Where are the Cosbys: an African American literacy study examining African American recognition and representation in contemporary young adult literature

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WHERE ARE THE COSBYS: AN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERACY STUDY
EXAMINING AFRICAN AMERICAN RECOGNITION AND REPRESENTATION IN
CONTEMPORARY YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

A Thesis

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
Master of Education

in

The Department of Educational Theory, Policy, and Practice

by
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M.A., Southern University, 2010
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ABSTRACT

The African American literacy crisis has been well documented. Many researchers have sought to find a remedy for the disparity in literacy rates between African American readers and white Americans. This study explores the potential role of young adult literature (YAL) in this crisis. More specifically, this study examines the recognition that African American works receive in contemporary YAL. This study also investigates the African American experiences represented in those works receiving national recognition. A list of fifty-one books was compiled from the winners (2000-present) of national awards such as Michael L. Printz award and the Coretta Scott King Book Award. This list was subsequently categorized based on such characteristics as genre and characters represented. These works were then closely scrutinized to determine the scope of the African American characters represented in these award winning novels. After completing a close examination of these works it became evident that very few African American works have received national recognition. Teachers and parents alike look to these lists for classroom worthy texts. If very few African American works receive these prestigious recognitions then it a reasonable assertion that very few African American works are being taught in the classroom. Although the current research calls for cultural relevance as a means of combating the literacy deficit for African Americans, cultural relevance is difficult to achieve because of the lack of African American YAL. Of those works recognized, the African American experiences represented in these works were overwhelmingly urban in nature. This study is a part of a growing body of research on African American literacy and YAL.
THE STATE OF CONTEMPORARY YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

Young Adult literature, once the redheaded stepchild of literature has now been likened to a “nephew you haven’t seen in years: transformed from a little darling into a hulking almost-grownup who is maybe even a little scary” (Corbett, 2011, para. 1). After years of debate as to the worthiness of its existence, young adult literature has made its presence felt in the publishing word and in pop-culture as a whole. Young Adult literature has found a comfortable seat in the once unoccupied middle place between the only two categories that existed for years, children and adult.

Long gone are the days of disparaging the category as “kiddie lit” or “chick lit” for teens. Critics no longer argue that Young Adult Literature is “not serious enough for use in schools” nor is it accused of being “written by less serious or amateur writers” (Stephens, 2007, p. 34). As Young Adult literature gained traction, arguments as to what this class of literature should be called have ceased. In its evolution, many terms have unsuccessfully auditioned for permanence. Such terms as adolescent, juvenile, and teenager have all at some time been applied to this seemingly enigmatic facet of literature. Thankfully, the literature gods decided omnisciently upon the term Young Adult literature, affectionately nicknamed YA literature (YAL).

Consequently, many textbooks such as Young adult Literature in the Classroom: Reading It, Teaching It, Loving It (Elliot & Dupuis, 2002), Young Adult Literature: Exploration, Evaluation and Appreciation (Bucher & Hinton-Johnson, 2009), and Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism (Cart, 2010) all use the term Young Adult Literature.

Arguments about names aside, for many, the issue of defining YA literature is one of lingering enigma. Perhaps this is because the “study of young adult literature as both an art form and teaching tool is still in its infancy” (Hayn, Kaplan, & Nolen, 2011, p. 176). However,
scholars have valiantly attempted to answer the question, “what is YA literature?” They have done so with varying degrees of complexity. One straightforward definition of YAL is that it is “literature written for readers whose reading interests and skills are not yet mature but who are themselves maturing” (Elliott & Dupuis, 2002, p. 3). Chris Crowe (1998) argues more ambiguously that YAL is literature “that has the added advantage of being more relevant to the lives of teenagers and is, therefore, more likely to overcome the resistance to school books” (p. 122). Another contention is that YAL is “intended for readers between the ages of 12 and 20, and offers a unique window on societal conflicts and dilemmas” (Bean & Moni, 2003, p. 638). Similarly, Apseloff asserts, YAL (1987) “has had a developing openness in dealing with a wide variety of new subjects and a growing sense of the maturity of the audience” (p. 397).

After taking just a few of the innumerable scholarly definitions of YAL into consideration, my own definition of YAL emerged. For the purpose of this study, YAL is defined as literature written expressly to address the concerns of contemporary youth. It is literature successfully marketed to youth primarily through its tales of the adolescent and emerging adult protagonist. Philosophically, YAL exists in the chasm between children’s and adult literature. It is a living genre that evolves and expands to match the constant metamorphoses of the youth of our society.

YA literature, for many English teachers, began simply as a list of required adult classics (Crowe, 1998) with school libraries touting shelves stocked full of canonical texts such as Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* and Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Perhaps, these classics could possibly be of interest to the average teenager but unlike contemporary YA literature, these books were not specifically written for the young adult nor were they written with intentions of targeting the issues specific to the young adult.
With the emergence of YA literature, fear that the canon would somehow be pedagogically devalued increased. For many proponents of YA literature, this fear is misplaced. Crowe argues, “YAL isn’t meant to water down the core of literary study in secondary schools” (1998, p.121). Books such as Herz and Gallo’s *From Hinton to Hamlet* (2005) propose that YA literature serves as an amazing bridge to the canon. To address this and many other pedagogical concerns, educational publishers have begun marketing newer course textbooks that offer future English teachers insight into the best practices of teaching YA literature (Cappella, 2010).

This teen market that, for many, was created in 1967 with the publishing of *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton, has become a lucrative business and market for which publishing houses have invested heavily in marketing and advertising. The Association of American Publishers reported to *Publisher’s Weekly* that sales in children’s literature and YA literature have soared exponentially in the first half of 2012. Twenty-one publishers reported that overall sales from January to June are up 40.7% with the largest growth shown in E-book sales. E-book sales grew 251% from $46.1 million to $146.4 million (“Children’s Sales Soar in the First Half of 2012 Says AAP,” 2012).

There are many factors in recent years that have lead to said growth in sales and popularity. One such factor is the remarkable success of novels such as J.K. Rowling’s (1998) *Harry Potter* Series, Stephanie Meyer’s (2005) *Twilight*, and Suzanne Collin’s *Hunger Games* (2008) trilogy. The success of these novels and others like it “reflects an engagement with adolescent readers that is quite profitable” (Hayn, Kaplan, & Nolen, 2011, p. 176). It has become clear that students read outside of the classroom and to an astounding degree.

These novels have seemingly achieved the “mystically vast accomplishment of convincing huge numbers of teens and adults that reading children’s books is fun” (Campbell,
Many questions, however, still remain. What is the composition of this YAL readership? Does this body of literature reflect the experiences of its readers or does it represent only a narrow set of experiences that are limited to white, female, and middle-class readers? What are the implications of these limitations? These are questions worth considering with answers that may possibly skew some commonly held beliefs about the recent success of YAL.

Prior to 2000 most bookstores housed their YA literature in the children’s section. Booksellers recognized that conscientious teens did not want the embarrassment of being seen in the children’s section. Because they no longer wanted to “lose the upper half of its audience, 15-19 year olds, to Danielle Steel and Stephen King” (Corbett, 2011, para. 7), most major books chains moved their YA literature out of the children’s section thus solidifying it as a genre. Consequently, YA sales increased.

There are a few other notable factors that have contributed to the recent success of YA literature. Many famous authors like James Patterson, Kaithy Reights, and Joyce Carol Oates have tried their hand with varying degrees of success to join the ranks of other writers of YA literature. Perhaps bestselling authors and critically acclaimed authors alike have turned to YAL because “the market opportunities are too big to ignore” (Bickmore, 2012, p. 187). Although definitive reasons are unclear, this “invasion” (Campbell, 2006, p. 64) has brought with it many adults fans that have elected to support their favorite authors despite the sojourn to another facet of literature. An increased adult readership has helped fortify the recent success. Many adult readers enjoy YAL because of the “emotional immediacy” offered (Benedetti, 2011, p. 41). Most YA novels introduce the protagonists, conflict, and basis for the plot within the first 15 pages, which is something that can happen much later in the average adult novel (Benedetti, 2011).
Another interesting factor is publishers’ recent decision to pay much closer attention to the packaging of YA literature. According to Yampbell (2005), “The packaging of the text, previously neglected by publishers of teen literature, currently is being carefully manipulated and altered as publishers and marketing experts recognize the necessity of visual appeal to succeed within the difficult arena of the teenage consumers” (p. 348). Although to many an insignificant factor, studies have consistently shown that packaging including book size, spine, and book jackets is an important element that impacts the initial interest garnered by a novel to both children and adults alike.

YA literature has reaped the benefits of the national attention given to the YA literature through its most prestigious awards. The literary world waits and watches as these awards are given annually to the supposed best of the best. The American Library Association is responsible for three of the most prestigious awards granted to writers of children’s or young adult fiction. One of the newest of these awards is the Michael L. Printz Award, which originated in 2000. Some have likened it to the “YA Newbery” (Campbell, 2006, p. 63). A committee of nine, of whom only four are elected, chooses the “best” young adult book of the year. Each committee member can make an unlimited number of nominations. Field nominations are also accepted but must be seconded by a committee member. The committee also has the option of naming as many as four Honor Books. The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) states that “best” is “defined solely in terms of literary merit” (2012). According to YALSA, “POPULARITY is not the criterion for this award, nor is MESSAGE” (2012, emphasis in original).

Secondly, the Newbery Medal Honor, in its eightieth year of existence, is another prominent award, although its focus is children’s literature. This award has the distinction of being the first children’s book award in the world (Association for Library Service to Children
A fifteen-member committee awards the medal “annually to the author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children published by an American publisher in the United States in English during the preceding year” (ALSC, 2012). To avoid any presumable ambiguity, the official Newbery Terms and Criteria outline definitions of several parts of the aforementioned classification of a medal worthy book. For example, “distinguished” is defined as being “marked by eminence and distinction and excellence in quality” (ALSC, 2012). Unlike the Michael L. Printz award, authors can submit copies of their work for consideration. The works must, of course, meet all requirements as outlined by the Newbery terms and criteria.

Finally, in 1970, the ALA gave its first Coretta Scott King Award to “authors and illustrators of books for children and young adults that demonstrate an appreciation of African American culture and universal human values” (ALA, 2012). This focus on African American culture is one criterion that separates this award from the two previously mentioned awards. Author submissions are accepted for consideration and from eligible submissions the Coretta Scott King Book Awards Committee selects winners and honorees. Any member of the Ethnic & Multicultural Information Exchange Round Table (EMIERT) of the ALA can join the committee (ALA, 2012).

The National Book Foundation is responsible for another prestigious award, The National Book Award. In 1950, the year of its creation, the award was designed for outstanding American literature. It wasn’t until 1996 that The National Book Award issued its first award for “Young People’s Literature.” Each year, the National Book Foundation selects a total of twenty judges, including five in each of the four Award categories: Fiction, Nonfiction, Poetry, and Young People’s Literature: “Judges are published writers who are known to be doing great work in their genre or field, and in some cases, are past NBA Finalists or Winners” (National Book
These twenty judges determine the winners and honorees for a given year. Authors may not submit their own work. Eligible works must be submitted directly by publishers (National Book Foundation, 2012).

