

**In Search for a Full Vision: Writing Representations of African American Adolescent Girls**

BY

Gholnecsar E. Muhammad

B.S., Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville, 2003

M.Ed., Lindenwood University, 2006

DISSERTATION

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Defense Committee:

Alfred W. Tatum, Chair and Advisor  
P. Zitlali Morales, Curriculum and Instruction  
Taffy E. Raphael, Curriculum and Instruction  
William Teale, Curriculum and Instruction  
Marcelle M. Haddix, Syracuse University

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy  
Read! In the name of your Lord Who created  
Who created man from a clinging form.  
Read! Your Lord Is the Most Bountiful One  
Who taught by pen,  
Who taught man what he did not know. (Surah Alaq)

**All praises are due to Allah.** Through His words, I am safe, protected and guided.

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GEM

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## SUMMARY

Through a qualitative case study (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009), this inquiry examined how eight African American adolescent girls wrote representations of themselves and which contextual factors contributed to their writings. The girls, ages 12-17 years old, participated in a four-week summer literacy collaborative grounded in the historical literacy enactments gleaned from nineteenth century African American literary societies. Literary societies during the 1800s were organized literacy collaboratives and members gathered to think across significant issues, read and discuss literature and write across a variety of texts (Porter, 1936). Literary societies were spaces where African Americans of various ages and literacy abilities could gather around meaningful and significant texts to encourage and improve reading, writing, and speaking skills (Belt-Beyan, 2004; McHenry, 2002).

During the literacy collaborative of this study, participants read mentor texts (Calkins, 1994) and wrote representations of themselves across personal narratives, poetry, short stories, informational pieces, and letter writing. Data sources include writing artifacts, pre and post interviews from each participant, researcher memos, and observational notes. Critical sociocultural theory was used to organize and make sense of the data (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). Using the three frames of critical sociocultural theory: identity, power and agency, the writings were organized and analyzed through open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Findings show that the girls wrote across similar platforms of African American women historically which included writing to represent self, to resist or counter ascribed representations and writing toward social change. The girls wrote multiple and complex representations which included ethnic, gender, intellectual, kinship, sexual, individual and community representations. The primary contextual factors of the literacy collaborative that

contributed to their self-representations included the use of mentor text, having the freedom to write openly and without apology, and uninterrupted writing time.

These findings suggest the girls' writings served as hybrid spaces for the girls to explore, make sense of, and express different manifestations of self. Their representations were not static portrayals of self; instead, they were socially constructed and dynamic with the potential to change with developmental stages and new experiences. Additionally, nurturing a literacy collaborative grounded in history created space for girls to cultivate writing proficiency, explore representations, use language to counter and reclaim power in writing, and build intellect. This study aligns with the extant literature that supports African American adolescent girls need spaces in and outside of classrooms to read, think, and write about who they are (Baxley & Boston, 2010; Boston & Baxley, 2007; Brooks, Browne, & Hampton, 2008; Carter, 2007; Deblase, 2003; Richardson, 2002; Sutherland, 2005; Winn, 2010; Wissman, 2008). It also extends the research by offering wider views of representations from the girls' voices as well as a broadened historical lens to their reading and writing. Implications for practice are suggested that involve the use of mentor text to support writing, writing across platforms, and viewing classrooms as literacy collaboratives. This study offers a more complete vision of representations of African American adolescent girls. When educators know such knowledge, they are better equipped to create spaces in learning environments that are responsive to their lives.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### Statement of the Research Problem

In the introduction to a collection of narratives by African American women from 1860-1960, Mary Helen Washington wrote, *The making of a literary history in which black women are fully represented is a search for full vision to create a circle where now we have but a segment* (1995, p. xxvii). In this line, Washington was making a reference to African American women writers and how they were silenced and underrepresented within literary traditions. While African American women's writings have made a substantial contribution to the intellectual community in projecting their realities, Washington argues that their writings have been portrayed in literary traditions as "singular and anomalous." She was also alluding to *A Voice from the South* by Anna Julia Cooper (1892/1988), who compared a world in which women are made to be "subordinate" to a physical body with one of its eyes covered with a bandage. When the bandage is removed, Cooper writes, *the whole body is filled with light. It sees a circle where before it saw a segment. The darkened eye restored, every member rejoices with it* (p. 122). Cooper added, *The myopic sight of the darkened eye can only be restored when the full range of the black women's voice, with its own special timbres and shadings, remains mute no longer* (p. xiv). The silencing or muting of African American women's representations provided the grounds for Washington's call for the reconstruction of the literary tradition suggesting that a full vision is restored when the voices, lives, and stories of African American women are represented and not blurred from the metaphoric bandage. Currently, there still exists a strong need to seek a similar *full vision* of African American adolescent girls. Their writings and contemporary literary pursuits are needed to piece together the "broken and sporadic" as well as missing accounts of how they are represented and how they represent themselves (Washington, 1987). The broken

and sporadic accounts of African American adolescent girls' representations are illustrated within two competing bodies of literature. The first of these are from African American women who have written to represent themselves and their lived experiences (Foster, 1993; Peterson, 1995; Royster, 2000; Wall, 2005). African American women have written about themes of love, art, imagination, civil rights, health, family, freedom, friendship, and beauty (Lee, 2006). They portrayed themselves as compassionate, sisterly, strong, resilient, loving beings who unselfishly used writings to advance conditions for themselves and for the wider community. In African American women's personal narratives, for example, they hardly separated the "self" from the "community" and the "I" voice within their writings was often representative of a multitude of voices (Stover, 2003). Comparably, Henderson (1992) explains that the voices of African American women were *multivocal* and represented a multitude of experiences, ideals, and identifications. Their writings characterized the diverse nature of their lives and were not singular, monolithic artifacts.

### **African American Women's Representations in Writings**

African American women have written multiple representations of themselves, across different types of texts. In an African American women's anthology with over 150 writings women ranging from colonial and antebellum periods to the twenty-first century, researcher, Valerie Lee (2006) found that through several genres of text such as poetry, short stories, autobiographies, memories, and essays, African American women expressed themselves across several themes of representations. In her literary analysis, she found that they represented themselves within writings among the following broad categories: 1) beauty, 2) gender, 3) race, 4) education and intellect (including writing about literacy and language), 5) arts and creativity, 6) global, national, regional and local identities, 7) religion, 8) family, friendships, relationships,

9) intergenerational representations and 10) health, life, and death. These diverse categories suggest the wide nature of lived and imagined experiences as well as the complex nature of their identities. As they represented themselves, they too wrote about critical issues affecting their lives. These included global issues, civil rights, poverty, privilege, racial conflicts, sexual harassment, violence against women, laws, citizenship, women's rights, and enslavement. These issues signified that their writings were intended to create awareness, advocacy, and social change (Lee, 2006; Peterson, 1995; Royster, 2000; Wall, 2005). They sought to represent themselves in literary traditions to make their voices public. Their writings exhibited a quest and display of multiple representations. Writing also served as a social platform to write to wide audiences about critical issues that were important in their lives. Multiple representations about topics signified the plurality of their voices. Their writings were expressions of "self, of society, and of self in society" while also the means to "write themselves into being" (Royster, 2000). Their writing practices were not merely skills to obtain or acts of participation but instead embodied a purposeful significance to their lives.

### **Historical Representations**

The second body of literature offers broken and sporadic accounts into Black girlhood and often focuses on others' projected representations on African American women and girls. This literature presents dichotomized and often distorted representations that exclude their voices, their interpretations, and their truths. Many of these representations of African American girls stem from history. From the seventeenth century onward, African American women have been portrayed and depicted as the "jezebel," "mammy," "wrench," "sapphire," "money hungry heartless bitch," as well as depictions of being loud, aggressive, and not beautiful (Collins, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Richardson, 2002; Stephens & Phillips, 2003; Sutherland, 2005;

Townsend, Thomas, Neilands, & Jackson, 2010; West, 1995). These representations have been deemed as assaults and linked to what has been called a “war” against African American females, affecting the selfhood of both women and girls (Brice, 2007). They have been pervasive over time and have the potential to marginalize their lives. Specifically, the images of the mammy, jezebel, and sapphire have been given attention by researchers who have studied representations among African American adolescent girls. Although these three images stem from history, they have contemporary manifestations and are still visible in today’s music, television, literature and films (Richardson, 2007; Stephens & Phillips, 2003; West, 2008).

**Mammy representation.** The mammy historically portrayed the African American woman who was enslaved as a domestic servant who put the needs of the “master” and his family ahead of herself and her family. She was portrayed emotionally and physically asexual, often serving as a nanny, housekeeper, or cook (Collins, 2000; Townsend et al., 2010). While this representation is still portrayed in contemporary media outlets and directed more toward women instead of adolescent girls (West, 2008), the physical description and interpretation of beauty of the mammy is still an issue among social science researchers who study African American adolescent girls. The mammy was portrayed as overweight, having natural coarse hair, with dark skin complexion. Measuring her beauty against Eurocentric beauty standards, she and others exhibiting any of these physical characteristics were seen as less attractive. Comparing African American women and girls against Eurocentric forms of beauty has positioned them on either side of good or bad hair, straight or nappy hair, thin-framed or boarded-framed, and light or dark skin, with the latter in each contrast being projected as the substandard (Lester, 2000). Researchers have found that these ideals of beauty serve as boundaries for African American



adolescent girls (Brooks et al., 2008; Carter, 2007; Sutherland, 2005) and that African American girls have spoken against such depictions after reading about portrayals in literature.

**Jezebel representation.** The jezebel image was presented as the African American woman or girl whose behavior was deemed as “loose” or immoral (Collins, 2000; West, 2008). The jezebel or “erotic icon” depicts African American women and girls as amoral, wild, promiscuous, predatory, and depicts an oversexualized female who gets attention, love, and material goods through her sexuality (Pilgrim, 2002; Stephens & Phillips, 2003). This perception characterized them as “sexually unrestrained” and consequently justified malicious acts such as rape, molestation and other assaults placed upon them (Ladson-Billings, 2009; West, 1995; 2008). Furthermore, they have been positioned as the “primitive sex object,” “animal-like,” “savage,” or being “highly sexual” (Harris & Hill, 1998). Unlike the mammy perception, the jezebel who was sexually desirable was depicted as a “mulatto” with long hair and light skin. In contemporary media, this image depicts women and girls on television and in music lyrics and videos who are dependent upon using their sexuality as a tool to gain material goods. Modern labels of African American women and girls are freaks, hos, and gold diggers who are sexually aggressive and lack the ability to love (Stephens & Phillips, 2005; West, 2008).

**Sapphire representation.** The sapphire representation characterizes African American women and girls as hostile, hateful, violent and dangerous who cannot control their emotions. Sapphire was also a character in the 1940s and 1950s radio and television show, Amos ‘n’ Andy who took pleasure in emasculating men, making her unattractive to any man (Townsend et al., 2010). Sapphire was viewed as loud, argumentative, who gave verbal threats and assaults (West, 1995). West explains that African American women and girls today may feel a need to avoid getting angry (even if it is justified) to avoid being portrayed as this “threatening-like” stereotype

(2008). This image is related to the ways African American adolescent girls are perceived in schools by teachers who pay more attention to their social behavior than their academics, subjecting the girls to behavioral modification (Morris, 2007). Morris found that this focus on discipline “stemmed from perceptions of them as challenging to authority, loud, and not ladylike” (p. 501) yet Morris did not observe this in his observational data. Instead he observed Black girls who were assertive and engaged in the classroom learning.

### **Prevailing Narrative on Social Injuries and Pathologies**

In addition to historical representations, the current landscape of mainstream media and research is saturated with social injuries and pathologies. Social injuries are any kind of pain or struggle that is inflicted by or shaped the social environment. Examples of pathologies include mental health issues, obesity, teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual victimization and violence (Brice, 2007). Researchers who study African American adolescent girls in the fields of psychology and sociology have overwhelmingly focused on such issues. These topics and their content are linked to long-standing historic representations. Even a search I conducted on an ERIC database using the words, *African American, adolescent, female, education, and school* yielded five articles of the following titles, “Vaginal Douching among African American Adolescent Females”; “Aggression, Victimization and Depression among African American Adolescent Females”; “Violence, Exposure and Health-Related Risk Among African American Adolescent Female Detainees”; “AIDS, Sexuality and African American Adolescent Females”; and “Peer-Level Risk Factors for Laboratory Confirmed STD Prevalence Among Low-Income African American Adolescent Females.” Ironically, none of these articles are directly related to school or academics. Researchers have shared findings, however that academic problems, mental health issues, and dismal economic conditions of African American adolescent girls are the result

of maladaptive behaviors and social injuries (Brice, 2007; Kaplan & Cole, 2003; Martyn & Hutchinson, 2001; Pugh-Lilly, Neville, & Poulin, 2001; Thomas, Davidson, & McAdoo, 2008; Townsend et al., 2010).

### **A Critique of Historical Representations and Research Focusing on Pathologies**

When analyzing these literatures, I found that researchers reported that these images still exist in the public, yet African American females reject such depictions. Many of the studies were absent of the voices or responses from African American adolescent girls themselves. It is unknown if African American adolescent girls observe such representations in their lives or if they accept, resist, reorient or negotiate such depictions. While many African American women wrote to negotiate, reorient and resist some of the historic representations (Peterson, 1995; Royster, 2000), we do not know if girls will write about this content and write in similar ways as women have done. Many African American women writers have written for social justice and as a form of resistance toward the representations that did not signify their lives or wrongful representations written by others. These “others” were those who did not know, seek to know, or live their lives, and often used socially constructed representations for their own, selfish needs or as controlling mechanisms to make oppression, racism and sexism appear to be normal, natural, and a part of everyday life (Collins, 2000). African American women’s writings were a form of safeguarding themselves from being defined by others and the assaults to their selfhood (Richardson, 2002). They wrote to resist false narratives and have repeatedly used their stories to represent truth (Collins, 2000; Peterson, 1995; Richardson, 2002; Royster, 2000; Wall, 2005). Audre Lorde (1984), speaking to the importance of self-representation among African American women, wrote, “if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others- for their use and to our detriment” (p. 45).

The persistent focus on these topics in research pertaining to African American adolescent girls' perceived vulnerabilities, social behavior, sexuality, or associated representations in research is not alone problematic, but these research literatures should be complemented with qualitative literacy studies with African American adolescent girls' voices central to describing the ways they perceive their lives and represent themselves because an imbalanced view of African American adolescent girls in the research has the potential to marginalize their lives. This may begin to seep into the thoughts of those who provide instruction to them (Thomas & Jackson, 2007). In the historical record among African American women's writings, there was not an infiltration of such pathology-focused writing. Instead, their writings offered depictions of strength, resistance, resiliency, and renewal (Wall, 2005).

Additionally, when African American adolescent girls continue to see potentially negative representations, do not see projections of themselves, or are ignored altogether, these become barriers that stifle their quest for self-definition and self-determination (Richardson, 2002). The quest of understanding self is important to their overall development. The barriers stifling an understanding of selfhood has led to African American adolescent girls having a low self-concept and being more susceptible to experiencing social injuries and pathologies (Brice, 2007). The researchers studying such pathologies suggest that these lingering historical representations offered by others have become normalized and have put girls in a position where they begin to internalize these beliefs. Richardson (2007) has argued through her studies with young Black women that it is not uncommon for African American girls to have to seek a positive sense of self as they battle with negative stereotypical images and messages. The discrepancy with selfhood can be difficult when considering the confluence of race, class, gender, and history and its impact on their ability to make meaning of who they are as they move

across different contexts. It becomes important then to understand how African American adolescent girls represent themselves when these types of images have historically surrounded many of their lives. There currently is not a wealth of information from literacy research to draw conclusions whether or not they are affected by these representations or if they still have a desire (as African American women in the past have) to write about or against them. Few investigations have explored how African American adolescent girls respond to, interpret how they are represented or explored how they represent themselves (Emerson, 2002).

### **Lack of African American Adolescent Girls in Writing Research**

Although there is a rich literary history of African American women writing to represent their lives, African American adolescent girls' representations of themselves through their own writings is missing from the research literature today. A search on the ERIC databases (i.e. CSA Illumina, EBSCOhost, FirstSearch, and Ovid) from the last 25 years using a variation of the terms, *African American, Black, of color, girl, female, adolescent, writing, and literacy* yielded fourteen studies with a focus on the literacies of African American adolescent girls, yet just four studies focused on their writings (Mahiri & Sablo, 1996; Winn, 2010; Wissman, 2008, 2011). I chose the time span of 25 years because I believed it would offer a wide range of research. Fewer of these studies discussed a historical link to African American adolescent girls today. Other searches in databases including PsychInfo and Sage Premier produced similar results.

African American women's literary traditions of writing to represent themselves coupled with outside accounts focused on distorted representations, pathologies and the lack of writing research on African American adolescent female representations do not offer enough insight into how they represent themselves. Instead, they paint an incomplete, unclear picture connected to their selfhood and into representing who they are. To respond to this incomplete picture of

African American girls, this study examined how they represented themselves within their writings. While researchers have analyzed how African American adolescent girls are affected by perceived representations (Peterson, Wingood, DiClemente, Harrington, & Davies, 2007; Richardson, 2007; Townsend et al., 2010), there is a limited amount of information on how they represent themselves through their own literary, writing pursuits. This study therefore provides more complete characterizations.

As I write about African American adolescent girls, I am referring to girls of African descent, who self-identify as Black or African American between the ages of 12-17 years old. African American adolescent girls, like African American women, make up a heterogeneous group of the population (Brooks, Sekayi, Savage, Waller, & Picot, 2010) and therefore cannot be represented in monolithic terms. The issue of representation is one of importance for African American adolescent girls because of the heterogeneity that exists. It is also important to counter potentially negative depictions that have represented them singularly. For this study, I defined representation as the description, depiction, portrayal or characterization of the self or someone else in a particular way. It is also a form of action of speaking or standing up for self or for someone else. Representation typically attempts to allude toward some type of truth. The focus on representation and writing is central because African American women and girls have a unique history of having others speak on their behalf and representing who they are as they have simultaneously written to resist certain portrayals. African American women have specifically written to represent self, counter misrepresentations, and have written for social change (Royster, 2000). I found that African American adolescent girls today write for similar purposes to offer interpretations of themselves.

## **Purpose and Significance of Study**

To get closer to a “full vision” in understanding how girls represent themselves, research is needed with their voices at the center. There is limited information about how they choose to be represented and how they write representations of themselves. Without research on the ways they represent themselves, we are left with mere segments or limited insight into who they are. The “bandage” stays on the “eye” or the visual landscape of African American adolescents girls and leaves a blurred image into their lives if there is a lack of attention to the writings of African American adolescent girls. Therefore, I decided to examine the writings of African American adolescent girls ages from 12-17 who participated in a literacy collaborative to understand how they represent themselves. The following research questions were used to guide my research, 1) *How do African American adolescent girls represent themselves through their writings?* 2) *Which factors within a literacy collaborative contribute to representations within their writings?* As these questions served as a guide, I considered the literary history and historical literacy collaboratives involving young African American women. These historical understandings were used to shape the research context and helped to analyze and interpret data. In addition, I explored the contextual factors within a literacy collaborative in the study that contributed to the participants’ writings. These factors could be useful in thinking about and designing pedagogy in educative spaces that could inform the process of writing as well as improving and advancing products of writing.

This study was planned to project the voices of African American adolescent girls in their own words. African American adolescent girls and their writings have been understudied. The research to help us understand how they write about themselves is absent. While researchers have previously examined the heterogeneity of African American girls and representations

through reading and responding to literature, very few studies have captured how girls represent themselves through writing. In the next chapter, I present a review of relevant research and include research that explicates the literary history of African American women's writings.



## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview of Review of Literature**

In this chapter, I explore the historical enactments and conceptualizations of literacy among African American people and explore the writings of African American women within these viewpoints. As part of my conceptual framework, I use three platforms gleaned from research of African American women's writings, which speak to the content and purpose of their writings. This leads to a brief review of nineteenth century African American literary societies, which were formal organizations for young African American women to improve and advance their writing, knowledge about self, and intellect. Within this chapter, I then review literacy research investigating the representations of African American adolescent girls and the ways certain texts offer representations of themselves. Next, I review studies that examined how African American adolescent girls talk among frames of representations and how they write representations of themselves.

### **Nineteenth Century Literacy and African American Women's Writings**

Over the past four hundred years, African American women's writings have been concerned with "recuperation and representation" (Wall, 2005). The need for African American women to both recuperate and authentically represent their lives was important due to a larger social context in the United States that was imbued with racial and gender hostility and discrimination against African American people. African Americans were frequently subject to hostility, abuse, and had a number of restrictions placed upon them (McHenry, 2002). One large restriction among African American people was the right to educate themselves and their youth. Because of this and other limited rights, they had to rely upon themselves to create and sustain their own pathways for learning (Fisher, 2004, 2009). Rather than wait for their rights and

education to be granted from those with legislative power, they instead created their own agendas and claimed authority by organizing spaces for literacy.

### **Conceptualizing Literacy**

During the nineteenth century, literacy was synonymous with education and therefore, to be educated meant that they were able to read and write print independently as well as engage in social and cultural literacy practices (Harris, 1992). The blatant racism and conditions for African Americans sparked an impulse inside of them to not only educate themselves, but also ameliorate the condition of their people and collaborate to promote change (McHenry, 2002). These historical contexts of structural oppression influenced the lives of African American people and they often enacted literacies within this context (Richardson, 2002). Literacy was also linked to ideals of liberation, security, and protection. Acts of reading, writing, and speaking served both oppressive and emancipatory functions in the nineteenth century (Harris, 1992). African Americans used literacy as a tool to counter misrepresentations and to advocate for needs of the wider community. They also used literacy to enter the political sphere and used language in ways as figurative weaponry against oppressors (McHenry, 2002). African Americans knew that if they could learn the discourse of their oppressors and write their own stipulations, they would begin to feel safe in the harsh society and comfortable with the protection it offered to future generations (Bacon & McClish, 2000). The further they advanced their literacy development, the closer they came to freedom. Using language and literature meant that they would no longer be trapped under societal boundaries that prevented them from speaking out against injustice. Literacy acts were transformative pursuits leading to greater ends of freedom. This led to empowerment and the means for African American people to collectively determine their own futures rather than allow others to prescribe their fates.

The early development of African American women's literacies was due to their quest for improvement and advancement for current and future generations among these social contexts. In addition, these contexts often left African American women invisible or misrepresented. Richardson (2002) suggests that misrepresentations played a critical role in the literacies of African American women and has been the cause for them to use literacy as a tool to counter wrongful images and represent themselves. These contexts were also the conduit that propelled African American women to "create their own sense of character, agency, authority and power" and propelled them to write and become established within the literary tradition (McHenry, 2002, p. 65).

### **Platforms of African American Women's Writings**

To explore African American adolescent girls' representations of themselves through writing, I situate my study within three platforms of African American women's writings. These platforms include, 1) writing to represent self, 2) writing to counter hegemony or misrepresentations, and 3) writing to advocate for change among themselves and others (Royster, 2000). Writing platforms are conceptualized as the foundation in which African American women's writings rested. These include their purposes and intentions of their writings. The use of "platforms" is drawn from Tatum's (2009) research on writing and African American adolescent males. He used the term, "platforms" to capture the historical writing conceptualizations of African American males and to examine textual lineages. The writing platforms of African American women, as part of a broader literary tradition, serve as my conceptual lens to the study. These platforms offer insight into how African American adolescent girls represent themselves through writing.

To illustrate the three platforms of African American women's writings, I use an excerpt of Anna Julia Cooper's essay that Royster (2000) provides in her analysis of African American women's essays of the nineteenth century. In this essay, Cooper writes, "My pen is devoted to a special cause" as she uses her writing as a tool to advocate for educational rights of African American women and girls (2000, p. 179). Cooper's essay provides an example of the three platforms being enacted within the writing. She writes:

I ask the men and women who are teachers and co-workers for the highest interests of the race, that they give the girls a chance! We might as well expect to grow trees from leaves as hope to build up a civilization or a manhood without taking into consideration our women and the home life made by them, which must be the root and ground of the whole matter. Let us insist then on special encouragement for the education of our women and special care in their training. Let our girls feel that we expect something more of them than that they merely look pretty and appear well in society. Teach them that there is a race with special needs which they and only they can help; that the world needs and is already asking for their trained, efficient forces. Finally if there is an ambitious girl with pluck and brain to take the higher education, encourage her to make the most of it... Let her know that your heart is following her, that your hand, though she sees it not, is ready to support her (p. 179-180).

In her essay, she represents African American females as capable and intelligent beings who with encouragement can offer a great contribution to society. The need for Cooper to write this piece speaks to some form of institutional hegemony that she counters in her writing. The enacted power here is the lack of education or "training" that African American women and girls receive in educational institutions. Finally, the third platform is observed in Cooper's language

as she pushes toward social change or for the minds of African American women and girls to be cultivated and supported. She advocates for their rights in education.

Representation, resistance, and recovery among African American women were very often embedded in their writings. African American women sought to know themselves and crafted “writing identities” which then supported the means for them to write themselves into being (Foster, 1993; Royster, 2000; Stover, 2003). This stemmed from the need to counter distorted representations, invisibility of their voices among mainstream media, literature, institutions, and hegemony that threatened the truth of their lives (Royster, 2000). Royster (2000) writes, “Symbolically their lives became literacy in action, that is, an empowered use of literacy in the interests of action, social consciousness, and social responsibility” (p. 61). This “action” led to the third platform of advocacy. African American women wrote to advocate for themselves and for others. Advocacy was connected to the promotion of improved and advanced conditions in society for those who had been marginalized. While their pens were instruments to write out themes of religion, art, imagination, love, and beauty, their writings also had a “performative power” and an intent to advocate for their rights and the rights of others (Lee, 2006; Peterson, 1995). Peterson asserts that African American women wrote to promote and incite activism (1995). Others have later concluded that an end goal of literacy should be to entail a transformative purpose to ignite change and liberation (Freire & Macedo, 1987). In this way, advocacy became a step toward activism and social change.

### **Connected Storied Lives**

African American women’s literate self-expressions and self-representations, as observed in the first platform, are connected to the writings of other African American women. African American women often entered a *zamani dimension* in their writings (Royster, 2000). The

zamani dimension can be best conceptualized as connective storied lives among African American women. Zamani is a Swahili word that means *past*, and it represents a literary presence or a metaphoric space created to utilize language to make themselves visible within the intellectual community (Tatum & Muhammad, 2012). It also represents a continuum of writing practices among African American women. Within the zamani dimension, an “ancestral voice” or a “culturally imprinted voice” emerges (Royster, 2000). This concept is used to explicate the connection of African American women’s writings across time and becomes deeply embedded in culture and is transmitted across generations. Royster hypothesizes that this transmission may occur intuitively, instinctively, spiritually, or through social and cultural practices of storytelling and writing. She offered:

...women in the zamani have helped African American women to understand—whether by intuition or instinct, through the spirit or by storytelling, or by some other process—who we are, how we should see the world, how we should perceive ourselves in it, and also how we might assume the authority to speak and to act as thinkers, writers, and leaders, even in the face of contending forces within a new geographical and cultural context (2000, p. 89).

These stories among women in generations before began to leave an imprint on the writings of women who came later. Collins (2000) found that the writings of other African American women were “safe spaces” that promoted growth and kinship among one another. Their writings afforded hybrid spaces for other African American women to read, think, and construct understandings of themselves. In this way, African American women have used and found comfort among each other through the authority of writing to resist inaccurate representations and to define their lives.

Fisher (2004) discusses a similar notion of a connection from the past to the present. In her study of the new literate and literary and their institutions, she suggests a continuum of similar and related writing practices among African American people. She found that African Americans continue to conceptualize and enact literacy in ways comparable to the early nineteenth century. Examples are offered in her examination of secret schools, Black literary movements from the 1920s-1960s, and independent Black institutions (IBIs) of the 1970s. IBIs are educative physical spaces and included African-centered schools, spaces in churches and private homes, performative settings such as open-mics and Black owned and operated bookstores. She also found that participants within these literary spaces wrote for similar purposes to African American people in the past. They often wrote to foster literacy skills, to represent self, for activism and social change. Whether instinctively, intuitively, or spiritually, they too became a part of connected storied lives from the past and writing was apart of a larger continuum of literate and literary practices from people of African descent. This is also connected to a line of work from Tatum (2009) who examines textual lineages among African American males throughout United States history. He found that young African American males today wrote across similar platforms of African American males historically.

### **Nineteenth Century Literary Societies**

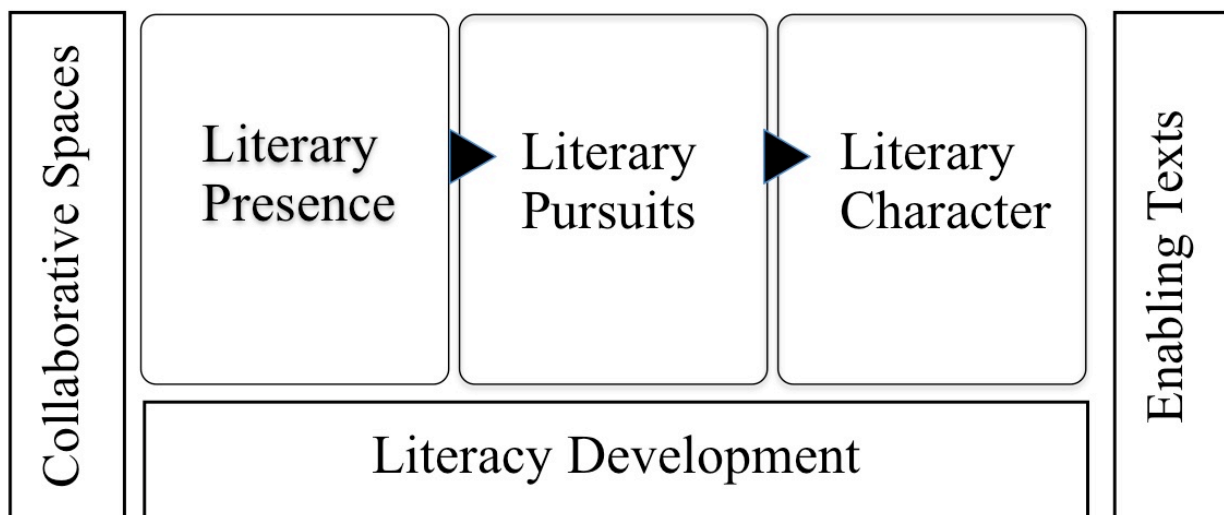
Other literacy spaces that young African American women participated to enact literacy in the nineteenth century were literary societies. I framed the current study based on enactments found in these spaces. African American literary societies date back to the 1800s and were some of the earliest records of writing in a literacy collaborative (Porter, 1936). African American literary societies were much more than book clubs, associations or spaces to discuss or write literature; they had wider goals of benefiting themselves and the conditions of others. These

societies were large and small and were gender-specific and unisex, but initially began solely for African American males and then African American females created spaces of their own.

Literary societies were spaces where women of various ages and educational levels could gather around meaningful and significant texts to encourage and improve reading, writing, and speaking skills (Belt-Beyan, 2004; McHenry, 2002). Members of these societies met regularly and engaged in reading literature that offered a variety of subjects to excite their interests and stimulate their minds to think about, evaluate, write, and debate significant issues.

Literacy development was key to three specific pillars of influence, namely, *literary presence*, *literary pursuits*, and *literary character* within literary societies. I refer to these pillars as the historical literacy framings because they provided structure and support to build and nurture literacy development in some of the earliest historical records (Tatum & Muhammad, 2012). Writing and publication were critical components of their literacy development and a larger goal in these spaces. Each one of the distinct framings led to the development of the other and literacy development heavily relied upon these framings with collaborative space and texts serving as the mediating influences of the three frames (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Historical Literacy Framings





These frames supported African American women by providing space for representations and their writings to be visible, valued, and honored. Although there was a relationship, literary was not synonymous with literacy. The historical literacy framings concerned the literary. In other words, the key to literacy development involved the reading, writing, and study of print and literature. Literacy was viewed as a social and cultural practice in the literary societies. In this view, the focus was placed on reading and writing the world similar to that as described by Freire and Macedo (1987). One large purpose of literacy was to understand the self within local and broader contexts to inform actions and behaviors. This allowed literary society members to make sense of and represent themselves in complex ways. Being able to define and represent one's self empowered African American women and enabled them to use literacy as tools for self-determination and self-reliance.

Exerting a *literary presence* meant staking a claim and making one's self visible within the intellectual community through acts of literacy. The idea of literary presence in literary societies meant that African American women did not wish to merely physically exist in the country but wanted to exert their presence and make their mark on literary history to tell their narratives, rather than have their stories told by others, which could fail to give accurate accounts of their experiences. They had a thirst to seek new knowledge as well as to be known and recognized for their contributions to scholarship—writing enabled this.

*Literary pursuits* were specific acts of literacy that were both individual and collaborative. Although in the most simplistic form, one may think of literary pursuits as *literacy activities*, but members of literary societies did not label their endeavors as simple activities. Instead these acts of literacy embodied greater ends and were consequently referred to as pursuits. These greater ends led to liberation, self-determinism, self-reliance, and self-

empowerment. Examples of literary pursuits included reading, discussing issues (often subjects found in texts), giving lectures, offering peer critique on other members' writings, debating, and penning and publishing original writings. As they engaged in literary pursuits, they surrounded themselves with enabling texts for reading, writing, thinking, and as the vehicle for debate. Enabling texts move beyond a solely cognitive focus such as skill and strategy development but also include a social, cultural, political, spiritual, or economic focus (Tatum, 2009). Literary pursuits were uniquely enacted simultaneously so as literary society members were reading, they were at the same time, thinking through the text, writing about related topics, and then debating about subjects among texts.

