

Mrs. Hope is a character similar to Faith, who happily creates a discourse about the books Faith reads, making her a teacher who promotes teaching multicultural literature in a positive manner, unlike her coworker. Since there should be some discourse around multicultural literature (Delpit, 2012), Mrs. Hope serves as the person who thinks beyond the norms of race, yet is not colorblind to Faith.

Mr. Fair is the quintessential educator who deems himself as colorblind, yet, reveals his biases and racist notions in his conversation with Faith. For instance, he is unaware that Faith is not a child from an urban background; she actually lives down the street from his home in the suburbs. Mr. Fair practices essentialism and judges Faith based on her color. He then exhibits interest convergence by letting Faith know that under normal circumstance, he would expel her from the school, but because her grades and testing scores are good, he is willing to keep her as a student. The disciplinary action Mr. Fair enacts has nothing to do with Faith’s behavioral records, but what she can offer the school in her academic achievements.

Faith shows her ignorance of what she reads in street literature based on the fact that she too practices essentialism (after a little convincing) and deems that she is not a “true” Black person.
Instead, she changes her whole perception and personality based on what she reads in street literature because she believes that this is how “real” Black people behave. This also highlights a lack of explanation and discourse about the books that Faith reads, which causes her to cement and create ideas of Black people, like Dressel’s (2005) and Bolgatz’s (2005) students did about cultures that were not of white people. Multicultural stories of all kinds should be told, but it is important to offer a context in which these stories take place, and no one offers Faith this context for the books she read, except for Miss Hope. Mrs. Coon benefits from the amount of books that Faith reads because of her school teacher ratings being based on the amount of points students read during the school year, yet she never talks to Faith about anything in the books.

Is There A Change Coming?

A positive, non-nihilist answer to this question says, “Yes.” There is a chance that African American young adult literature will hold more opportunity for writers to express multiple formats of storylines for readers of all backgrounds and cultures to enjoy. As expressed by the participants in this study and me, there is a vibe that African American young adult literature is on the rise and can have great influence, but it seems to be stuck in a monolithic storyline that revolves around street literature. This monolithic view of Black cultures causes a slight disconnect between the readers, which can lead to greater problems in creating and sustaining certain images about Black people. For instance, Paige said she wanted to learn about the lives of those in street literature, so she sought out street literature to get a greater understanding of those who live in “the hood”. Paige’s intention for reading urban literature was honorable, so in this lens, it is important that the depictions of those who live in urban environments are authentic and accurate to the best of the abilities of the author. Paige mentioned that she wished the young ladies in the urban books that she read were not as weak as they were depicted, that they could have shown greater strength in the
facing of adversity. Perhaps this is not really how the story should have been depicted and Paige projected her own views into the authenticity of the storyline; there is a chance that Paige was completely right. Rosenblatt (1978) said that the true meaning of the text is created within the confines of a transaction that happens when the reader’s past perceptions of the text meets the written word and intention of the author, so in Paige’s eyes, her ideas are completely founded and correct. The females in the book were depicted as weak or hopeless based on her idea of what a strong woman is. It may be that the author wanted to convey this message as well.

Lucy and Ami agreed with Paige that, when speaking about fiction, the characters in African American literature could show greater strength. Both sisters agreed that there is potential in African American young adult literature for fictional accounts to show a story of overcoming adversity, but it was not always a plotline they have seen or recognized. Ami and Lucy’s greatest concern with most of African American literature, whether made for adults or young adults, was that there was an over-sexualization of the female characters, either in their actions or that they have multiple children. The images of the welfare mother, the matriarch, and the jezebel are apparent to Lucy, Ami, and Paige, and they all agree that these images are not representative of the Black female experience. Lucy and Ami debated that these images were completely racist, as other cultures were not pegged to be “baby mamas” and were not seen to have inordinate amounts of children. These older participants believed that literature for young adult African Americans should show a more positive message of African Americans who persevere through difficulties rather than crumble at adversity. They mentioned books that do just this, that show Black people of all classes being successful and moving beyond the lives into which they were born, moving beyond poverty, moving beyond the idea of the “independent” woman, moving beyond the sexual images of hips, luscious lips, and breasts. They concluded that they were not like that latter image, and there are
other females like them. There are other females like them; their stories just have not been told because such is not the dominant narrative for African American females

**Implications for Educators and Librarians**

Educators have much work to be done, although traditionally they are not the ones writing, creating, or publishing the books. Educators must recognize the power they have to change the publishing market, but more importantly, to change students’ perceptions during their schooling. It is optimistic to say that a singular teacher or even a network of teachers can change the preconceived notions that students acquire about non-dominant races and cultures, but history has taught us that change has rarely taken place overnight. Critical Race theorists hold that there is no way that the structure of racism will never completely change (Bell, 1995b). To figuratively rattle the cages of the systemic structure of racism, discourse about this change must take place. The classroom is the first and the most influential place that any discourse of multicultural populations can take place. Like all multicultural literature, African American young adult literature requires a context for students to have an optimal understanding of the material in the book (Dressel, 2005).