Other less notable but equally influential recognitions come from public media, including lists published by scholars in practitioner journals, newspaper editorials, best-sellers lists, such as the New York Times and the occasional feature focusing on the genre. For example, National Public Radio’s “Best 100 Teen Novels” list, which was released on August 7th, and the NCTE English Journal’s yearly “Honor List.” These two lists and similar other reviews are especially important because publishers and teachers alike depend on both formal and informal reviews to make decisions as to what to teach and what to market (Carter, 1997). Even without the prestige of the aforementioned national awards, these lists are influential and oftentimes inform the pedagogy of the classroom teacher trying to vicariously determine the what’s hot and what’s not in YAL as well as parents looking to make worthwhile purchases for their children.

Despite the recent success and growth of YA “there has been very little examination of the body of literature published for today’s teen” (Koss & Teale, 2009, p.563). Only a fraction of that limited research has been dedicated to an examination of its effects on and representation of African Americans. However, a great deal of research has been dedicated to the literacy needs of African American children (Rawson & Hughes-Hassell, 2012; Tatum & Muhammad, 2012; Bell & Clark, 1998; Tatum, 2000). Much of the research is concerned with pedagogy and educational reforms necessary to improve fledging African American literacy rates but very few actually examine the body of African American YAL.
A great deal of research has been dedicated to eradicating the African American literacy crisis. According to the 2009 NAEP data, only 14% of African American 8th graders reached or exceeded proficiency on national reading tests (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Even more alarming, the *National Summary: Diplomas Counts* reported that only fewer than half of African American males are becoming high school graduates (as cited in Boone, Rawson, & Vance, 2010, p. 34). In recent years, a correlation between these staggering literacy deficits and poverty and incarceration rates has surfaced (Rawson & Hughes-Hasell, 2012).

In exploring possible solutions to this problem, it is important to consider the factors that affect the literacy skills of African American students. One such area of concern is the socioeconomic factors that precipitate the identities of many African American students. Tatum and Muhammad (2012) argue, “Literacy is more a product of a child’s home environment and access to economic, human, and community resources” (p. 442). The interconnectedness of socioeconomic status and literacy rates has been consistently shown (Noble, Farah, & McCandliss, 2006). Language deficiencies have also been linked to low SES. As a result many African American students begin their schooling on “an unequal academic playing field” (Tatum & Muhammad, 2012, p.442) and because of this language differential, struggle profoundly for the entirety of their matriculation.

The current school environment is another factor of necessary consideration as it pertains to African American literacy. Smith (2002) suggests that one negative aspect of the current school environment is its primary attention to verbal-linguistic intelligence when African American students possess other intelligences. Early cognitive studies suggest two styles of information processing: the analytical style and the relational style. Contemporary curriculum is
based on the analytical style. According to Hilliard (1976), this is problematic in that African American students are typically relational thinkers having short attention and concentration spans while developing relationships that tend to be functional and inferential (as cited in Smith, 2002). It is difficult for any student to learn when he or she does not possess the targeted learning style and his or her cognitive processing is different than that of his or her counterparts.

Another problem affecting African American literacy is the lowering of standards in the current educational model. The lowering of standards hampers the achievement of African American students. In recent years, education has seen a progressive movement towards more standardized testing and the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. These changes, in theory, are designed to improve achievement, however, “the gap between a comprehensive approach to literacy teaching and the widespread practice of teachers of African American adolescent students with poor reading skills is widening because meeting minimum standards is being emphasized” (Tatum, 2000, p.52). The pressure to meet minimum standards has lead many teachers away from pedagogy that fosters literary appreciation but instead toward a focus on meeting minimum standards. Perhaps the focus on minimum standards speak to a greater, less spoken about belief inherent in the American subconscious, that the black child is innately less capable than their white counterparts (Delpit, 2012).

Although standards are a necessary part of the educational process because of the need to create benchmarks for students and teachers, “depending on how standards are shaped and used, either they could support more ambitious teaching and greater levels of success for all students or they could serve to create higher rates of failure for those who are already least well-served by the education system” (Darling-Hammond & Faulk 1997, p.191). The latter of the two assertions has become a painful reality of African American achievement. The more failure a
student experiences the greater the possibility of his already low performance plunging to new
lows (Smith, 2002).

As standards and expectations decline the same is true of performance. Students are
being labeled because of their standardized tests scores and oftentimes placed in low level
reading tracks in accordance with the labeling they receive. Hayes, Wolfer, and Wolfe (1993)
assert, “long-term exposure to simpler texts leads to a cumulating deficit on knowledge, lowering
reading comprehension and verbal achievement” (as cited in Tatum & Muhammad, 2012, p. 447).
All too often standardized test scores are used to inform policy and pedagogy. Unfortunately, in
many instances, these decisions are to the detriment of the African American student. Students
in low reading tracks often struggle to improve because they are rarely asked to read literature
and oftentimes receive very little literacy instruction (Tatum, 2000). It is almost oxymoronic to
expect students to improve their reading skills while requiring them to do very little reading.

What changes can be made to combat these negative factors affecting African American
success and literacy? Despite the challenge of teaching in a country whose cultural framework
from its creation has “dictated that black is bad and less than and in all arenas white is good”
(Delpit, 2012, p. xix), the research is consistent in its insistence that cultural relevance is the
most powerful countermeasure in this war against African American literacy deficiency. Said
research shows that in addressing the needs of African American students the most effective
approach is a culturally relevant one (Tatum, 2000).

Ladson-Billings (1995) insists that in order to implement a culturally relevant pedagogy a
student’s culture should be made a vehicle for learning because students need help developing a
broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms values,
mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequalities. Cultural relevance fosters a
healthy sense of confidence and identity. Consequently, students are more likely to become
critical thinkers, unafraid to question the world around them. How can a teacher create a culturally relevant curriculums?

One important facet of employing a culturally relevant approach is the use of culturally relevant literature. Teachers can achieve this by centering meaningful and relevant texts at the heart of pedagogy (Tatum, 2009). Culturally relevant literature reflects the student’s personal experiences through the use of characters that authentically represent the lives, families, friends, and peers of those reading the literature (Rawson & Hughes-Hassell, 2012).

Culturally relevant literature assists African American students in “substantiating their existence” (Tatum, 2000, p. 60). Research shows that when reading literature in which students see themselves and their lives represented, students displayed greater levels of reading comprehension. It is therefore important to use texts that speak to the students’ personal experiences as, “culturally sensitive reading material enhances information processing in African American children” (Bell & Clark, 1998, p.473).

Teachers must search for the culturally relevant literature to share with their students. Teachers may, however, find this difficult because of the limited number of African American characters currently represented in YAL. Gangi (2008) called this lack of African American representation an “unbearable whiteness” in literacy instruction. Similarly, Bickmore (2012) asserts, “Most English Language Arts (ELA) classes continue to teach books primarily written by dead white males” (p. 186). It’s safe to assume that these “dead white males” were not telling stories about the African American experience.

Having so few African American characters present in YAL makes it difficult for teachers to employ a culturally relevant approach.

Since children must make connections to what they read in order to become proficient readers, white children whose images are depicted in books can make more
text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections than can children of color (Gangi, 2008, p. 30).

If the theory of cultural relevance is correct then there must be an evaluation of YAL. What kinds of books are African American students being exposed to in the contemporary English classroom? Do these works assist teachers in creating a culturally relevant pedagogy?
WHAT IS THE ROLE OF YAL IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERACY?

This question has remained largely unexplored. It is, therefore, important to examine the role of YA literature in this vital area of African American concern. Such an examination would assist in answering many unanswered questions as it relates to African Americans, including the following:

• How are African Americans represented in YA literature?
• What types of African American experiences are currently portrayed in YA literature?
• Is there a link between African American representation in YAL and African American literacy rates?

In hopes of gaining insight into African American literacy, it is important to look closely at YA literature and its treatment of African American texts. It is equally as important to examine how works of YA African American fiction holistically personify the African American experience. To find answers to these questions I performed a systematic investigation of characteristics of several African American YA texts. Only texts published from 2000-present were selected because of the recent legitimacy of YAL. The list of novels was comprised from the following sources:

• Micheal L. Printz winners and Honor Books
• Newbery Medal winners and Honor Books
• Coretta Scott King Book Award winners and Honor Books
• National Book Award winners and Honor Books
• NPR’s “100 Best Teen Novels List”
• NCTE’s *English Journal* 2011 “Honor List”
PROCEDURES

The focal point of this study was to examine African American representation in YA literature by both the writers and the larger YA community. It was firstly important to develop a methodology for determining which books to examine. Because an important facet of this study relates to the recognition given to African American YA literature, it became clear that the novels examined should be those novels that have garnered national attention. Therefore, the list of books was compiled from African American winners and honorees of the Michael Printz Award, Newberry Honor Medal, National Book Awards and the Coretta Scott King Award. Books were also compiled that received recognition from the NPR’s “Best 100 Teen Books” and NCTE English Journal’s yearly “Honor List.” This methodology served a two-fold purpose.

After compiling the list of books, I simultaneously examined the extent to which African American YA literature has been recognized and honored for its value and contribution to literary world. I was also able to scrutinize the scope and diversity of the African American characters and experiences portrayed in these books.

After compiling the list of award winning books (See Appendix A), those works were categorized according to genre. The genres represented were fiction, historical fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, and verse novel. After categorizing these fifty books by genre, I began a close look at the representation of African American life and experience. I started with an examination of the characters of the fifteen realistic fiction novels and the eight verse novels. Because these twenty-two works are the focal point, I did not find the characters and setting of the other genres pertinent to this study and those specifics were, therefore, excluded from Appendix A.

After being classified by genre, I then examined each novel’s characters, experiences, themes, and form to categorize and identify particular aspects of diversity. Therefore, these
works were then broken down into subcategories. In determining these subcategories, I examined form, content, themes, and the characteristics of the protagonists.

I made comparisons of these works based on similarities and differences of these subcategories. I only chose novels with African American protagonists because this study focuses on works driven by African American characters. The decision not to choose works with only African American supporting characters was not because these characters are unimportant but instead because these characters and their experiences are not the focal point of these works.
FINDINGS

The compilation began with a close look at the Michael L. Printz Award, which claims to “exemplify the newly literary, sometimes experimental, and increasingly diverse character of young adult literature” (Cart, 2010, p. 28). In its twelve-year history there have only been two African American winners. In 2000, Walter Dean Myer’s *Monster* won the first award. Since then, the only other African American winner is Angela Johnson’s *First Part Last*, which received the award in 2004. Both of these novels are widely considered iconic African American YA books and have both received numerous other honors and awards. Five other books with African or African American protagonists have been recognized as Michael L. Printz Honor Books. Only 11% of the Michael L. Printz awards and Honor recognition have been bestowed upon works of African American literature.

Since 2000 there have only been three African American books awarded the National Book Award for Young People’s Fiction: Virginia Euwer Wolff’s *True Believer* (2001), M. T. Anderson’s *Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing Traitor to the Nation* (2006) (also a Michael L. Printz Honor Book), Vol. 2: *The Kingdom on the Waves*, and Phillip Moore’s *Claudette Colvin* (2009). In the last twelve years, nine other books of African American interest became National Book Award Finalists. Only 20% of the winners or finalists of the National Book Award for Young People’s Fiction have been books with African American characters or of African American concern.