*Literary character* was the personal and academic characteristics of a person that developed as a result of engagement in reading, writing, and speaking. The strength of members' nature and personality was tied to print, texts, and acts of literacy. Literary character, more specifically includes the ability and desire to share ideas about literature, having a disposition and appetite for reading and writing literature, finding and using one's own voice, (re) claiming the authority of language, adopting and exercising habits of personal morality and temperance, exhibiting eloquence, the possession of reasoning, confidence in sharing ideas in literature and writings, using acts of literacy for advocacy and activism for self and the community and publicly mediating, negotiating and constructing representations of themselves (McHenry, 2002).

Literary traditions are still continuing and unfolding and there are other contemporary examples that resemble or are reminiscent of literacy practices of the past (Fisher, 2009; Tatum, 2009). The continuing literacy practice of writing with African American adolescent girls is explored in this study because there are connective threads of African American women writers

from earlier times to the literacies and types of representations found in the reviewed literacy research involving African American adolescent girls.

### **Representations Found in Literacy Research Involving African American Adolescent Girls**

I shifted from examining the literacy enactments and literary institutions of African American women historically to the literacy research focused on African American adolescent girls. After synthesizing the research, I found that representations and the heterogeneity of Black girlhood were enmeshed in literate practices of African American girls. In other words, as researchers were studying their literacy practices, issues of representations of the participants emerged. The textual resources that are commonly read among African American adolescent girls also have embedded representations within the content. Several types of representations emerged in the literature involving physical characterizations, sexuality, intelligence, and kinship, although physical and sexual representations were the most prevalent. The persistent focus on physical representations of beauty and skin color and sexual representations became most important for researchers to study as opposed to a fuller range of representations of Black girls. This could be a consequence from African American women writings and their consistent focus on such topics in their writings (Washington, 1990). However, this presents a narrow lens into the literacies and representations of African American girls and circumscribes the profiles of girls in the social science literature and media without examining how they have been impacted by certain representations. In order to get a more complete profile, we need research that explores the ways they make sense of themselves, which could offer wider portrayals. One way to do this is through writing, which is supported by the few writing studies reviewed. In addition, most of the representations of African American girls that appear across the reviewed literature are presented as distorted depictions and the girls in the studies (and protagonists in text read)

often challenged certain representations that they felt portrayed them inaccurately. Researchers studying literacy and African American adolescent girls collectively argue that Black girls need spaces in and outside of classroom environments to read, think, and talk about who they are.

### **Physical Representations of Beauty and Skin Color**

Physical Representations emerged in literatures examining the heterogeneity of representations of African American protagonists in young adult and urban literature as well as in studies involving how girls discuss texts. Physical representations involved depictions of skin color or race, hair, and beauty. Brooks, Savage, Waller and Picot (2010) conducted a close reading of several young adult novels. Among these texts included *November Blues* (Draper, 2007), *The Skin I'm In* (Flake, 1998), *Bronx Masquerade* (Grimes, 2002), *Sisters on the Homefront* (Williams-Garcia, 1995), and *Maizon at Blue Hill* (Woodson, 1992). These texts are commonly found on reading lists in middle schools and were one of the reasons they were selected for analysis. Physical representation was one of the themes found in the texts and included narratives about body size, facial features such as skin or eye color, hair length, style, texture, and height. In the novels, the protagonists are written to be aware of their physical identities and undergo reassessments of representations of themselves such as self-affirming beliefs or confidence of their physical beauty. Because the characters had to undergo “reassessments” of their own representations, it is suggestive that the authors are writing about images that have portrayed African American female beauty as unattractive. The authors of these young adult texts are all Black women so in keeping with the literary tradition, they wrote along the same topics related to historical representations yet, negotiated and countered images through the characterization. It is important to understand if African American adolescent girls write in similar ways.

In another textual analysis, Hinton-Johnson (2005) examined, *Toning the Sweep* (Johnson, 1993); *Heaven* (Johnson, 1998); *Blue Tights* (Williams-Garcia, 1988); *Like Sisters on the Homefront* (Williams-Garcia, 1995); *The Dear One* (Woodson, 1991); and *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* (Woodson, 1994). Unlike the Brooks et al., Hinton-Johnson's purpose was to select novels that had a central theme of physical appearance with a Black female protagonist. The reason for these selections was tied to the history of Black women writing fiction about beauty standards. Hinton-Johnson found a resemblance to the ways African American women writers have written about physical beauty in their narratives to the ways authors of young adult fiction write about physical beauty. This resemblance included writing about characters that long for Eurocentric forms of beauty with skin tone, hair texture, color and length, and eye color. She focused on three themes: body image, skin color, and hair, which were portrayed in the novels. Similar to Brooks et al. (2010) Hinton-Johnson found that the characters in the stories countered the power around beauty aesthetics and supported their own ideas of positive self-representation. The characters in the texts did not accept representations that excluded them from being depicted as beautiful. One example of this that Hinton-Johnson offers from the text, *Blue Tights*, is when the central character, Joyce, refuses to undress in the locker room after dance class because she thought the other girls would stare at her physique and her backside. Characters in the story suggest that the central character is "less than human because of her shapely buttocks." While this affects Joyce psychologically, it leads to her questioning and challenging the dominant notions of defining physical beauty. Failing to accept such single views of beauty, Joyce asks, "What's wrong with white people, anyway? Don't they know that this is just how black folks are made? How come she don't see nothing wrong with any of these no-tail, no-hips, no-nothing nons?" (Hinton-Johnson, 2005, pp. 31-32).

In Sutherland's (2005) research, six participants read Toni Morrison's, *The Bluest Eye* and discussed how beauty is represented in the text. The researcher explored how girls constructed both gendered and racial representations in experiencing the literature and how certain ascribed representations about African American women and girls can serve as boundaries. Boundaries are defined as those constructs or ideals that keep African American girls confined and inhibit their thinking about positive representations. Sutherland found that participants' talk about the text was either how Eurocentric views of beauty act as a boundary in their lives or how others' assumptions about who they are and how they should behave act as a boundary of how they think about themselves. Sutherland found that the girls in the study all experienced racism based on skin color in addition to negotiating what it means to be Black and various representations that are typically ascribed to African American women and girls. *The Bluest Eye* provided an opportunity for African American adolescent girls in the study to confront their own ideologies and beliefs about selfhood through a means of literature, which offered them the space to "self-represent and assert power as human beings" (2005, p. 393). This study gives more qualitative evidence than the textual analysis yet supports that certain texts with African American female protagonists may offer opportunities for girls in classrooms to talk about representations. Yet, I think by having bounded frames related to the text limited the participants' open talk about representations of self. They only discussed a central theme of representation in the novel and we are left without an understanding of how they see themselves extended from physical representations of beauty.

In another textual analysis by Marshall, Staples, and Gibson (2009), they found two overlapping themes of African American adolescent girl representations within two novels of urban fiction. Urban fiction is also referred to as street literature, hip-hop literature, black pulp

fiction, ghetto lit, and gangsta lit. This type of literature started to become published in the 1960s and 1970s during the Black Power Movement (Marshall et al., 2009). Similar to the social ills that many African American people countered during these years, common subjects within the plots of urban fiction usually involve, sex, abortion, drugs, abuse, and teen pregnancy (Morris, Hughes-Hassell, Agosto, & Cottman, 2006). Typically written in first person, these texts usually feature a Black female protagonist between the ages of 16 and 23 who overcomes difficulties in her experiences with some sort of social injury. In the resolution, the protagonist often experiences a sense of empowerment (Gibson, 2010). These texts too are widely written by Black women authors.

These novels studied for Black female representations include *Black and Ugly* (Styles, 2006) and *Bitch* (King, 2006). The first theme, color consciousness, is found throughout the book, *Black and Ugly*. They found that the protagonist negotiates her physical characteristics such as skin complexion to transform negative stereotypes related to African American female beauty. The protagonist does not believe she is beautiful at the beginning of the book but later discovers the importance of loving herself and feels beautiful. The author works to transform contested beliefs about beauty and widely used negative representations of African American girlhood. Marshall et al. (2009) argues this is first tangled with “reductive ideals” of Black femininity. The second theme found is the “navigation through derogatory representations” of African American adolescent girls. In the book, *Bitch*, the protagonist experiences a life surrounded of neglect, abuse, and drugs and uses sex and her sexuality for “survival and material acquisition” with the goal to climb the social ladder to be ranked as the “head bitch” (King, cited in Marshall et al., 2009, p. 34). Although the protagonist navigates her way to what she feels is

success, she does it in a manner that accedes to the same negative images and representations that were historically degrading to African American women and girls.

One opposition to urban fiction is that these texts are not appropriate for African American adolescent girls and the stories may pathologize their lives and represent them in negative ways compared to the ways in which young adult fiction represent the lives of Black girls. Urban fiction commonly portrays stereotypical images of African American women and girls that depicts them as being hypersexual, angry, materialistic, superficial, spiteful and experiencing pathologies such as teen pregnancy or drug use (Gibson, 2010; Stovall, 2005). Often times, these portrayals are similar to the historic images that represented African American women and girls such as the mammy, jezebel, and sapphire. These topics often fail to neither refute monolithic perspectives of African American adolescent girls nor capture wider and dynamic views of who they are. This is suggestive of a misguided genre.

The similarity that I found in the analyses of young adult and urban fiction however is some type of problem narrative related to physical representations of the main character and the negotiation of such portrayals. Both types of texts offered the potential for African American girls to connect with, negotiate, and challenge complex portrayals found in the literature. Refuting images found in text may create opportunities to critique representations, which could influence the ways they think about and represent themselves (Gibson, 2010). One strong limitation from the textual analysis studies is that they did not include African American adolescent participants to understand how they respond to such representations found in texts. Questions left unanswered in these studies include: *How do African American girls respond to representations found in literatures? Do they accept, negotiate and/or resist such representations? In what ways do African American adolescent girls resist depictions within*



*these texts? How can teachers mediate such texts with African American adolescent girls in English language arts classrooms?* Other research gives evidence toward understanding some of these questions.

Colorism is investigated through Sharon Flake's novel, *The Skin I'm In* (1998). Brooks, Browne and Hampton (2008) sought to understand how the novel portrayed colorism (defined as inter- or intraracial discrimination based on skin color stratification) from the viewpoints of ten African American adolescent girls. The focus on colorism is a part of a literary tradition among African American writers who have written about physical characteristics such as hair and skin tone within children's or young adult literature (2008). Researchers collected data in an after school book club and found that participants connected with the story, reflected upon the protagonist's feelings about self-worth and self-image, and encouraged the protagonists through reading responses. One participant responded, *I think many people feel the same way about their skin as Maleeka [protagonist] does. But I think, instead of looking at herself in a negative way, she should look at herself in a positive way. Instead of feeling she is half empty, she should feel half full* (2008, p. 665). Reading the text and making connections to the protagonist, served as a medium to explore their own thought processes pertaining to self-representation (i.e. self-worth, self-love, and self-image). While this is a helpful implication for teachers, the study lacked depth into the participants' thoughts and responses of themselves outside of colorism. I believe that an analysis of the teacher's or facilitator of the book club would have also been useful for exploring what led to the participants' responses. Additionally, it would have also been helpful to understand if there were differences in responses to representations found across the text from the ten participants.

Boston and Baxley's (2007) study combines a textual analysis with the voices of African

American adolescent girls. Although this study was not focused on representation, the participants commented that they desire to see ethnic representations of themselves in the texts read in school. They analyzed four texts with Black female protagonists. These young adult novels included Jacqueline Woodson's *Hush* (2002) and *The Dear One* (1991); Sharon Flake's (1998) *The Skin I'm In*, and Nikki Grimes's *Jazmin's Notebook* (1998). They then examined the textual connections of eight middle level African American adolescent girls (Baxley & Boston, 2010). All participants reported wanting to have choices in literature and text selections in language arts class and 88% of the participants most often chose text with relatable characters or plots that represented some aspect of their lives. One participant in the study reported on the lack of self-selection of books in class stating that there are *...no Black faces in any of the novels. If we do, most of the time they boys and they ain't even the main characters.* Another participant stated, *I want to read about things I like....things like...me.* The data from the studies overwhelmingly supports that African American adolescent girls desire to see representations of themselves in literature read in school.

Carter (2007) explored racial representations facing two African American adolescent girls in a British literature classroom. She examined the influence of Eurocentric curriculum on African American adolescent girls as participants read William's Shakespeare's sonnet, *My Mistress' Eyes* and examined representation in images related to beauty. African American adolescent girls found representations of themselves ignored in the text read that was part of the school curriculum. As students read the poem, images of beauty were discussed that did not affirm physical characteristics of African American adolescent girls. Instead, the classroom discussion from the text emphasized a Eurocentric view of female beauty. Further data made their voices heard in which one participant stated, *She [the teacher] don't do nothing but base*

*the class on White people....Reading all that White crazy stuff.* When asked about reading text that centered on an Eurocentric sense of beauty and how that makes her feel, the same participant said, *It makes me feel like she trynna say I am ugly but I know I look good* (p. 50). Here the participant expressed that in ways she feels affronted by the messages of the text, since those messages contrasted with how she looks but what is problematic is the teacher has not taught the text in a way that builds African American girls' feelings of self-worth nor was the discussion critical in ways that taught students how to interpret hegemony and read texts in a reflexive manner. This could encourage educators to not only critically examine the curriculum and instructional practices in classrooms for African American adolescent girls but to *listen* to how they *receive* the curriculum. This means teachers frequently asking and listening to their perceptions of the text read in class while also remaining attentive to how they interpret various texts.

In the Kaplan and Cole (2003) magazine study, African American adolescent girls selected a list of teen magazines marketed to gain the interest of this age group of adolescents. Although the selection presented to the participants in the study were magazines dominated by images of White people, the African American girls in the study chose the *Seventeen* magazine because it appealed to them "*regardless of race...showing girls how to look good* [referring to hairstyle and fashion tips]. *...shows girls' embarrassing moments...what it is like being a teenage girl*" (p.146). Participants of other race groups had similar responses. Findings from this study highlight the awareness of the shared experience and viewpoints adolescent girls have regardless of race, in this case when offered the opportunity to select texts of interest. However, when it came to the girls making connections to the representations of girls who looked like them in the text, some of the participants pointed out the subtle messages the magazine exposed about the

presence of African American women versus White. An African American fifteen-year-old participant responded with, *These magazines don't show enough black girls*. The same participant then commented on how the Black model in the magazine, *looks weird*, and more masculine than the White female model who, *looks feminine*. Data from the study also suggests that African American adolescent girls make little connection to this type of text due to the lack of relatable images.

### **Representations of Sexuality**

Sexual representations involves relationships and interest in boys, sexuality, and teen pregnancy and is a topic within young adult literature read in middle school classrooms (Brooks et al., 2010). The enactment of sexuality can be complex because having sexual representations within stories could serve to normalize pathologies among African American adolescent girls, yet these topics present opportunities for them to read and discuss these issues. Richardson (2007) examined how African American adolescent girls explore various representations of Black women presented in the media, specifically rap music videos because mass media has played a significant role on the construction of creating ideals and cultural conceptions about African American people. Richardson gives examples of the “bad black girl, video vixen imagery linked to historic controlling images of the wench and the jezebel; the wench, commonly exchanged with bitch which was used to refer to an enslaved (and sometimes free) female, whose sexual behavior was deemed to be loose and immoral” (p. 790). She explored how some of these same historical depictions are rendered and exploited in media and how African American adolescent girls construct meaning from them. She found that providing space for them to use their language to “critique and identify the social situations of black youth,” demonstrated their ability to critically examine how they view the messages by discussing the

ways these messages are degrading to African American girls. She also found that in ways, the participants struggled to overcome hegemonic representations that deeply rooted into their thinking and frequently reproduced some of these same representations of the Black women in the video.

### **Representations of Intelligence and Kinship**

Two other findings related to representation in studies involving African American girls included intellectual and kinship representations. Each of these representations was found in select novels with Black female protagonists (Brooks et al., 2010). Intellectual representations involved the protagonist engaged in dialogue about intellectual ability, feelings of academic work, academic goals and academic aspirations. Near the conclusion of each text, each of the protagonists experienced a commitment to continued education and greater possibilities of academic success. Kinship representations included relationships with fictive kin (bond among a group of girls) and family relationships. Each protagonist in the text had at least one bond with a girlfriend who was not biologically related to her. The representation of kinship relationships was deemed as important to the characters, which supports Collins (2000) notion of female relationships as safe spaces for African American women. Although other students focused less on these topics, I believe they are very prevalent in the writings of Black women. I would suggest that text is selected and read with African American girls that also have a central focus on these themes of representation.

### **The Need for African American Adolescent Girls to Read, Discuss and Construct**

#### **Representations of Self and Challenge Certain Socially Constructed Representations**

Each of the studies reviewed on text, and the reading and discussion of text not only suggested the need for African American adolescent girls to read and discuss representations of

themselves but also that they are afforded opportunities to critique and challenge socially constructed representations through text. This critique of certain representations could lead to constructions of self-representations. Although representations related to physical beauty, skin color, and sex are common themes among African American women's writings, I was surprised that there were not wider representations of self and that intellect and kinship appeared less frequently in the literature. This suggests that representations of intellect, kinship and others are less enmeshed in African American girls' literate practices. This leads to the push for researchers to examine other types of representations. These studies also suggest the use of text to serve as useful vehicles for such explorations and critiques. African American adolescent girls used these topics within texts to talk about and critique representations, which could lead to contributing to shaping their own representations of self. African American adolescent girls need opportunities within learning spaces where they can discuss issues of representations openly. Although researchers call for self-exploration and self-representation of African American adolescent girls, through discussing text, writing affords added opportunities.

### **African American Adolescent Girls' Representations Through Writing Text**

Writing is another literacy practice that can assist African American adolescent girls to make sense of the ways they are represented and how they represent themselves. Writing has the potential to help mediate these tensions with representations and becomes an instrument for girls to write their experiences and their stories to tell others and themselves in similar ways African American adolescent girls have used literature and other forms of text. This can be helpful to build and rebuild positive representations, which could lead girls with a heightened sense of self. Moreover, writing gives girls a private and public space to self-exert and self-express themselves

and their selfhood. They can then “name, define, describe, explore, and transform” hegemony that threatens to silence who they are all together (Blake, 1995).

In a study investigating the voluntary writings of African American teens in out-of-school settings, an African American adolescent female participant (Keisha who self-identified as a writer) was able to “write for her life” for the purpose of telling her story from her experiences and of the harsh and violent community that surrounded her life (Mahiri & Sablo, 1996). In one of her poems, she discusses a “fiery hell,” representation of her neighborhood, which was a site of gang violence. Through her writing about her neighborhood struggles, she uses her pen to write out social change just as African American women have done historically. Through genres of poetry and play-writing, writing became an escape and the means to recover. She was able to not only write about what she saw in her everyday experiences but what she imagined her life to be beyond her current circumstances. The researchers suggest that volunteer or open writing where students have decisions in writing to represent themselves or their lives can serve as a refuge and a safe space for African American adolescent girls from social ills experienced in life.

Winn (2010) analyzed self-constructed narratives of four formerly incarcerated African American adolescent girls in out-of-school contexts and how they used writing to build resilient and agentic representations of themselves. Much like African American women of the past, Winn argues that the African American adolescent girls in the study who were adjudicated were in a liminal space or “betwixt and between.” She explains that African American women and girls felt in an “in between space” and much of who these women and girls could become “was determined by others which left little space, if any, for opportunities to forge their own identities and paths independent of stereotypes and characterizations” (p. 428). Like literary traditions of African American lives of the past, writing was coupled with acts of reading, speaking, and

performing for the participants in the study. They used their writing to represent their selfhood in order to invoke change in themselves and among others. Playwriting and performance helped the girls represent themselves for themselves as well as the ways in which others viewed them. Spaces needed to be created for girls to represent themselves through writing and re-writing.

Wissman's (2008) research bridges in and out school writing and studied a four-week in-school created elective class. The elective class was developed due to a group of girls' strong desire to create a space to discuss and write about representation issues faced by a group of urban girls and due to the lack of opportunities in schools to self-represent themselves through writing. Introducing their work to an audience of educational researchers and teachers, two of the participants wrote:

We think this work is a reflection of the things that are left unsaid because of the scarcity of opportunities that are placed in schools for young, strong sistahs to find a way...Our individual poems emerged from our past and present experiences, the problems we face as young females trying to make a way, and the way we are presented in society (p. 340).

The two girls resist and write against "scarcity of opportunities" for expression in schools and the problems they face of "trying to make a way" or represent themselves amidst dominant discourses. Wissman used poetry as authorial mentors for the girls' writing with 16 adolescent girls (who mostly identified as African American). Authorial mentors or mentor texts are model examples of texts used with the intention for students to learn something about the writing (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994; Friese, 2010). The participants read different types of literature written by women that invoked ideas of selfhood, resiliency, beauty, and intelligence from mentor writers such as Margaret Walker, Maya Angelou, June Jordan, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, and Ruth Forman. One of the participants uses the style of June Jordan (1989) to write



a “First They Said” poem:

Mentor Text:

First they said I was too light  
Then they said I was too dark  
Then they said I was too different  
Then they said I was too much the same  
Then they said I was too young  
Then they said I was too old...

Renee (participant) writes:

First they said I was skinny  
Then they said I was a nice size  
Then they asked me what I was mixed with  
Then I said many things  
Then they said, Oh, that’s why your hair is like that.  
Then I said, Don’t worry on how my hair is, but make sure your hair is nice (p. 342).

Although, just one example of writing, the participants used the structure and content of the texts as vehicles to write their own representations of with beauty into poems to resist dominant discourses and claim agency just as the mentor writers had done.

Stone (2005) also uses mentor texts (children’s literature) with an African American adolescent girl, who desired to write a Cinderella story that kept a similar plot of the traditional children’s tale, yet infused with representations of herself into the story. As she wrote her story, she simultaneously read Cinderella stories from around the world to support the development of her own children’s book. She used what the author calls, “recontextualization” to recast the traditional story with her added cultural values. In her finished product, her character went to the prom rather than the ball, rode off in a “limo with the works” instead of a pumpkin, and fell in love with the DeeJay rather than a prince who proposed marriage over the phone. The participant recontextualized the text in ways that spoke to her youth and social identities and the mentor text supported her use of the preceding substitutions.

These research studies suggest that writing texts give African American adolescent girls the tools to support, disrupt and transform fixed discourses and may conceptualize

representations they have of themselves. In the latter studies, writing was supported and mediated through model examples of text. This line of work aligns with the wider pool of studies examining how adolescents (of various ethnicities and gender) write to represent with the “mentorship” of literature (Bean, Valerio, Senior, & White, 1997; Gomes & Carter, 2010; Jocson, 2006; Tatum & Gue, 2010).

### **A Push for Writing Instruction to Represent Self**

In 2007, among the eighth grade U.S. student population, only 33% were proficient in writing. This is small increase (2%) from 2002 and just 6% from 1998 (Salahu-Din, Persky, & Miller, 2008). Twelfth-graders, on the other hand have even lower levels of writing, showing 24% proficiency in 2007, just a 2% increase from 1998. These data mirrored the proficiency of adolescents five years earlier when Graham and Perin responded by conducting a meta-analysis on studies of adolescent writing instruction (2007a). Several national reports have been compiled due to these low percentages in writing. Reports like *Writing Next* (2007b), and *The National Commission on Writing* (2003), respond to the lack of proficiency on adolescent writing and neglect of the nation to make writing a priority in schools. These reports also allude to the importance of writing in several areas, including writing to build skills and knowledge and writing for the betterment of the national agenda such as for the workplace and economy. Each report suggests several suggestions to improve writing policy and instruction. While these reports mention self-esteem and self-confidence among student writers, they do not call for writing instruction to be used as a tool for students to know and represent themselves or as an assessment for teachers to learn more about students. Common to the findings of the extant literature, I believe there should also be an equally important push for adolescents to be able to explore themselves in writing pedagogy. This will call for new and expanded ways to think about

the purpose of writing, useful platforms for students to write across, and other factors related to writing that will enable success within society. Historical narratives inform us that the purposes for writing went beyond skill and strategies to meet the wider needs of society, but were also ways to define one's self within society (Royster, 2000). Writing in this perspective, shaped and transformed the world and the people in it.

Writing also has the potential to be used as tools to push African American adolescent girls toward agency and advocacy for themselves. Researchers also suggest that representation may shift and fluctuate as African American adolescent girls participate in and move across spaces and enact different ideals of selfhood. Other studies have examined how adolescent girls write across gendered lines (Grote, 2005) and to counter representations for agency (Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004), but what is unique about African American adolescent girls is their history of being historically marginalized and represented in terms of both gender and race. Writing practices help African American girls to be aware of these representations as they negotiate power and remake their selves for themselves and for others and to assert their humanity against controlling representations. My study with African American adolescent girls, using a historical perspective, reveals that the ways in which African American adolescents girls write to represent themselves and how these ways are intricately linked to the intentions of African American women writers.

### **Summary of Reviewed Research**

Collectively, the research reviewed has contributed to establishing a line of literacy research that has not centered on pathologies as seen in other social science literature and has instead focused on the heterogeneity of Black girlhood. Within each study, the African American female adolescents, whether as protagonists in fiction or as participants in studies, all negotiated

ideals of self amongst ascribed representations. Methodologically, these studies have also provided rich qualitative descriptions of the literacies and identities of African American adolescent girls. What was left out of the extant literature however, is a broadened historical orientation of their literacies. Nor did any of the studies examine a space constructed for a group of African American adolescent girls to read, discuss, and write about themselves using African American women's literature and the literacy enactments of African American people of the past as a framework to support writing. This dissertation responds to this gap and takes a wider examination of writing as well as a broader historical orientation and examines the writings of eight African American girls participating in a literacy collaborative that in many ways mirror writing groups involving African American women from the nineteenth century. I examined the three writing platforms and the literacy enactments of African American women in the past to participants in this study in order to understand how representations and writing from the past are connected to African American adolescent girls today. Finally, I examined the contextual factors of the literacy collaborative that contributed to their writings.

### III. METHODOLOGY

I conducted a qualitative case study (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009) to describe how eight African American adolescent girls represent themselves in their writings in a four-week literacy collaborative. A literacy collaborative is defined as a socially constructed space to improve and advance literacy development among a group of learners with varying identities, experiences, and literacy abilities (Tatum, 2009). Qualitative inquiries were previously employed to examine how African American adolescent girls write and talk about representations in literary and media text (Baxley & Boston, 2010; Brooks et al., 2008; Carter, 2007; Deblase, 2003; Kaplan & Cole, 2003; Mahiri & Sablo, 1996; Richardson, 2007; Stone, 2005; Sutherland, 2005; Winn, 2010; Wissman, 2008) and this was also useful in approaching participants' writings and the contextual factors leading to their writings. I describe the participants' writings *across* and *within* cases. The across analysis focuses on all participants and I present overall findings from the participants' writing artifacts and interview data. I also examined each girl's writings. In the latter analysis, I discuss a case that provides a unique view of the multiple entanglement of representations when compared to the other participants. The following research questions were used to guide my study:

1. How do African American adolescent girls represent themselves in writings?
2. Which factors within a literacy collaborative contribute to representations within their writings?

A qualitative case study was selected as the methodology because it affords opportunities to provide thick descriptions of the multiple representations in the writings of the participants in a uniquely designed literacy collaborative focused on writing within an out-of-school context. Qualitative methodologies such as case study design also offer the tools to investigate writing

extended from the school context to inform pedagogy in other learning contexts such as classrooms (Schultz, 2006).

### **Theoretical Framework: Critical Sociocultural Theory**

This study was grounded in critical sociocultural theory. Critical sociocultural theory considers issues of power, equality, and social justice in learning and is a part of sociocultural views of literacy (Lewis et al., 2007). Sociocultural theory focuses on learning and meaning making through interactions. Common to other social learning theories, knowledge is constructed socially and is dependent upon the context. Unlike cognitive theory that places emphasis on the mind, sociocultural theory goes beyond biology to explain phenomena and provides insight in examining how learning is connected to the environment and to the cultural make-up of individuals. In literacy practices, sociocultural theorists examine how literacy development is contingent upon the social context that surrounds individuals or groups of people and how learning is both socially and jointly constructed as a result of the interaction with the context (Vygotsky, 1978). Learners instinctively bring their cultural knowledge to situations. Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains this cultural knowledge by suggesting how multiple layers and cultural influences can be theorized by considering the metaphor of a “nested set of Russian dolls.” These multiple layers of culture allow the creation of experience impacting human development as well as literacy practices. Bearing resemblance to New Literacy Studies (NLS), sociocultural theorists view literacy in the ideological sense therefore the inherent focus is not so much on skills as within cognitive perspectives but in thinking about literacy as a social practice or events (Heath, 1983; Street, 2003).

Sociocultural theory also adheres to the notion that literacy is never practiced in a vacuum, instead it a social act often invoking a relationship between the *text* (anything print and

beyond that can be interpreted) and the *reader* (people). In this sense, almost every literacy event can be defined as a social one. Au (1997) explains that even something as simple as reading a book is a social activity as one simultaneously engages with the text, the author, and previous experience and knowledge structures to elicit meaning and understanding. There is always a transaction between the reader and what is being interpreted. Sociocultural theory dismantles hierarchical relationships that may exist in learning because within social learning theories, each person, whether a student, teacher, or researcher, is a significant contributor to meaning, learning, and the creation of new knowledge.

Critical sociocultural theory holds fast to the belief that learning spaces are never neutral environments and often times there is an element of power at play. Although sociocultural theory has been widely researched and accounts for multiple dimensions of literacy development, researchers have argued that it was not intended to overtly address issues of power (Lewis et al., 2007). Lewis and Moje posit the need to reframe sociocultural theory by arguing that it alone does not account for how power in literacy learning shapes one's self and how it produces a need to develop agency toward dominant discourses. The "critical" in critical sociocultural theory acknowledges how embedded history and politics in events and spaces of learning are embedded with social and cultural (re)production. It expands sociocultural theory toward the understanding that literacy can have transformative aspects to it (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Texts read and written within this framework, for example, afford opportunities for the reader or writer to interrogate and investigate blatant and hidden messages of the text. There is then a recursive-ness of the reader or writer transforming the meaning of text and being transformed in the process.

## **Platforms of African American Women’s Writings & Identity, Power, and Agency**

Moje, Lewis and Enciso (2007) use three frames in their conceptualization of critical sociocultural theory: identity, power, and agency. Within this study, I focused on each of the frames, but look at representation as a subcategory of identity. Representation is the description, depiction, portrayal or characterization of the self or someone else in a particular way. Power is defined as anything related to any perceived strength, control or force and may include authority, hegemony or dominance used to construct representations. Moje and Lewis define agency as the “strategic making and remaking of selves, identities, activities, relationships, cultural tools, resources, and histories as they are embedded within relations of power” (2007, p. 18). These three frames are related to the three platforms of African American women writings. Historical writings from African American women are illuminative of writing to represent self (identity), to counter hegemony or dominance (power) and to advocate for change among themselves and others (agency) (Royster, 2000). These three frames taken from African American women’s writing platforms and the three aspects of critical sociocultural theory were used together to analyze the writings of African American adolescent girls in the study.

## **Methods**

### **Framing the Context of the Study**

The literacy collaborative in the current study embodies the framework of African American literary societies of the 1800s and the three historical literacy framings observed in these spaces. A closer examination of literary societies helped me to frame the literacy collaborative in the study. Specifically, I used ten aspects that I thought would be significant in shaping writing and representations among African American adolescent girls. These aspects



gleaned from 1800s African American literary societies, were central to the planning and developing of the instruction of the context of the research study. They are:

1. Literacy would be defined in the cognitive sense, as reading and writing skills and intellectual exercise, and as social and cultural practices
2. Participants of different literacy abilities and ages would come together in the literacy collaborative to write together
3. A kinship relationship would be nurtured and participants would be called, *Sister Authors*
4. Instruction would be responsive to the lives of the participants
5. Enabling texts (Tatum, 2009) would be central to all instructional support
6. Participants would read and write different types of texts
7. Participants would be encouraged to think about text in critical ways
8. Writing would be collaborative and a space would be created for participants to share ideas
9. A central purpose for literacy instruction would be to teach the importance of reclaiming authority in language
10. Issues of selfhood and representation would be enmeshed in the content of texts

In addition to framing the research context around the literacy enactments of 1800s African American literary societies, I also used knowledge and experience gained from leading an African American adolescent female literacy collaborative two years prior to the current study. After this previous literacy collaborative, I conducted a single case study with one participant to understand how the literacy collaborative helped her to make sense of selfhood and

how she wrote representations of herself in seven writings from the literacy collaborative (Muhammad, 2012). I found that writing within the context of the institute helped her to self-express and was a medium for her to reflect upon her multiple identities. She wrote across intersections of cultural identities related to gender, ethnicity, physical beauty, and kinship among other African American adolescent girls. This research helped to broaden my perspective in shaping literacy collaboratives based on historical enactments and also helped me to understand how history could be infused into a contemporary literacy space for adolescent writers.

### **Research Site**

The research study took place at a large urban Midwestern university in the form of a summer literacy collaborative from July 3-July 26, 2012. The location for my research was the university's Reading Clinic. The Reading Clinic space had a wealth of African American literature across different genres and disciplines. The research site also contained technological resources that were used by the participants including laptops and web access for writing, writing supplies such as paper and pens, a projector and white screen for presentations and images for instruction, a copy machine, printer, video and voice recording equipment for observation and interviews, and adequate chairs and tables for seating. I work as a graduate assistant in the Reading Clinic so I had access to the site throughout the duration of the research study.