Educators must demand that publishers create more books with positive primary Black characters. According to the participants, there are representations of Black teens, and, while street literature may be the more dominant narrative, there are books for African Americans. The participants’ inability to cite African American young adult literature indicates the lack of African American literature, street literature and otherwise. Some were able to identify specific books and others were able to identify a specific series, but even those books were the minority in the young adult publishing industry. Unless publishers see a purpose in publishing books with multifaceted storylines for African American populations, such books will not be accepted by editors and printed
by presses. Harris (1997) wrote that the responsibility is not solely the public’s but for the consumer to demand a certain type of books be published.

To create the demand for the books, educators and librarians must foster a population of readers for the books. Urban book series are successful because there is a high demand for them. The voices and the buying power of educators, librarians, and curriculum planners can alter the books made for schools, the books that are published, and those that are shelved in school libraries. One way to accomplish this is buying books from the authors and publishing companies that offer a multifaceted view of Black people’s lives. Independent publishers provide accessibility for teachers and librarians to such literature. Authors are able to publish their books independently online to booksellers, therefore allowing greater flexibility and control over a storyline without an editor’s interference.

**Future Studies from Findings**

Delpit (2012) mentioned a case in which a class read and discussed an African American novel and she commented on the amount of discourse created among the students. Future studies stemming from this dissertation would involve the usage of multicultural novels, be they from the street literature or not, which would show the type of discourse that is possible when students read African American literature. The novels can be classics from a previous generation, but students would benefit most by finding a current novel that could redesign with the students. The teacher stimulates discussion among the students through a creative lesson about the cultural norms explored in the text, the students’ views of the text’s authenticity, how the text might be viewed by those outside of the culture of the book, and how the text is relatable to cultures not described in the text. Rather than the teacher being the expert about the text, Rosenblatt (1978) should be invoked to allow the students to interpret the text based on their prior experiences. Students should be
allowed to share their interpretations with their classmates, and there should then be more class
discussion about each student’s point of view and how each arrived at this point of view.
Theoretically, students would encounter their own biases based on race, gender, and class, as well
as discus how they formulated their views. Students would be expected to remain respectful of
classmates’ viewpoints. This study could be replicated with different populations, and the results
could be compared based on this control.

It is equally if not more important that students from the dominant culture, white students,
are exposed to literature that does not feature only them as the main characters. When exposed to
stories about cultures outside of their own that deal with issues of class, race and gender that may
not adhere to their own societal structure, white students may need guidance in seeing how their
views are formulated; through this, cultural norms can be challenged and made apparent to all races,
in turn, challenging the mindset of students and their thought on race, class, gender, and sexuality.
Students can, in turn, challenge the dominant narrative and how it influences their lives. The story
of white children seeing themselves as the “kingfish” in the world with stories only showing their
point of view can be challenged (Larrick, 1965). Context given to students on topics outside of
white culture can offer a better understanding of non-white cultures (Dressel, 2005). The results of
this dissertation support a cultural revamp of Dressel’s (2005) study in which the teacher is
educated about the social and political aspects of multicultural populations. A list of books could be
compiled for students to read and discussed in class, and the teacher would be the facilitator of
knowledge, rather than the expert. Assessment would then be student driven.