Since 2000 there has only been one African American winner of the Newbery Medal awards. In 2000, Christopher Paul Curtis’ *Bud Not Buddy* children’s book won the prestigious honor. Eight other books received the distinguished Newbery Honor. These recipients constitute 18% of the Newbery Medal Awards given in the past twelve years. There were no
books featuring African American protagonists recognized on either NPR’s “100 Best Teen Novels List” or NCTE’s English Journal “Honor List.” Consequently, I was unable to add any books for consideration from these two sources. Of the 235 finalists for NPR’s “100 Best Teen Novels List” there were only four titles with diverse protagonists. Only two of those were of African American concern (Angela Johnson’s The First Part Last and Sharon Draper’s Copper Sun). Both of those books have won numerous other awards and were, therefore, already on the list of books for closer examination.

Because The Coretta Scott King Book Award was established to recognize outstanding African American books, all winning books and honorees from 2000-present were added to the list of books for consideration. The final list of award winning nationally recognized African or African American list consists of fifty-one books. It is important to note that although fifty-one books are listed, there are only thirty-seven different authors listed. Seven authors have more than one award-winning book and are therefore on the list more than once.

The list is comprised of eleven nonfiction titles representing 21% of the books nationally recognized in the past twelve years. Four of these nonfiction works are not written as a straightforward historical biography or retelling of past events. In Talkin’ About Bessie: The Story of Aviator Elizabeth Coleman, Nikki Grimes uses twenty fictionalized accounts to tell the story of Elizabeth Coleman, the first licensed African American pilot. Similarly, along with archival photographs from the “separate but equal” era, Tony Morrison’s Remember: The Journey to School Integration tells the story of this time through fictitious dialogue and feelings of students who lived during that time. Twelve of the remaining forty fiction titles are historical fiction, all of which are set in either the slavery era or during the civil rights era. These works all address racism and oppression. Only one of these historical fiction novels was written
in a form other than prose. Julius Lester’s *Day of Tears: A Novel in Dialogue* was written entirely in dialogue and therefore reads almost like a play.

The list contains seven books of poetry with a historical context. Interesting enough, three of these volumes of poetry are written by the same poet, Marilyn Nelson (*A Wreath For Emmett Till, Carver: A Life in Poetry, and Fortune’s Bones: The Manumission Requiem*). The fourth book of poems, dispersed intermittingly with collage artwork is Russell Freedman’s *The Voice that Challenged a Nation: Marian Anderson and the Struggle for Equal Rights*. The fifth poetry book examined is Carole Boston Weatherford’s *Becoming Billie Holiday*. The last of these books of poetry is Charles R. Smith, Jr.’s *Twelve Rounds to Glory: The Story of Muhammad Ali*. Unlike the aforementioned volumes of poetry, *The Blacker the Berry*, is a powerful collection of poems about self esteem. Seven verse novels are also present on the list.

The remaining fifteen books are all works of realistic fiction. Fifteen of the works of realistic fiction are written in prose. One book, however, is written in an unusual form. Walter Dean Myer’s *Monster*, first ever winner of the Micheal L. Printz Award, alternates between journal entries and the screenplay of Steve Harmon, the sixteen-year-old protagonist.

I paid special attention to the socio-economic status of the characters listed in the realistic fiction verse novel titles. My hope was to find diversity in these characters. Unfortunately, I was unable to find an array of different kinds of characters from different backgrounds in these works. These characters, although many very compelling, were all inner city urban youth dealing with the struggles of less than ideal circumstances. Many of these characters like Sharon G. Flake’s *Money Hungry* thirteen-year-old protagonist, Raspberry Hill, live impoverished lives.

Of the many characters in these works of fiction, there were only two queer characters, neither of who were main characters. In Jacqueline Woodson’s *After Tupac & D Foster*, Neeka’s older brother, Tash, is openly gay man who is incarcerated throughout most of the novel.
Secondly, Harris, a minor character, in Helen Frost’s *Keesha’s House* is disowned by his father after coming out and is subsequently homeless and living in his car.

Although these works offered no substantive diversity amongst the backgrounds of the characters, there was some diversity in the kinds of struggle that the characters in the works experience. Many of the characters were privy to crime in their neighborhoods with some themselves becoming criminals. In both *Monster* and *Lockdown*, Walter Dean Myers addresses the issue of adolescent crime with one of his teenage protagonists being accused of murder and the other incarcerated.

Several of the novels address the issue of teenage pregnancy. Perhaps, most famously, is Angela Johnson’s Michael L. Printz award winning *First Part Last*, as it uniquely tells the story from the perspective of soon to be father, Bobby. Sharon Draper also addresses this issue in *November Blues*. November finds out she’s pregnant after the untimely death of her boyfriend Josh. Nikki Grimes and Helen Frost also address the issue of teenage pregnancy in their novels *Bronx Masquerade* and *Keesha’s House*.

Congruent with the struggles of adolescence, the issue of identity and self-esteem was another common concern of the characters of many of these novels. Sharon G. Flake (*The Skin I’m In*) and Joyce Carol Thomas (*The Blacker the Berry*) both address issues of complexion, an important issue for many African Americans. Nikki Grimes also highlights the issue of identity definition and esteem with several of the characters in her *Bronx Masquerade*. The book details the struggles of a jock who hides his interest in book, a amazing artist struggling to overcome the insistence that she play basketball, and a kid struggling to decide if he will have hope for his future or not.

Loss, grief, family turmoil and brokenness were also conflicts presented in several of the novels. In Jacqueline Woodson’s *Miracle Boys*, three brothers struggle to survive after the loss
of both parents. Nikki Grimes’ *The Road to Paris* and Jacqueline Woodson’s *After Tupac & D Foster* and *Locomotion* have protagonists who have the misfortune of being in foster care. In Hope Anita Smith’s *Keeping the Night Watch*, CJ struggles to come to terms with his father’s abandonment and sudden reappearance.

There were a few other works with unique characteristics. For instance, Allan Stranton’s *Chanda’s Secret* is the only novel not set on US soil. It is set in Africa amidst the height of the AIDS epidemic. G. Neri’s *Yummy: The Last Days of Southside Shorty* is doubly unique in that it is the only novel in this study that directly addresses the issue of gang violence. It also tells the true story of the death of Robert “Yummy” Sandifer through the eyes of a fictitious classmate, eleven-year-old Roger. Tanita S. Davis’ *Mare’s War*, another uniquely written work, tells the story of Mare, a grandmother, and former member of Women’s Army Corps during World War II. This novel alternates interestingly between the events of Mare’s participation in WWII and the present day road trip with her two granddaughters, Octavia and Tali.
CONCLUSION/IMPLICATIONS

The first appearance of African American literature for children emerged in the late nineteenth century (Harris, 1990). It is therefore discouraging to see the limited number of award winning African American works. This lack of winners brings up several important questions. Are African American works not good enough to be recognized? Are there no works of African American concern written in an African American voice worth listening to? These awards and recognitions are for many a declaration that a particular work is genius. Is there no African American genius present today in YAL? Although a seemingly absurd question, the disparity in the attention African American works receive certainly points out problems in this system.

Perhaps it is not an issue of recognition but one of consideration. In looking at the composition of these committees and panels of judges it became clear that they are comprised mainly of middle class/upper class white Americans. These lists of winners reflect very definitely the interests and vantage points of those making the selections. For instance, 75,000 ballots were casts by NPR listeners in order to determine the supposed “100 Best Teen Books.” At first glance, this seems fair enough. However, after noticing that there wasn’t a single African American selection on the list and only two of the 235 finalists were African American books this warranted further investigation. 87% of NPR’s listenership is white. So although there is no profile available of the demographics of participants in this study, it is a fair assumption that the preponderance of them was white. The survey results reflect the participants.

There were only four titles total with diverse protagonists that made the list of finalists. In a blog entitled “Happy and Sad about NPR’s Top 100 YA List” award-winning author Laurie Halse Anderson (Speak, Wintergirls, and Chains) voiced her concern about the lack of diversity
on the list. She wrote, “This just might be the whitest YA list ever. As lovely an honor, as this is, it also made me sad and angry and frustrated.” Anderson is voicing the concerns of many.

The *English Journal* perpetuates this “unbearable whiteness” (Gangi, 2008) by choosing its “Honor List” from the lists of award winners from the previous year and also by its use of the “professional committees (mostly related to the ALA) and by editors of such publications as Book List, School Library Journal, VOYA, Publisher’s Weekly, the ALAN Review, and the *New York Times* (A. P. Nilsen, Blasingame Jr., & D. L. Nilsen, 2012). In only selecting five or six winners from the previous year it is fair to say that the chances of an African American book making the *English Journal’s* “Honor List” are very slim.

Another implication of these awards is the repetition of African American winners. Walter Dean Myers, Nikki Grimes, Sharon Draper, Jacqueline Woodson, Kadir Nelson, and Marilyn Nelson have all won awards for more than one of their works. Firstly, each of these writers is amazing in their own right but are there no other writers of great talent? Do new writers even have a chance at garnering recognition for their work? I do not argue with the legitimacy of any of the work these writers have done. I do, however, wonder if these writers will also have first consideration amongst selection committees because of their established body of work? Have these writers set the standard or the recipe for African America literary success?

Many pedagogical concerns have arisen out of this study. The research insists that English educators must employ culturally relevant pedagogy. Where do teachers begin? According to Harris (1990), “canons, or sanctioned lists of works perpetuated by critics, educators, and cultural guardians, constitute the literature many students read” (p. 540). Teachers are looking to these lists for answers and means to make the books their students read more culturally meaningful. Do we, however, assume that the only necessary culture to cater to is the “characteristically urban” one (Tatum & Muhammad, 2012)?
The majority of the characters featured in the works of African American fiction that have garnered national attention, are urban and often from impoverished backgrounds. The difficulty of finding contemporary YAL “that take place outside of the harsh inner-city setting” (Rawson & Hughes-Hassel, 2012, p. 24) presents a monumental challenge to English educators striving to create the culturally relevant classroom. Are these gritty inner city tales of hardship culturally relevant to the student from a middle class two family home?

Are these predominantly heterosexual stories culturally relevant to the gay or lesbian African American student? Novels with LGBT characters are beneficial not only to those students who need to read literature that is reflective of them but it is also a necessary component of teaching tolerance and combatting rampant homophobia, especially in the African American community. “It is not enough to comprehend the homosexual experience on a cognitive level; we must develop an empathic understanding as well” (Crisp, 2007, p.200).

Unfortunately for many teachers and librarians “homosexuality remains a love whose name they dare not speak” (Martin, 2006, p.38) and consequently many school libraries and teacher syllabi are without rainbow characters and storylines. What message does the absence of LGBT African American characters send to queer African American students? The two queer characters found in these works were both secondary characters. Is a gay character too taboo a character for discussion in African American YAL?

Sexuality is only facet of identity but identity as a whole is a crucial component of adolescent development (Tatum 2008). Therefore, the culturally relevant classroom gives credence and recognition to all identities. Tatum (2009) asserts that teachers should select books with characters that have multiple identities—academic cultural, religious, gendered, social, and etc.
Many curriculum and teachers focus on canonical texts. This is problematic for African American students as, “few texts written by African Americans or other groups of color are designated classics, even though many exhibit extraordinary merit, expand or reinterpret literary forms, or provide a forum or voices silence or ignored in mainstream literature” (Smith, 1990, p.540). There are brilliant African American works that “deserve to be read alongside classics that are written by whites” (McNair, 2010, p.96). The age-old question remains, what is a classic? Who decides and why are the classics predominantly white? How does this affect the culturally relevant classroom?