### **Recruitment**

Going into the study, I planned to recruit 7-12 girls between the ages of 12-17 years old. The planned number of prospective participants for the study was selected because seven represents the mean number of the participants in literacy collaboratives (e.g., book clubs, writing/reading discussion groups) from studies with African American adolescent girls (Baxley

& Boston, 2010; Brooks et al., 2008; Davis, 2000; Henry, 2001; Richardson, 2007; Sutherland, 2005; Winn, 2010; Wissman, 2008). The higher number of 12 in the range represents the number of African American adolescent males from Tatum's (2009) research study at the same research site. The current study was planned as an intensive writing experience. A larger ratio of 12:1 was not manageable.

The university's Reading Clinic keeps an email listserv of parents, educators, and community members who are informed about the Reading Clinic's research and outreach initiatives. I sent out email communication to inform parents, educators and community members to recruit the participants. The email contained an overview of the research study and included a one-page application for interested participants to complete. This application elicited demographic information and asked applicants to submit a writing sample about a topic that is important and/or unique to African American girls (see Appendix A). The applicants had three weeks to submit an application. I received a total of ten applications.

### **Orientation**

On June 25, 2012, I held a research informational meeting for the girls and their parents. This meeting was held at the research site. Nine of the ten girls attended. One girl had formerly participated in a previous literacy collaborative in 2010 at the same location. As the girls and their families entered the Reading Clinic, I gave each family a folder that contained an agenda for the meeting, a welcome letter, the planned schedule for each day of the literacy collaborative, a lesson plan outline, and two copies of the assents and two copies of consent forms. The meeting lasted for one hour. During this time, I explicitly discussed the study and read the assent and parental permission forms. I explained that the literacy collaborative would focus on reading and writing about representations throughout the four-weeks. I told them that each week, we

would read and write different types of texts infused with themes found among African American women’s writings, but I informed them that they did not have to write about the same themes or topics. I expressed that I was seeking to understand how they wrote about themselves.

**Participants**

Eight girls participated in the study. One girl who attended the orientation decided not to participate because her parent explained that the commute was too far. The eight participants met three days per week, three hours per day, for four-weeks from 1:30pm-4:30pm. The sample of participants was diverse across age, grade, and school setting (see Table 1).

Table 1  
*Demographics of Participants*

Participant	Age	Grade	Writing interest (Self-reported)	Reading proficiency (Self-reported)	School setting
Camille	17	11	Yes	Proficient	Public/suburb
Dahlia	12	8	Yes	Proficient	Public/urban
Heather	15	9	No	Struggling	Public/urban
Ivy	13	7	Yes	Struggling	Charter/urban
Jasmine	13	7	Yes	Proficient	Public/urban
Lily	13	8	No	Proficient	Private/suburb
Violet	17	11	Yes	Proficient	Private/urban
Zinnia	16	10	No	Proficient	Charter/urban

In addition, three of the eight participants entered the study without an interest in writing and two of the eight girls self-identified as struggling readers. At the time of the study, the mean age of the participants was 14.5. The girls were also diverse in physical appearances. I include a brief description of their physical characteristics of each participant because physical representations of self emerged in their writings. The participants did not receive any incentives for participation other than lunch and copies of the text read.

The participants in the study, including myself, and authors of the texts selected for the study were referred to as “Sister Authors.” The term “Sister Author” was used because historically African American writers referred to each other as “Brother” or “Sister.” The name “Sister Author” also was used because it helped to remind the participants about their purpose to write within the literacy collaborative. “Sister” also alludes to a sisterhood and connection to each other, which is one of the larger contextual frames of the literacy collaborative. In this section, I introduce each of the Sister Authors. The identities of participants are salient in helping to understand and explain the heterogeneity found in their writings.

**Jasmine.** Jasmine was a 13-year-old, seventh-grade student attending a large urban secondary school. Her school’s population consisted of approximately 95.7% African Americans, 2.1% Hispanic, and 2% White. She was accepted in the school’s accelerated academic program for students who score in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile on a norm-referenced assessment. She self-identified as a proficient reader and has natural light brown hair and a light skin complexion. She was one of the youngest participants. However, she spoke very assertively in discussions and used strong language in writings to push different messages to readers. She often engaged the older participants in informal debates about representations of African American women and girls. She was not easily swayed toward an opposite viewpoint after making her mind up and taking a stance on an issue.

She decided to participate in the study because she enjoyed writing and wanted to make writing a part of her future. She enjoyed writing both at school and at home. She liked writing realistic fiction the most because it gave her opportunities to put truth in her writings, yet still express creativity. She mostly enjoyed to write in ways that others could relate or connect to the content and frequently wrote about her personal experiences. The opportunity to write alongside

other African American girls, she said during her pre-interview, played a small role in her decision to participate in the study. Although she is around other Black girls in home and school communities, she felt that Black girls in her immediate communities were not “on the intelligent side” but she expected the girls participating in study to be “smart” and “act proper.” In the sample writing she submitted as part of her application, she wrote a short story about what she calls, a “shy, pale, natural-hair, nerdy black girl” who gets picked on at school. She selected this piece because she wanted to offer a story with a counter narrative of a how a Black girl can be represented, arguing that Black girls are typically portrayed as being strong and tough rather than shy.

Ivy. Ivy was a 13-year-old seventh-grade student attending an urban PK-8 charter school. Her school demographics were roughly 61% Hispanic, 21% Black, 11% White, 5% Asian, and 2% multi-racial. Ivy was light skin with dark natural hair. Prior to the study, I knew Ivy and her parent from a tutoring program she participated in at the university, at the same location of the research study. She participated in this tutoring program because she struggled in reading comprehension and vocabulary. I worked to supervise her tutor and have previously taught some of her one-hour tutoring sessions. Knowing her previously, I also learned that Ivy generally did not think that African American girls are represented much differently than other girls of different ethnicities. When I asked Ivy to describe herself, she began to tell me her name, age and that she enjoyed writing, drawing, and spending time with her family. She also enjoyed writing about her favorite things and vacations and holidays with her family. During the study, I encouraged her to explore topics that she had yet to write about. I used a metaphor to encourage her to write, telling to *step into the ocean* in her writing, rather than *staying or standing in the sand*. The metaphor was used to encourage her to explore deeper and critical thoughts related to

the representations in her writings. She decided to participate in the study because she enjoyed writing and wanted the experience of bonding with other African American girls.

After the first day of the literacy collaborative, Ivy's guardian explained to me that he and her father were worried if she would be able to understand different representations involving African American girls and how she would react to others who have withstood more difficult environmental conditions. He went on to explain that they sheltered her from knowing about the difficulties some African Americans face in this country. For example, they only allowed Ivy to see what he called, positive images of African American people, in the media. They also gave her access to Black-owned magazines in the home or allowed her to watch television shows with Black characters. He said that it was hard for Ivy to understand that this is not necessarily the same ways African American people are portrayed in the greater society.

In her sample writing, she wrote about the importance of African American girls bonding:

01 Bonding is getting together and getting to know one somebody. That person  
02 can be a friend or a relative someone new or someone you've known a long  
03 time. To African American girls it is important because sometimes you need a  
04 friend or relative that is close and you can trust to talk to. If we have a  
05 problem or sometimes just talk and listen to another or just have fun and go  
06 places we are there for each other. Sometimes while bonding you can learn  
07 different and new things about each other that you didn't already know. You  
08 can also learn the things you have in common.

In the above eight lines, she explained that bonding helps African American girls meet friends and the friendship could feel like a family. She expected that the literacy collaborative would help her learn about being an African American girl and bonding with other participants. She explained in her pre-interview that although she is an African American girl, she really did not “know a lot of things” related to them. She wanted to gain friendships from this experience while also learning how to focus on a single topic in her writings.

**Dahlia.** Dahlia was a 12-year-old, eighth-grade student at an elementary school with a school population of 48% White, 34% Hispanic, 6% Asian, 4% Black, 6% and 2% Native American. Dahlia was a tall, brown-skin girl with short natural braided hair. She identified as a proficient reader. Dahlia was the youngest participant. In her sample writing, she wrote,

01 A way to describe myself after I started to write is magic. I feel like I have  
02 magic because all my writings feel like I have powers just spitting out poetry  
03 like a magician. If I had a choice between having a lot of money and being a  
04 world famous writer, I'd pick both because first I'm not crazy, I know a lot of  
05 people would want to pick the money. Second of all being a writer comes with  
06 hard work, and hard work comes with rewards.

The pre-interview revealed that she became interested in writing because she felt it gives her the opportunity to be herself and tell her story on paper. She connected this with a sense of feeling free. In the same interview, she explained that when she feels free in her writing, “a whole new world opens up.” Writing allowed her to write about things that she was holding inside. She felt writing gave her “endless power.” She also wrote because her mother loves to write. She described a story to me during a time when she read one of her mother’s writings and she was simply amazed at her use of language and emotion in the writing. From that point, she felt that writing was something she wanted to make a part of her future. Being in a space with other African American girls was not something that appealed to her, yet she predicted it would be a different experience because of the few African Americans in her school. She was interested to see how the other African American girls work and get along. It had been her experience that there are times when they do not get along well.

Dahlia described herself as someone with lots of energy who likes to talk, laugh and be outgoing in social situations. I discovered that she, in fact, embodied all of these characteristics. She however, was very shy and quiet at the start of the literary collaborative and did not talk about her ethnic or gender identity until the latter part of the study. She began to open up after



the other participants gave her positive feedback on her writings. She liked to write mysteries, fairy tales, and adventures, but she enjoyed poetry the most. Within these types of writings, she liked to write about herself so she would not forget who she is when she looked back and read them. She explained to me that she enjoyed the freedom offered in writing and would like to have opportunities to choose what she writes. She hoped that her writings would someday help other young girls follow in her footsteps.

**Heather.** When I first met Heather, I inquired about the correct spelling of her name. Her email and application had two different spellings. She explained that one spelling was her “government name” and the other was her preferred name. I thought right away that Heather was socially, and maybe even politically conscious. She attended an urban high school and self-identified as a struggling reader. Her school was 85% Black, 6% Hispanic, 3% Asian, 2% White, and 4% mixed ethnicity. Heather was tall, very thin, and had a shaved short natural hairstyle. In her pre-interview, she told me that she listened to what she called “white music” and felt that the playlist on her mp3 player would be labeled as White or “mixed.” She called this music, “uppity music” and the type of music that many African Americans did not listen to. She described herself as a strong-willed and opinionated person who saw things as *black and white* only. Heather explained that she had a difficult time expressing her emotions and usually remained reserved when in new spaces with people.

Heather entered the literacy collaborative making it clear that she did not like to write and that her mother was the motivating factor on her participating. In her pre-interview, she said her mother “sorta forced” her to participate so that her time would not be spent idly during the summer days. After the informational meeting, she felt more at ease participating because she liked to talk about African American girl representations and being able to “re-write” some of

the negative representations said about “us.” Yet, when I asked what she thinks it would be like working with other African American girls, she felt that the other girls would be “acting out stereotypes.” When asked to talk more about this, she felt that some of the other participants would have “good and bad hair.” She went on to tell me that some stereotypes are positive. For example she named natural, un-chemically treated hair, as “crazy looking and bad” yet she said it can also be beautiful. The talk about hair was also observed in her sample,

01 I feel that African American girls are seen as people that always have weave,  
02 permed, or crazy natural hair. Many TV shows only have four or five  
03 Caucasian people and one or two African Americans. Many shows have  
04 African American girls as the follower in a group of people or they are the big  
05 and bossy friends. They are viewed as loud and obnoxious. Many of these  
06 depictions are true with many teen females.

Although she came into the study not self-identifying as a writer, she thought it would be interesting to write about stereotypes of African American girls to create awareness for others.

**Lily.** Lily entered the literacy collaborative with little to no desire to work with other African American girls or to write. She was 13-years-old and attended a suburban school that had a population of 77% White, 13% African American, 5% Hispanic, 3% International and 2% Asian. In her pre-interview, she referred to her current school as a “white school” due to the racial breakdown of students and teachers. She self-identified as a proficient reader and loved to express herself creatively through drawing and painting.

Her mother was the driving force of her participation. Initially, Lily was against participating because she did not feel she could relate to many Black people’s experiences, which in her pre-interview, she defined as urbanization and struggling in life. Growing up in Malaysia, she felt that she would not relate to other African American girls in the U.S. In Malaysia, she was rarely labeled as a “black girl” and was instead identified as an American. In the pre-interview she said that she felt that she would have little to contribute to a group of

African American girls. She was encouraged to participate because her mother told her that the other girls looked and dressed like her. Lily was dark-skinned with natural dark hair. In the pre-interview, Lily also reminded me several times that she “is a reader, not a writer” and never had a desire to write. She also described herself as a shy girl who liked to make new friends. In her sample writing, she wrote a piece entitled, “D<sup>3</sup>” about Black girls with dark hair, dark eyes, and dark skin. She wrote,

01 Dark hair, Dark eyes, Dark skin  
02 Blending in but standing out  
03 Dark hair, Dark eyes, Dark skin  
04 With hard things in the past  
05 I try to make a better future  
06 Dark hair, Dark eyes, Dark skin  
07 With confidence I show the world  
08 I am no different than the others

In this poem, she discussed the complexities of monolithic views of Black girls contrasted with uniqueness. She said she expected to gain the experience of being in a new environment around African American girls. She assumed all the other participants lived in the city and thought it would be interesting to hear their stories.

**Zinnia.** Zinnia was a 16-year-old sophomore. She attended an urban charter school. Her school’s ethnic make-up was 67% Hispanic, 23% African American, 4% Asian, 3% White and 3% Multicultural. She was a tall, brown-skin girl with short brown hair. Self-identifying as a proficient reader, she was also very athletic and participated in several school organizations and sports. She decided to participate in the study because she said she enjoyed reading and writing. She was not interested in participating with other African American girls and did not know what to expect. Zinnia described herself as someone who is very opinionated, outspoken and enjoys helping others. For example, she was never shy about expressing her opinions about representations even when other participants did not agree with her.

She explained further in her pre-interview that she liked to write about topics that “hits home” with her. In other words, she explained that her best writing happened when she wrote about something that she related to. She wrote at school and home but was able to express herself more at home because the “standards” of school writing censored what she wrote. While never writing about herself prior to the literacy collaborative, she expressed a desire to do so to help other African American girls through “their problems.” During the literacy collaborative, I discovered that Zinnia was interested in gender-related issues rather than just racial topics of African American girls. In her sample writing, she wrote,

01 A relationship is a bond between people who have a common interest or  
02 genuinely care for one another which consist of emotion trust and dependence.  
03 Relationships are important to have because they teach people that it’s okay to  
04 feel vulnerable, that it’s fine to feel lost and not know which way to go. My  
05 advisor has taught me things that classes don’t teach and I’m thankful for that.  
06 I learned that every relationship is important and I should value all  
07 relationships.

This piece is about the power of relationships and how relationship building is important. In her pre-interview she expressed that Black girls are the most “neglected minority” and believed that they needed more support growing up. She also had some perceptions of Black girls. Prior to the study, she said she hoped to be able to have conversations with other Black girls without it “getting rude” or “ghetto.” She believed that many African American girls could easily get tense when they do not agree on something.

**Camille.** Camille participated in the 2010 African American Adolescent Female Summer Literacy Institute (AAAFSLI). When asked what she gained as a result of the 2010 program, she felt that it strengthened her writing. She also said she learned not to judge others quickly and to work toward bonding and sisterhood with other African American girls. Also, she felt that AAAFSLI helped to improve her writing and increased her interest for writing. She was a 17-

year-old senior attending a large suburban high school. Her school's ethnic make up was 42.2% White, 33.2% Black, 16.6% Hispanic, 3.9% Multicultural, 3.6% Asian, and .5% Native American.

Camille self-identified as a proficient reader and was enrolled in AP high school courses. In the pre-interview, she described herself as uplifting and someone who likes to make others happy through optimism. During AAFSLI, I do not recall her speaking out much. However, during this study, she voiced her interpretations of the topics and texts quite often. She was a small-framed dark-skinned girl with long straight hair who was also head of her cheerleading team at school. During the study, she often assisted the younger writers with forming ideas and helped them to shape their final drafts.

She decided to participate because she thought it would be beneficial to see the viewpoints of girls from different communities. She specifically wanted to understand if other girls shared her same struggles. Camille loved to write about the world around her and what she saw in her everyday life. She specifically liked to write things about her childhood. She preferred writing at home because of distractions and other students at school made her uncomfortable with self-expression. She also stated that her teacher assigned writing related to responses to the characters read in books. In her writing sample, she wrote a piece entitled, "Forgotten":

01 I wronged and so I was forgotten  
02 I took home my enemy  
03 And fed him well to bring peace  
04 Friends took wrong impressions and now I am alone  
05 Awaiting a sentence in a room full of  
06 Bloodthirsty prosecutors  
  
07 My true remorse is uneasy  
08 But my apologies remain secure  
09 Stone cold faces show no emotion to my fulfilling words  
  
10 I wronged and so I was forgotten

- 11 I am rebuilding my honor
- 12 To restore all that was lost
- 13 But my journey will not be easy
- 14 For every wall that blocks me
- 15 Remains harder than the last to climb

She explained in her pre-interview that lines 10-15 were written to illustrate how Black people are portrayed in society and sometimes deemed as bad people based on a single mistake. She wanted to express that all people are capable of making mistakes as well as improving their lives.

From the literacy collaborative, she expected to create new relationships and friendships and expected some of the same benefits from her participation in the first literacy collaborative. This included, enjoying being around other Black girls, supporting and valuing each other, and knowing that she is not the only person who struggles with issues of representation. She believed literacy collaboratives like AAASLI are important for African American adolescent girls because Black girls are sometimes afraid to speak up and writing is an important medium to articulate thoughts clearly and purposefully.

**Violet.** Violet was a 17-year-old high school senior. She attended a private Catholic school with a population of 98% African American, 1% White, and 1% Multicultural. She was dark-skinned, with a small frame. She worked a job each day and attended the literacy collaborative after her morning shift. She decided to participate because she loved to write and was intrigued with being able to contribute to research about Black girls. Violet was interested in writing with African American girls because she never had such opportunity but was unsure what she would gain from participation. She had to write her thoughts on paper before transferring her final piece to the computer. Similar to some of the other girls, she thought it would be helpful to share the same problems that she expected other girls would have experienced.

Violet described herself as someone who is creative, outgoing, and open-minded. She also felt strong about her reading ability. She enjoyed writing about life's experiences such as relationships with family and friends. She especially enjoyed writing about herself and felt writing about herself is therapeutic. She was able to transfer her emotions to paper. In her sample piece, she wrote a poem entitled, "Different Outfits":

01 I walk into a room among other breeds  
02 And I feel judged  
03 Immediately, they dress me with stereotypes:  
04 Ignorant as a shirt,  
05 Confrontation on my lips,  
06 Beads of afro centric in my hair  
07 Voluptuous spelled among my thighs and back side,  
08 Shoes labeled "Going No Where."  
09 Then I open my mouth and speak  
10 Cleverness, mannerism, gentleness, integrity  
11 All flow out of me.

This poem is about how African American girls are "dressed" with stereotypes and false perceptions. In lines 03-08, she explained that she wrote this piece because she felt that Black girls are often misjudged and labeled with stereotypes. As a result, she often felt that others think African American women and girls cannot compete on an intellectual level. In addition to learning about the experiences of other African American adolescent girls, she also hoped to gain a better understanding of African American literature and improve her writing skills.

**Researcher.** Growing up, I attended schools in urban and suburban environments. As a result, I have had diverse learning experiences. I now, self identify as a Black women and a writer. Yet growing up, I struggled deeply with knowing and understanding my identity. I knew I was of mixed race (African-American and Iranian), but only acknowledged my Black ethnicity although I did not understand myself completely. To many Black people, I was not "Black enough" due to my small build, my long hair, lighter skin, and the manner in which I spoke,

which was called “talking White.” I did not see many positive representations of myself in my environments, which stifled my pursuit to understand who I am. It was not until mid college years that I began to make sense of my identities related to ethnicity and gender.

My interest in African American adolescent girls stemmed from my work as a middle school teacher and administrator. For five years, I led a girls’ organization called, Girls Circle. Initially, the purpose of the organization was for academic, health, and overall wellness for adolescent girls. I soon discovered that the girls who participated had many hardships related to social injuries and pathologies that many girls experience in their adolescent years—many of which I experienced as a teen. I wanted to understand if literacy practices could help girls understand these issues. I believed that if girls had a stronger sense of self, they could begin to protect themselves against social injuries.

When I led the 2010 AAASLI, I entered the space knowing that writing could be a useful tool to help African American adolescent girls make sense of their lives, but as I engaged in writing with the girls, I became more aware of the greater sense of heterogeneity that existed among the group of girls. I also learned how girls of different ages and experiences could teach each other something new about issues of identity and representation. The belief that there is no *one way* to be an African American girl became stronger in my mind and I felt that it helped participants, including myself, feel safe and comfortable in affirming our own self-identities.

As I entered the context of the current study, I still had assumptions that girls would come with diverse experiences and ideals of selfhood yet, I did not want to push any particular type of representation in their writings. I used the literacy collaborative to explore my own thoughts of selfhood and representation because I feel that the exploration of self-representation and identity is an ongoing and continuous process. My role in the literacy collaborative was to:



1. Introduce the participants to the framework of each session
2. Teach with the mentor texts and aspects of how to write the given genre for the week
3. Edit and improve each piece of writing individually with each participant
4. Use questioning and probing to push the participants toward thinking about and interpreting their own thoughts about representation in their writings

They also helped me in much of the same ways with my writings.

### **Seating Arrangements of Participants**

The participants sat at two different tables in the Reading Clinic with four girls at each table. I asked the girls to sit in groups that showed a mix of their ages. I thought that the older and younger girls could learn from each other. Besides two visiting authors, there were no visitors during the study because I wanted the girls to feel safe and because some of the issues of representation were sensitive, I did not want them to feel uncomfortable in the discussion or sharing of their writings. This type of safe space was something I learned from the 2010 AAASLI girls who shared with me how visitors made them feel that they had to code the language they used during the discussion. Lunch took place half way through the three-hour block and during lunch, the girls mostly talked about favorite literature read in and out of school, music, and social issues as they continued to write. During their lunch talk, I learned more about their personalities and why they wrote in certain ways. For example, after Heather said, the main purpose of school is to socialize with friends. Lily chimed in and said, “Yea but I would never let my grades fall. I keep my grades up.” I later discovered that Lily wrote this personality trait of never letting her grades drop within the main character of her short story.

## **Pedagogical Routine**

**Lesson plans and texts of the literacy collaborative.** I wrote and facilitated lesson plans during each day of the literacy collaborative to help African American adolescent girls think and write across content related to representations. Literature was used as mentor texts for the girls' writings. Mentor texts are model textual examples to help gain knowledge about the type of writing such as content and structure (Calkins, 1994; Dorfman & Cappelli, 2007; Dutro & McIver, 2011; Gallagher, 2011). I used mentor texts from authors, Harriet Jacobs, Gwendolyn Brooks, Dorothy West, Sharon Flake, Ebony Wilkins, Anna Julia Cooper, and Sister Authors from the 2010 African American Adolescent Female Summer Literacy Institute (AAAFSLI). Mentor texts have been found to support adolescents as they make sense of their identities and representations of themselves while constructing different genres of text (Jocson, 2006; Stone, 2005; Tatum & Gue, 2012; Wissman, 2011). I selected the text for the collaborative that:

1. Modeled the style and structure of each type of text I asked the girls to write
2. Helped the girls to see how others wrote about representations
3. To provide background knowledge of various topics related to representations
4. Was in response to some of the dialogue that occurred during the literacy collaborative

The selected texts were representative of a wide frame of time periods (see Table 2).

Table 2  
*Central Mentor Texts Read*

	Author	Text	Type of Writing	Time Period
Week 1	Harriet Jacobs	Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl	Personal Narrative	Colonial and Antebellum (1800s)
Week 2	Gwendolyn Brooks	To Black Women; To Those Of My Sisters Who Kept Their Naturals Never to Look a Hot Comb in the Teeth	Poem	Black Aesthetic Movement: 1960s, 1970s
Week 3	Dorothy West	For Richer, the Poorer	Short Story	1995
Week 4	Anna Julia Cooper	The Status of Women in America	Essay	Reconstruction Period (1892)
	Sister Authors from 2010 AAASLI	Open letters to African American adolescent girls	Letter	2010

The texts in Table 2 were the central mentor texts read. In addition, the girls’ own writings, as well as magazine articles, images, and video clips, were used as resources to support instruction. Appendix B provides the complete list of text read throughout the literacy collaborative.

Each lesson began with the girls collectively reciting a preamble that they wrote during the first day of the literacy collaborative. Depending on the weekday, the recitation was followed by reading a brief biography of the featured mentor author, reading and discussing mentor texts, sharing and critiquing writings, and writing (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Literacy Collaborative Schedule

Tuesdays	
1:30pm	Preamble
1:35pm	Sister Spark: The type of text written for the week is discussed and illuminated through examples.
2:00pm	“Herstory”: A brief history and background on the featured Sister Author is discussed. The Sister Author is the writer of the mentor text read.
2:10pm	Mentor Text: The selected mentor text is read and discussed.
2:40pm	Writing: Girls collaborate and discuss writing among each other and write independently.
4:00pm-4:30pm	Sister Share: The girls share a piece of writing publically while others engage in critique and feedback. Preamble
Wednesdays & Thursdays	
1:30pm	Preamble
1:35pm	Writing
4:00pm-4:30pm	Sister Share Preamble

We started the first day of the week with what I called, *Sister Spark*. The Sister Spark was an attempt to gain the girls’ attention toward the writing. The type of writing for the week was discussed and explicitly clarified through textual examples so girls would have a greater understanding of the topic and of the type of writing. On average, the Sister Spark lasted 25 minutes.

This was followed by an introduction of the featured mentor Sister Author. The featured Sister Author was the author of the mentor text that we read together. We read a brief biography of the author and discussed the author’s purposes for writing (Tatum, 2009). These included African American women writers and we would then read the mentor text together. At times, I

would pause during or after the readings and discuss the meaning of the text. I remained cognizant that I had a range of proficient readers, younger girls, and girls who were taking advanced placement courses in high school. Because of this, I discussed and explicated what I perceived as different vocabulary or concepts as we read the text together. I did not lower the level of readability of the text. Writing followed the reading of the mentor text. Table 3 shows the amount of time spent writing each day and on average, we spent two uninterrupted hours writing during each session of the literacy collaborative.

Table 3  
*Total Uninterrupted Writing Time*

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3
Week 1	1 hour, 50 minutes	2 hours, 30 minutes	Holiday (no session)
Week 2	1 hour	2 hours, 5 minutes	2 hours, 30 minutes
Week 3	1 hour, 30 minutes	2 hours, 30 minutes	2 hours, 30 minutes
Week 4	2 hours, 15 minutes	2 hours, 30 minutes	2 hours, 30 minutes
Total writing time	23 hours, 40 minutes		

During instruction, the girls were encouraged to write openly and without apology. In other words, they were given the freedom to express themselves as they desired, without judgment or writing prompts. To help them develop their own writing styles, I modeled how to read texts like writers, which enabled them to pay greater attention to authors' use of sentence structure, language complexity, voice, conventions, use of dialogue and other literary features. During time allotted for writing, some of the girls would write notes on paper to brainstorm ideas. Others would begin to listen to music and some just kept earplugs in their ears for concentration. I sat with the girls with my laptop when I started to write. As they moved closer to their final drafts during the second and third day of the week, each girl would switch writings

with another to give feedback. I also switched writings with the girls. We used the following feedback form (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Feedback Form

Sister Author: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Self-Regulation/Evaluation	Peer Rating
<b>Organization:</b> The events and ideas follow a logical sequence.	4 3 2 1
<b>Interest Level/ Momentum:</b> The piece is interesting and keeps the reader involved.	4 3 2 1
<b>Situated:</b> The piece is clearly situated in a time and place.	4 3 2 1
<b>Authenticity:</b> The piece seems real and believable.	4 3 2 1
<b>Details:</b> The author provides vivid and necessary details.	4 3 2 1
<b>Word Choice:</b> The author chose strong words that capture the reader's attention.	4 3 2 1
<b>Style:</b> The style of the prose speaks to the content.	4 3 2 1
<b>Voice:</b> The voice seems real and authentic.	4 3 2 1
<b>Efferent/Aesthetic:</b> This piece has both factual and/or personal, emotional content.	4 3 2 1
<b>Additional Feedback:</b>	

In doing this, I worked with the girls on how to write and observe for those elements in their writings and in the writings of others. In the last 30 minutes of each day, I would ask a few girls to share their writings with the entire group. I encouraged other girls to comment on the writings and offer suggestions to improve the piece. They were also encouraged to share strengths about the piece. Each session was concluded with the recitation of the preamble they wrote together.

On the first day of the literacy collaborative, I created a presentation using each of the girls' sample writings from their applications and projected it for the entire group of girls. I talked about how the literacy collaborative will be a space for all of us to write representations of ourselves. I also informed the girls that writing would be nurtured in ways to help them write

openly about themselves explaining that this may lead them to coming closer to understanding their individual purposes for writing. To emphasize this, I invited them to read the following piece of writing by Toni Cade Bambara (1980),

Writing is one of the ways I participate in struggle—one of the ways I help to keep vibrant and resilient that vision that has kept the Family going on. Through writing I attempt to celebrate the tradition of resistance, attempt to tap Black potential, and try to join the chorus of voices that argues that exploitation and misery are neither inevitable nor necessary. Writing is one of the ways I participate in the transformation....Writing is one of the ways I do my work in the world (p. 154).

Bambara expresses how writing is a service to self and to others. It is a form of self-expression, which can be used to write out selfhood in ways that project voice. She explains that writing is a tool of resistance to improve and advance the conditions for the “Family” which could be other African American females, other African American people or the entire humanity. Finally, writing is a transformative exercise of intellect. It is more than just an activity that one engages in but a literary pursuit that is aimed at using language in ways to speak change into action. For Bambara and for many other writers, it is part of our work and purpose in the world. I explained to the girls that their presence within the current literacy collaborative makes them a part of a rich lineage of African American women writers who came together in literacy clubs and other organized groups to write and critique each other writings to advance their literacy development.

Following the introduction, the girls constructed a preamble that would energize us at the start of each session. I explained that preambles have been written as a form of self-expression and to illuminate the purposes of being in reading and writing groups. The girls took 25 minutes to write lines to insert into the preamble. Two girls, Jasmine and Dahlia, wrote their own preambles. The others wrote lines to include in the group’s preamble. I encouraged the opening lines, “We the Sister Authors” because the literacy collaborative framework was modeled after studies that used similar language in their preambles (Muhammad, 2012; Tatum & Gue, 2012).

There were 19 responses that the girls shared from their individual writings. I facilitated an open discussion to generate the collaborative's preamble. One girl, Zinnia wanted to add, "We are defined by color of skin, ignored and neglected cause we speak Ebonics." I asked the girls if this line countered or aligned with the other lines of pushing against being identified singularly.

Camille chimed in and said that all Black girls do not speak Ebonics and the others agreed. After 1 hour and 15 minutes, the girls had written the preamble that follows:

01 We, the Sister Authors, are here to encourage all our sisters to be brave, share  
02 our stories and not to fear those without knowledge about us. Together we  
03 shall clear a path for those who come later. We will write to ignite a spark in  
04 our fellow sisters in order to bring unity among us. Our writing is to entice  
05 society with our minds. We write with intelligence, passion and personality.  
06 Only we can tell our stories. We are smart and can strive to be anything we  
07 want although society projects us as all the same. Today we will change the  
08 way we are defined. We will write to not only leave an impression on paper  
09 but also on society.

Constructing a preamble was an important aspect of the literacy collaborative and was connected to a practice within nineteenth century literary societies. When analyzing their preamble, I found that the girls had a desire to share their stories and insight into their identities like many African American female writers of the past (Muhammad, 2012). This is indicated in lines 04-06 and 08-09. A sense of kinship emerged from lines 02-04 in the language, "Together we shall clear a path for those who come later and "We will write to ignite a spark in our fellow sisters in order to bring unity among us." They used words like "together," (line 02) "fellow sisters, (line 04)" and "unity" (line 04) to depict solidarity and a relationship with other African American girls. Their purpose is also to engage future generations or "those who come later." They engage other African American girls, but also the society at large. They represent themselves as intellectual beings in line 06 by expressing that they "write with intelligence" and that they "are smart." As they wrote to represent themselves, they wrote against the misrepresentation that they are



monolithic beings or African American girls who are defined as being, “all the same” (line 07). They conclude the preamble by proclaiming that they will use their pens to change the ways in which others mislabel or define them.

### **Pedagogical Timeline**

**Personal narratives: Week 1.** Throughout the literacy collaborative, the girls composed six types of writing: 1) personal narratives, 2) two poems, 3) short stories, 4) informational pieces, and 5) open letters. During the first week, we each wrote a personal narrative. I asked the girls to think about a personal and meaningful event or experience in their lives and to capture this event in writing. I explained that they could write how they and others reacted during this event and could reveal their thoughts about how they felt during this time. Finally I asked them to think about how this moment contributed to defining their lives. To support their writing, we read from Harriet Jacobs’s, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Lee, 2006, pp. 22-23). Jacobs provides a personal account of her childhood and adult experiences through the horrid years of enslavement.