The lasting impact of a study involving the perceptions of Black female characters in all
young adult literature could hone in on the perceptions of Black female characters in African
American young adult literature. The participants touched briefly on this topic, however did not
focus on it or reveal a need for this type of study. The results did show that the participants had ideas of how Black women are portrayed in young adult literature, but not regarding a specific book; their responses indicated a need to investigate this group through the lens of Black Feminist thought. Collins (2000) wrote that Black females are all intellectuals and experts on the Black female narrative, so it is logical that Black females critique the power structures and images of Black female in young adult literature through a critical lens. Participants could turn their own narratives into discourse, which could in turn could refute the images that the dominant culture holds about Black females and Black female life. All but one of the participants in the study took issue with the representation of Black females in literature and young adult literature. Sarai did not critique literature for stereotypical representations of women but did mention that the Black women in books are like “us” [Black females] because we all have to do something for our man [black men] for him to protect us. This viewpoint portrays Blacks as favoring a patriarchal society (hooks, 1994; Collins, 2000), and, thus, the literature that Sarai cited supports operating within a patriarchal society. It is only through Black female narratives where there is a need for patriarchal family dynamics that these ideas can be rethought and rewritten. The results of this dissertation indicate that there needs to be more discourse about the Black female narrative and how it operates within American society and, historically, white-centered epistemological thought. Gathering a group of Black females, with different intersection combinations that serve to interact with each other’s intersections, would be beneficial as these females could discuss the affect that their intersections have had on their perceptions of the world around them, and as they record their versions of the Black female narrative. An important charge of Black feminist thought is to keep social activism for Black females, which means maintaining a fight for socialized view of Black females (Collins, 2000).
Limitations

The main limitation of this study was time. Ideally, I would have liked to conduct books groups or clubs with the participants, so that the issue of representation could have been discussed in depth from the students’ perspective. I would have chosen books based on the student’s ethnic/racial background and the meetings would have operated as a focus group, allowing the students to express their views, while engaging the views of others from their racial background on the given topic.

Phenomenological studies encourage repeated interviews with participants to see meaning change over time (Daly, 2007), however, time limited the tools used in this study. Students had to attend class, and teachers opted to control the time that students were interviewed or participated in focus groups based on assignments given in class that day. Additionally, students may not have answered questions with adequate responses, so data that was collected created a scarcity in data and made it difficult to create meaning from their responses. Students may have also struggled to answer the given interview questions, finding different meaning in what was being asked, due to previous experiences (Rosenblatt, 1978).

My practical concern before conducting the study was how much time participants were able to offer to be in the study. I pre-screened before the study; the majority of adult participants had jobs that affected their time and availability. Interviews were conducted before the beginning of the college semester, so the students’ workloads or academic work requirements did not affect the time allotted for students’ participation in the study.
References


McNair, J. (2013). 'I never knew there were so many books about us' parents and children reading and responding to African American children's literature together. *Children's Literature In Education, 44*(3), 191-207.


APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

ACTION ON EXEMPTION APPROVAL REQUEST

TO: Deleon Wilson
Curriculum and Instruction

FROM: Dennis Landin
Chair, Institutional Review Board

DATE: July 11, 2014

RE: IRB# E8859

TITLE: Interpreting Blackness: A Phenomenological Case Study of Representation in African American Young Adult Literature


Review Date: 7/10/2014

Approved X Disapproved

Approval Date: 7/10/2014 Approval Expiration Date: 7/9/2017

Exemption Category/Paragraph: 1

Signed Consent Waived?: No

Re-review frequency: (three years unless otherwise stated)

LSU Proposal Number (if applicable): __________

Protocol Matches Scope of Work in Grant proposal: (if applicable) __________

By: Dennis Landin, Chair

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING – Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU’s Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects*
2. Prior approval of any new studies, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of whether the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
8. SPECIAL NOTE: All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU’s Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at http://www.lsu.edu/irb
APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

Parental and Participant Consent Form

Project Title: Interpreting Blackness: A Phenomenological Case Study of Representation in African American Young Adult Literature

Performance Site: Current students: At school site, Children’s Charter; for non-minors, East Baton Rouge Parish Library (specific library site to be determined by participants) or via phone conversation

Investigators: The following investigator is available for questions, M-F, 7:00 a.m.-2:30 p.m.
Deleon M. Wilson
McKinley High School Library
(225)344-7696

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study if the gauge what is being represented in African American young adult literature and how this representation affects student

Inclusion Criteria: Young adults, African American, females

Exclusion Criteria: Non- African American females, anyone outside of prescribed age range

Description of the Study: Students will be interviewed with a series of questions asking about personal reading habits, exposure to African American literature, and prescribed meaning gathered from African American literary works. Based on the responses given, students will be given follow-up questions on the same topic, aiming to gather a greater understand of how African American may affect personal identity and learning of students.

Benefits: Teachers, curriculum planners, and librarians will have a greater insight as to the popularity and usefulness of African American literature. Teachers, curriculum planners, and librarians could use the information from the study to aid in material selection and curriculum planning for reading materials in local schools. Students will also gain a greater self-awareness of their stance on issues revolving representation of race in literature.