It is important for African American students to see themselves in the literature they read. It is equally as important for those portrayals to be hopeful and truly representative of African American life. How do these urban tales of poverty, violence, teenage pregnancy, and crime foster hopefulness in these students? For many of them these stories are a mirror image of their tattered lives but are these tales holistically reflective of the African American experience or only a snapshot of the downside?

It is not yet clear if a definitive link exists between the African American representations in novels or the lack of African American books in the classroom and poor literacy rates. Perhaps this study has only raised more questions as to the solutions for this literacy crisis. One thing, however, is clear, writers, teachers, and librarians alike must work harder to ensure that the choices of text reflect life as it truly is for all students, African American or otherwise. This is a necessary first step in unlocking the potentiality of African American readers.
REFERENCES


*The nation’s Report Card: Reading 2009. Grade 8 National results.*


## APPENDIX A.

### AWARD WINNING BOOKS 2000-PRESENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Awards Received</th>
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<th>Setting</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. <em>Monster</em></td>
<td>'00 Printz '00 Coretta Scott King Honor</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
<td>Steve Harris (16 year old accused of murder)</td>
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<td>2. <em>Lockdown</em></td>
<td>'10 National Book Finalist '11 Coretta Scott King Honor</td>
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<td>Reese (14 year old son of abusive father and drug addicted mother)</td>
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<td>Walter Dean Myers</td>
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<td>3. <em>The Battle of Jericho</em></td>
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<td>Fiction</td>
<td>November Nelson Jericho Prescott (high school students)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sharon Draper</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. <em>November Blues</em></td>
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<td>Fiction</td>
<td>Jericho Prescott Josh (high students)</td>
<td>Inner city Cincinnati Ohio</td>
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<td>Sharon Draper</td>
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<td>5. <em>The Road to Paris</em></td>
<td>'07 Coretta Scott King Honor</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
<td>Paris (8 year old ward of the state)</td>
<td>Foster home of the Lincolns</td>
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<td>Nikki Grimes</td>
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<td>6. <em>Who Am I Without Him</em></td>
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<td>Fiction</td>
<td>Multiple teens (12 short stories)</td>
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<td>Sharon G. Flake</td>
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<td>7. <em>The Skin I'm In</em></td>
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<td>Maleeka Madison (poor middle school student)</td>
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<td>8. <em>Money Hungry</em></td>
<td>'02 Coretta Scott King Honor</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
<td>Raspberry Hill (impoverished 13 year old daughter of abusive drug addicted father)</td>
<td>Housing projects</td>
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<td>Sharon G. Flake</td>
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<td>9. <em>After Tupac &amp; D Foster</em></td>
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<td>Fiction</td>
<td>Neeka Unnamed Narrator D Foster (teenagers)</td>
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<td>Jacqueline Woodson</td>
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28
| 10. **Miracle Boys**  
Jacqueline Woodson | '01 Coretta Scott King Book Award | Fiction | Ty’ree (22)  
Lafayette (12)  
Charlie (15 and recently released from jail)  
(orphans after untimely death of mother) | Washington Heights Section of Manhattan |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 11. **Chanda’s Secret**  
Allan Stranton | '05 Printz Honor | Fiction | Chanda (16 year daughter of alcoholic father and mother with AIDS) | Sub-Saharan Africa |
| 12. **Ninth Ward**  
Jewel Parker Rhodes | '11 Coretta Scott King Honor | Fiction | Lanesha (12 years old) | Lower 9th ward New Orleans |
| 13. **Yummy**  
G. Neri | '11 Coretta Scott King Honor | Fiction | Roger (11 years old) | Southside Chicago |
| 14. **First Part Last**  
Angela Johnson | '04 Coretta Scott King Book Award  
'04 Printz Honor | Fiction | Bobby Nia (high school students) | Inner New York City, New York |
| 15. **Mare’s War**  
Tanita S. Davis | '10 Coretta Scott King Honor | Fiction | Ocatavia Tali (teenagers) Mare | Various (cross country road trip) |
| 16. **Dark Sons**  
Nikki Grimes | '06 Coretta Scott King Honor | Verse novel | Sam Ishmael (teenagers) | The nomadic desert |
| 17. **Locomotion**  
Jacqueline Woodson | '04 Coretta Scott King Honor | Verse novel | Lonnie Lili (ward of the state) | Brooklyn, NY |
| 18. **Bronx Masquerade**  
Nikki Grimes | '03 Coretta Scott King Award | Fiction/Verse novel | Various high school students | Inner city high school in Bronx, NY |
| 19. **Keesha’s House**  
Helen Frost | '04 Printz Honor | Verse novel | Keesha (teenage orphan and daughter of abusive father) | Joe’s house |
| 20. **The Great Migration**  
Eloise Greenfield | '12 Coretta Scott King Honor | Verse novel | Various travelers | Various parts of United States |
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APPENDIX B

WHY THIS NOVELLA?

I frequent bookstores. As an avid reader, there is no greater place on earth. Some believe that paradise will be relative to the individual. If that is true then my heaven will be filled with shelves full of books, quills and inkbottles. In a recent trip to the bookstore I visited the young adult section. I was pained to see only a few African American YA books on the shelves. Of course those books were the staples that one would find in every bookstore in the country. Each of these books told the tales of urban inner-city youth. I, like so many other readers, want to read characters that lives somehow relate to my own. I am in no way suggesting that a reader cannot connect with a character whose life is totally unlike his or her own. I’m simply saying that it makes it easier.

In writing this novella and in designing this study, I thought about one of my professors who talked passionately about the missing middle class African American YA novel. I then thought about my frame of reference. I grew up in a religious working class two-parent household. Although we had financial struggles, my parents did well to shelter us from the inner-city life just outside our front door. The same can be said of many of my students and many other African American youth who know not of the violence of the streets or the perils of broken homes. I, therefore, wrote this novella because I just couldn't read about another African American character struggling in the urban jungle. There are, indeed, some blacks who escaped that tumult. This is my attempt to interject that voice. This is also my attempt to present a voice of “otherness” that is all too often taboo in the African American community.
THE RELUCTANT DEBUTANTE
Another Day in the Life…

I think my life is an experiment. The universe is obviously trying to figure out what happens to people when implanted in an alternate dimension. Nothing about my life feels real. I don't belong in this reality. None of it makes sense. Maybe I’m the star of a sitcom with every episode having a different more dysfunctional storyline than the last. The characters in my sitcom are one-dimensional stereotypes, typical private school attending rich kids. Yawn. I’ve long since grown tired of the never-ending saga that is A.P. Tureaud Preparatory High School. How is it that I’m one of the most popular girls in school and I still don't fit in? I can name 20 girls off the top of my head that would love to be in my shoes. The sad part is I’d welcome a change in apparel. I’d gladly trade my expensive Italian leather loafers for a pair of Converse.

My life is anything but typical. I should be happy, but I can’t remember the last time I felt a genuine sense of joy or satisfaction. My brother, Derek Jr., and I are the sole heirs to the Hebert Construction empire. My dad built the Hebert legacy from a small contracting company to the largest construction firm in New Orleans, holding almost all of the local government contracts. Business really took off after Hurricane Katrina and needless to say I stand to inherit millions when the company becomes mine. DJ, as everyone affectionately calls him, looks forward to his ascension to the Hebert throne. I, on the other hand, would rather eat gravel. I have zero interest in the family business and even less interest in becoming some suit wearing business tycoon. I would never tell my parents this, of course, so I smile and nod when they go on and on about the importance of our family legacy and my need to put myself in a position to some day head the family business with my brother.
My family is black royalty here in New Orleans. I guess wealth brings a certain status. Apparently, we’re important because we have money. I don’t see the connection but my parents have totally bought into the idea, especially my mom. As far back as I can remember we’ve been subjected to every possible social grouping with other kids from well to do families. The weird part is that I have nothing in common with kids that I should obviously have everything in common with. All they care about are things like vacationing in the Hamptons, Ralph Lauren’s fall line, and the latest change in body style of their favorite BMW. Maybe I’d care more about these things if I hadn’t grown up with such easy access to every materialistic thing known to man. If only those things excited me.

“Addison, would you like to join us on planet Earth?”

Mr. Sampson, my Calculus teacher, quickly pulled me from this daydream and journey into the land of “I wish my life were different”, when he yelled my name.

“Yes, Sir. I’m sorry.”

I ignored the giggles from my classmates and pretended to focus my attention on whatever alien symbols he’s writing on the board. Even though I’d always been really good at math, numbers meant nothing to me. Equations and calculations meant even less but I struggled through the class period in hopes of the end of the day quickly approaching.

I might have been able to pay attention if his voice wasn’t so monotone. No one took him seriously. I’m sure it’s because his clothes were always wrinkled and he didn’t know the first thing about color coordination. Today he had on a brown shirt with orange pants and white shoes. He should probably avoid shopping at the Goodwill if he wants these snobs to ever take him seriously.

After the bell rang and I entered the hallway, I heard Kaitlynn calling my name. It took everything in me not to ignore her and keep walking. Kaitlynn is the unofficial leader of the
popular girls, a group I unwillingly find myself apart of. I’ve never met anyone more obsessed with material things in my life. I swear she’d trade in her first-born child for a Gucci bag. She’s so out of touch and so is her throng of followers. They deserve each other. I doubt she even knows that the president is black. Wait…forget that he’s black. She probably doesn’t even know who the president is.

She growled, “Girl, I know you hear me.”

“What is it Kaitlynn? I’m trying to get to history class.”

She rolled her eyes at me.

“What happened to you this weekend? Why didn’t you come to the party?”

*Come on Addison come up with a good excuse. I know you can do it. You’re a writer after all.*

*Be creative.*

“I wasn’t feeling well. I had the stomach virus.”

*How unoriginal.* I could see the suspicion in her eyes.

“Oh. Well ok. We had a great time. Everyone asked about you. There’s another party this weekend at my house. I hope you can make it. There’s an exclusive guest list.”

“I’ll definitely try.”

“Don’t try Addison. Succeed.”

With a tilt of her head and a squint of her eyes she walked away. I was left standing there thinking of all the reasons I avoid these parties. Those reasons came easy. I just needed one reason to actually go. Sooner or later I was gonna run out of excuses. I don’t know. I think I’m afraid. Sometimes I think they’ll see through my sarcasm and quick wit. I’m not even ready to acknowledge what lies beneath the humor. Neither are they.
The rest of the day was going on without a hitch but I found it impossible to concentrate on anything any of my teachers said. I was sitting in AP English, my last class of the day, looking out the window when I spotted a tiny bluebird walking back and forth on a really thin tree branch. The bluebird walked back and forth about eight or nine times. I found myself wondering what was stopping it from jumping. It had to know it was meant to fly. I could only imagine how fast its little heart must be beating considering all the possibilities and thinking of everything that could go wrong. I knew that feeling. It’s the same reason I avoided the parties, dances, and all social situations in general. I shared the same fear as that tiny bird. My wings might not work. I might say the wrong thing or do the opposite of what’s expected from a girl with my social status. I’d never live it down. So why even subject myself to their microscope? It was settled. I wasn’t going to that party.

I looked down at my watch and there are only forty-five minutes left in this class period. I couldn't be more excited. I was in the middle of my customary countdown when I saw the door open. A girl of average height with golden dreadlocks walked in and whispered a few words to Mrs. Johnson, my quirky English teacher. Mrs. Johnson nodded knowingly, almost as if she were expecting her. Mrs. Johnson turned to the class and offered an informal introduction of the new student.