...I was sent to spend a week with my grandmother. I was now old enough to begin to think of the future; and again and again I asked myself what they would do with me. I felt sure I should never find another mistress so kind as the one who was gone. She had promised my dying mother that her children should never suffer for any thing, and when I remembered that, and recalled her many proofs of attachment to me, I could not help having some hopes that she had left me free. My friends were almost certain it would be so. They thought she would be sure to do it, on account of my mother’s love and faithful service. But alas! we all know that the memory of a faithful slave does not avail much to save her children from the auction block (p. 23).

In the full text, Jacobs writes across sexual exploitations, ethnic, gender, and familial representations while writing about and against the institution of slavery and other oppressive conditions at the time. In the excerpt above, she writes about how love and faithfulness were not enough to save children from enslavement. This example of rejecting an enacted form of power

aligns with the literary traditions of Black women who often wrote to counter or resist forms of injustice in their writings. I shared with the girls that many African American writers, like Jacobs, used pseudonyms to protect themselves. Jacobs used the pseudonym, Linda Brent. The use of anonymity during authorship is part of a broad history of writing among African Americans during the antebellum period. McHenry (2002) writes, "...the mask of anonymity allowed black women to confidently experiment with roles that might otherwise have remained socially and culturally outside the realm of accepted norms" (p. 62). The part of the narrative we read discussed Jacobs's identities and the events leading to the wider discussion of sexual abuse toward enslaved women.

**Poetry: Week 2.** During the second week, we read poetry and wrote two poems, including one broadside poem that spoke to our personal views of who we are or who African American girls are collectively. We read two poems from Gwendolyn Brooks entitled, "To Black Women" and "To Those Of My Sisters Who Kept Their Naturals Never to Look a Hot Comb in the Teeth." Both of these texts were written in the 1960s or 70s during the Black Aesthetic Movement. In "To Black Women," Brooks writes to tell Black females to remain steadfast in difficult conditions.

Sisters,  
Where there is cold silence –  
No hallelujahs, no hurrahs at all, no handshakes,  
No neon red or blue, no smiling faces –  
prevail.  
Prevail across the editors of the world,  
Who are obsessed, self-honeying and self-crowned  
In the seduced arena.

The second poem was selected because the girls discussed how hair is linked to who they are and informally debated if natural or relaxed hair was preferred among Black girls.

Sisters!  
I love you.  
Because you love you.  
Because you are erect.  
Because you are also bent.  
In season, stern, kind.  
Crisp, soft -in season.  
And you withhold.  
And you extend.  
And you Step out.  
And you go back.  
And you extend again.

Brooks describes hair as the essence of the self and writes about hair metaphorically explaining that just as African American females' hair is bent, soft, erect, tough, stern, and overall versatile, so is the African American female herself. There is a great deal of resiliency that exists in both comparisons.

When we wrote broadside poetry, I explained that broadside poetry is slightly unique from other forms of poetry in that these types of poems are socially conscious and infused with political statements (Reid, 2002). They may be strongly opinionated and often a form of protest. In the 1960s when broadside poetry was prevalent, Gwendolyn Brooks began writing more of these types of poems because as she explained the social climate was “no time for urgent-free verse” (Fisher, 2009). She then began to write in ways to exert her ethnic and gender identities and typically was brief in the amount of language used yet kept powerful word choice. She also wrote more about social issues including, racial tensions in the United States, women's roles, segregation, and the social and political conditions affecting the lives of African Americans (Rugoff, 2009). I explained that broadside poetry should be informed by facts and it is important for writers to take time to research the content for their texts. To nurture the writing of poetic broadsides, we read mentor texts and slam poetry. Like broadside poetry, slam poetry can often

be socially conscious writing intended to advocate for social change or awareness of a critical issue. During this time, a previous 2010 AAASLI performed her broadside/slam poem entitled, “State of Crisis.” She was not a participant in the current study but was invited to share her poem with the girls.

CHECK IT, CHECK IT! NEWSFLASH!  
JUST IN  
If you got that long hair and light skin  
It's time for antagonism to commence  
Against your dark skinned sister so let the rivalry begin  
The world takes one gaze at my flesh and see's black  
Creating obstacles from here to infinity at my back  
You see my sparse melanin and that's automatically a basis for attack  
Or you won't even recognize our kinship because of what half of me lacks  
We are the daughters of Humanity  
Our stories are woven together intricately creating the tapestry of our ancestry  
But collectively we have come to be  
Reduced to nothing  
We are descendent from former princesses and queens  
Our blood rich with imperial royalty  
So tell me why that is my sister I see  
“Backing that ass up” on a TV Screen  
And more importantly why is that the only option that she sees for herself  
We are the daughters of humanity  
So can someone please tell me  
Why society is committing a social genocide against my sanity?  
They tell me to ingest this but my body can't digest it  
So it's time for me to confess this to anyone that will listen  
Word on the street is that I must sling rocks or get shot  
Ball on the block or drop it like it's hot  
There is no stepping out of these lines I am confined by the system  
I guess I just can't win.

In this poem, this author wrote about the dichotomy based on skin color that exists among African American girls and the representation that depict girls in sexualized ways on television. She writes to counter such dominance by suggesting that Black girls are the “daughters of humanity” and their identities are complex (Muhammad, 2012). This poem served as another mentor text for the girls to think about this genre since many of them had not written poetry in

this way before. Other text read and viewed this week included a poem entitled “Warrior” written by another 2010 AAASLI Sister Author and a clip from a 2006 documentary on Black girlhood entitled, *The Souls of Black Girls* which featured African American women and adolescent girls discussing representations. Three additional brief videos of broadside poetry performances were shown on the second day of the week to support their writing.

**Short Stories: Week 3.** During week three, we wrote short stories. I shared the beginning of my own story:

I frantically entered the doors of my new middle school. The walls were filled with student-made work on science experiments and posters about “good test taking skills.” It was second hour already and Mama mistakenly dropped me off late. I can usually count on being the last kid to arrive and last to leave any school event. I quickly found the main office and gave the secretary, Mrs. Brownlee my transfer slip as she tried her darndest to pronounce my 10-letter, multi-syllable name. That was just the first name; she should probably forget my two middle names and hyphenated last name. She squinted her eyes through her already oversized, square-shaped bifocals and when that didn’t help, tilted her face down and peered outside of her glasses, so that her chin was near to touching her chest. She looked up and asked, “Uh, oohh, I’m going to have a hard time saying this.” I looked up, and gave her a pallid smile, wondering how many more times did I need to hear this in my life. She was able to muster out the first sound and said something that sounded like *dinosaur*. “No!” I snapped without thinking. “My name is Gholneccsar.” “Well, do you have a nickname?” she said with an attitude. I just glazed off wondering how much I dreaded new schools and the typical *no-name-sayin, nick-name givin, annoying kids and adults* that came along with it. After some needless back and forth talk with her, I walked the slow green mile to social studies.

I asked the girls to do the following actions when opening their own stories: Name the character early on, name things that situate their stories, use language to establish momentum and to imitate critical elements of short stories such as the structure, description and use of dialogue (Tatum, 2009). We read and discussed Dorothy West’s, “For Richer, the Poorer” (1995).

Over the years Lottie had urged Bess to prepare for her old age. Over the years Bess had lived each day as if there were no other. Now they were both past sixty, the time for summing up. Lottie had a bank account that had never grown lean. Bess had the clothes on her back, and the rest of her worldly possessions in a battered suitcase.

Lottie had hated being a child, hearing her parents' skimping and scraping. Bess had never seemed to notice. All she ever wanted was to go outside and play. She learned to skate on borrowed skates. She rode a borrowed bicycle. Lottie couldn't wait to grow up and buy herself the best of everything.

This is a story of two sisters taking their individual and different paths in life and then coming together. We also explored the short story, *The Ugly One*, written by Sharon Flake (2004) to examine character development and how the author represented the protagonist. They went home reading the first three chapters of the novel, *Sell Out* by Ebony Wilkins (2010) which is a story about a protagonist Black teen locating herself as she is positioned among competing frames of what it means to be a Black girl. During the last day of this week, Wilkins visited the girls to discuss how she wrote the text and the process of publication.

**Informational Pieces and Open Letters: Week 4.** During week four, I asked the girls to conduct research and look up facts, statistics, or other data about African American adolescent girls and to use this in their informational pieces. The essay was a common text written by African American women in the past and was used to discuss existing data that related to the local and global communities at that time. Essayists Sojourner Truth, Maria W. Stewart, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Anna Julia Cooper, and Frances E. W. Harper used language in text to write against oppressive conditions or certain representations. Before sharing the central mentor text from Anna Julia Cooper, I shared with the girls an excerpt from one essayist, Maria W. Stewart.

O, ye daughters of Africa, awake! Awake! Arise!  
No longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves. Show forth to the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties. O, ye daughters of Africa! What have ye done to immortalize your names beyond the grave? What examples have ye set before the rising generation? What foundation have ye laid for generations yet unborn? (Lee, 2006, p. 15)

This excerpt from “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which We Must Build,” was written in 1831. We examined and discussed the author’s message and her

language, proclamation, and rhetorical questioning used to advocate for African American females. Similar to the excerpt, they were encouraged to write their own informational pieces with key elements that might include factual information, the use of proclamations and rhetorical questioning, an intended audience, an appeal (serious or urgent request toward something), and have a purpose aimed at social change. The second mentor text this week also supported these elements. The girls spent time in groups of two or three researching and identifying critical issues or messages to address in their writings. To support their writing I asked the girls to complete a chart that helped them to find a statistic, and write out details that the statistic did or did not tell. Writing followed this. These were edited pieces but I explained to the girls these could later be taken and expanded into essays or papers.

On the last day of the fourth week, we wrote open letters to other African American girls. As mentor texts, the girls read letters from 2010 AAASFSLI participants. Additionally, I shared my own open letter with them as well as individual letters I had written to each of them. The purpose of the letter writing was to give the girls a space to share their voices directly with other generations of African American girls, just as women in the past used writing to share messages to contemporaries.

### **Data Sources**

There were multiple data sources for this study. They included 16 pre- and post audiotaped interviews. I collected 48 writing artifacts that included eight personal narratives, eight poems, eight broadside poems, eight short stories, eight informational pieces, and eight open letters. Other data sources included participant-researcher memos and observations. A detailed description of the data sources follows.

**Interviews.** Each participant participated in a pre- and post audiotaped individual interview that involved each girl discussing representation and writing. A semi-structured interview protocol was used because I sought to allow space for participants to discuss responses to the questions and/or any other related thoughts about representations within their writings (see Appendix C). This resulted in the interviews being similar to recorded conversations. For example, there were moments when a participant and I would have dialogue related to a particular question, especially if the participant asked me a follow-up question. I conducted each interview in a private office of the Reading Clinic. This prevented disruptions and afforded privacy for the participants to share thoughts. Each pre-interview was conducted before the start of the literacy collaborative and on average, lasted for 24 minutes. The post interviews were scheduled and conducted immediately following the literacy collaborative and lasted for an average of 49 minutes.

I transcribed a total of 16 interviews. Each interview was transcribed immediately after, adopting Poland's (2001) strategies for high-quality transcriptions. This included having the digital recorder prepared prior to the interview, conducting the interview in a setting that is free of interruptions, asking the participants to speak clearly and informing them that I could restate or clarify any ambiguous questions, and labeling and transcribing data immediately following the interview. I not only took into account *what* was said but *how* it was said as well. I initially transcribed each interview verbatim using notations for pauses, elongations, interruptions, laughter, and intonations. As Poland (2001) notes, many interpersonal interaction and nonverbal communication are not captured in the audio; therefore, I made detailed memos on the side of the transcript explicating my interpretations and notes about the responses, the participant and myself. The pre-interview data gave me a sense of the participants' stances of how African



American women and girls are portrayed in society as well as a greater sense of their feelings about writing and what they have typically written about. The post interview helped me to gather information on the impact of the literacy collaborative and how aspects of the collaborative helped to shape their writings. Each pre- and post interview was reviewed several times and each participant's responses were organized into summary charts. I also informally coded the interview data for emerging themes or points of related to the study.

**Writing artifacts.** Throughout the four weeks, each participant wrote six artifacts including a personal narrative, a poem, a broadside poem, a short story, an informational piece, and an open letter to African American girls. I found that these types of texts were common genres among African American women's writings (Lee, 2006). I analyzed a total of 48 writing artifacts. In addition to the 48 writing artifacts from the participants, I examined my own six writing artifacts and the mentor texts used for instruction each week because after analyzing the participants' writings, I wanted to see if they wrote across similar types of representations.

**Participant-researcher memos.** Throughout the study, I wrote memos before, during and after each day of the literacy collaborative. These memos helped me to keep ongoing reflections of the study and enabled me to make sense of the topic of representation and record ideas related to the topic. This was helpful as I refined the lessons and analyzed the writing artifacts. Memos were written on methodological issues, personal reactions to the interactions of the participants, and new ideas (Maxwell, 2005). Such organization included coding memos, theoretical notes, operational notes, and subvarieties of these (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These notes allowed me to engage in my own positioning in the research and self-critique of my role as researcher, observer, and facilitator of the lessons.

**Observations.** The literacy collaborative was videotaped for its duration. Video recorders were a part of the research site and were controlled through a recording station. I viewed the recordings when triangulating the findings. The observations were helpful in reviewing the daily interaction leading to the writing and were helpful when considering implications for learning contexts.

**Analyzing, Interpreting and Triangulating Data**

Three phases were implemented for analyzing, interpreting and triangulating data in the study (see Table 4). Each of the phases of analyzing and interpreting helped me to understand and describe the text (writing artifacts), the creator of the texts (participants), the participants’ process of text production and the context in which the writer has participated and from which the writing emerged.

Table 4  
*Phases of Analyzing, Interpreting, and Triangulating Data*

Phase	Methods Used	Data Sources
1	Thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) to examine themes related to representation, power and agency	Writing artifacts and interview data
	Open, axial, and selective coding of themes related to representation	Writing artifacts and interview data
2	Member checking	Post interviews, researcher’s memos, observational notes, and video data
3	Triangulation and outsider coder to check for inter-rater agreement	Interviews, writing artifacts, researcher’s memos, observational notes, and video data

**Phase 1: Coding writing artifact and interview data.** To respond the first research question, *How do African American adolescent girls represent themselves in writings?* I used a

line-by-line thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) of each writing artifact to examine how participants represent themselves. Through thematic analysis, I looked for language related to the three categories of critical sociocultural theory and the three platforms of African American women's writing platforms: representation (identity), power, and agency. I then examined the lines found to signify themes of "representation" and engaged in open coding of these lines to elicit codes related to representation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I engaged in coding as soon as I collected the writing artifacts and at the end of the study so data analysis was ongoing. During open coding, I found 136 themes related to representation. Some of these codes included beauty, family, college/higher education, hair, individuality, writing, and bonding. Considering these codes, I took a second pass through the writing artifacts and engaged in axial coding to find connections of these codes. I began to select fewer codes by categorizing the initial themes found in open coding. During axial coding I developed eight codes related to representation. These codes included representations related to community, ethnicity, gender, intellect, kinship, personality, physical/external self, and sexuality. A third pass through the data allowed me to choose and confirm the final categories. I use six selective representation codes, which included taking ethnic and gender representations and putting them in the category of *cultural representations*. I also took a close look at the physical representation code related to bodily appearance, beauty and hair. I took a closer read of the language surrounding these codes and categorized it instead under the ethnic or gender codes because the physical representations applied to either of the two. Next, I began to develop a coding scheme (see Appendix D) with the selective codes. I took another pass thorough all the data collectively to confirm selective codes of representation within the writing artifacts. The final selective codes are *Community*, *Cultural* (ethnic and gender), *Individual*, *Intellectual*, *Kinship* and *Sexual* representations. I found that the

girls represented themselves in writing among these six broad topics. I finally took a fifth pass through the data once an outside coder examined the writing artifact data.

Although participants wrote across multiple representations of self in each piece, I identified the central code per writing artifact that was agreed upon by myself and by each participant. I present writing artifacts excerpts that illustrate those central representations. It is important to note that some participants wrote centrally across two representations of self in one given artifact. I honored both of these types of representations. I also found that representations were similar to each other. For example, when the girls wrote about kinship or sisterhood, they often also wrote about being female or their gender in the same writing. The same thing happened when they wrote across sexual representations of themselves; they were also writing about being female. This shows although the representations were clearly defined, they were not always mutually exclusive. Finally, as I examined the representations they wrote about, I also looked at embedded power found in writings. I found that in 37 of 48 writings, the girls wrote about or against seven themes of power, which included physical beauty and health, education, abuse and violence, monolithic profiles, sexualization, racial stereotypes and personal selfhood. This was followed by writing for agency or change within these same categories in 35 of those same writings. This helped me to further make sense of how they represented themselves.

The post-interview was used to help me to gather findings from the second research question, *Which factors within the literacy collaborative contribute to representations within their writings?* To gather data for this question, I asked each participant to talk about the aspects of the literacy collaborative that helped them write representations in the manner they chose. After transcribing the post interview data, I coded the data using open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) just as I had done with the writing artifacts to understand for which factors helped the

participants to represent themselves in their writings. From their responses, I looked for language to understand how each factor helped to support the ways they represented themselves in their writings. I asked the participants to respond to 13 contextual factors that was used to shape the writing instruction and how each of these factors contributed to their writing. These factors were gleaned from literary societies as well as a similar study around sociocultural framed writing within a literacy collaborative by Alfred Tatum and Valerie Gue (2012). In addition, several of these factors (i.e. use of mentor text, focus on representation, discussing literature) were used in representation and writing studies with African American adolescent girls and helped participants in the studies construct identities while writing (Wissman, 2008; 2011). All of the 13 contextual factors were used in a previous study I conducted on how an adolescent girl make sense of her identities while writing (Muhammad, 2012). These factors included: the focus on representation, use of mentor texts, discussion, use of technology to write, publically sharing writings with other Sister Authors and critique, writing different types of writings, visit from a published Sister Author, freedom to write openly, uninterrupted writing time, calling each other by the name Sister Author, the researcher writing alongside them, and participating with girls of different ages. Through a review of my memos and the observations, I found that these were key in developing the writing instruction. Each participant responded to each of these factors in addition to any other aspects they felt assisted in their writing.

**Phase 2: Member checks.** I was able to engage in member checks during the post interviews with each participant. During the post interview, I asked the participants to discuss representations from their writing artifacts. Such questions asked each participant to talk about who they are in each of writing artifact and why they chose to write about that particular representation of self. Because I analyzed each writing artifact and engaged in axial coding by

this time, I asked each participant if they represented themselves in the ways I had interpreted in my coding. I followed this by asking each participant to talk about what the writing artifact says about representations of herself or of other African American girls. Using this protocol, I revealed what I found to be prevalent in the writing and asked them if I made sense of the writing in the way they intended. I felt like I had a strong sense of the meaning and representations in the writings from our discussions during the literacy collaborative and through passes through the data throughout the study. Many times, the participants told me that the ways I perceived they wrote about themselves were actually the way they intended. Other times, some participants refuted aspects of how I made sense of their writing and explained how they wrote about themselves. Ultimately, I chose to honor their voices and interpretations of their writings above my own. This member checking helped me to understand representations in the ways the writing was intended while also giving validation to the study to ensure that I am not just gaining interpretation from the writings alone and therefore reduces bias or limitations.

**Phase 3: Triangulation & inter-rater agreement.** In the third phase, I compared the writing artifacts and interviews with the observations and reflective notes to triangulate my findings to aim for consistency. Examining the data sources together strengthened my interpretation. I was able for example to understand how each participant entered the study with certain perceptions of African American girlhood which helped me to then grasp how they represented themselves in their writings. Their writing representations were then checked against how they talked about representation in each writing artifact during the post interviews. I added this triangulation of the interviews to my original coding scheme (Boyatzis, 1998). This coding scheme was then used for another doctoral student to code the data. I gave the outside coder a representative sample of 20 of the participants' writing artifacts, which included three personal

narratives, three poems, three broadside poems, five short stories, two informational texts, and four open letters. I also made sure that the outside coder read multiple artifacts from each of the eight participants. I did a comparison of my codes and the coder's codes for each artifact. I found that we agreed on 71 of 78 representation codes, which makes for a 91% inter-rater agreement (Tinsley & Weiss, 2000). Appendix E shows each reviewed artifact and how the outside coder and I individually coded the data and what we agreed and differed upon. Although the coder did not have the other data illustrating the wider context, we overall agreed on the findings related to writing representations. In chapter four, I explicate the findings from the study.

#### IV. FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present findings from the study. To respond to the first research question, I framed the findings around the three platforms of African American women's writings, which include 1) writing to represent self, 2) writing to counter power, and 3) writing for agency or social change. Under the platform, *writing to represent self*, the girls wrote six main representations. These are *Community*, *Cultural*, *Individual*, *Intellectual*, *Kinship*, and *Sexual*. The *Cultural* representation is divided into *Ethnic* and *Gender* representations. As the girls were representing themselves in their writings, in 37 of 48 of the writings, they also wrote about or against some enacted form of power. This was followed by writing toward agency or social change in 35 of 48 of their writings. As I illustrate the six representations through examples from the girls, I embed my analysis of the types of power they wrote about or against and the analysis of agency or social change within the analysis of representations. The types of power that the eight girls wrote against fell within the following seven categories:

1. Physical Beauty and Health (being portrayed as not beautiful or unhealthy)
2. Education (being portrayed as uneducated)
3. Abuse and Violence (being portrayed as violent or being physically or mentally abused)
4. Monolithic Profile (being portrayed as a homogenous group)
5. Sexualizing and Objectification (being portrayed as over sexual)
6. Racial Stereotypes (being portrayed within fixed notions of race)
7. Personal Selfhood (personal struggles such as self-confidence)

When looking across all girls in the study, I found that the power they wrote about or against was related to issues they found to be important in their lives and the lives of other groups they identify



with (i.e. African Americans, women). Writing about or against power stemmed from either a personal space (internal source of power) or a societal space (broader source of power from society). Writing toward agency or change meant that they were writing toward ways to improve, advance, disrupt, or change the power they were writing about or against. Writing for agency or social change appeared at the end or conclusion of their writings.

As I examined the writings for each of the eight girls, it became clear that they wrote across multiple representations in the different texts from week to week (see Table 5). Therefore, when selecting writings to illustrate the representations found, I chose pieces that could give a clear view of each representation. I also chose pieces to represent all of the girls' writings in the findings. For each of the girls, I found a difference across sexual representations. The older girls ages 15-17 wrote about sexual representations while the girls ages 12-14 did not. This suggests that writing about sexual representations appear to be more developmental than gendered. I end this section by presenting a single case example of the participant, Lily to illustrate what I found across all the girls and what was unique in her conceptualization of Black girlhood. In comparison with the other girls, Lily entered the literacy collaborative with a different conceptualization of Black girlhood than what was observed in her writings. Finally, I present the findings from the second research question explaining the three contextual factors that the girls felt contributed to representations found in their writings the most. This includes, writing with mentor text, writing openly, and having uninterrupted writing time. Throughout this chapter, I use data from other sources such as interviews, memos, and observational notes to support the findings.

Table 5  
Representations Across Participants

Type of Text	Cultural		Community	Intellectual	Individual	Kinship	Sexual
	Ethnic	Gender					
Personal Narrative	*Jasmine, *Dahlia, Heather, *Camille	Jasmine, Lily, Zinnia, Camille, Violet	Ivy, Heather, *Lily, Camille	Ivy, Dahlia, *Heather, Lily, Camille, *Violet	Ivy, Heather, Lily, Zinnia, Camille, Violet	*Ivy, Dahlia, Lily	*Zinnia
	Dahlia, Heather, *Lily, *Violet	Ivy, *Dahlia, Heather, *Lily, *Camille	Zinnia, *Violet	*Jasmine, *Ivy, Heather, Zinnia, Camille	Ivy, Dahlia, Zinnia	Jasmine, *Heather, *Zinnia, Camille	Camille
Broadside Poem	*Jasmine, *Dahlia, *Lily, Violet	Jasmine, Ivy, *Dahlia, Heather, Lily, *Zinnia, Camille, Violet	*Ivy, Violet	Jasmine, Heather, Zinnia, Camille	Jasmine, Dahlia, Zinnia	Jasmine, Ivy, Heather, *Lily, Zinnia, Violet	*Heather, *Zinnia, *Camille, *Violet
	Jasmine, Ivy, *Dahlia, Lily, Zinnia, Camille, Violet	Jasmine, Ivy, *Dahlia, *Heather, *Lily, Zinnia, Camille, Violet	Ivy	*Jasmine, *Ivy, Zinnia, *Camille	Jasmine, *Dahlia, Heather, Lily, Camille	Dahlia, *Lily, Zinnia, *Camille, *Violet	Jasmine, Dahlia, Heather, Lily, Camille
Informational Piece	Jasmine	Jasmine, Lily, Camille, Violet	Jasmine, Dahlia, Heather, Lily, Camille	Dahlia, *Lily, *Zinnia	Jasmine, *Dahlia, *Heather, Lily, Zinnia, Camille, Violet	*Jasmine, *Ivy, Dahlia, Lily, Zinnia, *Camille, *Violet	Dahlia
	Jasmine, Ivy, Dahlia, *Heather, *Violet	Jasmine, Ivy, Dahlia, *Heather, Lily, Zinnia, Violet	Lily, Zinnia	Jasmine, *Ivy, *Dahlia, Lily, Zinnia, Camille, Violet	*Ivy, *Dahlia, Heather, Lily, *Zinnia, Violet	*Jasmine, Ivy, Dahlia, Heather, *Lily, Zinnia, *Camille, *Violet	Dahlia
Open Letter	Jasmine, Ivy, Dahlia, *Heather, *Violet	Jasmine, Ivy, Dahlia, *Heather, Lily, Zinnia, Camille, Violet	Lily, Zinnia	Jasmine, *Ivy, *Dahlia, Lily, Zinnia, Camille, Violet	*Ivy, *Dahlia, Heather, Lily, *Zinnia, Violet	*Jasmine, Ivy, Dahlia, Heather, *Lily, Zinnia, *Camille, *Violet	Dahlia
	Jasmine	Jasmine, Lily, Camille, Violet	Jasmine, Dahlia, Heather, Lily, Camille	Dahlia, *Lily, *Zinnia	Jasmine, *Dahlia, *Heather, Lily, Zinnia, Camille, Violet	*Jasmine, *Ivy, Dahlia, Heather, *Lily, Zinnia, *Camille, *Violet	Dahlia
<b>Total</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>10</b>
	<b>Central: 12</b>	<b>Central: 9</b>	<b>Central: 3</b>	<b>Central: 11</b>	<b>Central: 5</b>	<b>Central: 11</b>	<b>Central: 7</b>

\* indicates the central representation written for that type of text  
Underlined names of participants indicate that participants wrote across two representations in one writing artifact

### Research Question 1: How do participants represent themselves in their writings?

Overall, the girls wrote mostly across cultural representations with representations of gender being rendered the most frequent. Representations of kinship and intellect were the next most frequent representations (see Table 6).

Table 6  
*Frequency of Representations*

	<i>f</i>	<i>P</i>
Community	16	9.0
Cultural Ethnic	26	14.8
Cultural Gender	37	21.0
Individual	25	14.2
Intellectual	29	16.5
Kinship	33	18.8
Sexual	10	5.7
Total	176	100.0

The girls often wrote across multiple representations in one writing piece. Although this was the case, I found through careful analysis that each writing piece illuminated one central representation that captured the meaning and significance of the entire piece. There were ten instances when five girls (Ivy, Dahlia, Heather, Lily, and Zinnia) wrote across two central representations in one single writing piece. This explains the total of 58 central representations in Table 7. Although gender representations emerged the most overall, the girls focused on issues related to ethnicity (see Table 7).

Table 7  
*Frequency of Central Representations*

	<i>f</i>	<i>P</i>
Community	3	5.2
Cultural Ethnic	12	20.7
Cultural Gender	9	15.5
Individual	5	8.6
Intellectual	11	19.0
Kinship	11	19.0
Sexual	7	12.0
Total	58	100.0

### **Cultural Representations**

Cultural representations are related to the description, practices or beliefs of a particular group. The two dimensions of cultural representations included ethnicity and gender.

Representations related to ethnicity express a national or cultural tradition of a distinct group that denotes a specific origin by birth or culture by the girls' environment. For all of the girls, this was writing about their race or about being African Americans or Black. Gender representations illustrated female or feminine references. The literacy collaborative was nurtured for African American girls so it comes to little surprise why ethnic and gender representations were observed most frequently.

**Ethnicity.** Representations of ethnicity appeared in the girls' personal narratives and poetry. Jasmine wrote about the dichotomy that exists between lighter and darker skin African American girls along with the labeling that sometimes occurs with being Black within her personal narrative. She wrote,

- 01 Being a lighter skinned African American girl can be just as hard as being
- 02 darker skinned one. Being lighter skinned or even just talking in a more
- 03 profound way, acting differently, carrying your self in a certain style, etc., it

04 all comes down to a whole different type of issue. Not being a cliché black  
05 person, within the racial profiling and stereotype, but being out of it. Being  
06 too “white” instead. It’s just as hard. The truth in that came to me one day in  
07 school, of all places. Minding my own business, talking, waiting for the doors  
08 to the next class to be unlocked. Leaning against the wall, no longer active in  
09 conversation, I sigh and check the time. I’m bored. Then, Lyn, this girl with  
10 skin just a fair as mine, if not a lighter shade, walks up to me, with her dark  
11 hair frizzled in its braided up-do. She says to me the most unnecessary things  
12 possible. “Sydney, you talk smart, too proper...” And on she went, like I was  
13 actually paying her any attention. I honestly didn’t care what she thought, so I  
14 did my best to block her out with thoughts of ‘when the heck was the teacher  
15 going to unlock the doors’, and fiddling with a cell phone. I was doing pretty  
16 well, too, until she brought up skin color. Talking about how it made me  
17 white. I blinked and looked up at her in shock, surprised she had the audacity  
18 to talk about my skin color, when she was right in front of me, about as fair  
19 skinned as I was.

In this personal narrative, Jasmine told a story and offered an ethnic representation that often dichotomizes some African American girls based on skin color. Using words like related to skin color, skin tone, and race throughout the writing helped me to know that she was representing an ethnic representation. She told a story about a girl named Lyn at her school who also had a lighter skin tone and “frizzled hair” (lines 09-11). Although Lyn had similar physical features as Jasmine, she teased Jasmine about not being “Black enough” due to her skin tone, hair and the way Jasmine talked, which Jasmine described as “smart and proper.” The girl who teased Jasmine’s way of talking, referred to it as *acting White*. Jasmine wrote to the counter power of notions of racial identity and language in lines 16-19. In an example of writing against such notions in lines 04-05 and line 12, Jasmine wrote that being fair-skinned and talking “proper” was mostly associated with acting and being “white” and “not black” in Jasmine’s experience. Jasmine captures this in her writing:

20 Yep, a real attitude. A stereotypical one. I wonder if that’s why she found it  
21 acceptable to talk about how “not black” I was, since she acted how an  
22 African American girl stuffed inside a box of racial profiling, then shaken  
23 around in it repetitively until her thoughts ran funny would. As if in society,  
24 her attitude covered up the fact that her skin color would always be a factor.

In the same piece, she offered the rhetorical question to Lyn, “You do realize how wrong you are, right?” She ended the piece with what she learned from this experience, stating this “made her think about how we all have it hard, as far as just being an African American in today’s society goes.”

Jasmine also wrote about an ethnic representation in the following broadside poem.

- 01 Other people’s ignorance can afflict the world
- 02 One-person steps out of line, makes a fool of themselves,
- 03 And we come tumbling downhill with them,
- 04 Practically
- 05 Forced
- 06 Into *unnecessary likeliness* [researcher added italics]
- 07 Why not?
- 08 Same skin, same hair, same eyes.
- 09 Same personality?
- 10 Same level of intelligence?
  
- 11 We may be this way to people whose words are plagued with
- 12 *Irrelevance* [researcher added italics]
- 13 Ensnared within their thoughts,
- 14 Can’t escape the
- 15 *Insignificance* [researcher added italics]
- 16 Trapped, cannot comprehend
  
- 17 Just because we look similar does not mean we are.
- 18 We are all people,
- 19 All with our own sempiternal personalities,
- 20 Lives, dreams and ambitions.
- 21 Maybe a person of my ethnicity made a mistake
- 22 Did something foolish
- 23 Acted with utter
- 24 Ignorance
- 25 But so what?
- 26 And maybe they could use a lesson in life
- 27 To be enlightened,
- 28 Release the inner intellect trapped inside
- 29 But do not think for a second that I, or any of my
- 30 other sisters,
- 31 Do as well.
- 32 We may stand together,
- 33 But we are still separate beings.

Jasmine used the word, “ethnicity” in line 21. This first led me to understand that she was representing her ethnic self. This is supported by language about skin and hair in line 08. She chose to write about generalizing African American people based on ethnicity as revealed in her post interview and in line 17 of the poem. She specifically wrote to counter power that all African Americans are homogenous or all the same. I came to this point from the language used in lines 06-10 as she wrote about African Americans being depicted as having the same skin, hair, eyes, personality and level of intelligence. She expressed in the writing that she and others within her cultural ethnic group experience the consequences of this type of label. She wrote against a dominant ideology that results in what she names, “unnecessary likeliness,” caused by “ignorance and irrelevance” of other people’s thinking. This same “unnecessary likeliness” is a similar notion of representing African American girls in a monolithic profile. Toward the end of the poem in lines 26-28, she writes toward agency by stating, “maybe they could use a lesson in life; To be enlightened; Release the inner intellect trapped inside.” In these lines she advocated for others with such monolithic views of African Americans to learn a lesson that counters such thinking or become enlightened that there is much diversity that exist among African Americans and others should “release” such minimal thoughts.