Risks: There are no known risks.

Right to Refuse: Participation is not required, and if a subject wants to withdraw from the study, they may at any time. Students less than 18 years of age must have parental permission.

Privacy: Student privacy will be protected by the usage of pseudonyms in order not to reveal students names. Student records may be viewed by the researchers of this project. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.
I certify that I am willing to participate in the following study about African American Literature. All aspects of the study have been discussed with me in length, and if choose to exit the study at any time, I am within my rights to do.

Participant Signature
(Parent Signature if participant is under 18 years of age)
___________________________________________            ___________________

This indicates to me that the participant or parents of the participant cannot read. I certify that I have read this consent form in fullness to the participant or parent. My signature confirms that I have been allowed to read this form to the participant or parent of the participant.
Signature of Reader
____________________________________________            ________________
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL QUESTIONS

Interview Protocol

1. Were you exposed to reading at a young age?
2. How were you exposed to reading? Give me a brief timeline.
3. How often do you read? Include school and your free time.
4. Are you able to read in your free time?
5. Does anything affect how often you are able to read in your free time?
6. What is your definition of African American young adult literature?

The next few questions are going to involve what your idea of African American literature/young adult literature is.

7. Have you read African American books, as made by your definition of African American young adult literature?
8. What African American books can you remember reading throughout your life? This includes your free time and home life?
9. What African American stories can you name that you read in school from middle school to present time?
10. What are the names of any young adult literature (books made for ages 11-24) that have African American primary characters in them? Name as many as you can.
11. How are young adult books about African Americans realistic (or not realistic) to the Black experience?
12. If you had the ability to take books about African Americans young adults from the library or the store and read them in class (not Accelerated Reader) would you have the class read the books? In other words, should your teachers use these books as novels in class?
13. What do you think other Black young adults learn from African American literature?
14. What do you think those from outside of your culture would learn about Black culture if they read current young adult African American books?
15. How are Black females portrayed in young adult literature? In African American young adult literature?

If there was any mention of stereotypes at any point in the interview:

1. What stereotypes you see in the literature?
2. Are these stereotypes negative or positive?
3. If the stereotypes are problematic, why?
VITA

Deleon Miriam Wilson was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 1989. She is a graduate of Baton Rouge Magnet High school in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. In high school, Deleon always was a voracious reader, though it was a challenge to have her read content she deemed to be uninteresting. She was frequently caught not paying attention to her schoolwork because of reading books she purchased during the previous weekend. Deleon’s love of books and reading encouraged her to pursue her lifelong dream of becoming a secondary school English teacher as a way to share her love of reading with other students who may struggle in creating a love of literature. Deleon graduated from Louisiana State University with a Bachelor of Arts in English with a concentration in Secondary Education in 2010.

Not ready to end her higher education learning experience, Deleon enrolled in Louisiana State University’s Educational Technology and Leadership Master’s program and graduated in 2011. Still not ready to stop her learning endeavors, Deleon remained in graduate school but gained her first job as a high school English teacher in Baton Rouge. While at this job, Deleon was encouraged by her school’s librarian to pursue her love of books by becoming a certified school librarian. Deleon happily accepted the challenge and enrolled in Louisiana State University’s Masters of Library and Information Sciences program. During this time, Deleon moved among schools as an English teacher, but, instead, was hired as the school’s librarian. While Deleon did not complete her MLIS, she decided to become a student in the Department of Educational, Theory and Policy to pursue her education as a Specialist in Reading. Deleon completed the necessary coursework to become a certified school librarian in the state of Louisiana in 2013, and continued her pursuit of her Education Specialist, which she also completed in 2013.
As a school librarian, Deleon formulated an idea for a topic of study and decided to pursue a doctorate of philosophy in the Department of Educational Theory, Policy and Practice in Curriculum Theory in 2013. Deleon’s interaction with Black students in urban neighborhoods’ school libraries often revolved around conversations about students’ interest in African American young adult literature and young adult literature in general. These conversations lead to a topic of studying what students gained from reading African American young adult literature, while questioning how students thought that they were represented in African American young adult literature. Deleon moved to her current place of employment at a local historically Black school in Baton Rouge, where her research interest continues to flourish as she promotes the usage of African American young adult literature within classrooms in her school. She hopes to expand the usage of African American young adult literature in secondary classrooms on a parish level.

Deleon will be conferred the doctorate of philosophy at 2014 Fall Commencement exercises.