“Class, this is Natalie Jefferson. She’s a transfer student from Huey P. Long High School.” My classmates whispered in hushed tones. I heard Kevin Anderson say a nasty comment about her obviously being on scholarship. We made eye contact with one another just as he finished the statement. I glared at him. He hunched his shoulder and puts his head down. Mrs. Johnson asked politely, “Is there anything you’d like to say to your new classmates or maybe you want to introduce yourself?”

Natalie paused. I could almost see her thinking. She smiled.  *Why is she smiling?*
“Sure. My name is Natalie Jefferson and I have very good ears. All of your comments were well received. Thank you for your assumptions.”

A silence fell over the class. Everyone took a moment to process her remarks then the guys giggled and gave each other dap while the girls rolled their eyes. Natalie looked completely unaffected by the commotion.

She turned slowly to the teacher and asks, “Mrs. Johnson, is there any seat in particular where you want me to sit?”

Mrs. Johnson shook her head no. Natalie took this as her cue to sit anywhere she wanted to.

There were only two empty seats in our large classroom. Of course, she chose the seat next to me. She walked passed me so swiftly that her scent filled my nostrils. She smelled like lavender and baby powder. This was a pleasant distraction from the smell of old textbooks and mildew that previously preoccupied my senses. She looked at me and smiled. In return, I gave her a quick uncomfortable smile and nod of my head. I guess she noticed that I wasn’t in the group of idiots making judgments as soon as it was announced that she transferred in from a public school.

It was amazing how such a small thing like a smile could offer such relief. She seemed so different. The last thing I wanted her to do was write me off as one of “them”. I couldn’t explain it but I wanted to know her. I wanted her to know me. The real me.
Get Noticed or Be Forgotten

A few weeks went by and I was happy to know that Natalie and I shared four classes. We spoke to each other occasionally. I’m not what you would call a social butterfly so making friends doesn’t come easy. I’ve never had to make friends. People have always flocked to me because I was Derek’s baby sister. Most of these people had ill intentions and I knew that so I’ve always been on guard. I spent most of my days with my head in a book or working on my latest poetry piece. I’d gotten used to being alone. I thought better that way but for some reason I’d met someone I actually wanted to be friends with. I had been contemplating what I should say to her to break the ice and hopefully start a friendship. It turned out I didn’t have to say anything to her. The fates were on my side.

In English class we were studying poetry and as an assignment Mrs. Johnson asked each of us to write a poem about identity. Because we’d just finished reading and analyzing a number of famous poems about identity, Mrs. Johnson thought it would be a good change of pace for us to read our own words. I’d been looking forward to hearing everybody’s poetry since the moment she gave the assignment two class periods ago. Maybe there was something deeper beneath the surface of these seemingly shallow human beings. I was hoping to be proven wrong.

“Who would like to read first,” Mrs. Johnson asked excitedly. Not a soul in sight moved. It was so quiet we could hear laughter from some girls in the hallway walking past our classroom. As each minute passed, Mrs. Johnson grew more impatient.

“Guys, I don’t want to have to pick someone. Sharing your words with the world is liberation. Your ideas are a sacred part of who you are and the way you express those ideas is as unique as a fingerprint. Please be brave.”
I don’t know what came over me. Before that moment, I had never shared my poetry with a single soul. My words were secrets. My secrets. They were the part of me that I was unwilling to share. My words were just one of the many parts of myself that I kept locked away in the corners of my subconscious.

In a voice I’d never used I said, “Mrs. Johnson. I’m brave.”

I stood and walked toward the front of the class. It was as if time stood still. The only thing I could hear was the rapid beat of my heart. I felt my face flush. *What are you doing Addison?* 

*You’re wasting your time. They won’t understand your words anyway.*

I spoke softly, “This poem is untitled. I find it difficult to title my poems. Titles never really fit.”

*Who asked you that?*

Nobody moved or reacted. I don’t know what reaction I was expecting but I was jarred by the almost zombie like stare everyone was giving me. *Just read.* And so I began.

*I live for moments*

*Stolen moments*

*Moments to just be*

*I am a thief*

*I steal these moments from those who insist*

*Those who persist in their need to squeeze me into their tiny boxes*

*Its retaliation*

*They stole from me first*

*They took away my right to breathe*

*I cannot inhale in a world that excludes me*

*I cannot exhale when I don’t fit*

*Oxygen deprivation*
I live for moments

Moments of truth

My truth

But there is no place for truth in this world of pretend

Imagination holding more value than honesty

Fiction an easier choice than fact

There’s comfort in delusion

Not for me

I squirm within the grips of uncomfortable lies

I long for moments of freedom

If only I could string these moments into minutes into hours into days into weeks into months....

Maybe I’d find peace

I walked back to my desk in a trance. I felt so exposed. I didn’t know if they loved it or hated it. Somebody say something. Then it happened. It was like something off of a cheesy teen movie. One slow clap rang out and merged with another slow clap until there was a full on round of applause. They were clapping for me. I was shocked. Natalie turned to me amidst the clamor and whispered, “Girl, that was amazing.”

It felt good to have people hear my words and appreciate them. I guess I gave everyone the courage they needed. For the rest of that fifty-minute period my classmates shared their inner most feelings and insecurities. Of course some were well written and others not so much. Either way it was refreshing to know that they actually had something in their brains and on their minds.

When class ended I was walking into the hall when I felt someone grab my arm. I turned to see Natalie standing there will a silly smile on her face.
In a very quiet voice she stated, “I loved your poem. It was so true. Sometimes the truth hurts and people don’t wanna deal with it. “

I wasn’t expecting to have a conversation about my poem but I was gonna go with it.

“Yeah. It’s easier to just ignore certain realities. Like my parent’s for instance, sometimes I think they don’t even know that a world exists beyond their vacation homes and benefit dinners.

It’s so scary because neither of them grew up rich. It seems like they’ve just left that part of their histories behind.”

She put her head down.

“I wish I could leave certain parts of my life behind but I know these experiences make me who I am. Someday grilled cheese sandwiches and ramen noodles will only be a distant memory. But I won’t forget ever. I accept my reality. At least I try to.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. She’d opened up to me and I didn’t wanna say anything to make her regret it so we just walked together in silence. When we reached the student parking lot we said our goodbyes. I walked over to my brother’s Camaro and waited for him. That was my daily routine. I watched Natalie walk away. I assumed she was walking in the direction of her car. *I wonder what kind of car she drives.* I was distracted from this thought by Nathaniel’s arrival.

“Hey sis. Let’s get out of here. I’ve had the worst day.”

Without any words I got in the car. During the ride home he didn’t once ask me how my day was. He just went on and on about his girl drama. Kennedy found out about his date with Amber. Blah Blah Blah. I tuned him out. I used my imaginary remote to press mute occasionally. I wasn’t in the mood for his whining. I’d unmute him just enough to follow the story and interject occasionally. This went on for the entire twenty-five minute drive home. As we pulled up all I could think about was the fact that I’d never been happier to see my house.
My mom was in the kitchen cooking when I walked in. The aroma of smothered chicken and rice and gravy filled the air. She didn’t even notice I was standing there. I saw her heart jump out of her chest when I said hello.

“Hey you. How was my baby’s day at school today?”

“It was ok. You know how you’re always telling me to be more social and stop fading into the background.”

She giggled.

“Yes that sounds familiar,” she said sarcastically.

“Well I took your advice today mom. I read one of my poems in English class and everyone loved it.”

“That's great sweetie. What was the poem about?”

“Well the assignment was to write about identity. My poem was about how hard it is to really be yourself. Sometimes people expect you to be a certain person and kind of take away your right to decide who you are.”

She paused. I could tell she didn’t know what to say.

“Wow. That's pretty heavy stuff for a sixteen year old.”

My mother has always had a way of dismissing a conversation strategically.

“Not really.”

“Well Addison I’m glad you did something to be noticed today.”

What does that mean? I took that as my cue to get up and go to my room. I did so without a word. My mother and I were exact opposites and I got the feeling that she hated it. She loved attention and would do almost anything to be the center of it. She wanted me to love the pageants and debutante balls. I wanted me to love it too. I just didn’t. Sorry.
Thanks Mom

Natalie and I were joined at the hip since the poetry reading. We hung out constantly and she’d even been over and met my parents. I was so nervous that she wouldn’t meet their standards. I’d only brought a couple friends home before but they were both people I knew for certain they’d approve of. Kaitlynn was a miniature version of my mother so they hit it off immediately. I couldn’t stomach Kaitlynn but I wanted my parents to think I was fitting in. I didn't want them to know I’d made myself a social leper.

Natalie met my dad first. It was in passing of course as he was rushing out the door as always. He said a quick hello as he rushed out the door. I don’t even think he looked up on his way out the door. I was annoyed by his inattentiveness. I’m not sure why it bothered me because I should have been used to his schedule by now. Natalie didn’t seem to mind. She almost looked relieved. I guess meeting someone’s parents for the first time wasn’t exactly a welcomed event.

I really wanted her to meet him and see the better half of my DNA. My dad and I had so much more in common than mom and me. He was easier. He was, or least he appeared to be, interested in me. He’d listen to my poetry and read my short stories. My mom barely acknowledged me but it was different with dad. Our passion connected us. I was passionate about my words and he was passionate about his business. He recognized that passion in me and it made us closer. He saw himself in me. This was especially important because I’d been told my whole life that I was a mirror image of my mother. How ironic.

As I’d expected, the introductions between Nat and my mother didn’t go so well. My mom walked in and gave a Southern belle’s obligatory smile and salutation. After her polite hello she suddenly morphed into a private investigator. She looked at Natalie’s beat up shoes
and her worn uniform skirt and I swear I could see her thoughts. I knew her. That's when the interrogation began. I wondered if they could hear my soul sigh. My anxiety skyrocketed.

“So Natalie what do your parents do for a living?”

Natalie hesitated. “My mom is on disability. My dad died a year ago in an accident on his offshore rig.” For the first time I saw the light in her eyes dim. She had never mentioned her dad’s death before.

“I’m sorry to hear that dear. I know that must be tough on you guys.”

I exhaled.

“Thank you Ms. Hebert. Yeah it’s been really rough, especially for my mom. She says all the time that he was the love of her life.”

“I couldn’t even imagine life without Derek. Umm. Tureaud is a very expensive school. How is your mom able to pay the tuition?”

I exhaled too soon. I swear the oxygen particles in the room were replaced with atoms of embarrassment. My dignity floated into space. I watched it leave.

I interrupted Natalie before she could answer my mom’s inappropriately intrusive question.

“Nat you don’t have to answer that. Mom that is none of our business.”

“Excuse me Addison. I have a right to know what kind of family your friend comes from. I wouldn't want you getting mixed up with the wrong kind of person.”

The tension in the air thickened. Natalie was becoming more and more visibly uncomfortable.

She started fidgeting, something I noticed she did in awkward moments. She looked at me.

“It’s ok Addison. Mrs. Hebert I’m on scholarship. I had the highest GPA in my class at Long High. I was bored and tired of the hood drama of the fights and drug deals at school so I started applying to private schools in the area. Tureaud accepted me and offered me a full scholarship.”

Silence.
After what felt like a lifetime of quiet, mom responded, “Oh ok. How nice. For you.” She turned and walked out the room. So much for collecting the shattered pieces of my dignity. I was humiliated.