When asked why she wrote this poem in the post interview and what it says about African American girls, Jasmine said it is about racism and generalizing in lines 03-05. She gave an example from television that shows Black girls in one particular way. Also in the post interview data in lines 07-08 she compared Black girls to White people who she described as having common physical characteristics with Black girls but then saying that they instead are portrayed as being unique and creative. This analysis is supported from the following post interview transcript:

01 **Muhammad:** Can you tell why you decided to write this and what it  
02 says about black girls?  
03 **Jasmine:** It's this whole thing like with racism. People say that, *oh*  
04 *they all look alike, they are all black girls, they must be the same*  
05 *because that's how they are portrayed on the tv.* I don't get that. White  
06 people, most of them all look the same, they have same color skin.  
07 Why do they get to be different, be their own self and be unique and  
08 creative? Why don't we? I mean of course we "look" alike. I mean we  
09 are all from the same ethnicity, the same heritage from the same place.  
10 Of course we look the same. Because of where we been and where we  
11 grew up and were raised you know. But that doesn't mean we are the  
12 same person.

She questioned why African American girls like her could not be depicted for their individuality. While she felt there is a great sense of solidarity and sisterhood that is present among African American people, which create a fictive kinship, she explained that there is much heterogeneity that still exists among this population of people immediately after the previous transcript:

01 We are all one in this big whole sisterhood and brotherhood, whatever you  
02 want to call it. We are all one big giant family you know. But within the  
03 family, there's individual brothers and sisters, and fathers and uncles and  
04 whatever. We are all our own people you know. We're all nerds or jocks or  
05 whatever. We're all just who we are. We all have personalities. Just because  
06 we look the same, I don't know, doesn't mean we are the same.



The point here that there are differences among African American people and that they should not be represented monolithically, speaks to her writing across multiple representations (e.g. gender, kinship, individual).

Camille also challenged some boundaries of representation by expressing contentions of false portrayals of African Americans in her personal narrative as they relate to ethnicity. She wrote:

01 As a young child no one really knows what color is. We all laughed, played  
02 and committed reckless acts just for the pure fun of it. Together. No one  
03 looked at one another's skin color, eye color, grade of hair or if someone  
04 talked a little funny. We were around each other because we liked the type of  
05 person they were, not what they looked like.

She introduced the personal narrative in line 01 with, "As a young child no one really knows what color is." During the collaborative as she was constructing this text, she explained that she used this line to depict the innocence that is present among children with it comes to racial identity. During childhood, she wrote that no one looked at "another's skin color, eye color, grade of hair" or "if someone talked a little funny" (lines 02-04). In my analysis, these are all constructs that can relate to racial or ethnic representations. She explained that others formed opinions about her when she was a child based on these physical descriptors without knowing her. She wrote about moving to a new neighborhood and school with others who were not Black and how they judged her based on skin color, eye color, hair type, and language rather than getting to know her. Her written representations related to "skin tone, eye color, hair and voice" are physical representations but they were more connected to her ethnicity rather than just her gender. She wrote about power as it relates to prejudices related to physical appearances:

01 As time went on, I was constantly being teased about my skin color, the way  
02 my body was shaped, and my hair. They began to wonder why I never wore  
03 my hair down and always had twistys and barrettes in my hair. They were

04 astounded by the fact that I didn't wash my hair everyday like them, and  
05 because of that they thought I was dirty. This resulted in endless harassment. I  
06 dreaded going to school and going outside to play. I had no friends and now  
07 that I think about it, it was all for no reason. These kids didn't actually know  
08 me in order to say they didn't like me. It was the mere fact that I looked  
09 different from them that kept them from getting to know the real me. I was  
10 one of the smartest kids in my classes, yet they still called me stupid. How  
11 could you dislike someone based solely on the fact that they looked different  
12 from you? I didn't understand any of it...  
13 Automatically I was prey, I didn't dress like them and the way I spoke was  
14 surely different. I was labeled "The Oreo." My outer appearance might have  
15 been a chocolate brown but on the inside to them I acted and spoke like a  
16 white girl.

She wrote on to say that most of her elementary school experiences embodied this feeling of "harassment" (line 05). Based on her physical differences, she felt like "prey" and was labeled with representations such as "oreo" (lines 13-16). "Oreo" is a term that signifies a "betwixt and between" space (Winn, 2011) where she felt neither *here* nor *there*—not *Black enough* or *White enough*. She concluded the narrative by writing about her experiences with learning to redefine herself and to not allow others to dictate her selfhood. These lines, 17-20, represent writing for agency:

17 I am not defined by the color of my skin, the texture of my hair, the way I  
18 dress or how I talk. I had to learn that nobody could love myself like I can.  
19 Once I realized that and felt more comfortable with who I truly was, other  
20 people started to feel more comfortable around me.

The experience she wrote about in the personal narrative had an effect on her personal life and this became an opportunity for her to write about issues related to representations that she was wrestling with. In the post interview she explained,

01 I wrote this piece because that was my experiences for a long time. I felt like  
02 he [classmate who misjudged her] was right about my appearance and that I  
03 pretty much looked crazy and I was ugly. It was probably not until I got to

04 high school when I realized everybody is beautiful in their own way. If I  
05 would have realized that at a younger age, I feel like I probably would have  
06 more confidence and I'd be a lot further than where I am right now and "I just  
07 wish younger people to realize that sooner than I did."

Her response from the interview in lines 06-07 suggests that she wrote not just for herself but for other African American girls as well. Camille's last line in her interview exhibited a desire to use writing to benefit others, which is also connected to writing for social change.

Violet wrote about an ethnic representation in her poem entitled, "My Roots":

01 My seed was planted into this American soil in 1994  
02 Nourished with assimilation  
03 My roots began to grow  
04 Until I blossomed into America's favorite flower,  
05 The rose  
06 My rich red petals pleased society  
07 Until my roots expanded and grew into the Motherland  
08 Drinking from the Nile River  
09 Taking in the proper nutrition  
10 I became the flower I was meant to be  
11 The African Violet  
12 Uniqueness standing out among beautiful roses

Violet complicates the word "roots" by describing both her heritage (history and lineage) and her hair. Both constructs contribute to defining her ethnicity. As she explored her ethnicity in her writing, she also wrote across a national community representation (e.g. American soil, America's favorite flower) in lines 01 and 04 and global community representation (e.g. Drinking from the Nile River, The African Violet) in lines 08 and 11. In this poem, she alluded to the history of her ancestors coming to America who became "nourished with assimilation" or forced and encouraged to integrate and become like the previous Americans. Although the assimilation she described was mostly forced, without permission through enslavement, she wrote that people sharing her racial background began to flourish into a beautiful flower. She

used a metaphor of herself as a flower to explore representations of herself and how she cannot be defined as one type of *self* or another. In her post interview, she said a similar type of assimilation occurred with her hair. In the post interview she discussed the poem:

01 It says how when I was younger, I was kinda like being forced to fit in with  
02 the whole hair and perm in my hair so as I began to realize that I didn't have  
03 to be that way, I grew out my hair, went natural and kinda discovered and  
04 embraced my uniqueness.

Confirming that she was writing about her ethnicity through history and hair, when asked what this poem says about who she is, she shared:

05 There are two aspects. There's the hair piece but also the heritage aspect like  
06 you said too. My roots and going back to my, how can I say this, like going  
07 back to my natural hair was the same thing as me going back to the  
08 Motherland and embracing who I am as an African American.

This poem also expressed ethnic and community representations while also being representative of her individual traits.

**Gender.** The second dimension of cultural representations is gender. Gender representations illustrate female or feminine references and examples included writing about being a girl, a women or writing about physical-gender descriptions of self such as bodily appearance or hair. In several types of writings, which included a poem, a broadside poem, the informational piece, and the open letter, every participant wrote about gender representations.

Dahlia wrote about beauty in her poem, entitled "Our Appearance." Although this poem is centrally about gender representation, it is also about ethnicity. She wrote about the ways in which she feels African American girls physically "appear" in the views of other people, which

is not how she feels they want to be represented. According to Dahlia, this dichotomy creates pressure for African American girls to be who they are not. The pressure is internal and is a source of power she writes about as indicated in lines 07-08. Using examples from the media, she explained that African American girls desire to look like the image that is widely seen on television and in magazines.

01 How we appear now,  
02 Is not what we want to appear to be  
03 We tend to frustrate about how we look  
04 Instead of what is important.  
05 We as young black girls,  
06 JUDGE others and ourselves by what we are influenced by.  
07 We feel we need to be the ones  
08 That is on the magazines and on TV.  
09 We feel that we need to loose weight  
10 Just cause we think we seem fat,  
11 We don't have that body that is seen on TV.  
12 We consider ourselves non-perfect.  
13 We changed ourselves for others people's enjoyment.  
14 What about your enjoyment for yourself?  
15 Now that you've changed are you happy with yourself?  
16 I feel I need to be the one that I want to see myself as  
17 I try hard to be me instead of being others  
18 I'm the one who see's myself as a strong black girl

After rhetorically asking other African American girls if they are happy with changing for others' enjoyment, Dahlia wrote toward agency in lines 10-12, by writing that she seeks to be an individual, "a strong Black girl" and not what others want her to be.

I analyzed this writing centrally as gendered representations because she gives physical descriptions related to females in lines 05 and 09-10. In the post interview, Dahlia talked about why she wrote about her gender and the larger message she intended to articulate. The following is from the interview transcript:

01 **Muhammad:** Talk about who you are in your poem and why you

02 decided to write this.

03 **Dahlia:** I decided to write this because I felt that it was important. A

04 lot of black girls think that they're always judging themselves by the

05 way we look on the outside instead of the way we look on the inside.

06 **Muhammad:** Okay

07 **Dahlia:** 'Cause they think that oh look I don't have a body like that or

08 I'm not as pretty as her. They're always judging themselves.

09 **Muhammad:** Okay

10 **Dahlia:** And I see myself in here, well not this, but I wrote it for other

11 girls.

Her language used in the post interview about physical appearances “on the outside” (line 05) and the discussion about body and beauty in lines 07-08 confirmed that she wrote a gender representation in her poem.

Dahlia continued to write about gender the same week when she wrote the following broadside, “Identity Theft”:

01 Trying to be the model seen in magazines.

02 Fake!

03 Trying to be someone else,

04 Killing the real you

05 Trying to make your self look bright.

06 All that glitters isn't gold

07 It's hard to be you,

08 Why?

09 Not many positive black role models?

10 Redefine

11 Define unique,

12 Define Original,

13 Define beautiful,

14 Define strong,

15 Define different,

- 16 Define outcast,
- 17 So worried about the flaws, imperfections
- 18 We fail to see the bright side of things.
- 19 Stressing about the insignificant thing that don't matter.
- 20 Trying to dress for someone else
  
- 21 Instead for ourselves.

Embodying similar language from her poem, she wrote to Black girls about physical representations of beauty as indicated in lines 01-06 and line 17. She wrote to Black girls about how girls represent their physical selves in order to be liked by others. She was writing against power or the ideal of seeking beauty most often observed in the mainstream media such as models seen in magazines (lines 01-06). She questions if Black girls lack the ability to embrace their own beauty due to the lack of visible Black role models (line 09). After writing against monolithic views of Black girlhood or sameness and girls seeking to be people they are not, her writing calls for agency among Black girls (lines 10-21) asking them to redefine who they are for themselves.

The content in her both of her poems bears resemblance to the informational piece she wrote in which she writes to her “Black Sisters.” She continued to write about media and gendered representations of Black girls, specifically the power structures that are created that depict African American girls as violent and sexualized (lines 01-05). This piece below is entitled, “We as Black Girls.”

- 01 Black sisters, why do you think we're portrayed in media in the manner that
- 02 we are? Sexuality, violent actions, profanity. Is this what people think of us?
- 03 Sisters, you must know that what we do in our every lives affects how we are
- 04 portrayed in the media. Is it because we act like someone we're not? Dancing
- 05 in short skirts, shorts, and blouses in videos sexually? Do we do this for just
- 06 fun, or are we doing this because it's what we were told to act like? Who
- 07 knows us better than ourselves? Who can tell our stories best but us? We
- 08 determine how we think of ourselves, not by what other people think of us.
- 09 But our actions affect others' perceptions. If you think that we are not

10 portrayed in media badly, you obviously don't spend enough time watching  
 11 television, reading magazines, or listening to music. Other people who are not  
 12 black think we are always out to commit violent actions. That's just media.  
 13 We can take control in media by starting our own representation of who we  
 14 are as young black girls leaving an impact on young girls' lives.

Gender representations also emerge in the description she offered about the sexualizing of Black girls in lines 04-05. Dahlia uses rhetorical devices such as questioning and statements used to evoke an emotional response from the reader as she writes against the media representations and the Black girls who subscribe to such views of Black girlhood. These writing devices were modeled in a brief section of an essay written by Maria W. Stewart (Lee, 2006, pp. 14-21) who wrote across representations of intellect and used questioning and statements to push a message forward to the minds and hearts of readers. There are similarities in the writings from Dahlia and Stewart (see Table 8).

Table 8  
*Comparison to Mentor Text*

	Mentor writer	Dahlia's writing
Rhetorical questioning	What have ye done to immortalize your names beyond the grave?	Do we do this for just fun, or are we doing this because it's what we were told to act like?
	What examples have ye set before the rising generation?	Who knows us better than ourselves?
	What foundation have ye laid for generations yet unborn?	Who can tell our stories best but us?
Writing toward an appeal	Show forth to the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties.	We can take control in media by starting our own representation of who we are as young black girls leaving an impact on young girls lives.

Stewart uses language to advocate for other African American women to take a social responsibility and work toward improving the conditions of their lives and for future generations. Dahlia similarly positioned her own writing to communicate a point that Black girls can take



control of their projections of self rather than succumb to the representations that are often used to depict Black girls such as being overly sexual and violent. As in Stewart's piece, Dahlia wrote a form of an agentic self with the lines 07-08, "Who can tell our stories best but us? We determine how we think of ourselves, not by what other people think of us." Here she wrote toward a redefinition of self and strives for change. Continuing to speak to Black girls, she wrote to them explaining that their actions as Black girls affect how others view them.

When asked about representation issues in society and within the media before participating in the literacy collaborative, Dahlia was unable to articulate many opinions about how they are viewed. She answered that she did not know how African American females are portrayed in the music, but was more descriptive about it within her writings. However when talking about representation on television in the pre-interview, she said, "I was watching a movie about something like this and few women were just like, I thought *here are some people who shouldn't be doing this*. It's not right for us to be doing this." When I followed up and asked her to explain this comment, she said she was not talking about their behaviors directly but the ways in which African American females look, dress, and speak. She views these as negative examples contributing to the larger narrative of misrepresentations saying that they often dress provocatively or without clothes in music videos and this needs to be "cleaned up." This explained her writing against such representations and the need for her to write toward change. It also says that she wrote from a personal and internal space explaining such representations can come from Black girls themselves.

In Heather's informational piece entitled "Beauty," she wrote to her sisters about the importance for girls to accept and appreciate their physical beauty:

01 My sisters, you are Beautiful. My sisters, you are Beautiful, no matter what  
02 society portrays beautiful to be. You think that only being slim is beautiful?

03 Think again. You think you have to be thin or adhere to a Eurocentric form to  
04 be beautiful? You're wrong. Being "thick" is beautiful. Have you looked in  
05 the mirror lately? Has society been putting you down with all these skinny  
06 models running around in magazines thinking that they are better than you?  
07 But they aren't picture perfect... You are. Take a look in the mirror. You're  
08 gorgeous and you have no need to put yourself down. You don't need to lose  
09 weight to fit the image of someone else. You need to be the image you love  
10 seeing. You need to be you. The beautiful, amazing you.

Like Dahlia, she wrote against the power-imbued perceptions observed in media outlets while using language to help girls acknowledge their own beauty. This is evident in the lines, "Has society been putting you down with all these skinny models running around in magazines thinking that they are better than you? But they aren't picture perfect" (lines 05-07). In doing this, she compared Black girls specifically to girls of European descent and wrote about the comparison with a Eurocentric form of beauty. The expressed gender language includes "slim, thick, skinny," which primarily focuses on body size of girls (lines 02, 04, and 05). She used written text as a form of communication to Black girls and conveys agentic messages of self-love and self-acceptance.

Lily wrote centrally about gender in three writings. In her poem, she equally wrote about her race and gender in, "A Black Woman's Crown." She explained that she thought of her mother while writing this piece:

01 To sit with a crown on your head  
02 Is to claim the world  
03 With a beautiful face  
04 Of brown sugar and rich dark chocolate,  
05 With eyes as dark as night with a spark  
06 That twinkles like the North Star  
07 A crown seems fit  
  
08 Though others in the world  
09 Try to conspire  
10 Betray and deceive  
11 As though time has stopped

12 In the days of overthrowing kings and queens  
13 With determination  
14 They try to take your  
15 Throne

16 It is time, that in spite  
17 Of foolish pursuits  
18 The crown stays upon  
19 The Queen's head  
20 It is a jewel unseen  
21 But known  
22 That is the cause  
23 Of such deceitfulness

She wrote about how Black women need to reclaim the power and influence (the crown) that belongs to them. She celebrated Black women in this poem and used language to write about their external beauty. To illustrate their gendered beauty, she described these women with “a beautiful face, of brown sugar and rich dark chocolate, with eyes as dark as night.” The power enacted here is from whom she refers to “others in the world” (lines 03-05). In lines 18-19 she wrote that the crown or power stays with the Black woman although the authority Black women have may go unseen. The pursuit of reclaiming their authority is the reason behind the “deceitfulness” in their lives. I asked her what she was trying to get across in this piece. An excerpt from the transcript follows:

01 **Muhammad:** What were you trying to say about Black women in this

02 poem?

03 **Lily:** That

04 **Muhammad:** About who they are

05 **Lily:** You know just to say in general we don't let people push us. We

06 shouldn't let people push us around because we're not there for that.

07 We're not here to be pushed around just in general. We deserve happiness

08 and a good life and a life worth living.

### **Intellectual Representations**

Intellectual representations referred to writings that were related to academics, thinking, learning, mental creativity, career goals, and aspirations. Intellectual representations surpassed only behind gender and kinship representations. Writing about intellect began during the first week of the literacy collaborative, when Heather and Violet both wrote across ideals of intellect in their personal narratives. In Violet's personal narrative, she told an event from a sixth grade spelling bee, which indicates an intellectual representation. She wrote through feelings of competing academically and how she was unable to spell the word, *adobe* when it was her turn. She wrote,

01 "Spell adobe," the moderator said. U-D-O *boom, boom, boom, boom, boom,*  
02 *boom.* My heart was beating so fast. Everyone was looking at me. I have to  
03 say something, but I've never heard this word before. I'm just going to try.  
04 Everyone was just staring at me. Ok think. A-do-be. There must be a P in  
05 there. *P?* This is so embarrassing. Now everyone one is going to think that I  
06 am dumb, that I can't spell, one of the smartest girls in the six grade can't  
07 spell "adobe." Ugh, I just want to sit down. I'm so embarrassed.

When asked in her post interview why she choose to write about this personal event in her life she said because this particular experience stuck out in her mind and she said, "I don't like to appear that I'm not smart, not meet the standards that other people expect me to be, not meet other people's expectations of me." This similar thought is related to her pre-interview transcript in which she mentioned that others' portrayals of African American girls include them not being intelligent or being able to compete academically. She does not write about power or toward agency in this writing.

Two poems written during the literacy collaborative alluded to intellectual representations. The first came from Jasmine who in her pre-interview revealed that she was a bit

apprehensive about writing poetry. She thought that she was not good at it and therefore did not enjoy it. During the literacy collaborative, she even said that she does not consider people who only write poems, “real writers.” She felt that real authors write fiction. Accepting my challenge for her to try to write a poem during the second week, she decided to write through her perceived difficulties. In her piece entitled, “Poet out of Practice...(or not)” she wrote about the personal pursuit of poetry writing and overcoming her fear.

01 I don't prefer poetry  
02 I don't excel in its practice  
03 But I try  
04 Should I fail, I try again.

05 I will pry at the closed doors of poetry,  
06 Gain dominance over the gatekeeper that blocks my way  
07 For he defends the room of which I crave access  
08 Cannot let the guard keep me away, let nothing cross my path

09 I may not be so great now,  
10 But in the end I will prevail  
11 Take the bull by the horns,  
12 Put pen to paper,  
13 And  
14 Write

Jasmine wrote against a source of power and dominance in this poem that was more internal than external. An example of this internal dominance is written in the lines “I will pry at the closed doors of poetry, Gain dominance over the gatekeeper that blocks my way.” This is an intellectual representation because she not only writes about the literary pursuit of writing but how she will continue to strive toward excellence if she fails. The language of perseverance at the end of poem in line 10, “I will prevail,” shows that she writing toward an agentic self, one that overcomes internal barriers.

Ivy also wrote about herself as a writer, entitling her piece, “I am a Sister Author”:

- 01 I Am A Sister Author
- 02 A sister author is a sister-girl who likes to write
- 03 Anything she wants
- 04 WELL, this sister author loves to write
- 05 About anything she can describe
- 06 Or think of beyond her mind.
- 07 She is a writer who can pen different types of
- 08 writings...
- 09 About African American women, little girls and teenage girls.
- 10 Or what she's feeling.
- 11 Through non-fiction, fiction, graphic novels, personal-narratives, Friendships,
- 12 identity, family, and freedom in slavery
  
- 13 Ivy is a sister author who describes herself
- 14 As intelligent
- 15 A beyond the mind writer and
- 16 Loves to write poems about anything
- 17 She can pen anything she wants.
- 18 This sister author is special because she can learn
- 19 things while creating pieces of poems and writings

In the poem she wrote about her love and interest for writing, which also represents intellect. This is evident in her writing about being a Sister Author in lines 01-04 and 13 and her writing about all the things she likes to write throughout the piece. Ivy does not write against any particular form of power or agency but simply wrote that she likes to write about topics of self and various genres. In the post interviews, Jasmine and Ivy both expressed thoughts on writing and being a writer. Jasmine talked about her initial struggle with self-efficacy in writing poetry and how the other girls helped her to feel better about her identity as a poet. The transcript is below:

- 01 **Muhammad:** Can you talk to me maybe about yourself in this poem and
- 02 why you wrote it?
- 03 **Jasmine:** It says at the beginning, "I don't prefer poetry and I don't think I
- 04 excel in its practice." I think I'm horrible at poetry. When I wrote it, I
- 05 didn't know if it was good or it was bad. I was literally dying for someone

06 to tell me how good it was. Because when I think about poetry, I think  
07 uck, no. When you first told us we were having a poetry week, I was like  
08 NOOOOOO. WHY!?! I don't see myself as being good in poetry. I just  
09 don't. It's something that I always struggle with. It takes a lot more  
10 thinking than everything else does to make it fluent and sound right. And  
11 it has to look good like how you put it in stanzas and stuff. Poetry just  
12 takes more effort than everything else does. It's really hard.

13 **Muhammad:** What did you think of yourself as a poet when you received  
14 feedback?

15 **Jasmine:** Everybody said it was really good so it was like oh, ok. So I  
16 think I'm a better poet now but I don't think I'm fabulous in this.

In Jasmine's transcript, I learned about her internal thoughts when constructing her poem and how she did not like poetry writing. Talking about the intellectual representation of writing, she told me why she had difficulty writing the poem, explaining that it takes more effort than everything else does," and that it is "really hard" (line 12). Ivy talked about her writing as an intellectual exercise when asked to talk about her poem in her post interview and what it reveals about her. She said, "When I write I'm an intelligent writer because every time I write I learn something."

In their informational writings, three girls wrote pieces related to intellect. In one example, Camille wrote,

01 Now is not time to wither away our precious faculties. Many young black  
02 women have started the foundation. Now it is time for us to lay the concrete.  
03 We must step into the light to be seen, yell from mountaintops of greatness to  
04 be heard. Just as our fellow seasoned sisters have done before us. We must let  
05 our genius show and stop being afraid of being inadequate. For we are just as  
06 exceptional as anyone else. The concrete we lay will be the stepping-stone for

07 those to come later. Just as our past sisters led the way for us, we are obligated  
08 to do the same for our younger sisters. Our struggles are immeasurable and  
09 that is what makes us beautiful strong women.

Key language like “faculties, let our genius show,” and “we are just as exceptional” in lines 01 and 06 gives evidence of her writing about African American girls’ intellect. As she was writing to express that they are intelligent, she wrote to African American girls and appeals to them to “stop being afraid of being inadequate” which I analyzed as power stemming from African American girls themselves. She wrote toward agency following this line and tells them, “Our struggles are immeasurable.” Camille wrote to connect the past to the present by communicating to African American girls today that Black women of the past have made extraordinary accomplishments and that they can do the same. She confirmed these observations in the post interview.

01 **Muhammad:** Can you talk about who Black women and Black girls are in  
02 this piece?

03 **Camille:** Yeah I just feel like um you don’t have it easy so it’s up to us to  
04 prove that we belong umm where everyone else is and that we deserve it.  
05 We can succeed but in order to do that, there are times when you feel like  
06 giving up but we should encourage one another to just stay strong and  
07 keep going. And I just wanted to basically say that I wanted for the  
08 younger generation to have it better than I did. I don’t want them to have  
09 to feel my struggle.

### **Kinship Representations**

Kinship refers to language in writing related to the relationship with family or fictive kin. Examples included writing about family, friendship, sisters, or sisterhood. Writing about family



or fictive kin relationships and the importance of solidarity or unity among members in these groups emerged largely in the girls' short stories and open letters. This also appeared in two of the poems. In Zinnia's poem, for example, she wrote a letter to her mother, entitling the piece, "Dear Momma":

01 Dear Momma,  
02 Or do you even deserve the title?  
03 What should I call you  
04 hmm I know  
05 I'll call you Tikia  
06 That is your name right?  
07 Oh? You don't

08 Why should your name be mother when I haven't spoken to you in 2 years  
09 I don't even know you....  
10 You're like the crack in the street that the construction men can never get.  
11 You're the anger buried deep in the alcohol unemployed men intake for lack  
12 of money to substitute their thin pockets.  
13 You're the reason I feel left and betrayed  
14 See a mother's love is what keeps a child  
15 A mother's love is the one thing a child can't live  
16 without  
17 A mother's love is much deeper than 3rd degree burns  
18 A mother's love isn't forgotten  
19 And I'm still not searchin' for a mother's love  
20 see I found my grandmother's love

21 Something that you missed  
22 When you remissed  
23 Something you kissed goodbye when you saw me  
24 My love is something you can't see...  
25 Dear Tikia, maybe I should thank you  
26 Maybe I should tell I don't need you  
27 For your womb is cold  
28 So I will thank you  
29 Thank you for sitting me on my grandmother's porch  
30 Thank you for forcing me to learn that I'll be okay  
31 without you  
32 Thank you for I now know your mother's love isn't love  
33 for me  
34 Thank you for showing me who I don't want to be  
35 Showing me who my kids WON'T be

Zinnia said she wanted to write out the importance of relationships and how they are essential for African American girls. The theme of meaningful relationships was also prominent in her sample writing that she submitted with her application. Relationships were analyzed as kinship representations and in Zinnia's poem she discussed a relationship with her mother and grandmother. The parts of the poem showing kinship representations are found in the first line "Dear Momma," and in lines 21-25. In her poem, she wrote to her mother asking her if she deserves the title of "Momma" while writing against the maltreatment received from her mother growing up. In lines 14-15 she wrote about the various types of love and affection she feels a mother should provide to her child. As she represented a kinship representation by discussing the relationship with her mother, she wrote against power in the form of a mother's neglect to a daughter. Due to the neglect she felt that she does not know her mother well and the reason why she feels betrayed (lines 09 and 13). Zinnia finished the poem by referring to her mother by her first name and reminds her that she received the family love from her grandmother, who raised her. Referring to her mother by first name, rather than "Momma" seems to remove the closeness or bond of their relationship. She also closed the poem with agency and rather than wishing for a stronger relationship with her mother, she thanks her for allowing her to be loved and raised by her grandmother. The love and care she received from her grandmother, shows the healing or renewal of love, which is a form of writing toward agency.

Violet wrote about kinship or family in a short story. Like several other girls, she entered herself into the story and wrote about a real life experience even though short stories are seemingly fiction. She began the story with the main character's mother asking her to wake up from her sleep to go to the hospital. The character, which Violet revealed is herself, does not know why they are visiting the hospital or who they are going to see. While at the hospital, she

writes about seeing different family members and close friends of the family at the hospital. Like Zinnia, she also wrote about a grandmother:

01 “Hey grandmother,” I said. My grandmother would only let me and my  
02 cousins call her grandmother; there was no granny, grandma, or nana, she  
03 claimed those names made her feel old. “Hey baby,” she said smiling  
04 revealing nothing but pink gums. My grandmother had magical powers. She  
05 could remove her teeth and put them back in whenever she felt like it. I sat  
06 besides my grandmother, while my Momma went into another room.

The story ended with the character discovering that her father was in a hospital bed, dying. The plot of the story was a real and vivid experience for Violet and she still remembers the music that played in car, the tone of her family members’ voices and the dialogue. She incorporated all of these elements into the story. Violet does not write about power or toward agency. Both Zinnia and Violet wrote about the topic of loss within kinship representations.

Three girls wrote kinship representations of themselves in open letters. The girls were asked to write to other African American girls. I sensed that many would write about sisterhood or solidarity because this tone was also apparent in their preamble. The ways in which the girls addressed the readers of their letters were telling of kinship representations illuminated the most. Jasmine, Lily, and Camille addressed the reader by writing, “To My Sister” and “Dear Sisters.” The label and address using the word, “sister” shows a fictive kinship relationship to their readers and in each of the writings there was a language that further implied a familial relationships with other girls. Within this language, each of the girls also wrote against some enacted power and wrote toward agency or social change. Jasmine wrote:

01 To My Sister:  
02 Know I understand. Know that I walked down a road so very similar to  
03 yours. Know that I, and all our other Sisters, will be here for you, here to  
04 assist you when you grow wary from embracing the hardships in life, the  
05 stereotypes and harsh comments, and help you to overcome and let go of  
06 them. Eventually, you will outgrow the need to even acknowledge such

07 troubles, to not give the people throwing them at you the time of day.

She wrote to express solidarity or unity among African American girls by writing, “Know that I, and all our other Sisters, will be here for you” in line 03. This is important because she asserted that African American girls experience hardships, stereotypes, and harsh comments directed toward them, which could relate to the representations in lines 04-05. This shows the three examples of the power she is writing against. She wrote to tell them they could overcome these barriers and ignore such “troubles” in lines 05-07, which pushes toward agency and change.

Lily addressed her sisters directly in her letter as well:

01 They have built a wall so tall that it is blocking our path toward the  
02 greatness we have strived to be. We need to break it down. It doesn't  
03 matter if it is brick by brick or if it crumbles piece by piece. IT WILL  
04 COME DOWN. We have been intricately knitted together as sisters  
05 and the bond cannot be broken, it can only become stronger. The bond  
06 can grow, should grow, so strong that together we create our own  
07 unbreakable circle. This is my dream that all our sisters around the  
08 world could come together as one community and create a network so  
09 deeply rooted that it could withstand the hardships of anything to come  
10 in the future.

She wrote to represent kinship in line 04 of the letter, which states, “We have been intricately knitted together as sisters.” This statement and other uses of language, “we,” “our” “together” and “sisters” throughout the letter also shows kinship. Lily wrote against power structures that serve to marginalize the lives of African American girls in lines 01-04 stating that, “They have built a wall, blocking our path toward the greatness we have strived to be.” The ideal of power as boundaries and guidelines serving to marginalize or inhibit the lives of African American girls is a reoccurring theme in both of her poems as well as this letter. She pushed toward agency and wrote to remind African American female readers that the relationship they have among each other could create a strong bond that cannot be broken (lines 05-07). She directly revealed that it

is her dream that all African American girls can come together to create community that is resilient against life's hardships.

Finally, Camille represented kinship by similarly writing about sisterhood in her letter. In her letter, she informed Black female readers that their shared ancestry connects them to each other and it is the struggles that they experience that keep them strong because they are able to overcome these difficulties. The shared-ness of African American girls' experiences is what she depicted as a protection of each other. In other words, if they remain steadfast in the face of vulnerable-producing conditions together, which I understood as power, they will become resilient. This relationship among other African American girls that she described portrays a kinship representation.

01 Dear Sister,

02 I write this letter because you are what have kept me going. I am your  
03 present sister, our ancestry is why we are associated with one another,  
04 but our struggles and resiliency is what keeps us together. As sisters,  
05 we are intertwined with the obligation of protecting each other. Not  
06 one of my sisters shall struggle, and neither should yours. I whole  
07 heartily dedicate my life to advocating for my sisters to come so that  
08 they will have it better than I did. I do not want my struggle to be your  
09 struggle. I want a better, brighter, and more abundant future for my  
10 sisters to come. All adversities will be left in the past; the everlasting  
11 identity crisis will abruptly end. If you make it, I make it. My soul will  
12 rest within the harmonious sounds of your victory. The seeds have  
13 been planted, now it is up to us to nourish the flowers so that our  
14 future generations will stand tall and beautiful. Never again will they  
15 know what it feels like to struggle, to feel inferior and to feel like all  
16 hope is gone. We must leave a legacy; a legacy of excellence. We are  
17 all Queens and must conduct ourselves accordingly, for there is a  
18 whole community of sisters looking up to us. We are daughters of  
19 greatness; therefore we are destined to be great!  
20 With love from your fellow sister,

21 Camille

Camille wrote against power-imbued adversities that African American girls may experience. She then shifted to write about social change that may result from adversities. She pointedly wrote to explain that she has a connectedness among other African American girls by stating, “If you make it, I make it. My soul will rest within the harmonious sounds of your victory.” In these lines she explained that she is not successful unless her fellow sisters are successful. She also made a reference to past sisters or African American females in the past who, “have planted” the seeds for new flowers or girls to blossom. She ended the letter by representing African American girls as “daughters of greatness,” which further shows a kinship relationship to other girls presently, and of African American women of the past. In the post interview, Camille explained that she wrote about kinship because of the relationship she has with her mother and sister.

01 I just kind of thought of like the relationship I have with my sisters and my  
02 mom and like my little sisters get on my nerves but we still encourage each  
03 other and just as much as they look up to me, I look up to them as well  
04 because when I go to my little sister’s middle school, I was like, *I don’t know*  
05 *how you can make it through middle school these days*. But she can. It just  
06 kind of helped me see that she’s a trooper. So, yeah I just wanted to convey  
07 that in this letter.

Lily wrote about kinship, race and gender in her broadside. Entitled, “Asking changes everything,” she posed several questions in the poem to get readers to think about issues of race and sisterhood:

01 Are both your parents black?  
02 Is your skin dark enough?  
03 Do you talk white?  
04 Do you act ghetto?  
05 Why

06 Why those questions  
07 Am I not black because  
08 I went to a white school all my life  
09 Am I not black because  
10 I talk proper  
11 Am I not black because  
12 I'm not ghetto  
13 What does that even mean?

14 ... We have created guidelines  
15 Manipulated in to boundaries  
16 That leave us confined and divided  
17 By undesirable expectations of being black  
18 Born out of these guidelines  
19 Already cast out of our sisterhood

20 Our sisterhood was created to stop the lies  
21 Fabricated by those around us  
22 But while we fight  
23 We leave are different sisters out  
24 On the outskirts  
25 As if their story is not worth fighting for

26 Black  
27 Has only one concept  
28 These questions, guidelines, expectations don't  
29 Include it  
30 My ancestry  
31 Your ancestry  
32 Both trace back to the same continent  
33 Africa  
34 We are African sisters  
35 No matter the differences

36 We are  
**37 TWO**  
38 Of the  
**39 SAME**

In the first half of the poem, she sought to operationalize the term, *Black*, speaking against those who project monolithic Blackness on to African American women and girls. She does this by posing several questions in lines 01-04 to get the reader to think about wider conceptualizations of Black girlhood. In lines 05-13, she explained that there is no one particular way to be a Black

girl based on the type of school she attends, the way she speaks and if she is or is not “ghetto.” This type of narrow way of thinking about representations she explained in lines 14-19 has created boundaries that leave Black girls “confined and divided, by undesirable expectations of being black.” This type of confinement and separation she explained in lines 20-23, has been “fabricated by those around us” and leaves “different sisters” out. The different sisters she refers to are not those who fit the monolithic profile that misrepresents Black girls as not talking proper, acting “ghetto,” and attending schools with a mostly Black student population. Instead of conforming to such beliefs, she uses agentic language in lines 26-39 for Black girls to move toward solidarity and sisterhood. She explained why she wrote this piece this way and how others have worked to break down the unity among Black girls. She said they are now doing similar things to themselves.

01 **Muhammad:** Can you talk about who you are in this poem or who Black girls  
02 are?

03 **Lily:** The main reason I wrote that was because like I said before in the first  
04 interview I was like I’m not NORMAL. I wouldn’t say a NORMAL Black girl  
05 but I’m still a Black girl and I may be different but I’m still a part of the  
06 sisterhood and we like don’t include all our sisters. It’s not right like in the  
07 past when we were not part of society but now we’re breaking up our own  
08 society.

09 **Muhammad:** You said we’re breaking up?

10 **Lily:** Like it’s when like I said it’s dividing us. We can’t even break up we  
11 can’t break our sisterhood just because of what we define as Black.

12 **Muhammad:** So did you write this piece because many maybe of your other



13 sisters have separated you out or?

14 **Lily:** Not because I've been separated out I don't think I've ever really been

15 separated out but I've seen being people being separated out because of it

16 **Muhammad:** Girls like you?

17 **Lily:** Not exactly like me but like the girls who talk White or they don't even

18 hint they don't like me I've been to a White school but then there's this girl

19 Maya who didn't even really hang out with the Black kids. She didn't even

20 talk to us but she didn't try to become our friends and we talked to her and we

21 were cool with her but she never really tried to be part of us and so I guess at

22 the same time we're excluding her but she was also excluding herself from us.

### **Sexual Representations**

Sexual representations refer to language in writing related to relationships, intimate interest (or lack thereof) in males or females. This included writing about sexuality, objectification and teen pregnancy. This definition comes from the work of Brooks et al. (2010), who looked at representations of Black girlhood in young adult fiction. They defined their finding of sexual identity in a similar way. I found that the older girls ages 15-17 wrote centrally about sexual representations while the younger girls did not. In Zinnia's personal narrative, she shared an experience of feeling objectified by a young boy at school. She began this piece by talking about physical representations and explained that she was very thin as a child, but she had a growth spurt when she became an adolescent that led to unwanted attention from boys and older men. She wrote, "I had the perfect body, the boys would say provocative things to me and I hated it... Often guys assume that I'm sexually active and that, what they see means they can

touch.” She wrote about a time when a boy who had these same thoughts touched her inappropriately and how angry and furious it made her.

In her informational piece, she wrote against this same type of objectification of African American girls and women. She chose to write about the statistic that nearly 14% of black teenage girls report being verbally injured by boyfriends. As she wrote across this statistic, she infuses lyrics to a song, objectifying women:

01 “I know plenty of hoes in love with they niggas, but they be the same bitch  
02 that’s fucking niggas.” Why are we constantly being referred to a hoes and  
03 bitches? “Poppin’ her pussy like a pill till it’s morning time, and you at home  
04 sendin’ texts to the bitch” Rappers refer to us women as pills, and our name in  
05 their phones are Bitch 1, Bitch 2 , Bitch 3 etc. Do you accept of this title? Do  
06 you realize you are more than image? More than a man’s boy toy? Nearly  
07 14% of black teenage girls report being verbally injured by boyfriends. You  
08 are royalty! YOU DESERVE EVERYTHING. Respect, Love, Heard,  
09 Complimented, Loyalty. Have you ever thought about what you deserve? You  
10 know you can be anything that you strive to be. The media portrays you as  
11 just an object. Don’t let that define you. You’re beautiful!

She connected this statistic to the incessant sexualizing of African American girls in lines 01-06. In lines 02-03, she asked, “Why are we constantly being referred to a hoes and bitches?” She continued to write against an image of being a “man’s toy” or being used for sexual pleasure. In her post interview, she expressed that that these types of representations continue to dehumanize girls and makes them susceptible to injuries like verbal abuse by their boyfriends. When asked what this piece says about Black girls, she said:

01 I feel like women Black women are constantly getting degraded by rappers  
02 and the Hip-Hop world and I just felt like I kind of needed to like address the  
03 fact. It’s fine for the rappers to rap about whatever they want to but they DO  
04 need to have a limit on women like you can’t always have something negative  
05 to say about a woman. There has to be some type of positive in there because

06 not every women is negative and even if she is negative she's negative for a  
07 GOOD reason like she's been through something and you're not taking the  
08 time to understand that she's been through things. So I took the time to  
09 address how Hip-Hop versus women is just like pretty much the world right  
10 now because everybody is listening to songs where they're degrading women  
11 and women are just like not being respected. I feel like women needed to put  
12 their foot down more basically I guess.

In Heather's broadside poem, she wrote about girls who glorify getting pregnant. She explained that she wrote this because she heard in media outlets and articles of girls forming "pregnancy pacts" in their high school where they agree to get pregnant at the same time. In this poem, she wrote directly to these girls, imploring them to rethink this type of pathology and thinking.

01 You think it's cute to get pregnant?  
02 Think it's funny?  
03 Why do you consistently try to fit in?  
04 You think that having sex is fitting in with all your friends.  
05 But when you get pregnant, your friends disappear.  
06 Now called a hoe, a slut, and trifling....  
07 It isn't fun anymore is it?  
08 It wasn't funny when you wanted to have sex with him.  
09 It wasn't funny when your friends were teasing you  
10 cause you were a virgin.  
11 It wasn't funny when your mom talked about having you  
12 at a young age.  
13 So what made you think that this was going to be funny?  
14 It's not funny that you're pregnant.  
15 never will be.  
16 It's not funny that you're only 16...  
17 Be the person to tell other girls it isn't funny.  
18 Be the person that educates boys too.  
19 That condoms do help.  
20 Tell the boys and the girls that if they really want a kid,  
21 That their life is going to change for the worst.

22 Be the person to tell kids everywhere  
23 “JUST DON’T DO IT”

Language such as “pregnant,” “sex,” and sexualized images such as “hoe” and “slut” in lines 01, 04, and 06 gives evidence of her writing across sexual representations. As she continued writing, she countered the power or dominant ideals of being popular, girls attempting to fit in with others, and young males not being there to help take care of a child. In the lines 08-10, “It wasn’t funny when you wanted to have sex with him. It wasn’t funny when your friends were teasing you cause you were a virgin,” she discussed the pressures that girls have to engage in sex with boys at a young age. She then wrote toward agency, urging girls to think differently and educate themselves on the consequences of such sexual thoughts and plans of getting pregnant. In the post interview she explained that she wrote this piece because she heard many young girls in school say they want to have sex and sometimes do not think through the consequences of pregnancy. She wanted her writing to be informative and thought provoking to help girls understand their possibilities.

Violet wrote a provocative text about what the world of Black women and girls would be like if there were no Black males. She was inspired to write this piece after church, hearing her pastor talk about losing our Black males in the community to violence. She thought more about his words and news reports on violence in her community. In this broadside poem, entitled, “To My Black Brother,” she invited the reader to imagine a world without Black men. In this world, she posits, there would be confusion and women would turn to each other for sex and reproduction.

01 Picture a world with confusion  
02 Created by this allusion of a world of females  
03 But no males at all  
04 And since there are no males  
05 There’s no reproduction

- 06 But a lot of arousal
- 07 As women turn to each other for pleasure
- 08 Lips locking
- 09 Eyes closed
- 10 Fingers exploring a body that is familiar to them
- 11 Entering and Breaking
- 12 Entering and Breaking
- 13 But nothing comes out of this
- 14 No new life is born
- 15 So the existing ones die one by one
- 16 First your grandmother, then your mother, next your
- 17 Daughter
  
- 18 I know, you wish you could save them
- 19 But, how can you when you are dead
- 20 And I would love to get revenge
- 21 But seeking revenge means that I kill my other brother
  
- 22 And now I slowly go back into this world of confusion
- 23 Created by this allusion of a world of females
- 24 Where there are no males to lead us
- 25 Because they all died before us
- 26 Not realizing that my future was in their hands

This broadside poem exhibits a sexual representation because she introduces the consequence of Black males being absent in the world. In this world she wrote in lines 01-14 that women will turn to each other for sex and reproduction but “No new life is born.” Consequently, grandmothers, mothers and granddaughters die off. The purpose for this writing is also to talk about what is happening to many young Black males all over the country so she wrote to counter the violence among them, yet she does not write toward agency in this piece. She explained in her post interview that many Black men are being killed and why she felt it was important to write about it.

- 01 I felt like it’s an issue that so relevant now. Like every time you turn on
- 02 the news, it’s somebody being killed and it’s usually a Black male and I think

03 the week before that we were talking about this issue in church and I decided  
04 to write about it.

She ended the piece with the line 26, stating that the lives of African American women and girls are in the hands of their brothers or Black men. While this piece also greatly illustrates kinship relationship because of the dependency on Black males for families, because her focus was centrally on the relationship between a man and a women and the reproduction of life.

### **Individual Representations**

Individual representations were related to writings about personality, individuality or personal traits of the writer. These representations appeared in short stories, open letters, and personal narratives. In their short stories, most of the girls infused individual representations of themselves written into the characters or plots, as did the mentor texts read. For example, in her post interview, Dahlia said that she wrote her character with personality traits that embodies her own personality, in her short story, “The Luck I Never Had”:

01 Later on that day it was time to go to the championship game. I was  
02 waiting outside my school waiting for the coach bus to take us to the game  
03 two hours away. I sat in the back by myself so I could do my secret chant  
04 before every game. “I wish upon the stars, to leave us with no scars, help  
05 us win the game, leave us with no shame.” I said it 3 times and kissed my  
06 ankle bracelet and placed it on my leg. I do this before every game so I  
07 make sure we do our best, and wish for the most.

She told the story through first person of a character named Sophie. She is a character who is a teenager involved in playing basketball for the school, hanging out with friends, and who has interest in a boy. As Sophie eagerly gets ready for the big championship game afterschool, the character’s love interest, Matthew asks her out to the school dance. She now has two events to get excited about. Trying to stay focused, Sophie does a ritual chant to bring her luck before the game.

The story continued and when Sophie missed a shot in the big game, she is substituted for another player, Lela. This causes Sophie to feel defeated because she was not the one to help her team win. Dahlia wrote, “*Everybody misses*, Coach said. *Not me*, I cried. As I walked back into the gym I saw that we were winning. It wasn’t me who was making us win, it was Lela.” After reading this, I asked Dahlia in the post interview if any parts of the story were about her. She responded that although this was about an event she saw in school, she infused herself in the story because she likes to play basketball and do well at the sport. She also shared that she sees herself as a competitive person and wanted to enter that characteristic into the story.

Heather wrote about her individual characteristics as well. In her short story, she infused individual details of her life into the story and wrote about her love for food and her experiences communicating with her classmate who she names, Patience. In the story, Patience, who is anything but patient, acts as a bully to the character Heather wrote into the story to reflect herself. In the following excerpt of the story, Patience is frantic about the school administrators’ decision to cut the students’ lunch hour short during finals week, and asks Heather’s character for help.

01 Three days before finals, Patience frantically went to everyone in sight. No  
02 one gave her an answer to her questions. She looked so defeated. I never  
03 expected she would come to little old me. She only acknowledged my  
04 presence when I was in her way. But this recognition was different. She  
05 wasn’t trying to knock me out of the way; she was coming to me for help on  
06 her “Big dilemma.” She shook me like a rag doll. I look like a twig  
07 compared to Bigfoot standing in front of me. She yelled, “WHAT AM I  
08 GOING TO DO ABOUT LUNCH?????” I looked like a tornado whipped  
09 through me when she yelled from her oversized lungs. I simply replied, “Get  
10 some money and buy some poparts.” She looked at me like I was a genius.  
11 She thought I was a goddess or something.

In the post interview she wanted her story to be humorous because that is also a part of her personality. I asked her about her story in the post interview.

01 **Muhammad:** Now we have your short story. This took place in a school so  
02 first I thought you were trying to relay this intellectual or academic self umm  
03 and then, I felt like a personal something coming out because of food and  
04 know you love food. First tell me why you wrote this piece.

05 **Heather:** Well these are somewhat of my school experiences because there is  
06 this girl in my school named Patience, and she is how I describe her in there in  
07 my story, and I put in the food side of me to relate myself to this character.

08 **Muhammad:** Because you love food?

09 **Heather:** Yes. And like I just wanted to have fun with it because during  
10 seventh and eighth grade I had a lot of fun. When I think of short story, I  
11 would want it to be funny or fun and that's one of the experiences that  
12 happened that was very humorous to me.

### **Community Representations**

Community representations related to membership in a specific group living together in one place or practicing a common interest. The girls wrote about their home, national, and global communities.

**National and global representations.** In her personal narrative entitled, "From a Different Perspective," Lily wrote about a national community representation in an international context as she also explored her ethnicity. As a young child, she and her family moved to Malaysia and for the first time. This gave her the experience of viewing herself among different cultures and races. In her personal narrative she wrote,

01 I was a little girl moving to a place I didn't even know existed. Malaysia, I did  
02 not even know where that was on the map... There, my race had no past, no  
03 stereotypes. To them I was American not African American. My complexion  
04 never mattered. I was just one of the five students from America whose



05 families moved over seas. At times I might have been recognized as one of the  
06 Americans who owned the world, but never as African American.

In her pre-interview she expressed not being able to fully make sense of her ethnicity while living there in Malaysia, stating that although she was surrounded by an array of ethnicities, she felt very alone and disconnected from other classmates. She knew herself to be Black because of skin color, but in Malaysia, no one referred to her as a Black girl as indicated in lines 03-04. Others did not make mention of her race the way she thought they would. In her post interview, she explained that she thought they would focus on her being African American or Black. Through this piece she made sense of a global and national representation, that is, living abroad in Malaysia as she also wrote about her ethnicity and nationality. How she made sense of herself in that space was different than her making sense of who she is now living in the United States. There, she was represented as an American first before anything else. Because of this, she wrote that she did not have to be judged or measured against past enslavement or stereotypes that existed in America. She explained in her post interview that although she was nervous about moving to Malaysia because she did not know how people would react to her, she left this experience with a greater sense of herself in a wider context. She also said in the same interview that it encouraged her to explore other countries and cultures.

**Local representations.** In her broadside poem, Ivy wrote about violence in her local community and how young African Americans girls are often caught in the crossfire. During week two, Ivy chose to write about the story of a young African American girl named, Heaven. Heaven, who lived in the same urban city as Ivy, was shot and killed in front of her home from a drive by shooting one week before Ivy wrote the following:

01 Heaven  
02 A little girl  
03 Smiling and laughing

- 04 In front of her house
- 05 Playing with her friends
- 06 Selling candy with her mother
- 07 10:30pm
  
- 08 The little girl's hair styled and beautiful
- 09 More than a thousand beautiful braids
- 10 Butterflies and flower barrettes
- 11 Preparing to see Bugz Bunny!!
- 12 She sat on the porch with her mother
- 13 She saw a gang driving by
- 14 CATATROPHE!!
- 15 The person who was driving had a gun in his hand
- 16 Shot the bullet in the direction of the little girl
- 17 Flew
- 18 Twirling
- 19 It hit
- 20 But not his target
- 21 The little girl.
- 22 Shot in the chest
- 23 Sent to the hospital
- 24 Seven-year-old girl
- 25 Heaven
- 26 Died
- 27 Now
- 28 Heaven is in Heaven

Just before the shooting, Heaven got her hair done and was preparing to go to an amusement park with her family. Ivy wanted to write about the issue of violence in her neighborhood and found the story of Heaven through her research. Ivy also sought to capture the joy and innocence of this young girl. She found a CBS news article on the incident, printed it out, read it and used it to inform her writing. She then combined her original ideas for writing about violence and African American girls with a true story. After reading the news article written about Heaven, Ivy wrote a poem with the young girl's name as the title. Her first draft read like a summary of the CBS news article rather than a poem. I then worked with her and advised her to allow fewer words to tell Heaven's story. We returned to our mentor text to

examine the structure of poetry writing. For the first two stanzas, Ivy wrote about Heaven rather than jump right into the secondary focus on violence. She described the little girl's hair and how she was dreaming of going to the park with her loved ones (lines 08-11). Then in lines 14-26 she wrote about the type of violence that existed in her surrounding local community through Heaven's story. When asked why she chose to write about this in her post interview, she said, "Because everyday a little kid like everyday, an African American girl or boy or just someone always gets killed. Like everyday they're just shooting somebody, just for no reason." I believe Ivy wrote about this community issue because she was affected by her local environment and chose to write about frequent occurrences through the story of one African American girl. This was also a context-heavy writing piece, which may not have been interpreted alone by only reading the words she used in the poem. I knew this was about her community from our interaction during the literacy collaborative and then during the post interview.

### **Writing About or to Counter Power From Personal and Societal Spaces**

When writing against power, I found that the girls either wrote from a personal space or a societal space. These spaces are defined by where the power stemmed. Writing to counter power from a personal space meant that they were writing against some kind of internal conflict within self or within their family or fictive kin. This was something that they may have had a role in creating. Of the 37 instances the girls wrote to counter power, 14 of these times, they wrote to counter a personal, self-imposed struggle or source of power. In Jasmine's poem, "Poet out of Practice," for example, she wrote to counter an internal struggle or a source of power dominating her mind. Within the content of this poem, the power was feelings of inadequacy in regards to writing poetry. She wrote:

- 01 I will pry at the closed doors of poetry,
- 02 Gain dominance over the gatekeeper that blocks my way

- 03 For he defends the room of which I crave access
- 04 Cannot let the guard keep me away, let nothing cross my path

This was power she wrote against but it was a source of dominance that came mostly from within.

Writing to counter power from a societal space on the other hand means that the power stemmed from some larger influence related to society. Writing from a societal space occurred 23 times in their artifacts and was largely illuminated in their broadside poems. An example showing this is from Lily's poem, "A Black Woman's Crown." In this poem, she addressed boundaries or barriers that others place in front of Black women, attempting to prevent them from self-empowerment and self-determination. The language of power she used is:

- 01 Though others in the world
- 02 Try to conspire
- 03 Betray and deceive
- 04 As though time has stopped
- 05 In the days of overthrowing kings and queens
- 06 With determination
- 07 They try to take your
- 08 Throne

The use of the words "others in the world" in line 01 speaks to the wider society that have created this power. Regardless of age or other demographic, all girls wrote from both spaces and typically made shifts from week to week, going back and forth from writing from either space. Both spaces are influenced by each other. Like the representations found in their writings, neither personal nor societal space stands alone and both are influenced by the other. In many cases the personal space writings were connected to larger issues within society and the societal space writings could also be personal and related to internal struggles experienced by the girls.

### Individual Case: Lily

As I have presented throughout this chapter, there were similarities in findings found across all the girls' writings. The girls all wrote across the same platforms of African American women historically. Each girl wrote to represent self, to counter power and toward agency or change. I also found that all the girls wrote across multiple representations of themselves. These representations shifted from week to week. In other words, none of the girls wrote across singular representations of self throughout the literacy collaborative. As they wrote to represent themselves, they wrote about or against power and shifted from writing from personal and societal spaces. These similarities were found regardless of the girls' ages, backgrounds, self-reported reading proficiencies and whether or not they self-identified as writers. Through Lily's story, I will illustrate these findings. Lily as a case offers of more focused view of what I found across all the girls. With supporting data from Lily, I will show examples of this but I will also discuss a difference I found in Lily's data that was not found when analyzing the other girls' data, which pertains to the ways Lily, conceptualized Black girlhood entering the study and how her conceptualization of Black girlhood played out in her writings.

To illustrate the three platforms of writing, I include Lily's informational writing, entitled, "Life Changing." She wrote:

01 Did you know African American girls between the ages of 12 and 19 are  
02 nearly 60 percent more likely to be overweight? Is it not disturbing that  
03 we, as black girls, are most likely going to be overweight? Obesity is one  
04 of the biggest reasons that our black community in general is at high risk  
05 for chronic diseases like diabetes or having asthma. Our lives are at risk.  
06 So many of us today are insecure about being a so-called "big girl" but do  
07 not realize that we do not have to be. Obesity starts with eating too many  
08 calories that our bodies do not burn up during the day. So if we consume a  
09 lot and do not pursue anything active later all those calories we ate just  
10 turn into fat. This is why exercise is so important in losing weight, so you  
11 can burn those calories. Also if we eat smaller portions or just not as much  
12 food the amount of calories consumed will decrease. My black sisters,

13 these statistics need to change; we need to be more in tune with our bodies  
14 and take care of ourselves. Then we will not only feel better about  
15 ourselves, but also feel better on the inside. Being healthy and living a  
16 healthy life style is something that can enhance our lives.

In this piece, Lily wrote to represent self, to counter an internal source of power and toward change. The audience she writes to is African American girls. This is evident in line 03, “we, as black girls” the use of “us,” “we,” and “our” throughout the writings and addressing the reader as “My black sisters” in line 13. As mentioned in the pedagogical timeline in chapter 3, during the fourth week of the collaborative, the girls each worked with another to research an issue that they felt warranted attention. Lily and Heather chose to write about obesity among African American girls. Lily used the statistic that “African American girls between the ages of 12 and 19 are nearly 60 percent more likely to be overweight” (lines 01-02). Heather and Lily took different approaches to writing across this issue. Heather wrote to Black girls who are overweight but appealed to them to embrace and love their body size. Lily told me in the post interview that she was not trying to write against Heather’s message but wanted to promote healthy eating habits in her writing.

Lily wrote centrally about a gender representation but also ethnicity and kinship because she wrote to Black girls, who she also refers to as “My black sisters” in line 08. The central gender representation is illustrated in 01-03 as she discussed female body size and being overweight. In lines 02-03, she rhetorically asks Black girls are they not disturbed of the high percentage (60%) of them being overweight. The statistic of obesity is the power Lily wrote against. As she continued the piece, she linked obesity to chronic diseases to show the urgency in healthy eating. She showed the reader the ways body fat accumulates and the ways to avoid being overweight from lines 05-08. She also showed a kinship representation in her language and

wrote, “My black sisters.” Although obesity among teen African American girls can be linked to society and unhealthy eating options across the nation, Lily wrote about power from a personal space to African American girls. This is evident in her lines 02-03, “But do not realize that we do not have to be.” This shows that the power was internal and she wrote that they have the power to change statistics of being overweight. Toward the end of the writing in lines 09-12, she wrote toward agency or change and made an urgent request to the readers to change the statistics and engage in physical healthy habits to “take care of ourselves.” Similar to Lewis, Enciso, and Moje’s (2007) definition of agency, Lily wrote to *remake* or redefine the representations or identities of Black girls by writing, “Being healthy and living a healthy life style is something that can enhance our lives” in the last line. This shows that she is writing for change from what already exists among African American adolescent girls. I asked Lily to talk about why she wrote this piece. She explained Heather’s piece and how she wrote about the message she sought to project.

01 Rachel wrote about “don’t not think you’re pretty” and “be secure with  
02 yourself” but I wasn’t trying to write against that. I wasn’t saying don’t be  
03 insecure. I was saying it’s not healthy and we have to take care of ourselves  
04 and if *this statistic* is *the statistic* then obviously it’s true, and means so many  
05 of us are unhealthy and it’s not good for our bodies. We get diseases and some  
06 of those diseases are passed down through generations and then even if your  
07 daughters or your granddaughters are not obese, they could still get this  
08 disease and so it has to stop...

She continued talking but now shifts to discussing a personal experience. This informs why she chose to write about this issue.

09 ...because like I remember when my uncle was in the hospital because he had  
10 a heart problem or something and my dad has high blood pressure and high  
11 cholesterol and it just made him really sad. He felt that he don't want to be in  
12 there. He was like, "It just makes me think I have two daughters and then I  
13 have high cholesterol, high blood pressure." So, after doing something about  
14 it, my dad, he's always joking around like, "Oh I look so good don't I?"  
15 because he's working out and my mom specifically makes sure we all eat  
16 healthy. Then the statistic isn't true. It's obviously showing that all Black  
17 families don't do that. They don't eat healthy enough and do the right  
18 things that their bodies need and they just eat fast food and they eat things that  
19 aren't good for them and they're not taking care of themselves and it's not  
20 good.

Her post interview confirms that she was writing across gender (lines 01-05), ethnicity (lines 16-17) and kinship in line 07 as she talked about this issue affecting "daughters" and "granddaughters." She also talked about the power or dominant statistic that she wrote about and discusses how change needs to occur by sharing a narrative about her family.

Lily also differed from the girls when analyzing the ways she conceptualized Black girlhood in the pre-interview data compared to what was observed in her writings. The seven other girls entered the space with wide conceptualizations of Black girlhood that was carried out in their writings throughout the study. For example, when asked, "What do you think it would be like working with African American girls this summer in the institute?" Camille responded with:

01 I think it would be good to see, 'cause we all come from different areas and  
02 different communities so I think it would be interesting to see what



03 similarities we all have and what differences and just learning about other  
04 people's stories or struggles.

Camille used the word "different" or "differences" multiple times in lines 01-03 to express her conceptualization of the multidimensional nature of African American girls. Lily answered this question to talk about how she is "different" from other African American girls but talks about Black girlhood monolithically, expressing that because she is "different" from other girls, she can not fully identify with them. The transcript showing this analysis follows:

01 **Muhammad:** My first question is why did you decide to participate in the  
02 writing institute?

03 **Lily:** Ha, Well I didn't find out about it, obviously my mom did. I would say,  
04 I mean you say all black girls are all different but I would say I'm QUITE  
05 different. When I was seven, my family moved overseas and we lived there  
06 for years and it was a different experience. I didn't have that *Black*  
07 *experience* or whatever but my life. I experienced a lot of cultures and stuff.  
08 My mom thought it would be good for me to good just to see 'cause I haven't  
09 been around black kids all my life. I used to go to white schools and I am  
10 going to a white school again and I lived overseas. We were like the only  
11 black people there. Everyone thought we were Indian so my parents really  
12 want me to be in a black environment for some time because I'm usually not  
13 in one.

14 **Muhammad:** So how do you feel about all that?

15 **Lily:** I feel a little weird because I'm not used to this even when we go to  
16 church. Sometimes I think I should experience a little. It's not like I don't

17 have any black friends cause I do, I quite a few actually. But it will be  
18 different because they all go to my school, so we all went to a white school  
19 together.

20 **Muhammad:** When you hear *black girls* or *African American girl*, did you  
21 think it would be about a certain perception of girl? Did you think they would  
22 all some sort of a city experience?

23 **Lily:** Kinda, because where I live. I live in a very small suburb or whatever  
24 like that's where not in the city. It's a white neighbor, like seriously! It's a  
25 white neighborhood so I was a little intimidated at first and didn't know if I  
26 really wanted to do it because I didn't think I (pause). I do a lot of work  
27 around my house or whatever and my parents make me clean up and get really  
28 good grades in school and so I always feel like I am doing something and  
29 being helpful so I was like, I DON'T KNOW IF I'M GOING TO BE  
30 HELPFUL [in the literacy collaborative]. *Like what am I going to say?*

31 **Muhammad:** So what do you think it's going to be like working with other  
32 African American girls?

33 **Lily:** It'll be different. That's for sure. Umm I don't really know what to  
34 expect. I know...My mom was all looking around at the orientation. She was  
35 like, "Lily, these girls all look like you and dress like you." I don't know. I  
36 didn't really think about it. She was like, "they all look quite nice." I didn't  
37 say they didn't look nice. I just knew it would be different and was kinda  
38 nervous about it.

In this pre-interview data, Lily expressed that she is not like other African American girls and says that she is “QUITE different” in lines 04-05. From lines 06-07 she conceptualizes Black girlhood as having a “Black experience” which later in the pre-interview she describes as living in an urban city, rather than a suburb. This is also evident in her response to the question, “When you hear black girls or African American girl, did you think it would be about a certain perception of girl?” that I ask in lines 20-21. In these lines, she compared the city and the suburbs. She explained in the pre-interview that her mother wanted her to participate to be around more African American students because of her previous schools and communities yet Lily was not convinced initially that she could contribute to the institute. In lines 25-30, she expressed feeling intimidated in participating in the study and worried that she might be about to “be helpful” among the group of African American girls. Her mother told Lily that she was not as different from the other girls as she thought and said that Lily looked and dressed like the rest of the girls (lines 34-35).

I interpreted this transcript as Lily having a certain perception of Black girlhood that depicted them singular (i.e. having a “black” or “city experience”) especially since she felt she would not be helpful in her contribution. I then compared this perception with the ways she wrote throughout the literacy collaborative. I found that she wrote across multiple (23) representations of Black girlhood. In her broadside poem, she even wrote against the ideal of African American girls creating “guidelines and boundaries” that keep them “confined and divided”, “leaving different sisters out.” She wrote:

01 ... We have created guidelines  
02 Manipulated in to boundaries  
03 That leave us confined and divided  
04 By undesirable expectations of being black  
05 Born out of these guidelines  
06 Already cast out of our sisterhood

07 Our sisterhood was created to stop the lies  
08 Fabricated by those around us  
09 But while we fight  
10 We leave are *different sisters* out  
11 On the outskirts  
12 As if their story is not worth fighting for

From this poem, it became clearer that she needed to write against others making her feel separate from other African American girls. Her other writings offered different representations of African American girls, showing a wide and complex contributions of who she and other African American girls are.

**Research Question 2: Which factors within a literacy collaborative contribute to representations within their writings?**

In this section, I present findings that tell which factors or variables within the literacy collaborative contributed to the representations written in the girls' writings. I conducted a direct analysis from their post interview data when I asked them directly to respond to the following question: *What aspects of the institute helped you to write in the manner in which you wrote?* After recording their responses, I then asked them about specific factors that I believed helped to play an integral role in shaping the writing space (see Appendix B). All of these aspects were intentional when designing the study except the visit from the published Sister Author. The visit from the published Sister Author occurred because the author was local and did not require any expenses for her to speak to the girls. I also analyzed my observational notes and memos with the post interview data to support the findings in this section.

Overall the factors that the girls thought were most helpful for their writings were:

1. Reading mentor texts
2. The freedom to write openly without censorship
3. Uninterrupted writing time

Three or more girls felt that these were the most helpful although the more than half of the girls commented that the other aspects were assisted in the development in their writing. In the following sections, I will share the girls' voices as they responded to each of these areas.