I didn’t know what to say. I looked at Natalie. She smiled. It wasn’t her usual smile. The light still hadn’t turned back on in her eyes. She could sense that I wanted to say something.

“Don’t worry about it Addie. Let’s just go study.”

“Ok.”

We went upstairs to my room and spent afternoon studying. Natalie was unusually quiet. I was usually the quiet withdrawn one. I knew she was upset. I had to do something to fix this.

“I’m sorry about what my mom said.”

“It’s not your fault. I guess I’m just shocked. You’ve always talked about your mom. You told me she’d lost touch with herself but seeing it and experiencing it for myself is just weird. I guess I’m trying to process it.”

“I’m sorry. She was wrong. She’s never done anything like that before.”

“Have you brought any friends home like me before?”

I was confused. “What do you mean like you?”

She raised her voice. “Be for real Addison.”

“I’m serious. What do you mean? I’ve brought other friends home before. Kaitlynn, Tiffany, and Amber have been here before.”

She rolled her eyes. “Exactly. I’m nothing like those girls. I’m poor. You know that. I can’t believe you would play dumb.”

Oh my God. We were arguing.
“Natalie I’m not playing dumb. That doesn’t matter to me. I know you’re nothing like those girls. That’s why we’re friends. I blow them off regularly. It just never occurred to me that you were poor. We’ve never talked about it. It’s not important. How was I supposed to know?”

She started gathering her things.

“Well it’s obviously important to your mom.”

“What are you doing? Where are you going? We haven’t even worked on the history project yet.”

“That’s not due until next week. I’m going home. I can’t be here right now.”

“Nat.”

It was almost a plea of desperation.

“What Addison?”

“I’m nothing like those girls. I’m nothing like my mother. Trust me.”

She just looked at me. I’d never seen that in her eyes before. I think it was disgust. It cut me.

She hurried to the door. I grabbed her by the arm. She turned around and looked at me. I could see the hurt and frustration in her eyes. The sunshine was extinguished. I didn’t even know what to say.

“Don’t leave.”

She pulled from my grasp and walked out the door.

I couldn't focus for the rest of the night. I fell asleep thinking about what I’d say to her the next day to make up for my mom’s ill-mannered attempts to make conversation. I was used to this feeling. Resentment. I could admit it. I resented my mother. I resented that she didn’t know me. I resented that she doesn’t want to know me. I resented that she didn’t know herself.

Things were awkward the next day at school between Nat and me. She barely spoke to me. We exchanged very few words the next day. Since this was our first disagreement I wasn't
sure what was the best way to handle things. I didn't know if I should just give her space until things calmed down or if I should make an attempt to smooth things over. This war went on in my head all day and well into the evening.

I was at home lying across my bed reading Ebony magazine when DJ burst into my room. I really wasn’t in the mood.

“Hey sis.”

“Hey.”

“Are you okay? You’ve been moping around here all day.”

“I’m pissed. Mom went off on Natalie yesterday and pretty much called her poor because she was on scholarship.”

“Are you serious?”

He laughed hysterically. As his laughter increased so did my rage. Nothing was funny. After noticing my irritation he said quietly, “I’m sorry A. It’s just that mom is ridiculous. You know how she is. I don’t even know why you let her get to you. Dad and I talk about it all the time. Ya’ll are at each other’s throats all the time. Everyone can feel the tension.”

This wasn’t a revelation.

“Whatever. Being at each other’s throats is one thing. Being an ass to my friend and embarrassing me is another. Natalie barely even spoke to me today at school. She probably thinks I’m one of these disgusting rich kids.”

He hunched his shoulders.

“I hate to break this to you A but you are one of the rich kids.”

With that he walked out. I knew he was right but I’d spent so much time distancing myself from that truth. Pretending it didn’t matter. Now I know different. I couldn’t leave things the way they were. I picked up my phone and sent Natalie a text message.
Hey Nat. Things were weird today at school. We cool?

Felt like hours went by before I heard a text message alert. I knew it was Natalie because I’d given her a special ringtone.

It is what it is. We come from two different places. I’ll see you around.

Huh?

There was no response. There was no sleep.
She Knows Me… I Think

I’d lost friends before. This felt different. I didn’t know why it was bothering me so much but weeks went by and Nat and I only exchanged pleasantries a couple of times. She wouldn’t even look at me. I guess she’d accepted her fate as the scholarship kid. No one talked to her. She talked to no one but I wanted her to talk to me. I wanted to fix things and make her see that I wasn’t like them. I didn’t care about what her mom did for her a living or where she lived. I got to know her. She was funny and smart. She had a good heart. Her stories about her childhood were fascinating. Maybe I was so mesmerized by her that I missed some important details or maybe I just didn’t care. I still don’t. It doesn’t matter if she grew up in the projects or the suburbs. Why was I taking this so hard? I missed her.

I decided that I had to do something about it. I’d made up my mind that I’d talk to her after school in the student parking lot. As much as I’d convinced myself that I was ok being a loner I knew it was a lie. Things were better when we were friends. The pain of being alone was gone when she was around. The agony of being different was somehow lessened. We were both outsiders.

During seventh period, I kept rehearsing what I’d say to her when the bell rang. I decided to just be honest. I was hoping that sincerity would fix things. When the bell finally rang I rushed past my classmates and called her name and she hurried out of the classroom. I nearly yelled, “Natalie.” She turned around. When she noticed that it was me, she rolled her eyes. That stung. I felt myself losing courage.

“Hey girl. How have you been?” She reluctantly responded, “I’ve been fine.”

“That’s good. Well, umm, things haven’t been the same since we stopped hanging.”
“Ok.”

That definitely wasn’t the response I’d hoped for.

“Can we just try again? I am not my mother. In fact, I’m nothing like her. You know I don’t care about money or any of those things. In all the times we’ve hung out, how many times did you hear me say anything about my family’s money or my dad’s company? Did I ever once ask you about your family’s finances?”

“No you didn’t. I get that. I don’t fit in here and I’m cool with that.”

“Neither do I.”

“You keep saying that but you do. Please don’t play the poor little rich girl routine with me.”

“I don’t have a routine Nat. I miss being friends with you. We have so much in common. Why should we both be pitiful, miserable, AND alone? Let’s go to the library or go walk on the levee like we used to.”

She smiled. And then I saw the light in her eyes again. A rush of warmth covered me. It was something I’d never experienced before. I wrote it off as mere happiness. Then, as quickly as her smile appeared it vanished. My heart sank. She looked at me.

“I’m not going back to your house Addie.”

She paused.

“Ever.”

“Cool. I understand.”

And I did. I couldn’t blame her.

We spent that afternoon sitting in the library laughing and catching up. She listened to my latest poem about my mother. She loved it. She told me I was an amazing writer. That felt good. Especially, coming from her.

Things got quiet and she spoke softly. “Can I ask you a question?”
“Why do you always tell me that you don’t fit in with Kaitlynn and her crew? On paper you do fit in. You’ve got the money. All the boys want you. Why do you refuse the limelight? Most of the girls at school would die to be in your shoes.”

I got the feeling that she was talking about herself.

“I just don’t like a lot of attention. I like my privacy. I don’t wanna live my life out in front of everyone.”

“So you hide instead?”

“Some things need to stay hidden.”

She had a puzzled look on her face, “Like what?”

“Nothing.”

She wanted me to admit to her something that I couldn’t admit to myself. So I did what I did best. I avoided. Thankfully she didn’t press the issue. It was getting late so we left the library and each headed home. As I walked home the truth settled in my belly like undigested food. I was uncomfortable. It was something I’d known since the beginning but so long as I didn’t speak the words then it wasn’t my truth. That couldn’t be my reality. It didn’t fit into my picture perfect family. I knew eventually that there’d be nowhere to hide.

It was time to start facing the music. Things were going fine at school. The social drama remained the same. They’d invite me. I’d make up an excuse not to go. Same ole same ole. I guess Kaitlynn and her gang decided to accept Natalie because she hung out with me. I’m not quite sure why people value Kaitlynn’s opinion so much. She’d been asking Nat and I to hang with them and we both graciously declined on more than one occasion. One time, however, Natalie decided she was gonna go to Kaitlynn’s party and check out the scene. My answer remained the same. No. Hell no. I felt a definite twinge of jealousy though. That was a new emotion for me. Why was I jealous? Who was I jealous of? Kaitlynn? I didn’t understand what I
was feeling. I didn’t own Natalie. Of course, she was free to be friends with whoever she chose to be friends with. I guess I got caught up in this idea that we were in our own little bubble together. I really wanted it to stay that way.

So needless to say the night of Kaitlynn’s party, I was sitting at home wondering what was going on at the party. I was anxious to hear how things went. I knew it was wrong but a huge part of me hoped Nat had the worst time ever. That way she would have gotten this nonsense out of her system. My heart jumped when I heard my phone go off. It was a text message from Natalie.

Sup?

Nothing much. How’s the party?

Hmmm…

I’m listening.

Wack.

Sigh of relief.

I’m sorry. I hoped you’d have a good time.

I lied. Another first.

Yeah right. Be real. I know you didn’t want me to come to this party.

What would make you say that?

I know you. When I told you I was going you started doing that pouting thing you always do when you don’t get your way.

You think you know me so well. You don’t. Skank.

Lol. Whatever.
She did know me. Or at last she knew what I allowed her to know. Maybe that’s all anyone can ever know about us. Maybe they’ll only know what we’re willing to share. I took out my journal and started writing.

*Secrets fester like sores untreated*

*But maybe they’re needed*

*Like shelter from hailstorms*

*Like concrete bunkers from bomb threats*

*Secrets linger like a bad aroma*

*But maybe they’re needed*

*They mask the truth like scented candles and soiled garbage cans*

*They hide blemishes like concealer and untimely breakouts*

Sleep starting to come down on me. I decided to finish the poem later. I had so many questions in my mind.
Revelations

The more familiar things got between Natalie and me the stranger they became. Ever since the night of the party I started thinking more and more about my feelings for her. The smallest things made me super happy. I smiled consistently. If I was in a bad mood, one text from Nat and all was right with the world. I missed her when we had separate classes. I couldn't focus on class because I was thinking about what we’d do when we saw each other later that day. We’d grown really close to each other. We were best friends. I knew why that still didn't’ feel like enough. I just didn't’ wanna admit it.

Natalie passed me a note during English class. She startled me. I was daydreaming. In typical Nat fashion, she wanted to know what I was thinking about and why I seemed so distracted. I loved that she paid attention to me and could always feel my mood shift. I told her that nothing was wrong and that I was just thinking about something I’d written in my journal the night before. She seemed satisfied with that answer.

I went back to my daydream and wanderings. My feelings grew. My reactions to her grew stranger. The slightest touch of her hand or the sensation of her putting her arm around me scared me. I wondered or more accurately obsessed about whether or not she felt any of the things I felt. It was doubtful. My bigger concern was whether or not she noticed me. Did she notice my reactions to her? I hoped not.

She was a very affectionate person. She says its because her mom is so spaced out that she doesn’t even know she exists half the time. Natalie told me she often felt alone in the world. Her dad was gone and he took her mom with him. I guess she just needed to feel loved. That wouldn't be a problem if the hugs didn't make me tingle. I’d be ok if holding her hand didn’t make my palms sweaty. I decided to avoid her touch. Things were getting out of hand. That was a mistake. She noticed.
We were studying in her room one afternoon and she attempted to put her head on my shoulder and share my history book with me. She laid her head on my shoulder and I jumped up. I made up an excuse about needing to use the bathroom. An hour later when it was time to go home she attempted to hug me, instead of our usual full body hug I put one arm around her and tried to hurry past her. She grabbed me.