### **Mentor Texts**

Reading mentor texts as models for our writings were reported in the post interviews to be the most beneficial aspect of the literacy collaborative. I invested time selecting texts because I wanted each text to cultivate their intellect, help them to think more broadly about selfhood and representations and texts that would help them advance their writings. These were helpful factors because they helped the girls to write their own pieces. The texts served as useful models and guides to show them structures of the particular genre or help nurture ideas for writing. Heather, Ivy, Dahlia, Lily, and Zinnia all expressed that the mentor texts helped them develop ideas for their own writings and they found them most useful for the content. Heather said, the mentor texts "really helped us get a general idea on how to write and what ideas we can write about." Lily said that the texts helped her to understand how other Black women wrote about themselves, which gave her ideas on how to write about herself and also ways to write. Violet, Jasmine and Camille were more interested in the texts to model, give examples, or exhibit language use in the genre. Jasmine, who benefited from reading how the language was used in mentor texts said:

- 01 Oh I like the examples 'cause when I see a strong nice, example that I like, it
- 02 gets to me and I like to take that and not like base my writing on it but like

03 think about how they wrote theirs and what made it strong and what about it  
04 made me tick. And, I like to put that in my writing, you know because if it  
05 made me tick, I mean, I can't say that everyone else liked it in the same way,  
06 but if that piece is beautiful and became famous enough, maybe if I find  
07 something great about it in there and try to put it, a little bit of it, in my  
08 writing, maybe mine will be awesome.

In lines 03-04, Jasmine talked about how she liked to read something in the mentor text that made her “tick” or something about the writing that sparked her interest. She felt that if the mentor writer could invoke that type of response as she had, then she could do the same with her writings for others, saying, “maybe mine will be awesome.” This is evident in the lines 06-08.

Violet said the mentor texts were “guides to her own writing” and Camille enjoyed seeing visual examples of the genres rather than just being assigned something to write such as given a prompt.

### **Freedom to Write Openly**

The freedom to write openly was another aspect that helped the girls to represent themselves in ways they desired. Censorship in school came up several times during the interviews. The girls frequently compared writing within the literacy collaborative to writing in their classrooms. More pointedly, they compared opportunities to write openly and without apology or censorship in both environments. Several girls said they had the opportunity to select and use the language to help them push their content to readers within the literacy collaborative. Sometimes they wrote about controversial issues such as rape, abuse, physical beauty, and racism. Heather said,

01 That was good because in school writings, I would want to use certain

02 words. If I didn't put it there, you wouldn't get the emphasis. Since we  
03 were able to write them in here, I got my point across with as much emphasis  
04 as I needed.

Heather talked about being able to have freedom in writing allowed her to use the word choice she desire to pushed her point or message across to the reader. Similarly, Jasmine said she also got to use her own word choice. When asked about this, her energy level and tone increased, which I deemed, spoke to her passion around wanting to be open and unapologetic in her writing.

01 **Muhammad:** What did you think about the freedom to write openly?

02 **Jasmine:** Oooh I like that too. 'Cause in school, if you start to talk about  
03 topics of like who we are as African Americans, they would be like "OH MY  
04 GOD THAT'S SO INAPPROPRIATE, PUT THAT AWAY." I liked how we  
05 got to write about who we are and express ourselves, using the wording that  
06 we wanted to without being like, "OH YOU CAN'T WRITE THAT, THAT'S  
07 A LITTLE TOO GRAPHIC."

08 **Muhammad:** What would be an example of [**Jasmine:** Like expressions,  
09 expressions. I don't know. I can't think of it.]

10 **Muhammad:** What wouldn't be welcomed in a school setting as far as  
11 writing about who you are?

12 **Jasmine:** Yea. Like if I don't know like writing about who I am, well I have  
13 certain opinions and if I stress too much, they will be like "Oh Jasmine, you  
14 see "this" will make everyone argue about your writing and we can't really  
15 put this on the wall 'cause people start to read it and other teachers will be  
16 like, "Wow, she posted that!" I remember once we got to write about a topic

17 either a food topic about girls and how they ate and like being obese and stuff.  
18 Well, kids, a lot of them got in trouble for writing about how it was like, well  
19 you like to eat, some people like feel bad and cope with eating when they feel  
20 bad and stuff. There's this one boy, Ray, he was writing, "I don't know why  
21 you get mad when people call you big in your daily life, you can stop it but  
22 you don't" So he got into big trouble for literally writing that.

In this post interview transcript Jasmine illustrated examples of censored language in school when writing. She explained that her teachers do not want her to write across certain topics related to her African American identity. It seems that if the writing is likely to raise concerns from others, teachers are less likely to encourage it even if the student desires to write in that way. Closely resembling this, Lily said this to the same question:

01 I really liked that a lot because now in school I got to choose a topic but if our  
02 teacher didn't like the topic you probably had to change or make changes this  
03 time it was what I wanted to write about I could write about it.

Similar to Jasmine she compared the writings during the literacy collaborative to school writing and found that school writing was more geared to what the teacher wanted her to write. In response to this factor, Camille said, "This was nice because in school we have to censor a lot so by the time you're done censoring it's kind of like, it's not really your writing because that's not what you really want to say." Violet also explained that in school, she has to stick to "one subject to write about and one type of length" such as "the five-paragraph essay." Ivy said this aspect made little difference in her writings because she is always able to write about what she wanted in or out of school. Dahlia on the other hand liked this aspect because she has always been told what to write at home and school.



## **Uninterrupted Writing Time**

The third factor that the girls named as most beneficial to representing themselves in their writings was uninterrupted writing time. The total uninterrupted writing time for the literacy collaborative was 23 hours and 40 minutes from a total of 33 hours. During week one, we wrote for 4 hours and 20 minutes, week two was 5 hours and 35 minutes, week three was 6 hours and 30 minutes, and during week four we wrote for 7 hours and 15 minutes. There was a steady increase in writing each week as the girls became more comfortable with the writing exercises and confident in their work. On average, the girls and myself had slightly over two hours of uninterrupted writing time each day and the only time we paused was to talk with one other person about our writing. All the girls except for Dahlia and Zinnia gave reasons why this aspect was beneficial. Heather felt that it was “good to think through ideas with no distractions and then write.” Jasmine felt that she had time “to get stuck and pick right up again.” Violet, Lily and Ivy felt that the time gave them an opportunity to fully think through ideas before writing and remain focused while writing. Camille said that it was good to convey what she wanted without the pressure of time constraints.

## **Summarizing the Writing Context**

Examining the context of the literacy collaborative was key in understanding what supported the girls’ representations in their writings. I found that the aspects were each beneficial to more than half of the girls. Reading mentor texts, writing openly, and having uninterrupted writing time served as the largest influences to representing themselves in writings. The environmental aspects of the writing reflected what I found to be similar in the spaces of historic literary societies and I found that even hundreds of years later, the girls still benefited from similar enactments of literacy. This afforded the writing to take place in the manner in which it

did, although I did not find enough data to support if they would be able to write in similar ways in other environments. Because many of the girls were self-identified as writers and wrote in similar ways at home, I cannot conclude that their writing was only due to the support of the literacy collaborative. Instead it increased the likelihood of the girls writing about themselves and helped me to conclude that the aspects influenced the 48 writing pieces.

#### IV. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

To Black Women

Sisters,  
Where there is cold silence –  
No hallelujahs, no hurrahs at all, no handshakes,  
No neon red or blue, no smiling faces –  
prevail.  
Prevail across the editors of the world,  
Who are obsessed, self-honeying and self-crowned  
In the seduced arena.

It has been a  
hard trudge, with fainting, bandaging, and death.  
There have been startling confrontations.  
There have been tramlings. Tramlings  
of monarchs and other men.

But there remain large countries in your eyes.  
Shrewd sun.  
The civil balance.  
The listening secrets.  
And you create and train your flowers still.  
(Gwendolyn Brooks)

In the poem above, Gwendolyn Brooks writes to other Black women about resiliency and engages in a reciprocity type of writing where she writes to and for other Black females. Brooks addresses issues of representations and types of power that many of them encounter in their lives. She writes directly to Black females about triumphing among difficult conditions absent of joy, excitement, and praise, telling them to overcome and prevail. Brooks uses imploring language to ask them to remain steadfast against the “editors of the world” or those who attempt to write the stories of Black women and girls, attempting to tell narratives of their lives without their permission. She writes about the same “bandaging” that Anna Julia Cooper (1988) discussed in her writing, *A Voice from the South* as she too pushed for a “full vision” of the lives of African American females. Brooks closes the poem with an appeal for hope and courage and reminds

Black girls, young and old, “there remain large countries in your eyes.” In other words, in the forecast of their futures lie the potential of new and unexplored journeys with the promise of new insight into themselves and the world.

I open this chapter with this poem intentionally because it speaks to the types of writings I observed during the literacy collaborative of the study. We read this poem on the third day of the literacy collaborative and I remember the silence that occurred in the room after I shared Brooks’ powerful and revealing language. I believe we remained still and rested on her words as she nourished our minds and hearts with the types of lessons that I feel Black women and girls need when surrounded by a range of images that have shaped perspectives of themselves. The writing pieces written by each of the eight girls illuminated a very similar presence of writing about and against profound and critical issues affecting the lives of African American girls.

I also start this chapter with this poem because of the last line, “And you create and train your flowers still.” Brooks writes for capacity building, writing for and teaching future generations of females to create their own agendas or pathways of their life (Tatum, 2009). She does this by using the flower metaphor to refer to Black females as the flower in nature that has traditionally been used to refer to women in literary writings (Rutkowski, 2008). Also, I saw the image of a flower being represented in the writings of African American girls who participated in this study. Violet for example wrote about herself as a *flower* in, “My Roots” and wrote, “I became the flower I was meant to be. The African Violet. Uniqueness standing out among beautiful roses.” She wrote about her unique qualities among other “beautiful roses” or other African American females. Camille also wrote about African American girls as “flowers” in her open letter. She wrote,

If you make it, I make it. My soul will rest within the harmonious sounds of your victory.  
The seeds have been planted, now it is up to us to nourish the flowers so that our future

generations will stand tall and beautiful. Never again will they know what it feels like to struggle, to feel inferior and to feel like all hope is gone. We must leave a legacy; a legacy of excellence. We are all Queens and must conduct ourselves accordingly.

Here Camille refers to “seeds planted,” as previous generations of African American women who, through their writings as social action, have paved the way for other young women to be successful. She then stated that it is now time for girls today to do the same and “nourish the flowers of future generations” to come. Observing such language in the girls’ writings and the writings of Black women historically, I chose to name each of the girls’ names of flowers that captured the meaning and appearance of respective flowers to the girls’ personalities, their physical styles, and to the content and meanings found in their writings. In addition, my first own name, Gholnecsar, in Farsi means, “to share beautiful flowers.” In many ways, I shared the voices and passions of these eight beautiful flowers in this dissertation to counter a tradition of research and practice that leaves their voices out.

The metaphoric image of the *African American girl as flower* will serve as my framework to approach this final chapter as I provide a discussion of findings, implications for practice and research, limitations of the study and a final conclusion. I have organized this chapter to first discuss *the seeds*. In this section, I will revisit the need for this study and why the questions examined are worthwhile. In many ways, the problem statement discussed in chapter one *planted the seed* for designing and conducting this study. Next I will discuss, *the roots*. As the name implies, in this section, I connect the literary pursuits of writing within the study to history. I believe the historical orientations taken in this work played a large role to the outcomes and this therefore requires a brief discussion. After this, I will discuss *the stem*. The stem of a flower has significant purposes. It holds the flower away from the ground so it could grow and flourish. It has structural purposes and supports and elevates the flower while connecting the root to the

petals. The stem provides the transportation of water (nourishment) between the roots (history) to the leaves and petals (girls). Stems are the storage houses for nourishment and keeps the flowers in the sunlight. In many ways, *the stem* in the study was the literacy collaborative and the various factors that helped shaped the context of the girls' writings. In this section, I discuss contextual factors that assisted the girls to write. I revisit the historical literacy framings discussed in chapter two: literary presence, literary pursuits, and literary character and how these framings played out in the context of the study. Next, I discuss *the petals*, or the girls in the study. The petals are typically viewed as the most beautiful and aesthetically pleasing part of the flower. The petals of a flower are vibrant in color and very attractive to other elements in the environment. In this section, I write about what I learned about the girls and what I learned about their writings. After this, in the section titled, *the water*, I discuss my role and what I learned about my selfhood and myself as a writer. I am including myself under this section, because I do not believe I gave the girls the language or anything directly that made them write in the ways they did. Instead, I facilitated or *watered* what, in many ways, already existed in their minds. This will lead me to discuss *the field*. Here I provide insight into how this study aligns with other extant research and what expansions it offers. Finally, I discuss *the sunlight*. In this section I discuss implications this study offers for research and practice. I also explain limitations I found within the work. I conclude this chapter with final points that revisit what Mary Helen Washington calls, "a search for full vision" when referring to representations and writing. It is my hope that researchers, educators and others in the public will read this work along with the girls' voices and consequently come closer to a more clearer and complete vision of who African American adolescent girls are and what they need in regards to literacy development.

## **The Seeds: Revisiting the Need for the Study**

This study was a broad attempt to reconnect the literary past to contemporary literary pursuits with eight African American girls participating in a four-week literacy collaborative and to understand if such historical connections offer any benefits to the girls and their writings. I specifically sought to answer two research questions: 1) *How do African American adolescent girls represent themselves through their writings?* 2) *Which factors within a literacy collaborative contribute to representations within the writings of African American adolescent girls?* These questions were examined based on the need for more research with a broader historical lens that makes the voices and the writings of African American adolescent girls central because the current landscape is saturated with the ways in which others have represented who they are. These representations are often focused on pathologies or false public assumptions of African American girlhood and are absent of African American girls' voices. This study therefore, provided a counter narrative to such representations and created space for African American girls to write about themselves in ways that they felt they needed. These questions deemed to be worthwhile because I found that the majority of the girls in the study felt that the wider society negatively positions them based on judgments and negative portrayals. I also found that the girls, much like African American women historically, are too affected by such depictions. I did not find that such false notions discourage them however; they found importance in using their writing as a tool to write out contentions and reshape how they are viewed. Although I went into the study to mainly make sense of the two questions, I also began to more widely understand why African American girls write and what their aims and purposes are for writing.

## **The Roots: Realigning the Literary Pursuit of Writing to History**

Missing from research and pedagogy is typically a historical lens and how African American students have historically developed and practiced literacy (Tatum & Muhammad, 2012). This historical orientation is frequently excluded from theoretical frameworks, from discussions of policy and practice, from curriculum planning and from instructional practice. I found that shaping the literacy collaborative grounded in history created opportunities for girls to cultivate literacy in similar ways of members in historical literary societies. Writing for the girls became a means to self-represent and gain knowledge about self. From previous archival research on the literacy development of African Americans (Muhammad, in press), I found that writing to represent and to know self were enmeshed in literacy practices. I will discuss the interpretations and enactments of each as found in the study. I am defining the term, *enactment* as, to put into practice or act out. I use this term because it carries and stresses a position of pushing forward an agenda that allows one to claim power and authority, to tell their own narratives to redirect pathways needed for their literacy development and reconstruct the frames needed in their lives.

### **Self-Representation**

Representation is defined within sociocultural literature as fluid, multilayered, and relational and is shaped by the social and cultural environment as well as by literate practices (Sutherland, 2005). This definition bears resemblance to Gee's (2001) notion of identity, which is a dimension of representation. Both identity and representation are multiple and situated and are tied to historical, institutional, and sociocultural forces. The girls wrote about who they are and African American girls collectively. In doing so, they wrote across several different representations. I found that only in one of the 48 writing pieces did a girl write to offer one



particular representation. Their writings of multiple representations suggest that their sense making of their selfhood is complex, giving present day evidence of Henderson's ideological views of "voice" in African American women's writings (Henderson, 1992; Winn, 2010). She posits that African American women's writings are *multivocal* or represented of a complex variety of experiences, ideals, representations and identifications. Likewise, the writings of the girls in the study shared a similar multivocal-ness and they characterized their lives as diverse and not as narrowed, monolithic beings.

The representations were not just personal or individual, they were socially constructed and shaped by their environments and discourse communities (Gee, 2000; Street, 2003). Many of the girls commented that their writings stemmed from their experiences or the experiences that they observed of other discourse communities that they identify with. There were many examples in which girls wrote about the lives and experiences of other African American girls—experiences that they did not yet face themselves. Because they saw themselves as part of a collective of Black women and girls, they were able to represent issues of other women, other African Americans or other African American adolescent girls. Lily for example, never lived in an urban city or felt that she even had "the Black experience," yet she was still able to write about issues that girls in urban areas may experience such as the dichotomy of sisters based on language and skin color. Camille, Heather, and Zinnia approached issues affecting women such as relationship abuse, rape, and raising children. Although they have not reached this developmental stage in their lives or had these experiences, they were still able to look beyond their immediate identities as adolescent girls and write about issues they saw affecting a group of people whom they saw themselves part of. This suggest that their writings are hybrid spaces for them to explore, make sense of, and express different manifestations of self.

## **Learning about Self**

Historically literacy was conceptualized as an intellectual endeavor. Both historically and within the study, I found that writing each week was an intellectual exercise of the mind to gain new knowledge. Most of the girls were able to recall things they learned new as a result of participating in the study. Many times, writing called for the girls to engage in research and searching for facts online. Heather, Violet, Dahlia, Lily, and Camille all commented that research helped them to write. Jasmine said the research aspect in her writings helped her to form “new ideas in writing.” Jasmine also learned that Black girls do not fit a monolithic profile and their identities are vast and complex. Similarly Violet said that she learned from the other girls, specifically about their stories and perspectives. Heather learned more about historical misrepresentations of Black women and cited the example of the Tom and Jerry cartoon and how the Black woman was portrayed in the cartoon. Camille said she became even more aware of “how the world sees us” by researching and looking at some statistics involving African American girls. Ivy and Lily learned new genres or types of writings and about the histories of African American women. Many of these responses fell in the category of learning something new about perspectives and histories of who they are.

### **The Stem: The Context of the Study**

From the writing samples of their applications, I found for many of the girls, they entered the collaborative writing about self and writing to counter some form of enacted power important to the lives. The girls found the context and instructional practices helped them to write. These were similar variables that framed the historic African American literary societies. This suggests that the ways in which literacy was framed historically for African Americans benefited the literacy development of girls today. In this section, I will take the framework that emerged from

previous ground theory research I conducted prior to the study on 1800s African American literary societies to further discuss the context of the study. Literacy development was historically shaped and supported by three pillars of influence—literary presence, literary pursuits, and literary character.

### **Literary Presence**

The girls made themselves intellectually visible through acts of literacy. This literary presence was enacted from the creation of such space for girls to write about themselves but also from their desire and commitment to write for four-weeks. The establishment of literary presence originally developed as young African American women created literary societies during the 1800s. Their writings were one major display of literary presence because this would mean their writings were accessible for others to read and learn from. The girls in the study came together to write and literary presence was one of the framings that took shape throughout the collaborative. In part, I shaped the space to simulate literary presence, but my observation allowed me to see how it was enacted and how the girls responded. I think because girls entered the space with varying ages and experiences, there were potentially opportunities for them to learn from each other. This learning then began to shape individual perspectives and the ways they wrote. Our public sharing of writings among each other, offering critique and feedback to each other, freedom to write openly, and calling each other Sister Author were also enactments of literary presence. This presence made it clear that their writings were contributions to scholarship and intellectual writings. In initial sessions with the girls, I explained to them that writing can serve as a powerful tool in their lives and they could engage in writing as a way to improve skills and build an understanding of themselves and the world. Writing is an ultimate form of communication and possibly the highest form of literacy because it requires one to

simultaneously read words and their world (Freire & Macedo, 1987), think across new and previous knowledge, speak and use language, and then communicate thoughts in print to self or a known or unknown audience. Stating the purpose of writing and informing them about the details of their involvement further communicated to them that they were within a literary presence. Their participation and examples of these displays of literary presence afforded opportunities for them to then engage in literary pursuits.

### **Literary Pursuits**

The literary pursuits the girls engaged in within the study were reading, thinking, discussing, and of course, writing. Every once in a while an occasional informal debate also took place. I believe their writings emerged from the simultaneous pursuits of reading mentor texts, discussing the text and issues related to representations, sharing writings, critiquing each other's work and then revising our writing. This reconceptualizes ideals of what writing is. Instead of just viewing writing as a remote act, it is instead a social interaction that involves pursuits of reading, thinking, critiquing, sharing and speaking and is both individual and collaborative. Writing had greater ends for the girls extended from writing and submitting work, but individual rewards also.

### **Literary Character**

The development or changes of literary character among the girls in the study is unknown since the study took place in a short time frame, however, as mentioned in the "roots" section, I do believe that the girls were able to gain or enact *literary character traits* from the literacy collaborative such as displaying selfhood, gaining new knowledge and print authority and building their writing skills. In the post interview, I asked the girls what they gained from participating in such *presence* and engaging in such *pursuits*. As it relates to the definition of

literary character, Heather said she gained better writing skills and ways to express her emotions. Jasmine, Ivy, Dahlia, Zinnia also said their writings improved. Dahlia expressed that she learned how to write openly and gained the benefit of writing in a supportive environment. Jasmine, Violet, Ivy and Camille felt that they gained a stronger sense of who they are. Jasmine who admitted that she entered the space adhering to the same types of representations she argued against, said that she learned about the diverse nature of Black girls and that there is no one way to be a Black girl. Violet said that she became a better reader of literature and learned how to read literature like a writer. Lily felt that her actual experience exceeded her expectations and she gained knowledge of learning about how such writing spaces for African American girls have benefits for those who participate. The three historical literacy framings supported the girls in the study much as they benefited young African American women in literary societies. This suggests that these frames are useful for supporting the writings of African American girls in contemporary spaces.

### **The Petals: Knowledge About the Eight Sister Authors**

The girls were diverse in their experiences and backgrounds. During the study and when I reanalyzed the data after the study, I learned more about the girls through their writings and social interactions. In this section, I discuss what I learned about the girls and their writings.

#### **Complex Self-Representations**

One thing that was reaffirmed for me was how researchers and educators must not get trapped in singular profiles of African American adolescent girls. The girls very often talked and wrote about how others project “sameness” upon them. In their preamble, they wrote, “We are smart and can strive to be anything we want although society projects us as all the same.” Through the girls’ writings, I paid attention to the ways they represent themselves to learn more

about their identities and the identifications that wanted to be known for. Their identities are very complex and the text did not have to respond to each of the varying identities but instead respond to their lives somehow and serve as a vehicle to explore their own thoughts and about representations of themselves. The girls did not largely write across the same representations of the mentor text authors. This also suggest that lists of set texts or set curriculums may not be useful for teaching African American girls while supporting their writing development. I learned that texts should be selected based on what emerges from day to day learning. The importance they found from writing about their kinship and intellectual selves outside of ethnicity and race, shows how they see themselves the most and if I were to continue teaching them, these areas of their lives would be honored and nurtured in literacy instruction.

### **Developmental Differences**

Additionally, I found that that the older girls ages 15-17 wrote across sexual representations of self when examining the central representations but the younger girls did not. This suggests that there was a developmental difference and the older girls could possibly see importance with issues of pregnancy, sex, or the opposite sex as they relate to African Americans and/or females. Zinnia focused on this representation in three writings, Violet focused on this in two of her writings, and Camille and Heather each wrote about it centrally in one writing piece. Within each piece about sexual representations, the girls wrote out critical issues within their local and wider communities. They saw broadside poetry as an opportunity to each push a political and social message to readers in this genre. Zinnia and Camille wrote about violence and sexual abuse against women, while Violet tackled a critical issue affecting many African American communities, involving the loss of young Black males due to violence. Heather wrote

about teen pregnancy among African American girls, which is something she has heard in conversations at school. Writing about these issues was not observed in the younger participants.

### **Writing in the “Zamani”**

The kinship found in their writings as well and writing about the pursuit of knowledge and aspirations are very connected to African American women’s writings overtime. When analyzing their kinship and intellectual representations in the data, often times, the girls were writing to and for other African American girls. This speaks to another significant purpose for writing outside of the three platforms. I found the writings of the girls involved writing for other generations of African American girls. In many ways this resonates with the past writings of African American women. In chapter two, I introduced a term that has been used by Royster (2000) and her explication of the literary culture of African American women writers. She explains that African American entered a *zamani dimension* in their writings. The zamani dimension is the presence of a type of reciprocity writing whereas African American women write to and for the benefit of each other. Throughout time, this was a practice of exchanging language among each other for mutual benefit because it was benefiting just as much for the writer to carefully and critically think through ideas, craft these thoughts, and communicate them to print. It was also equally benefiting to the reader to gain knowledge from such writings. Such knowledge as Royster (2000) puts it, helps other African American females to know their identities, how they should see the world, how “they should perceive themselves in the world, and how they might take the authority to speak and to act as thinkers, writers, and leaders, in the face of contending forces” (p. 89). African American women have used writings to carry messages to other African American females so that they understand themselves and so that

would know how to reclaim the power to be thinkers and leaders in their local and broader contexts. These serve as cultural imprints for future generations.

I noticed that the zamani dimension emerged in their preamble and various writing pieces written by the girls to other African American girls. They were writing to send a message or to encourage one another toward some form of individual or social change. In their preamble for example, they wrote, “Together we shall clear a path for those who come later.” This suggests that they are defining themselves as part of a wider population of people and see themselves in a fictive kinship with other African American girls and as part of a lineage of African American women.

### **Critical Issues in the Lives of African American Girls**

I learned that as they wrote about themselves, several issues emerged that were important to the lives of the girls. They wrote about problems, representations projected upon them, and critical personal and societal issues. This was done without being prompted. Once they learned the study was about me understanding representations and how they write about themselves, they began to write against issues that they needed to have reflected into print. Issues they wrote about, stemming from both internal and societal spaces, ranged from writing about self-efficacy of poetry writing and internal conflicts of beauty to writing to the media to stop the sexualizing and objectification of Black girls. This suggests that girls must have a space to write out local and global issues affecting their lives and the lives of others. In this way, they can and will write for personal and social change. This supports existing writing research with Black adolescent girls (Winn, 2010, 2011; Wissman, 2008, 2011). Writing about critical issues of their lives also links back historically when considering the history of African Americans’ writings and how they wrote about self and critical issues affecting their lives.



During the girls' pre-interview when they were asked how African American women and girls are portrayed in society and in media outlets, I found that many of the representations cited were very similar to the types of power they chose to later write against. When asked before participating in the literacy collaborative how they believed African American women and girls are portrayed in society and among media outlets, their responses were related to 1) not being physical beautiful (and judged by the appearance of their hair), 2) being viewed as angry, loud, and violent, and 3) being sexualized and objectified. Rather than choosing to accept or agree with any of these viewpoints, they vehemently wrote against them and used language for their benefit—to promote their representations of truth. These three categories of power are also tied to the three historical images that have misrepresented African American women and girls for hundreds of years and includes, the mammy (seen as not beautiful), the sapphire (seen as angry and violent) and the jezebel (seen as sexual and as an object of pleasure). This suggests that distorted representations are still visible and dominant and that African American girls are still affected by them. I did not find that they are negatively affected them but I they reclaimed authority in language to write about how they reject such images. This indicates that girls then need spaces to think about such issues, negotiate where these dominant ideologies stem from and then learn how to use language to reclaim and redefine themselves for themselves and for others so that outside others have an understanding into who they are. I purposefully use the terms “reclaim” and “redefine” when talking about representation and print authority because of the girls' history of African Americans defining and claiming the power to know themselves historically (McHenry, 2002; Royster, 2000) and this is not therefore anything recently developed. It instead, is the act of reconnecting them to their literary lineages (Tatum, 2009).

## **Writing for Imagined and Real Audiences**

As they wrote toward social change and critical issues, I found that the girls had wider conceptualizations of “audience.” They made shifts of directing their writings toward an audience of African American girls like them, to women, and to African Americans. Then they made wider weekly shifts and also wrote to “others” in society. These *others* were people who did know them, seek to know them or live their lives even though they were not directly reading their writings. This made me reflect upon my own knowledge of writers and myself as a writer. *As writers, do we ever know who will read our work, or what impact our language will have on the thoughts and minds of others?* Sometimes we write the most self-proclaimed, transformative, life changing prose and it never goes examined by an outside eye. Other times, writers write solely for themselves and the writing sometimes just happens to reach the hands and eyes of others and subsequently shapes their thinking. Regardless of initial intents, I asked myself if writers tone down or change the writing for self, real, or imagined audiences and do we write differently for ourselves then we do for the public? Do we reveal more or less of ourselves? These thoughts about audience emerged because I noticed that the girls wrote in powerful ways, about urgent issues, knowing that their writings may not be read by anyone else outside the group of girls. This could mean that their writings served as hybrid spaces to not only write across multiple aspects of self, but also to write for wide and different audiences. This connects to McHenry’s (2002) claim that African Americans historically sought to have their enactments of literacy reach the “minds of wider audiences.”

### **The Water: My Experience**

The water serves a significant purpose for flowers and is essential for their growth. In many ways, I see any teacher’s or instructor’s role in learning environments as the person who

waters or helps students grow in some way. I entered the study wanting to facilitate writing instruction for girls that would help them to think and write about who they are. I also entered this work with some initial assumptions and expectations of the girls, of the space, and of myself. I first thought that the girls who chose to apply and participate in the study would have an interest in writing. During the 2010 African American Adolescent Female Summer Literacy Institute that I led, all the girls who participated had a passion for writing but some of the girls in this study did not nor were initially excited about participating. I also expected to have more girls apply and when only ten girls applied, I assumed that I would not get a diverse group. As it turned out, I was still able to get a mix of girls across different school settings, ages, grade levels, and experiences. I was affirmed on the belief that girls are so diverse and one cannot always assume one's life experiences based on their demographics. I did not expect for an example for Lily to write about her global self and her experience growing up in another country.

I assumed that space would be created for the girls to feel safe and to write and they would consequently leave the collaborative with polished writing pieces. I believed this because of my prior years of teaching writing to adolescents. I assumed the girls would draw upon their experiences and write about issues that were somehow important to their lives and identities, and this happened throughout the sessions together. Working with literacy collaboratives for the last four years and writing about them particularly shaped my thinking of the types of ways writing could be used for youth. I came in thinking that writing can be useful for shaping selfhood and also as a means to engage others in the language (Muhammad, 2012).

I thought the girls would write about what they read that the mentor author wrote about or from what I wrote. Instead, I found that they used texts for different purposes and really wrote about issues that were personal for them. The data showed that they made shifts from week to

week on which types of representations they wrote about and from which spaces (personal or societal) regardless of the text read prior to writing. I also did not expect that they would write so largely about experiences they have not had. They wrote about the experiences of women, mothers, and African American males for example. I, on the other hand, learned that I wrote from less diverse spaces and mostly wrote across one representation (intellect) of myself from a personal space. I think this type of writing emerged from my personal experiences of studying at a doctoral level for the last few years and personally struggling with academic confidence.

Like many of the girls, I was also a bit apprehensive about publically sharing personal writings with the girls, but I learned that when we agreed that the collaborative would be a safe space for us to explore ourselves in ways we wanted without apology, it made for feelings of comfort and sisterhood. They saw and heard me struggle with word choice and “writer’s block” and working through my difficulties. I shared with the girls my personal struggles growing up with identity and how others would tease me because I did not fit within a certain profile of Black girlhood. I learned that the issues that adolescent girls face and women are not very different, they just play out differently because of developmental stages.

I had to keep reminding myself to remember my role as a researcher and inquire and remain objective. This was difficult at times because I saw myself in many of the girls. We could relate on different issues related to hair, beauty, image, and views of media influences of the lack of heterogeneity of African American women and girls. This comes to little surprise because I feel that this study illustrated the connected-ness of African American women and girls. In “Sister Outsider,” Audre Lorde (1984) wrote, *I am who I am, doing what I came to do, acting upon you like a drug or a chisel to remind you of your me-ness as I discover you in myself.* This

line illustrates how I saw myself in them and was able to engage and understand many conversations, while also keeping in mind that they were uniquely different from me.

During the final day, I wrote a letter to the girls. I have yet to share my literary writings in this dissertation but I feel this open letter captures how I feel about African American girls and the importance of history in our literacy development.

Dear Sisters,

In ways, I feel like I have been mentally writing this letter for many years, wanting to tell you how special you are and to thank you for all that I am. You continue to inspire me everyday with your brilliance, your enchantment and your voice. I have never met you but I feel that in ways I know you and through a rich and profound history, we are connected in a way of no other people. We share a mutual respect, love, and sisterhood. I share all my joys, accomplishments and pains with you. As we journey together in this world we will confront obstacles and challenges, but we must remember that we are not alone. We come from a long lineage of powerful, intelligent women who all live through us. Their stories are not that much different than the ones we experience each day, but we must be conscious to continue their legacy through our words and tell our stories so the world can hear our unique voices. This can be done with your heart, head, and hand. Nourish your heart and each day and learn more about yourself. Trust the faith in your heart so that you always act with the best intentions. Cultivate your head or mind in ways that allow you to reach your highest intellectual potential. Read and explore texts in ways that will impact your life and the lives of others. Read for understanding, for pleasure, and to learn all that you question. And, take your experiences and use the pen in your hand as the most powerful tool to share your story. Through the pen in your hand you cannot only speak your words to others, but you can listen to your heart and to other sisters who love and support you. We do not have to travel this journey blindly. We can avoid hardships and turmoil if we trust our own thoughts and listen to other sisters who have lived similar experiences to share their stories with us. As we continue to uplift each other, let us move forward together so that we create a new legacy for the next generations of sisters to come. I remind you of these things as I remind myself.

Sisterly,

Gholnecsar Muhammad

When I analyzed this writing, I learned that history is not far off from what took place in the literacy collaborative but going into the study I questioned, how do girls engage in a similar literacy culture of the past. I shifted in knowing and understanding the importance history in

literacy development. I think that during the collaborative I fell even deeper in love with the literary works and literacy enactments of Black Americans in the past. I strengthened my knowledge on what it means to have a historical lens to research and what that lens looks like in practice. I no longer had to imagine a type of literacy instruction grounded in history. More than ever, this study confirmed that there are multiple ways to define Black girlhood and writing becomes a useful tool to not only write out such multiple representations but also to write against any perspectives that speaks against our heterogeneity. This reconceptualizes the role of writing. Because the girls wrote about such personal and societal spaces, expressing both joy and contempt with representations, I discovered that writing was not just a pursuit for amusement and joy but was also used a tool to address and correct wrongs. Writing was for joy when Jasmine approached her enemy, *poetry* or when Ivy wrote about the love of her grandmother in her short story. Writing was used to stop violence in the local community as seen in Violet's broadside poem or to prevent a teen pregnancy like in Heather's broadside poem or when Camille and Zinnia wrote to stop rape and abuse of women. There was an equal balance of writing to experience joy and writing to change social conditions affecting the lives of African American girls and others in society. This led me to think more about my own writings, especially my academic writings to do the same—express joy and address critical issues. At a greater level, I would like my writings to change and improve classrooms while at the same time be compelling and enjoyable writings for educators and researchers.

### **The Field: How This Study Aligns With and Extends the Extant Research**

A growing body of research on the literacy practices of African American adolescent girls suggests the need for researchers and practitioners to advocate for “spaces” and literacy practices that afford opportunities for African American adolescent girls to make meaning of

their identities within schools through reading and discussion (Boston & Baxley, 2007; Brooks et al., 2008; Carter, 2007; Deblase, 2003; Kaplan & Cole, 2003; Muhammad, 2012; Richardson, 2002; Sutherland, 2005; Winn, 2010; Wissman, 2008). Such physical and metaphoric spaces help African American adolescent girls use literacy as tools to have their voices and their identities affirmed (Sutherland, 2005). More pointedly, findings aligned with research studies that have found purpose in writing to use language to reclaim authority and power to speak against issues critical in the lives of Black girls (Winn, 2010, 2011; Wissman, 2008, 2011). In alignment with this growing, albeit small, body of research, the literacy collaborative within the current study honored the importance of having African American adolescent girls write to represent themselves. Reconstructing a literacy collaborative grounded in a historical orientation also offered new insights into creating spaces for African American adolescent girls' reading and writing within and outside school. This study aligns with the extant literacy research but it also expands research in this area as well as writing research with African American adolescent populations. I particularly think it expands the research from Winn, Wissman, and Tatum. Such expansion of the study offers is a broadened historical lens to researchers studying writing.

This study extends the research of Winn (2010) and Wissman (2008) because it takes place in a different context and directly connects the context to collaborative historical literacy spaces, therefore taking a broaden lens on literacy. I also had a more diverse sample of girls when it came to ages, school settings, and grade levels, which offers greater implications for writing instruction when students come to classrooms with different literacy abilities and experiences. This study also extends Alfred Tatum's (2009) work with African American adolescent males and writing within literacy collaboratives. Tatum (2009; Tatum & Gue, 2012) investigated the writings from 12 African American adolescent males framed around four

platforms from the writings of African American males historically. These platforms included 1) defining self (finding the text and language that helps African American males put their voice on record without waiting for others to define them), 2) becoming resilient (remaining steadfast in the face of vulnerable-producing conditions), 3) engaging others (inspiring contemporaries to strive toward a better humanity for all), and 4) building capacity (creating a foundation on which future generations can build their agendas). These four platforms appeared in the writings of African American males historically and throughout the original writings of the young men in the research. Tatum and Gue (2012) found that African American males are still engaged in a literary culture similar to the past and are seeking platforms to project their voices. Throughout the study, the males gained sociocultural benefits of understanding and reflecting upon their identities. They also received cognitive benefits in terms of increased knowledge and writing skills. This study took place in the same research site as the current study and employed similar goals of writing. Because my study was modeled after his work, it comes to no surprise that the girls practiced literacy in similar ways. The platforms of writing were different in each study, but were very similar. In many ways, African American adolescent males and females wrote for similar purposes—to represent self, to build resiliency by writing against power, to engage others, and to build capacity for future generations. This helps to inform educators and researchers that there may be little variance in writing platforms of males and females, however without an examination of the young males' writings, I cannot draw conclusions if they write across similar representations or content. There may be more variance to their needs when this is examined.



## **The Sunlight: Implications and Limitations**

### **Implications for Practice**

The analysis from the findings of the study has led to three implications for practice. I also suggest several directions for future research.

**Use of enabling mentor texts.** The findings suggest that the use of enabling mentor texts is useful for writing with adolescents. In the study, the model texts helped the girls understand a specific structure, genre, or literary theme. The texts used were enabling texts (Tatum, 2009)—that is, they went beyond strategy or skill development, but they had wider social and cultural influences. The text and text selection are important aspects and texts serve as the core and heart of all literacy instruction (Moje, Dillion, & O'Brien, 2000; Wade & Moje, 2000). Connecting literature to their lives with topics of critical discussion afforded opportunities for the girls to integrate the text into their writings and assisted them in using their voices in writing. Enabling mentor texts can be used as support or to provide an opposing theoretical view at the same time a vehicle for demonstrating literary elements of writers. This will help students to read across texts, which could increase comprehension and support writing. Mentor texts also strengthened the reading, writing, and thinking relationship.

**Writing Across platforms.** The girls wrote across similar platforms of African American women writers. Writing across platforms impacted their writings, thoughts about self, print authority and intellect. This suggests that writing prompts, which are typically used in classroom instruction, should be replaced with writing platforms to advance the writings of adolescents. To determine useful platforms for the conceptual framework of the current study, I read literature written by African American women to understand their purposes for writing. I engaged in study of how the population of learners developed and practiced literacy historically to understand

writing platforms. This helped me discover their histories and realign history to current practice. Teachers in learning contexts could learn the local and wider histories of their students to inform writing instruction to develop writing platforms or meaningful purposes of writing.

**Classrooms as literacy collaboratives.** Finally, it is important that educators do not take any of the particular factors of the literacy collaborative context and think that students' writing will improve or that they will express selfhood in language. It was the fact that the aspects were enacted together. In addition, there were some foundational components that shaped literary societies and the space within the study that I believe can be transferred to classrooms. Some of these include: literacy being defined in the cognitive sense and in sociocultural ways, writing instruction being responsive to the events and learners in the collaborative, writing being collaborative and selfhood being cultivated alongside of literacy learning. These were structural components of nineteenth century literary societies. This type of instruction does not just have to take place outside of schools. Teachers can begin to see their classrooms as literacy collaboratives or as spaces where diverse learners could share ideas and write with significant purpose. This may call for reconceptualized views of literacy and roles for writing instruction.

### **Implications for Research**

Findings from this study push for further research on similar types of literacy collaboratives in school classroom spaces. Having all African American girls in a learning space is not typical in classroom settings, therefore, it may be informative if a researcher observed a classroom designed as a literacy collaborative and examined the writings developed from middle and high school students. The role and positions of the teacher along with the teacher's writings could also be analyzed to examine pedagogy. This study also implies that historical lenses are useful for understanding the literacy development of youth. More literacy research with

embedded historical frameworks or theoretical perspectives may therefore be useful in interpreting the literacies of learners. Employing such frames help to interpret the literacies of youth today. Furthermore, Gutierrez argues that “a historicizing literacy that promotes expansive learning through an understanding of one’s own history in ways that reframe and remediate the past so it can become a resource for the present and future” (Gutierrez, 2008, p. 179). Other researchers have also promoted such views of embedding research and practices in history (Fisher, 2009; Harris, 1992; McHenry & Heath, 1994; Tatum, 2009). Historicizing literacy for the African American girls in the study contextualized their writings and I was able to better interpret them. Finally, I think research is needed that offers broadened views and uses of literacy. Literacy in the study was conceptualized as more than just skill-based but also embedded in history, power, and culture. It is therefore recommended for reconceptualized roles writing instruction. Traditionally students have written to describe, inform, and persuade in school settings across the nation. Yet, this study found that there was more meaning to the girls’ writings. Their writings were not done for idle amusement but carried significant purpose. Other research on the purposes and uses of writing with youth could begin to transfer into classroom writing instruction and have an impact on the language written in national writing policy.

It is finally important the point to the challenges of writing about African American girls. It is possible that because of the history of others projecting representations on girls, absent of their voices that researchers write within those same limited frames. I found this to be in the case of much of the research literature. As researchers work to be more responsible in the language we use and how we frame studies, we must avoid misrepresenting or essentializing them. This is not an easy task yet we must write responsibly about them and include their voices and writings in future research will help.

## **Limitations of the Research**

As with all research studies, there are limitations that require attention. Although, I sought a larger number of girls in the study, there were only eight girls. The small sample size limits the transferability of research. Because of this, it limits if others African American adolescent girls will write in the ways the girls did or if girls in other environments will write across similar critical issues affecting their lives. Also, because the research was conducted in a university reading clinic where time was allotted to write, the implications for practice in school classroom spaces are limited. Similar amounts for time for writing is not typical in schools, so this further places limits on the practical implications. Some of the findings or implications may be context specific. Additionally, because I developed and taught the lesson plans, there were times that I was “not outside enough” of the research. The invested time of planning for and implementing the lessons during each session could have blinded me from seeing certain interactions and responses to the instruction through their writings. I also found that the post interview went longer in time than I originally expected and as I transcribed and read transcriptions, there were many times when I did not ask the girls to go into further depth when talking about their writing pieces. Although I went back and asked for clarity on any ambiguous sections, I felt that more explanation was needed to talk about their writings. I would have gone back for example and tried to understand further how my presence and position shaped their writings as well as asked for more explanations on why they wrote about certain forms of power.

## **“The Nature of This Flower Is to Bloom”:** Summary

The Nature of This Flower Is to Bloom  
Rebellious. Living.  
Against the Elemental Crush.  
A Song of Color  
Blooming  
For Deserving Eyes.  
Blooming Gloriously  
For its Self.  
*Revolutionary Petunia.*

As surmised in Alice Walker’s poem, the purpose of the African American girl or the flower is to bloom—to grow and cultivate. The growth and cultivation of their literacies is timely as there is an incomplete view of who they are. If educators in and out of schools contexts are to appropriately teach and respond to the needs of African American adolescent girls, pedagogy must be developed and implemented with their literacies, identities and histories in mind. To move toward this type of pedagogy in writing instruction, the voices and stories of African American adolescent girls need to be written from their points of view. Writing research examining how they write about who they are can assist educators with developing this type of pedagogy. In order to get closer to a “full vision” in understanding how girls make sense of their own lives, instructional practices and research are also needed with their voices being central. This study helps to provide research on African American adolescent girls and their literacies so that we are not left with mere segments or limited insight into who they are. When attention is given to the writings of African American adolescent girls, the “bandage” no longer stays on the “eye” or the visual landscape of African American adolescents girls. The once blurred image becomes a *full vision* into their lives and when we know such knowledge, we can then create spaces in learning environments for them to *bloom* to their full potential.

Appendix A  
Application for the Literacy Collaborative Research Study

Applicant's Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Applicant's Age \_\_\_\_\_  
Applicant's Home Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_  
Applicant's School and Grade Level \_\_\_\_\_  
Applicant's Email Contact: \_\_\_\_\_  
Names of Parents/Guardians \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian Home Telephone \_\_\_\_\_ Cell Phone \_\_\_\_\_  
Parents' Email Contact: \_\_\_\_\_

For Applicant Only: Please select one of the options to provide a writing sample.

Option 1: Write a poem or short story that captures what it is like being a young African American girl in today's society.

Option 2: Describe what you believe it means to be "my sister's keeper".

Option 3: Why is "bonding" among African American girls important?

Option 4: Describe how African American girls are portrayed in the media. What images do you see? Are these accurate depictions? Why or why not?

Option 5: Identify and elaborate upon critical issues that young African American girls are faced with in society.

Option 6: What issues do you feel African American girls face that other girls may not face?

Option 7: What makes African American girl issues unique?

Appendix B  
Complete List of Mentor Texts Read

Week	Authors	Text	Type	Time Period
Week 1	Harriet Jacobs	Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl	Personal Narrative	Colonial and Antebellum (1800s)
Week 2	Gwendolyn Brooks	To Black Women  To Those Of My Sisters Who Kept Their Naturals Never to Look a Hot Comb in the Teeth.	Poems	Black Aesthetic Movement: 1960s, 1970s
	Sister Author 1	State of Crisis	Broadside	(AAAFSLI) 2010
	Sister Author 2	Warrior	Broadside	(AAAFSLI) 2010
	Daphne S. Valerius	The Souls of Black Girls (clip from full documentary)	Film	2006
	Jasmine Mans	Three SLAM Chicago poets YouTube videos  <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YS-uea2AJgE&amp;feature=related">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YS-uea2AJgE&amp;feature=related</a>	Film	2010
Kush Thompson	<a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Njd67NGZ1c">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Njd67NGZ1c</a>		2012	
NiqKush	<a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWduqBU_LH4">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWduqBU_LH4</a>		2012	
Week 3	Dorothy West	For Richer, the Poorer	Short Story	1995
	Sharon G. Flake	Who Am I Without Him? Short Stories About Girl and the Boys in Their Lives, The Ugly One	Short Story	2008
	Ebony J. Wilkins	Sell Out (first three chapters)	Young Adult Novel	2009

Week 4	Anna Julia Cooper	The Status of Women in America	Essay	Reconstruction Period
	Hattie McDaniel; Mo'Nique	Supporting Actress Oscar Acceptance Speeches		
	Sister Authors from 2010 AAAFSLI	Open letters to African American adolescent girls	Letter	2010



Appendix C  
Semi-Structured Interview Protocol Questions

**Pre Interview Protocol**

1. Why did you decide to participate in the writing institute?
2. What do you think it will be like working with other African American girls?
3. How would you describe yourself to someone who didn't know you?
4. What topics do you like you write about?
5. Where do you write about these topics?
6. Have you written about yourself in your writings? If so, talk about these writings.
7. How do you think African American women and/or girls are portrayed in society?
8. How are African American women and girls portrayed in media such as music, television, internet, magazines, and radio?
9. Why do you think these representations exist?
10. In your sample writing in your application, you wrote about \_\_\_\_\_, talk about this topic.
11. Why did you decide to submit this piece?
12. What do expect to gain from the writing institute?
13. Is there anything else you want to share as you prepare to participate in the writing institute?

**Post Interview Protocol**

1. What did you like best about participating in the writing institute?
2. What did you like least about participating in the writing institute?
3. What was it like writing with other African American girls?
4. What do think about the writings you produced during the institute?

5. What do you think about the text read (literature, videos, and images)?
6. What do you think about the social nature of the writing institute like sharing ideas, talking about ideas, and collaborating on writing?
7. How did writing with other African American girls impact your writing?
8. When asked what you hoped to gain in the first interview, you said, \_\_\_\_\_. Is this something you feel you have gained? Talk more about this.
  - a. What else do you feel you have gain as a result of participating in the writing institute?
  - b. How did your actual experience compare with your expectations before you started?
9. In what specific ways (if any) did the writing institute help you to be a better reader?
10. In what specific ways (if any) did the writing institute help you to be a better writer?
11. In what specific ways (if any) did the writing institute help you to be a better thinker?
12. What (if anything) did the writing institute help you to become smarter about?
13. In what specific ways (if any) did writing about self-representation and representation of African American girls help you to know yourself better?
14. You and the other participants wrote a preamble. Discuss the process of creating the preamble and what the words in the preamble mean to you.
15. Talk about how you wrote about who you are in your personal narrative and why you chose to write about \_\_\_\_\_(themes found). Talk about the meaning of it and what it says about representation of yourself or other black girls.
16. Talk about how you wrote about who you are in your poem and why you chose to write about \_\_\_\_\_(themes found).

17. Talk about how you wrote about who you are in your broadside poem and why you chose to write about \_\_\_\_\_(themes found).
18. Talk about how you wrote about who you are in your creative writing piece and why you chose to write about \_\_\_\_\_(themes found).
19. Talk about how you wrote about who you are in your informational piece and why you chose to write about \_\_\_\_\_(themes found).
20. Talk about how you wrote about who you are in your open letter to African American girls and why you choose to write about \_\_\_\_\_ to other African American girls.
21. What aspects of the institute helped you to write in the manner in which you wrote?
22. I am going to name (other) aspects. Please tell me what you think of each and how they contributed to your writing during the institute.
  - a. The focus on representation
  - b. Using text as models to our writing
  - c. Discussing topics in the literature read or topics we were planning to write about
  - d. Technology and access to the internet and word processing
  - e. Publically sharing writings with other participants
  - f. Critiquing other participants' writings and giving feedback
  - g. Writing different types of texts (personal narratives, poetry, short story/fiction informational, letter)
  - h. Visit from a published Sister Author
  - i. Freedom to write openly without censorship
  - j. Debating

- k. Uninterrupted writing time
  - l. Calling each other *Sister Author* and learning about Black women writers in the past
  - m. Having me, as your teacher/facilitator, writing alongside you and the other participants
  - n. Working among other participants across age groups
  - o. Anything else?
23. Think about your own feelings and school assessments. How do you feel about your reading ability?
24. How did the writing institute compare with writing experiences you have had in your classrooms at school?
25. Why (if you think so) are all of the experiences from the summer literacy institute important for African American teenage girls?
26. Why (if you think so) is it important to write about ourselves (our lives, our stories)?
27. Is there anything else you want to share about the writing institute?

Appendix D  
Selective Coding Scheme

<b>Representation Code</b>	<b>Representation Label</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Writing Artifact</b>	<b>Interview Data</b>
Community Self	<b>CS</b>	Language in writing related to membership in a specific group living together in one place or practicing a common interest. Examples included home (writing about local environment), national (writing about America or being an American), global (writing about identity in an international context), and religious (writing about God, spirituality or faith) community representations.	<i>At times I felt like I was being judged, but in reality I never was. To them [Malaysians] I was American not African American. My complexion never mattered. (#6 personal narrative)</i>	<i>I'm not afraid to be different I guess like I was like nervous moving to Malaysia and I didn't know how people would react to me but now I would say I'm not afraid to be different anymore.</i>
Cultural Self	Language in writing related to the description, practices or beliefs of a particular group. Examples included language written about ethnicity (race) and gender. Writing is coded as either <i>Cultural Ethnic Self</i> (CES) or <i>Cultural Gender Self</i> (CGS).			
Cultural Ethnic Self	<b>CES</b>	Language in writing related to national or cultural tradition of a distinct group that denotes a specific origin by birth or culture by their environment. Examples included writing about race or being black.	<i>Not being the cliché black person, within the racial profiling and stereotype, but being out of it. Being too white instead. It's just as hard. The truth in that came to me one day in school, of all places. (#1, personal</i>	<i>That's not something that should be you know like made like "oh the way she acts, that's not "black" "the way she looks, the way she talks, the way she walks, that's just the way she is" it's not how</i>

			narrative)	<p><i>she's suppose to be just because she's black. No. It's just who I am. That's how it should be, how it should stay and that's it. The whole thing with talking proper bothers me so much. It's like, I'm not talking "white" I'm talking how like a person who uses proper grammar. This whole talking proper and black thing using Ebonics, that's not talking black. That's talking with slang and making yourself sound ignorant. Why don't you just talk proper grammar? Why don't you just get an English book and read it! You know and maybe you will start talking "white" too.</i></p>
Cultural Gender Self	<b>CGS</b>	Language in writing related to female or feminine references.	<i>Red tassels swaying; Hair flipping; Hips</i>	<i>Umm it was basically about a woman that</i>

		<p>Examples included writing about girlhood or womanhood.</p>	<p><i>gliding from side to side; The woman that works the “late night shift” (#8 poem)</i></p>	<p><i>umm she had to she was a stripper but it wasn't by choice. She was raped when she was really young she had nobody to turned to and she kind of just got sucked into this life and then she had a child but she had no other source of income so it's basically how like she was doing it umm so that her child could be greater than she was and I don't know if I really conveyed that quite right like her child didn't know that she was really doing it but she was basically just trying to umm keep her children motivated so that they would succeed in life and not try and let others bring them down or umm them</i></p>
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				<i>have the life that she had</i>
Individual Self	<b>IndS</b>	Language in writing related to personality or personal traits.	<i>God, I hate buses. I hate most people, and social interaction, and all sorts of things. I could hardly tell that it was my low tolerance for the world seeping from my body and into oblivion, but I know myself well, that was definitely what I felt, and I had to get up before I ran out of that good will. (#1 short story)</i>	<i>I just felt like I put a little of myself in this. I literally went ahead and made it me, only with a different name. It was suppose to be about people who die cause I don't like happy endings in stories cause every single story seems to have some sort of happy ending at the end even if it's minor happy or a big yay, the day was saved. It's always going to be a happy ending. A book never ends with "everybody dies and that's it" so I wanted to make it, not like a tragic ending where it leaves you like sitting in the corner like "Why did that have to happen, why did they have to write that!"</i>



				<i>but where it's you know like, it's sad, people die. You know. But I have to overcome and get over it but it's still going to be sad in the end.</i>
Intellectual Self	<b>IntS</b>	Language in writing related to academics, thinking, learning, and aspirations. Examples included writing about school and goals.	<i>Now is not time to wither away our precious faculties. We must let our genius show and stop being afraid of being inadequate. For we are just as exceptional as anyone else. (#8 informational piece)</i>	<i>I just feel like um you don't have it easy so it's up to us to prove that we belong umm where everyone else is that we deserve it. We can succeed but in order to do that there are times when you feel like giving up but we should umm encourage one another to just stay strong and keep going.</i>
Kinship Self	<b>KS</b>	Language in writing related to the relationship with family or fictive kin. Examples included writing about family or sisterhood.	<i>We have been intricately knitted together as sisters and the bond cannot be broken, it can only become stronger. The bond can grow, should grow, so strong that together we</i>	<i>I'm not really afraid like for something that I think is right or if something I want to do I try to do it. I try my best even if I know it'll be hard and it's something I</i>

			<i>create our own unbreakable circle. (#6 open letter)</i>	<i>really want to do like if it's something I don't want to do then I don't really care about it but if it's something that needs to be done and I really want to do it I'm not going to stop because there's a hard thing in my path. I'm going to work hard so I can overcome it and I think as sisters we all should do that together.</i>
Sexual Self	SS	Language in writing related to relationships, intimate interest (or lack thereof) in males or females. This included writing about sexuality and teen pregnancy.	<i>You think it's cute to get pregnant? Think it's funny? Why do you consistently try to fit in? You think that having sex is fitting in with all your friends. But when you get pregnant, your friends disappear. (#4 broadside poem)</i>	<i>I wrote this piece cause I've heard and been told a lot for things that young girls want to have sex and when I think of having sex, I think of EVERY outcome that can happen and a lot of girls don't think about pregnancy and then once it happens, their whole world just comes</i>

				<p><i>crashing down and I want to show them before they do anything, before they think about it that this is an outcome that could happen and I wanted to put all the emotion that they could be feeling when it happens so when they read it they could see what could happen.</i></p>
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Appendix E  
Inter-Rater Agreement of Representation Codes in Writing Artifacts

	<b>Writing Artifact</b>	<b>My Coding</b>	<b>Outside Coder</b>	<b>Details of Coding</b>	<b>Agreement of Codes</b>	<b>Percent of Agreement</b>
<b>1</b>	Ivy Personal Narrative	KS	KS	Complete match	1/1	100%
<b>2</b>	Lily Personal Narrative	CES CS IND-S CGS KS KS	CES CS IND-S CGS INT-S KS	Complete match	6/6	100%
<b>3</b>	Camille Personal Narrative	INT-S IND-S CGS	INT-S IND-S CGS	Complete match	3/3	100%
<b>4</b>	Jasmine Poem	INT-S IND-S	INT-S IND-S	Complete match.	2/2	100%
<b>5</b>	Dahlia Poem	CGS CES IND-S	CGS CES IND-S KS	The outside coder coded “we” as KS and I did not interpret the writing that way because the language used does not refer to family or kinship. The language only refers to “we” as other girls.	3/4	75%
<b>6</b>	Zinnia Poem	KS IND-S INT-S CS	KS IND-S INT-S CS SS	I did not agree with one code. The participant mentioned “having kids” in her writing and the outside coder coded this as SS. I did not agree.	4/5	60%
<b>7</b>	Ivy Broadside Poem	CS CGS KS	CS CGS KS	Complete match	3/3	100%
<b>8</b>	Camille Broadside Poem	SS CGS INT-S	SS CGS INT-S	Complete match	3/3	100%
<b>9</b>	Violet Broadside	SS CES	SS CES	The coder found the line, “my future was	5/6	83%
<b>9</b>	Violet Broadside Poem	SS CES CGS KS CS	SS CES CGS KS CS	The coder found the line, “my future was 184 their hands” as INT-S and I did not agree	5/6	83%

<b>10</b>	Heather Short Story	IND-S CS	IND-S CS	Complete match	2/2	100%
<b>11</b>	Lily Short Story	INT-S KS IND-S CGS	INT-S KS IND-S CGS	Complete match Had to code “sister” use as CGS because it aligned with how I coded the OL	4/4	100%
<b>12</b>	Zinnia Short Story	INT-S KS IND-S	INT-S KS IND-S	Complete match	3/3	100%
<b>13</b>	Camille Short Story	KS CS IND-S CGS	KS CS IND-S CGS	Complete match	4/4	100%
<b>14</b>	Violet Short Story	KS IND-S	KS IND-S	Complete match	2/2	100%
<b>15</b>	Zinnia Informational Piece	SS  CGS CES  INT-S	SS CGS CES  IND-S KS	The participant wrote to Black girls and said “You are royalty” and the coder coded this as KS. I did not agree. The writer also wrote “You are beautiful” which the coder coded as IND-S. I also did not agree. The writer wrote about “striving to be anything you want to be” and I coded this as INT-S.	3/6	50%
<b>16</b>	Camille Informational Piece	INT-S KS CES CGS	INT-S KS CES CGS IND-S	The coder coded the participant’s writing, “what makes us beautiful strong women” as IND-S. I did not.	4/5	80%

<b>17</b>	Dahlia Open Letter	IND-S INT-S CGS CES KS	IND-S INT-S CGS CES KS	Complete match	5/5	100%
<b>18</b>	Heather Open Letter	CES CGS KS  IND-S	CES CGS KS IND-S	Complete match	4/4	100%
<b>19</b>	Lily Open Letter	KS INT-S IND-S CS CGS	KS INT-S IND-S CS CGS	Complete match	5/5	100%
<b>20</b>	Zinnia Open Letter	IND-S CS KS CGS INT-S	IND-S CS KS CGS INT-S	Complete match	5/5	100%
<b>Total Agreement</b>					<b>71/78</b>	<b>91%</b>

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Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

## GHOLNECSAR E. MUHAMMAD

### EDUCATION

University of Illinois at Chicago	Ph.D.	2013	Curriculum & Instruction: Literacy, Language & Culture
Lindenwood University	M.A.	2006	Educational Administration
Southern Illinois University- Edwardsville	B.S.	2003	Elementary Education Minor: Psychology, Reading, & English Language Arts

### CERTIFICATIONS

Teaching Certificate  
Illinois Type 03 Elementary & Middle School  
Endorsement: Language Arts, Reading, Social Studies

Administrative Certificate  
Illinois Type 75

### PROFESSIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE AND TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Cahokia Unit School District 187, Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
District Assistant Curriculum Director, 2007-2009

- Developed a behavioral and reading intervention process for K-12 students
- Supervised teachers and principals throughout school district
- Researched and wrote literacy grants
- Provided literacy related professional development to teachers and staff
- Collected, analyzed, and reported reading and writing assessment data

Cahokia Unit School District 187, Wirth Parks Middle School

Middle School Reading Liaison, Classroom Teacher & After School and Summer School  
Reading Coordinator, 2003-2007

- Modeled instruction for teachers
- Taught middle school reading, language arts and social studies in grades 6 and 8
- Developed curriculum and lesson plans
- Served as a cooperating teacher to pre-service teachers
- Served as a resource for staff development and created opportunities to increase teacher instructional knowledge

### UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE

University of Illinois Chicago, Reading Clinic

Teaching and Research Assistant, August 2010-Present

- Serve as a teaching assistant to graduate level courses: CI 525 Assessment and Instruction for Struggling Readers, K-12: Part 1 and CI 526 Assessment and Instruction for Struggling Readers, K-12: Part 2

- Advise and assist graduate students in literacy (reading and writing) assessments and instructional planning
- Work on multiple research and community outreach projects related to literacy and African American males and females (elementary, adolescents and adults)
  - African American Adolescent Male Summer Literacy Institute (2011-12)
  - African American Adolescent Female Summer Literacy Institute (2011-12)
  - District Literacy Audit (2012)
  - Boys College (4<sup>th</sup> grade initiative teaching a multidimensional reading model to struggling readers) (2011)

University of Illinois Chicago, Collaborative Teaching Network (CTN) Research Grant, Department of Special Education

Research Assistant, August 2009-July 2010

- Assisted in the development and preparation of research materials
- Prepared and provided literacy professional development to content area middle school teachers and special education resource teachers
- Collected, coded and analyzed qualitative data

University of Illinois Chicago, Special Teachers and Exceptional Pupils =Urban Promise (STEP=UP) Research Grant, Department of Special Education

Teaching Assistant, August 2009-July 2010

- Taught graduate level course: SPED 448 Topics in Special Education/Literacy
- Organized professional development and other requirements for grant-funded doctoral students

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, Office of Curriculum and Instruction

Graduate Assistant, May 2003-August 2003

- Assisted director of middle level program in administrative tasks
- Reviewed and coded undergraduate student data in elementary and middle level education
- Assisted with the recruitment of partnering middle schools for pre-service teachers

## **SERVICE**

Graduate reviewer for Literacy Research Association, 2011-2012

Mentor to incoming doctoral students, 2010-2012

Instructor for P.O.W.E.R. (People Organized around Wisdom, Education, and Results) adult literacy institute, 2010

Instructor and literacy advisor to non-profit group, VOICES, 2009-2012

## **REFEREED PUBLICATIONS**

Muhammad, G. E. (2012). Creating spaces for Black adolescent girls to “write it out!” *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 56(3), 203-211.

Tatum, A. W. & Muhammad, G. E. (2012). African American males and literacy development in contexts that are characteristically urban. *Urban Education*, 47(2), 434-463.

Muhammad, G. E. (2012). The literacy development and practices within 1800s African American literary societies. *Black History Bulletin*, 75(1), 6-13.

### **Chapters in Progress**

Muhammad, G. E. (in progress). Historical Literacy Framings of African American Male Literary Societies of the 1800s. In A.W. Tatum (Ed.), *The Formation of the Literacy Development of African American Males*, Teachers College Press: New York.

### **INTERNATIONAL / NATIONAL – REFEREED CONFERENCES / PRESENTATIONS**

Muhammad, G. E. (2012, November; December). *The Self-Representations of Black Adolescent Girls Through Writing*. Roundtable at the 62<sup>nd</sup> Annual Convention of the Literacy Research Association.

Muhammad, G. E. (2012, November; December). *The Formation of the Literacy Development of African American Males: Linking Antebellum to the 21st Century Through the Study of Literary Societies*. Paper Session at the 62<sup>nd</sup> Annual Convention of the Literacy Research Association.

Muhammad, G. E. (2012, November). *In Search for a Full Vision: Writing Representations of African American Adolescent Girls*. Poster Session at the Annual Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English.

Muhammad, G. E. (2011, November; December). *Creating Legitimate Spaces for African American Adolescent Girls to “Write It Out.”* Paper Session at the 61<sup>st</sup> Annual Convention of the Literacy Research Association.

Muhammad, G. E. (2011, November). “*Not Knowing Who You Are is the Worst Feeling in the World*”: *An Adolescent Girl Talks About Identity, Context, and Writing*. Paper Session at the Annual Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English.

Muhammad, G.E. (2011, April). *Collaborative Teacher Network: Findings Related to Increasing Teachers' Knowledge of Content-Area Reading Strategies*. Roundtable at the Annual Convention of the American Educational Research Association.

Muhammad, G. E. (2010, December). *Creating a Space: A Critical Review of Literacy Research on African American Adolescent Females*. Roundtable at the 60<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the National Reading Conference.

### **PRESENTATIONS AT PROFESSIONAL CONFERENCES**

2008 Illinois Reading Council: Lewis and Clark Fall Workshop  
2008 Illinois Alliance of Administrators of Special Education Conference  
2008 Illinois Positive Behavior and Supports Winter Conference  
2007 Illinois Positive Behavior and Supports Winter Conference  
2003 Illinois Service Learning State-Wide Conference

**FELLOWSHIPS**

2012-2014 Cohort of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Cultivating New Voices Fellowship

2012 University of Illinois Chicago Abraham Lincoln Fellowship

2006 National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Fellow: South Africa Continuity and Change

2003 Illinois State Service Learning Fellow

**GRANTS WRITTEN AND RECEIVED**

2009 Illinois State School Improvement Grant

2008 Infinitec Assistive Technology Math Intervention Grant

2007 Infinitec Assistive Technology Reading Intervention Grant

2006 State Farm Insurance Service Learning Grant

**HONORS AND AWARDS**

2009 Illinois Reading Council Board Member

2004 Coke Cola Thirst For Knowledge Teaching Award

2003 SIUE Student Leader Award Recipient

1999 Illinois Golden Apple Scholar

SIUE Student Ambassador

SIUE Provost Scholar

Illinois Minority Teacher Scholar

SIUE Johnetta Haley Scholar

**PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS**

American Educational Research Association

Illinois Reading Association

International Reading Association

Literacy Research Association

National Council of Teachers of English