“Umm what was that?”

“What are you talking about Nat?”

“Girl stop playing with me. You’ve been acting weird for weeks now. What’s the deal?”

“Nothing. I’m just tired.”

She took a deep breath.

“Why do we always have to do this ring around the rosies crap? You know I know something is wrong with you. So just tell me. Don’t make me pull it out of you?”

Oh my God.

“I can’t talk about it.”

She smacked her lips and rolled her eyes.

“What do you mean you can’t talk about it? Does it have anything to do with this secret you’re always talking about in your poetry but refuse to talk about in real life?”

I felt tears form like stagnant puddles of water. I couldn’t let them fall. I know she saw that tangible show of emotion and wondered where it was coming from. She was my friend. But what if… She deserved to know. Courage washed over me. I felt like I was sunbathing.

I said very quietly, “Yeah. That's what its about. “

“Ok so what is it?”

I shook my head. “I can’t.”
“You can. I thought we were friends. I tell you everything. But maybe we aren’t. I don’t do secrets.”

“You know we’re friends. Don’t even say that.”

She sat down on the bed.

“If we’re friends then act like it and stop keeping secrets.”

“Fine. I don’t know any other way to say this other than to just say it. I’m gay.”

She didn’t move a muscle. A bronze statue. Our eyes never lost contact.

“And?”

I was startled by her matter-of-factness.

“What do you mean and?”

She ignored my question.

“And I guess you like me judging by the fact that you keep running every time I touch you?”

This is not my life.

“Why would you ask me that?”

“Because it’s true.”

I rolled my eyes at her.

“Chill out Nat.”

“No I won’t. You’re my best friend and you’ve been lying to me.”

Frustration was beginning to set in.

“I have not lied to you.”

“Well then you’ve been lying to yourself.”

We must have stood there for five minutes in silence before she looked at me with those lifeless eyes.

“Just go.”
So I did.

That night I wrote her a letter. I said in it all the things I couldn’t’ speak out of my mouth.

Nat,

I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you about me. Please understand that it has nothing to do with our friendship. It’s fear. People here aren’t exactly open-minded. I know it’s wrong to put you in that same category but it’s hard living every day worried that someone will start to get suspicious. At this school, or in my life period, suspicion quickly becomes reality. If that ever happens my life will be ruined. You know my mom. She’d never accept it. Things would get even worse between us. But anyway, I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you. I hope we can still be friends. This doesn’t change anything. I’m still Addie. I’m still the same girl who laughs hysterically at Scooby Doo reruns. I’m still the same girl who pours her soul onto the pages of my journals. I’m still me. Still your friend. It’s not a big deal, I promise.

Addie

P.S. You were right about what you said. I don’t want you to feel weird around me. You don’t ever have to worry about me acting on it.

I gave her the letter the next day after one of our classes. She took it from me and just walked off. I didn't know what that meant or what to expect next but I was honest for the first time in my life. Whatever happens happens. I felt a burden lifted from me. I had no idea it would be so freeing. Relief. The rest of the day my mind was filled with all the what ifs. What if she decides she doesn’t wanna be friends? What if she tells someone else? What if she feels the same way? I had no idea what would come of my admission.

Later that day I was sitting in my room staring at the wall. Obsessing over the what ifs had changed to and obsession with why? Why did I tell her? Why didn’t I tell her before now? Why did I make my feelings so obvious to her? My head felt like it was spinning. I was dizzy
with worry. I heard my cell phone vibrate. I rolled my eyes not knowing who was texting me and assuming it was someone I really didn’t wanna talk to. I was wrong. It was Nat.

“Hello”

“Come outside. We need to talk.”

“Ok.”

She was keeping her word about never coming to my house again. I hung up and ran down the stairs. When I got outside she was standing there in skinny jeans and a New Orleans Saints hoodie. She had a blank expression on her face. She opened her arms as a sign that she wanted to hug me. I was shocked but I welcomed the gesture.

When we released each other from the hug we were silent for a few minutes. She broke the silence by asking me, “Do you feel better now that you’ve told someone?”

“Yeah. Relieved.”

“How long have you known?”

“Forever.”

“How’d you know?”

I paused. These were things I’d only spoken about in the pages of my journal. The words spilled from me for the first time. It was as though someone else was speaking the words in a voice I’d never heard.

“I’ve had boyfriends but it’s never seemed possible to be connected to them. Not emotionally anyway. Physically … umm lets just saying there’s nothing there. I’ve always known something was different. At times I just convinced myself that I wasn’t interested in guys because they are so immature or maybe I was just focused on my schoolwork and my writing. Only recently have I realized that it’s more than that.”

She smiled.
I relaxed.

“So why now?”

“You.”

She smiled again.

I continued.

“I’ve started feeling things for you I’ve never felt for anyone before but I don’t wanna talk about it. It’s embarrassing and I don’t want you to feel weird.”

“It’s cool. I wanna know. Have you ever done anything with a girl?”

“No. I haven’t done anything with anyone. I know that’s so lame.”

“No. It’s not. Do you want to?”

“Of course I do.”

She laughed.

“Dumb question huh?”

“Ya think?”

We both laughed loudly. I felt the tension ease between us. I couldn't have been happier. We talked, for what felt like hours. I told her about my first girl crush. We also talked about my fear of being exposed. She thought I should be proud of who I am. Nat told me that hiding was the coward’s way out. I knew she was right. I just didn’t know what to do about it. When Nat finally got ready to leave she hugged me again but this time she kissed me on my cheek. Her lips were warm and felt like heaven against my skin. The rest of me felt like hell. I was on fire.
One Man’s Pleasure Another Man’s Gossip

From that day forward Natalie always kissed me on the cheek when we greeted each other or when we parted company. I always let her initiate affection because I was so worried about her becoming uncomfortable. Maybe I worried too much because things got even better between us after I admitted the truth. I’m not good at reading signals so I didn’t want to assume anything. I just wanted to live and see what happened.

One day we were in Natalie’s bedroom watching tv when she reached for my hand. She interlocked her fingers with mine. Butterflies. Then she started to rub her thumb against mine. I didn’t know what to do so I laid very still. I felt like a melting ice sculpture. Even though my heart was racing rapidly, I wasn’t breathing. I was frozen in the pages of my autobiography, waiting for an unknown author to write the next line or finish this chapter.

It was as though Nat took that thought out of my head when she asked me, “why haven’t you tried to kiss me?”

I was startled by the question.

“Why WOULD I try to kiss you?”

“Why WOULDN’T you?”

“I can think of a couple of reasons. One… you’re straight. Two…you’re straight. Three… you’re my best friend and I couldn't imagine doing anything that would mess that up.”

She let my hand go. “Well it looks like you have everything figured out.” She sat up. She seemed disappointed.

“What’s wrong? What am I missing?”

She rolled her eyes at me.

“Nat, what’s wrong?”

She asked me, “You haven’t noticed any differences between us since you told me?”
“Yeah I’ve noticed but I just figured that we’d gotten closer because I told you about me. Am I wrong?”

“No you’re not wrong. I’ve been curious since you told me.”

“Curious about what?”

She laughed and shook her head.

“Damn you are so slow. Curious about what it would be like to mess around with a girl. You know I’ve been with boys before and it was ok but not amazing. I hadn’t even thought about being with a girl until we started talking about it.”

I didn’t know what to say so I just grabbed her hand and pulled her into an embrace. In that hug I wanted her to feel my heart saying thank you. Thank you for not rejecting me. Thank you for being open. I pulled back and moved my head from her shoulder and our eyes met. I leaned in and so did she. I closed my eyes. She pressed her lips against mine. She was cotton candy and I was water. I melted into her. We kissed. We kissed. And we kissed again. For the first time in my life I felt like a person. Not a freak. I didn’t know what it meant to her or what it would mean to us but in this moment these kisses were everything.

I rubbed the small of her back and she wrapped her arms tightly around my neck. Her skin was fragrant. The sweet taste of her lips was nature’s nectar. The smell of her strawberry flavored lip-gloss lingered. These kisses were unlike anything I’d every felt before. It was pleasure that I had not yet experienced. I don’t’ how long we kissed but we finally broke away from each other when her mom called her name from the living room. It startled us both. She yelled back, “Ma’am?”

Her mom’s response was muffled. She looked at me and smirked. “I’ll be right back. Let me see what she wants.”
When she left I looked around the room making sure that I was still on planet earth. This
couldn't be my life. Maybe I’d morphed into a different universe. Natalie burst back into the
room and snatched me from my daydream. She was smiling.
I asked her, “What did your mom want?”

“Nothing. She wanted me to reach her the remote. Apparently getting off the couch and
walking three steps is totally out of the question today.”
I laughed.

She just looked at me. She’d never looked at me like that before.

“What?”

“So what did you think about your first time kissing a girl.”

“I don’t know. What did YOU think about your first time kissing a girl?”

“It was great. It was different. You didn’t just shove your tongue in my mouth. Most guys do
that and they grab me and try to touch me everywhere at once. It’s always so rushed like its only
an appetizer and they are in a hurry to get the entrée. It was different with you.”

“Good different?”

“Great different. Felt like the kiss was the entrée for once. You’re kisses are good. Really
good.”

I felt like I’d just bought prime real estate on cloud nine.

“I can’t believe this just happened. I don’t wanna say anything stupid and ruin the moment. I
want this moment to always be beautiful in my mind so I’m just gonna leave.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Umm yes I am. You know I get all goofy when I don’t know what to say.”

“Yes you do get very goofy. Like right now. It’s cute though. I like it.”

“Ok Nat. I’ll see you tomorrow at school.”
I stood up but she was still sitting on the bed. I leaned down and kissed her quickly on the lips. As I walked out of her room, I realized I’d just kissed her goodbye. I wasn’t sure where this newfound courage was coming from but it felt great. I felt amazing.

The next day at school things weren’t weird between us at all like I’d expected them to be. We laughed like we always did. We whispered and wrote notes to each other as always but the notes started to change from silly gossip and chatter about our teachers or our classmates to discussions of feelings. In English class, she slipped me note. It said, *I wanna kiss you*. I balled it up as soon as I read it and gave her a look. She laughed. She knew this kind of stuff made me nervous. All it took was one of these idiots to grab the note from me and we’d be finished. Nat didn’t seem to care.

We spent all of our time together. When we weren’t together we were on the phone or text messaging. We touched each other as often as we could when no one was looking. We kissed and held each other every opportunity we got. A couple of times Natalie pulled me into a stall in the girl’s bathroom and kissed me. It was exciting and nerve wracking all at the same time. Nat seemed to live for the adventure. She said she didn’t care if we got caught. The least of her concerns was the opinions of our classmates.

We settled into a routine. School. Schoolwork. Play. Life was as good as it had ever been for me. The school year was quickly ending and before we knew it we’d be juniors. That was a welcomed idea. The sooner I could get away from Louisiana the better. I was walking to the student parking lot one afternoon to meet Nate Jr. when I realized I didn’t have my cell phone. I told him that I just needed to run back in and find my phone. When I got back in the building I ran to my last class but it wasn’t there. I went to my sixth period class and just as I was about to walk through the door, Kaitlynn was coming out of the room. We nearly ran into each other. She didn’t say excuse me she just looked at me and laughed. Whatever. I was in no
mood for her antics. I saw my cell phone. It was on a desk a couple of seats from where I normally sit. I thought that was odd but brushed it off because I was just happy to have my phone. I put the phone in my pocket and hurried back to the student parking lot where DJ was waiting impatiently. We headed home.

The next day at school I thought I’d entered the twilight zone. It was like something off of a cheesy teen movie where the student walks down the hall in slow motion and everyone whispers and points. I didn’t know what the problem was so I checked the usual possibilities of embarrassment. My fly wasn’t open and I didn’t have toilet tissue on my shoe. I kept walking and ignored the idiots.

Things got really weird by third period. That was the first class Natalie and I had together. Bruce, a dumb ass football player, started talking to me. We never spoke. He asked me, “Don’t you wanna sit by ya girl Natalie.” I looked at him as though he were an alien life form. “No, I’m fine Bruce.” He laughed heartily in his deep baritone voice. I looked at Natalie but she was reading a book and hadn’t noticed the scene.

I tried not to think anything of it. I tried to write it off as just another day in the land of the dummies until my phone vibrated. I pulled it out of my pocket when my teacher turned to write something on the board. I had a text message from Kaitlynn. It was a picture. I scrolled over to the picture and it was a screenshot of a conversation between Natalie and me. My heart sank. She sent several more pictures of my conversations with Natalie. These conversations were private. In one message I told Natalie how good it felt to hold her and kiss her. In another message I told her that I’d never felt this way about anybody before. I’d never felt so violated in all my life. My embarrassment quickly turned to rage. I texted her back.

I should kill you for going through my phone.
I’m not worried. I always knew something was messed up about you. Dyke. I wasn’t “messed up” when you and your click of nothings kept inviting me to your wack ass parties. After the 50th declined invite I thought you’d get the hint. Attention whore!!

Whatever!! I invited you out of charity. I couldn’t care less about you. You’re tragic.

Fuck you!!

I’ll leave that to Natalie but I’ve already sent this to every sophomore whose number I had in my phone.

Wow... Funny... At least somebody’s willing... Pathetic bitch!!

When the bell rang I rushed out of the class. I felt like I could hear everyone’s thoughts. I didn’t know what I was gonna do. Natalie nearly chased me down the hall to get my attention.

We always walked to class together.

“Wait Addie.”

I turned around with tears in my eyes. She seemed startled.

“What’s wrong?”

“Everyone knows.”

“Knows what?”

“About me and you.”

She sighed, “What are you talking about?”

“I left my phone in class yesterday. I thought I left it in 7th period but I didn’t. When I went back to sixth period to get it Kaitlynn was coming out of the room. I didn’t think anything of it
at the time. Not until she texted me a few minutes ago in class. She looked through my text
messages and saw conversations between us and took screenshots.”

I was talking so fast I was surprised she understood anything I was saying. Natalie looked
shocked.

“But how do you know she took screenshots?”

“She sent them to me.”

“Are you serious? That bitch.”

Before I could respond Natalie stormed off. I didn’t know what to do and I couldn't be seen
chasing her down the hallway. Not after everyone read those text messages. I felt my world
crumbling. Out of nowhere I heard a loud noise. I heard my classmates screaming. I walked in
the direction of the noise. When I fought through the crowd. I was horrified and thrilled to see
Natalie on top of Kaitlynn punching her. Before I could break them up, Mr. Boudreaux, the
assistant principal, burst through the group of students and pulled Natalie off of Kaitlynn. By
this point Kaitlynn’s ponytail came loose. Her shirt was torn and covered in blood. Her blood. I
took pleasure in that momentarily until reality set in. My life was over.
Cloudy with a Chance of Pain

I walked into my house with every intention of going to my room and getting in bed and crying. I walked through the front door when I heard my mom whisper, “Give me your phone.”

“Why?”

She yelled, “Little girl don’t ask me any questions give me the damn phone.”

“Fine.”

I handed her the phone. I knew she’d find nothing because I’d already deleted everything out of my phone and set a lock code. Something I obviously should have done a long time ago. I put the code in for her. After a few minutes of her looking through my phone she handed it back to me. She looked at me with cold dead eyes. “Tiffany called me.”

“Ok. Who is Tiffany?”

“Mrs. Smith, your guidance counselor. My sorority sister.”

I didn’t speak. My body language said it all. My shoulders slumped so hard they must have touched.

“I didn’t raise you like this.”

“Like what mom.”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. Natalie is not welcome here. And you are not allowed to talk to her or see her and you most certainly won’t be going to her house.”

She never looked at me once.

“You can’t stop me from talking to her. It has nothing to do with her. It’s me. It’s always been me.”

“I will not talk to you about this. I’ve made myself clear. As a matter of fact give me the phone.”

I handed her the phone and walked off. I heard her yell at my back. “You are not gay. Period. I can’t believe you would embarrass me like this.”
I couldn’t respond. I cried. I knew Natalie would text me or call me but it wouldn’t matter. A few hours later my dad came into the room. I was lying in the dark.

“Baby girl?”

“Yeah.”

“Your mom told me what happened. How long has this being going on with you and Natalie?”

I’d already shut down.

“I don’t wanna talk about it dad. It’s over now.”

“Ok. We don’t have to talk about it now but we’ll have to talk at some point.”

“I know.”

I rolled over and pulled the covers over my head. He took that as his signal to leave.

It was hard pulling myself out of bed the next morning. On the ride to school my brother didn’t say a word to me. This was unusual. He was normally a chatty Cathy on the way to school. I asked him, “Are you gonna say anything to me DJ?”

He didn’t even look at me.

“One of my boys forwarded me the texts first thing yesterday morning. I wasn’t surprised but I’d hoped it wouldn’t have gotten out to everyone. You ok?”

“No.”

Awkward silence.

“Mama took my phone and forbid me to speak to Natalie again.”

“Damn. It’ll pass.”

“No it won’t. Wait. DJ you said you weren’t surprised. Why not?”

“Come on A. I know you. I can’t even count how many of my boys have tried to get with you. You blew them off. You were totally uninterested. I can’t think of a single time I’ve seen you
show any interest in a dude. And then when Natalie came around and I saw you moping when y’all had a fight, it was obvious. But you know I don’t care A. It doesn’t matter.”

Even though his words comforted some small part of me, I still couldn't respond. We rode the rest of the drive in silence. We arrived at school and said our goodbyes. He hugged me. I guess he felt sorry for me and wanted to show me that he understood. I appreciated that. As soon as I walked into the building I started to look for Natalie. I didn’t see her the whole day. I found out she’d been suspended.

I didn’t see Natalie for a week. It was the longest week of my life. My cell phone was our primary source of communication so without it we were disconnected. I didn’t know what she was thinking. I didn’t know what I was feeling. Things had gotten even worse at home. I was avoiding my dad and my mom was avoiding life. She rarely came out of her room and when she did it was only briefly. When we crossed paths it was gut wrenching like fingernails drug slowly across a chalkboard. She looked at me unlike the child she’d birthed. Unlike her babygirl. I was a stranger. An alien. It hurt.

One night, the family went out to dinner and I heard my mom and dad arguing about whether or not I should go. Of course, my dad was on my side and wanted me to go but as is always the case, she won the power struggle. I heard him say, “Come on Angie.” He was begging. He wanted to save me from her. It didn’t matter. Nobody even came to my room. Tears.

When I finally saw Natalie she didn’t even speak to me. She acted like I didn’t exist. By seventh period, I couldn’t take it anymore. I cornered her in the hallway.

“Natalie, why are you avoiding me?”

“Addison, I have absolutely nothing to say to you. I’ve been calling you and texting you all week and you haven’t responded to anything.”
I put my head down.

“I know. I’m sorry. Mrs. Boudreaux called my mom and told her everything. My mom took my phone.”

“Ok. So what? Why didn’t you come to my house after school?”

“Nat…”

“No it’s cool.”

She attempted to walk off. I stepped in front of her.

“Don’t walk off like this. My mom forbid me to speak to you or have any contact with you.”

“So. You didn’t have to listen! Damn. This is ridiculous.”

She was yelling at me.

“Nat you know how she is. She’s making my life a living hell. It’s not like we were close before but now its like she hates me. The few times we’ve talked she goes on and on about the embarrassment of her soror calling. All she cares about is her image and what’ll happen if it gets out that the great Angela Hebert’s daughter is a dyke. She even pulled me out of the debutante with some flimsy excuse about it interfering with my grades. Not that I care but still…”

She shrugged her shoulders. For the first time, Nat seemed completely unmoved by my sob story.

“Who cares what your mom thinks? You said YOU didn’t but I guess that was all talk.”

“It wasn’t.”

I tried to grab her hand. She jerked away from me violently.

“Go to hell. Don’t touch me Addison. We wouldn't anyone to see you touching me.”

“Come on Nat you know it's not like that.”

“It’s exactly like that. I damn near killed Kaitlynn. Got suspended. They wanted to expel me. Had to lie to my mom. All of that was for you. I couldn’t care less who knew what. That didn’t
matter to me. You did. You were afraid and in pain and I reacted. Out of love but that was my fault.”

She just looked at me. Eyes heated. She looked at me like she wished she’d never met me. I blinked hard hoping by some miracle that I’d be able to disappear and take the ugliness of this moment with me.

The truth in her words hit me like a ton of bricks. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t speak. I didn't try to stop her when she walked away. I knew there were no words that would fix this. She stood up for me. She stood up for us and I didn’t do the same. I didn’t even try. I didn't know how.

I knew she’d never speak to me again. I didn't want her to. It was such a strange sensation not wanting Nat to talk to me. I never in a million lifetimes thought I’d feel this way but I couldn't let her down again. I was destined to. There was nothing I could do. She wasn’t asking me for rebellion. She just wanted a sign…any sign of courage. If I’d snuck over to her house even once then maybe my feet wouldn’t be sinking into this quicksand. Maybe I wouldn’t be standing here watching the only truth in my life walk away.

I’d been lying to myself. I was seeing something in the mirror that really wasn’t there. I thought by refusing to join the social scene at school that I was taking a stand. How wrong could I have been? There was no real strength in avoiding everyone. I thought that made me a rebel. It didn’t. It made me a victim. A coward. In avoiding everyone and everything I was avoiding me. I couldn’t avoid Natalie. She only caused the reality to bubble to the surface. And I couldn’t avoid my mother. I can’t avoid this dark cloud hanging over my head. The air is fragrant. The rain was coming. I wasn’t ready to get soaked. I’d just have to find an umbrella.
VITA

Tremaine Sanders is a thirty year native of Louisiana. She was born in Lafayette, Louisiana but later moved to Baton Rouge at the age of one. She graduated with honors from Glen Oaks High School in 2000. Sanders received her Bachelors of Arts degree with honors in English Education from Southern University Agricultural and Mechanical College in 2010. She graduated with certifications in both social studies and English (6-12). Before graduating from Southern University, she fulfilled her student teaching obligations at Southern University Laboratory School where she taught English II and English IV. Upon successful completion of her bachelor’s degree, she was hired at McKinley Middle Magnet School to teach sixth grade World History. She is still employed at McKinley Middle Magnet School where she currently teaches seventh grade English Language Arts.